

creative english honors thesis

The Cardboard Sublime

novella and postscript

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class of twenty thirteen
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The Cardboard Sublime

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For the magi, the orangutang, the moose, and the platypus

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The real is a tightly woven fabric; it does not wait for our judgments in order to incorporate the most surprising of phenomena, nor reject the most convincing of our imaginings.

—Merleau-Ponty

ONE

inscribed

Dawn, and five men gather at the railroad tracks under the bridge. Low exposure and colorless film guarantee a shadowy vibe, but Jeremy insists the morning light lends itself to compression into eerie grayness. He is the first to arrive, perched with legs dangling over the steel grating that juts out behind the rusty caboose, fiddling with a microphone jerry-rigged to a vintage reel-to-reel magnetic tape recorder, two items exhumed from his father's garage some years ago. Jeremy has bronze skin and short black hair, still enjoying his vibrant twenties. His sunken eyes move over his machinery, the tools of his art worn to pieces with love and stitched together again with the same.

The next to show is Tennyson, so they call him. His shaven dome gleams in the pinkish sun, pi symbol tattooed on his forehead, sporting box-frame glasses and ears gaged to nickel circumference. His beard is braided in a celtic knot woven through wooden beads. A grungy freakshow of a man, stoned out of his mind on this fine morning, but ever the gentle stoic. He comes bearing a six-string bass strapped to his back and a battery-operated five-watt amp gripped like a suitcase.

Tennyson's two bandmates are close behind. Leading the march is the incorrigible Miles. He is a tower, thickly muscled with dark African skin, carrying on his head, cushioned by dreadlocks and balanced with one huge palm, a bass drum. His eyes are wide and his dense features are softened by his airy rastafarian smile. His other hand grips a high-hat by its cold steel shaft. He walks along the tracks in sneakers and bell bottoms, unbuttoned white vest flapping against his bare chest, taking three rungs at a stride.

Behind him steps the fire-eyed musical nerve center of the group, a short and stocky fellow oozing style. His five-string violin is leather-cased and thrown over one shoulder by the strap, and he walks with a cool swagger, carrying Miles's snare and stool. He goes by Vince, he is dressed in a tweed suit with plaid vest and hidden suspenders, and his hair is a wild dome of light brown curls. The three gather around Jeremy at the caboose and lay down their burdens. Vince reaches past his checkered tie and into the pocket of his tweed sports coat, holding up a pocket-watch on a golden chain to catch the light. His eyes skim over roman numerals inscribed on the ivory surface, then he flips the lid closed and stashes it away.

"Now where?" asks Vince. He's energetic in a twitchy, broken way, like a sabotaged wind-up toy. Over the last few years Vince has developed a heavy blink. Instead of flicking down and up, his eyelids squeeze closed for that one extra microsecond that can make someone wonder if he's got a condition.

"Nowhere," says Jeremy, all eyebrows. "Now where is that gutter slug Theo?"

"Up here."

Four pairs glance up to spot a gap in the glare. Two arms emerge from the obscurity, outstretched to the sun, and they hear a groan and a creaking of joints. Theo stands above them, boots on the rust-flaking catwalk that runs along the top of the train cars. He is angular, lanky, tall and pale. Stubble bristles on his sharp jaw and protruding cheekbones. Deep crow's feet around his gray-blue eyes suggest wisdom, experience, or mere insomnia. He is in his late twenties and looks overused. His dark mop of rugged hair is peppered with premature gray. He has donned his shabbiest for the occasion: a

black leather jacket, no shirt beneath—ribs showing, sapling branches soaked to bend—ripped blue jeans with bony knees under tattered fabric, a length of maritime rope for a belt. His laugh is a throaty hum as he climbs down the scaly ladder.

"You look like a bunch of carnies," says Theo. His voice is a melodic drifting, slow and low, bouncing among the concrete pillars of the overpass.

"You look fresh out of the landfill," says Tennyson with a gnarled smile.

"At least I get paid to look like shit. You clowns do it for free."

"It's all harmony and theater," says Miles, swaying on his feet and palms to the sky.

"I'll worry about aesthetics," says Jeremy, swift and on key. "Let's move, dawn's a-wasting. I got some preliminary shots of the site yesterday. It *reeks* of your sound."

"Help me with this, man," says Miles, and Theo takes the high-hat in his knobby hands.

They walk the tracks for a while, then hang a right up the concrete stairs and onto the canal walk that crosses the river toward the island. Bridgeless stone pillars divide the water's passage downstream. The yellows and reds of early sunlight shine on towering office buildings on the north side of the river, before they vanish from sight as the group passes under autumn branches, onto the leaf-sprinkled dirt trail that winds around the island's teardrop perimeter.

"How've you been?" Vince to Theo, walking in parallel.

"Wrung out. Rotting away." Theo flashes a sad smile.

"I feel you." There's a respectful silence between the two, a gap in need of a bridge, kind words where for now there are none.

"You and Jonas used to work in a garage right?" says Vince. "Engines and all."

"We did that."

"Miles's cousin has this shop, opened up a couple months ago. North side, corner of Lerner and Little Dock. He might could use another elbow in the grease."

"Yeah?" Theo's out of his element. So many issues with this crowd, psychological and chemical. They don't shake hands often. Then again, Theo's been slipping away in recent months, in some ways less visible than others.

"I don't tell a man his business." Quick disclaimer from Vince. "Just saying, if you need the work. I can give the guy your number."

Theo hesitates, looks up through the trees at the hazy sky. Lances of yellow and orange are dissolving in the atmosphere.

"Sure," says Theo.

"You got a cell?"

"No way this side of death."

"Good to have you in the luddite crowd." Then a bright laugh hops out of Vince's mouth, one brief spasm. He stifles it, looks confused. "Sorry, hey. I'm pretty strung out here, weird craziness. Up all night to be awake this morning. Not sure how much of that stuff it takes to put a man under. . . . Look, you're sure you're feeling alright?"

"You don't sound too good yourself."

"Constant vigilance." Vince sets down the stool for a moment just to give himself one primal chest-pound, nods in satisfaction and walks on. "Have to keep my feet on the ground."

"I just wanna know that I'll leave something behind," says Theo to himself. "When the grace runs dry."

"Too early in the morning for that kind of talk."

Another pause, and they listen to Jeremy up ahead on the trail. He's got three pots of coffee in him, talking loud and fast about perspective, silent film, and how sophisticated comedy was in the twenties. No one listens and he doesn't care.

"How's Jonas?" asks Vince.

Theo winces at that one, clicks his tongue and conjures words. When they come they sound frantic and abused, the way Jonas might describe himself if he were here.

"Sweet and oblivious. Tranquilized and hypnotized behind frosted glass. There's not much left of him."

"Well," says Vince. "He probably doesn't feel much, the way he is."

"Lucky man."

"Theo, let me tell you. Each of us. We're more than a sum of events."

"Too early."

They follow the trail past the old quarry, since filled with stagnant rainwater, past the reddish iron bones of what was once a mill, past the dirt-bike mounds and the muddy paths that lead to the rocks where people gather with booze and friends in summertime. Jeremy leads them down a narrow trail where kudzu and horsetail brush their faces with dew, and they emerge at the tall doorless threshold of the stripped hydroelectric plant. The windows are shattered and a smattering of graffiti colors the walls inside and out. Iron hemispheres bulge outward through the wall where the generators once roared. Now the place is a shell, a network of pipes bolted to brick surfaces funneling gasps of nothing from one point to another, rough textures and purposeless space.

"Set up over there," says Jeremy, pointing to a swath of weed-sprouting concrete floor in one corner.

"Whoa," says Vince, spinning around with eyes to the ceiling. He lays into the vocal line of a song he wrote, checking the acoustics. "We should play a concert in here."

"Seconded," says Tennyson as he unsheathes his bass from the gig bag.

"Gotta be crawling with ghosts," says Miles, flipping a drum key out of his pocket.

"Worse," says Theo. "Psychotic bums with nothing to lose."

"Theo," says Jeremy, setting up his tripod. "Shut up and get in character."

An old joke. Theo is more an absence of character in Jeremy's films: he appears aimless, destitute, forlorn, and depressed. He walks about in wasted landscapes and abandoned buildings, examining tiny fissures in ceilings and other meaningless details while presumably on the verge of tears. This performance is often accompanied by the musical stylings of Damn Them Torpedoes, the local post-rock trio now setting up in one corner of the dilapidated power plant.

Theo rounds the inside three times, planning his onscreen neurosis. Never too much looking ahead—the sad obsession must be natural. Organic interaction, Jeremy always says, is the most bizarre event to capture on film. Or such is his explanation when caught filming unwitting strangers in alleyways.

Damn Them Torpedoes is on soundcheck. They produce a fuzzy crescendo on a diminished chord that grows in volume and tempo until it crashes into a head-banging quarter-time breakdown. Then the sludgy groove melts into feedback and a cymbal vamp before dying all at once.

"The soundcheck swell," says Vince. "It *has* to be the first track on the new album."

"Only if the last track is the same thing backwards," says Tennyson, laughing. That nasal giggle is at odds with his urban viking look.

Jeremy scrambles up the wall behind the band with a microphone in his teeth, trailing wire. He loops it around a rusty pipe, feeds it some slack, then hops down. The silver mic hangs a foot above Miles's dreadlocked head.

Theo sees a used hypodermic in the dust, prods it with one booted toe. He sighs, rolls his neck to crack a joint. He feels the weight of forty waking hours. He feels in character.

"Ready to burn some celluloid." Jeremy's behind his tripod-mounted camera at the entrance to the generator room, lighting a cigarette while the butt of another still smolders in his mouth. The man moves fast, smokes fast. "Disclaimer, gentlemen. It hits the film festival first, *then* it's your music video."

"One condition," says Tennyson. "You buy us two cases, a handle, and a quarter, and we have ourselves a day party after this."

"Deal."

Vince's left already forms a chord on the violin neck, right quivering over the bridge ready to pick a melody, bow in the back pocket of his corduroys for now. Tennyson pops his knuckles, licks his lips, and spreads his legs out for the focus stance, bass hanging at crotch-level. Miles is twirling a drum-brush. His sticks wait for the

heavy stuff on top of the bass drum. Theo shuffles to the middle of the room, pockets his hands in the leather jacket and turns away from the camera, head twisted to catch a stream of morning light through a broken window.

Jeremy flips on the camera and the eight-track simultaneously, let's them eat up a little silence and stillness, then calls for action.

• • •

Jonas glided out from under the truck on a skateboard, left his wrench on the concrete floor and stood, wiping oily hands over the tattered denim shirt that hung loose from his wide shoulders. He glanced around the garage and muttered a curse under the drone, jerking his neck twice as if an insect were lodged in his ear. He pulled a sweat rag from the back pocket of his black jeans and ran it across his forehead, down over his broad nose, over the bushy blonde mustache spattered with grime. The shop was open to the warm humidity of late spring afternoon, and the light skipped off a few stray fibers of his blonde hair, hanging down over jungle-green eyes. He walked, heavy and proud, stepping over cables, axles, and tires on his way, passing under vinyl garage doors folded into the electric pallor of the ceiling. He cupped a scarred hand over his thick lips as he moved through a plume of exhaust from an elevated car having its tires rotated, then came to a rusty van and knocked on the hood.

Theo quit tinkering with the air conditioner, cranked down the driver's window and leaned out. He looked Jonas up and down, spat phlegm on the floor.

"Let's take a break," said Jonas.

They walked out of the caramel-tinted fumes and the sweet scent of oil into the broad daylight, across the parking lot. Jonas lit two cigarettes, took a hearty drag from both, then handed one to Theo. Their exhalations lingered in windless space on their way toward the two lawn chairs by the roadside. Orange-white tulip poplar blossoms shone in the sun and bees hummed in all directions, redbuds like frozen pink droplets stretched out along skeletal branches, dogwoods fresh with four-lobed white flowers,

and the bright greens of oak and maple leaves: a wall of life framing the asphalt lot and lining the road that ran to and away from quiet downtown.

Jonas and Theo took their seats and leaned back, lording over the bend in the road. They were twenty-three, strong and alive, happy to be somewhere.

"I've been thinking," said Jonas. His voice was always intense, even when not to the point.

"God forbid," said Theo.

"I've been thinking it's time to go."

"Go where?"

"To a city. Where there's a real wave to catch. A vibration to jostle the spine, keep me awake. I need noise, stimulation. Anything to keep from sleeping through judgement day. I gotta open up, let in some dirty air."

"The old village not doing it for you?"

"Each place inspires the growth of certain senses, and I've grown all the ones I need to digest . . . this place. No, not doing it for me. You?"

"I'm doing alright." Theo flashed a smile, grim but genuine. "It's been a rough year, you know that. With Dad and the house. And I was angry for a while. But I've found my stride now. Things are shaping up."

Jonas laughed. "Doing alright? At Willy's shack? That man will have you foaming at the mouth faster than me, even."

"Another six months in the shop and I'll afford my own place."

"One of those studio apartments behind the antique store? That's not going to get you laid, and that's not going to make you realize your potential. Look here brother."

Jonas leaned in a little closer. "Your father's been in the ground for a year. The bank took his property and you're the only one who's still mourning. Willy sure took it in stride. Meanwhile your mother's floating around the Continent again and probably doesn't remember your goddamn name. You keeping up?"

Theo was looking down the bend in the road, jaw tight shut, an inch of ash on his forgotten cigarette. Harsh words, but honest: Jonas had always possessed a certain gravity that resonated with Theo's darker reveries.

"Listen," said Jonas. "You and me, we're untethered men. We're young and sharp, we've got at least enough cash between us to go somewhere and get started, and every moment we stay is another we're not a part of the spectacle happening somewhere else."

"You evil bastard. I'm just trying to have a smoke break."

"Sorry." Jonas crushed the butt under his boot and lit another.

"My turn now?" Theo seethed inside but spoke slow. "Should I talk about the brain spasms? The hallucinations? How your parents are still terrified of you since the time you were seventeen and they found you bleeding all over the roofing, slicing yourself up with peeling knife?"

"Calm down. I said sorry."

"A goddamn peeling knife." Theo spat into the sidewalk where crabgrass was eating its way through fissures in the concrete. "We know too much. Both of us."

"I was just trying to help you see yourself. The way you do for me."

Theo looked at Jonas, and that strange gravity curled his scowl into a clownish smile.

"Yeah, I know," said Theo. "It's okay."

"So you'll think about it."

"I will."

Howls came from the garage, over the engine noise and clattering machinery. Theo and Jonas hustled back inside. Someone had broken a wrist with his arm shoulder-deep in a truck's undercarriage. The man was splayed out on the concrete floor now, the old bearded foreman tending to him with tattooed hands, telling him he'll be just fine. The spectators already knew they'd be joking about this in a few days, and even the man wincing and gritting his teeth on the floor showed a glint of preemptive laughter in his weird young eyes.

• • •

After a long day of alcoholic indulgence with Jeremy and the band, Theo returns to his apartment in the cool afternoon. He hasn't slept in forty-eight hours and the walls are breathing.

A single letter, freshly inked, has been slipped under the door. He takes it up gently between thumb and forefinger, lifting it to wide pupils in the dark. Brow furrowed in suspicion, he sniffs it to catch only the scent of whisky from his own breath. He drops it on the desk, then lights the kerosene lantern—one of his sole possessions, a family heirloom from his great-grandfather's logging days.

The letter glows in the throbbing light: the only white in the room. He can't bring himself to open it. He can't burn it either. So he lies on his bed and stares at it from across the dark. As he slips out of consciousness with eyes still open, he sees the letter not as white but as a void in the fabric of black. It's an intrusive presence in his quiet world, a fragment of elsewhere.

• • •

Sheryl is here, folded in the dream layers. Naked with open arms, she swims and skips through the fabric. A length of shining yarn shows Theo where to go, but it disappears here through the floor, there through the wall: the second anchored point is moving fast. So he moves up and down in the nothing between layers. She is below him in one, above him in the next. If she is trying to escape she would untie the yarn from around her neck. She's only being playful, spinning away just as he needs to feel her most.

He arrives somewhere. In this layer they exist in the same building. The yarn tells him she is downstairs, about to slip out the front door. He's so damn tired. But he'll go to her, sure as death he will go.

Theo wakes just before dawn with embers in his skull. He stumbles to the desk where rests the depleted kerosene lantern, a half-empty bottle of whisky, and a half-full page of nonsense in the typewriter. He skims it in the dusty streetlamp glow from the window. Something about glaciers and foghorns, bubbles slipping out of a dented hull. He thinks he may have been sleep-typing, or he wrote it several days ago while in a strange way that resisted the formation of memories.

It crosses his mind that he could go back to sleep and dream for another handful of hours. He knows full well that within the mirrored medicine cabinet above the sink is a box of potent sleeping pills, encased in a plastic film that a curious blend of willpower and masochism has kept intact for weeks on end.

But a sudden purpose seizes him, and he rips the paper from the typewriter and flips it over. Today he will be a cartographer, an explorer of distant lands, a records-keeper in a candle-lit study onboard a creaking galleon. The floor is moving under his feet, and he almost believes it. Shirtless back arched over the desk, vertebrae bulging under sallow skin, ribs visible, gut concave, he lifts a pencil from the desk and goes to the task.

Theo remains for the moment absorbed, oblivious to the letter that lies inches from his hand. He feels the woodgrain beneath the paper causing wrinkles in the graphite image: the topography of mountains and valleys in this wild new land is to be constructed by imperfections in the writing desk.

As he scribbles away, the sun rises above neighboring buildings and illuminates his dreary studio apartment. Shafts of light pass through what he calls the *deep* window—opening one story above Fourth street—setting the unvarnished hardwood floor aglow. Before this window is a rocking chair where Theo often sits to delve into one of forty encyclopedia volumes, obsolete by seven editions, stacked in one corner of the room.

Theo charts the coastline as they sail, measuring each edge of the phantom continent, drawing rivers and jungles and moonlit lagoons. He polishes his map to the final detail: a compass in one corner, with a mighty golden point aiming northward. He sets his pencil aside and stands to admire the drawing.

Before him on the table, textured to perfection, is a lucid illustration of a brick wall.

Theo stands, spine flat against the door, four strides across from what he calls the *shallow* window, which opens onto a brick wall one foot from the sill. As he counts the bricks, his left hand traces the edge of the door behind him, checking each of seven locks as it ascends. Pure reflex. The paranoia left him some months ago, succeeded by quieter stigmas. All bolts and chains accounted for, his calloused hand scratches his scalp.

"Damn," says Theo. He counts the bricks in the drawing.

"Damn," he says again. The same number. At least the fleur de lis on the compass is elegant, but still incongruous paired with an image of anything vertical. He crumples the drawing and tosses it in the wastebasket. Then his eyes fall on the letter.

Theodore is written on the envelope in a classical, feminine hand. He tears one end of the crisp paper to pull out an index card spattered with script.

• • •

Imagine a cinematic zoom earthward from a stormy sky, down through a chasm in moonlit cloud matter. Dim light refracts through the droplets, innumerable pinball photons leaping from one falling globule to the next. The city below is a creature with pulsing veins, plastered on the earth like a massive steel and stone amoeba, split in two by the winding river. It glows, pinpoints of many colors melding into a red aura that infects the clouds.

Creeping down toward street level, the gleaming whole is now sixteen blocks of brick warehouses, smokeless smokestacks, and rusting train cars near the southern bank

of the broad river that separates skyscraping downtown from the postindustrial south side. Then eight blocks, when roofs come into focus and stony islands and autumn trees can be seen blooming from the river's rolling obscurity. Then four, and the aura of each streetlight becomes isolated from the general gloom. Then two, where a homeless cripple is carting his wheelchair down the middle of an empty street, where a riverside bar is bursting with life and music. Then one block, down to the intersection of Fourth and Tyler.

Theo enters the outside, wearing jeans, boots, a collared plaid shirt and his wrinkled leather jacket, emerging into the rainy evening from the spacious hallway that was once a trolley station. The old brick rectangle, now a hive of studio apartments, served a hundred-year term as an artery of industry, ferrying laborers to the factories on the southern bank six days a week until the wars and the dreams ran out and all the heavy hands fled west.

Theo walks on down Fourth, hunched over, eyes to the sidewalk. He glances at the sky, pierced here and there by brick smokestacks that might imprison maidens with soot-cruled hair. Nestled somewhere in the industrial menagerie is the old parachute factory, converted a decade ago into cheap living space, where Miles and Tennyson share a bare-bones apartment on the third floor that looks out across the river.

The rain comes down, heavy drops bursting on the road. Theo feels thoroughly at home in the soft chaos. Cars come by, turning up waves in the oily streams that snake along the curb and vanish into storm drains. A homeless man is slumped on the other side of the street, his cardboard sign propped against a wall, splattered with whitewash strokes that form the words: *One day a man will come before the people and say: One day a man will come before the people and say. . . .*

"Tired old world," says Theo.

The crusty bum, hopeful for some breach in solipsism, assumes he is being addressed. He responds, rough words grinding against one another, competing for emphasis.

"That's quite a strut you got there, boy."

"Old man, I've gotta take each step as if I know my foot will touch ground again, or I'll drift off this filthy rock." It's a habit inherited from Jonas: spewing profound obscurities at the homeless in lieu of tossing them coinage.

Theo turns the corner onto Martin and passes a couple under an umbrella. He catches a fragment of conversation as they pass by. He mumbles the words to himself over and over in different permutations as he goes.

"They say it will stop by the morning."

She must have been talking to him about the rain. Theo wonders if the man was listening, or leafing through his bank account in his mind, or imagining his companion without clothes or a tongue.

"They say. It will stop. By the morning."

Her voice was soft, and Theo's mumbled chanting doesn't do the sentence justice.

"By the morning, they say, it will stop."

For Theo the rain is a falling of spirits and a solemn reminder of the natural relationship between earth and sky. *Now if only it would rain up. . . .*

"It will stop by the morning, they say."

Theo does not own an umbrella. He wants the water to take his shape before it meets ground.

"The morning will stop, they say it by."

Here strides the determined businessman, briefcase in hand, umbrella in the other, wristwatch glinting, jabbering numbers and pleasantries into his earpiece. Theo believes the morning will stop nothing. The cars will move and the couples will walk and the water will work its way to the sea. The apocalypse could descend like a wildfire from the heavens and still the morning would come and the couples would walk and walk their dogs and ignore every mushroom cloud on the skyline. They would keep going on past the end of the world with their loudspeakers and cellphones and clumsy desires.

"They will stop it. Say, by the morning."

Theo stops. What remains of his sense of direction tells him he's gone too far. He doubles back. There's a sour taste in his mouth tonight. He lets his mind drone. He's been living for so long in a montage of memories, and cannot help but see each passing moment as a memory in formation. He hears songs in the soft, percussive raindrops.

"They say I have gone too far, by the morning. They say it."

Small balconies jut out above storefronts, and here and there the windows behind them are lit. The coffee shop is wedged between an antique store and the office of a record label called *Actually Real Music*. Theo stands outside for a minute, sifting through his mind, straining to remember why he is outside his home, why this hour and place.

On the balcony above the antique store is a middle-aged woman wearing a sleeveless black dress, red lipstick, hair in a tight black bun, smoking in the rain. Theo stares, becomes vicariously aware of the cold. She sees him. Theo lifts a hand in greeting. She nods, tosses her cigarette, and goes inside.

The memory has returned, worse for wear. The letter slipped under his door two days ago refers to this time and place. That very letter is in his back pocket, and it is signed: *Velvet Artha Gates*.

Theo walks into the coffee shop. He shakes his shoulders and droplets spatter from the leather across the tile floor. Wooden tables shimmer under orange lights between seats of green upholstery. The walls are mirrored to make the room appear wider. Only four blocks from the trolley station apartments, but he can't remember being here before.

His eye is drawn to a woman sitting alone with a steaming mug, her head in the palm of one hand. Her hair is long, light brown, hiding her face in thick folds. Theo suffers a curious cognitive flicker: she is an old friend, then a stranger again. He infers that the truth must be somewhere between the two, that she is the woman he is here to meet.

So he sinks slowly into the seat across from her, as if he may be mistaken, as if they might never be meant to know one another. He has a line prepared in case he has

chosen wrong: *I seem to have mistaken you for someone other than myself.* But she looks up from the swirl of cream and begins to speak. Recognition shines in her eyes, behind the metallic frames of her glasses, or perhaps only incandescent light skipping off hazel irises.

"We'll make this quick," she says, in a voice that naturally follows from the name signed on the letter. "I have other appointments."

"Appointments?"

"My work is not your concern. All we have in common is this place, this talk. You won't see me again. Unless something goes wrong."

Theo is silent, watching the slight upward curve of her lips on one side. Half a minute in and the woman's already making power plays. He doesn't want to feel under-thumb, just wants to see her smile. She leans toward him over the table. Her hair is a gentle broom against the mahogany. Dust particles flee to the strands and work their way up until they orbit her head in a misty halo. The shadows leech substance from nameless faces in the room and begin to parade along the hardwood floor in the mirror. Theo feels the pull of sleep in his eyes. A song is on the air, catchy bop jazz, background to the grinding and frothing of the barista's labors.

"You want in on this? A cool two grand every week." Her face is sharp, all business. She sips the coffee and waits.

"Is this illegal?"

"It's a legal gray area."

"There are no gray piano keys."

"We know you're not a criminal. We know a lot about you, Theodore. You fit the profile."

"What profile?" Theo feels out of place, studied by many eyes.

"Graceless intelligence. A taste for discretion regarding your personal life. Reserved, clever, inventive, often passive. Previously a mechanic by trade, a relatively skilled machinist. Family history of psychological aberration. For fear of such you quit all the drugs. No jobs held down in the past year excepting the occasional acting gig

with an experimental filmmaker. Like anyone, searching for something better, worth your time."

She smiles the gorgeous smile he's been waiting for, but he doesn't care about that now, just leans back in the booth with his head cocked sideways. He feels surprise, along with a light-hearted elation—he hasn't been surprised in a long while.

"Why me?" asks Theo. And he trails off from voice to memory, recalling the days when his father was imprisoned in a wheelchair in the bedroom. *Don't trust me anymore. . . .*

"You need something new," she says, and her fingers snake across the table to touch his. "You're getting older by the day. Take this. It's that little something you want to leave behind. Maybe a spark of inspiration. As many circles as your mind can stomach, as your stomach can mind."

"Velvet. Is that your name?" She's looking straight at him, but he looks across the room to examine the side of her face in the mirrored wall, as if trying to see around a mask she wears.

"Velvet Artha Gates," she says, and smiles again. Less beautiful this time, more of a conspiratorial grimace. He feels her magnetism stirring his marrow, easing him closer to her. "Pleased to meet you, Theodore Wascomb."

"You seem dangerous," he says. He takes his eyes from the mirror and meets her gaze. He knows now it isn't just loneliness at the core of his attraction: she is truly beautiful, the calm femininity of a librarian and an edge of subtle wit. The clink of ceramics, jazz from the speakers in the rafters, Velvet's thin nose and narrow eyebrows, breasts under a tight blue button-up, all are wrapped in the sweet, earthy scent of roasting coffee.

Theo already knows he'll accept—he's trying to understand why. It could be all the nights and days spent alone in dusty gloom, reading books and tinkering with moving parts, laughing at his own thoughts, waiting for the building to burn down or his aching hands to fall off. Ever since Jonas was committed it's been shadows, regret, insomnia, no reason to move or be moved. Now Velvet's eyes assume a faint shade of

green, and Jonas speaks to him through memory, words spoken beneath a sizzling ferris wheel some ten years ago. *The mystery will consume you either way. The trick is to want to be surrounded, dissolved, absorbed. That's when you're part of the eternal happening.*

"I'll do it," says Theo.

"I knew you would." Velvet retracts her hand and leans back to resume sizing things up at a glance. "Look for a package at your door next week. Godspeed."

She rises, drops two dollars on the table, swings her arms into her jacket. She stares past him, out the windows of the restaurant, into the rain, beyond the rain, and back at herself in the translucent reflection.

"They say it will stop by the morning."

With that she is out the door and across the street, rain boots slapping on wet asphalt, hair bouncing with each step. Theo is left to rap his knuckles on the mahogany table and bite down on in-turned lips.

• • •

"Tonight, Theo, you become yourself."

When Tai said it his eyes bulged, knuckles tightened on the torch. Firelight reflected off the green face-paint decorating his cheeks and bare chest.

The night of Theo's sixteenth birthday, and his head was swollen with psilocybin. He'd been instructed to consume a handful of dried fungi, the color and taste of raw soil, before meeting his father between the willow and the woodshed in the backyard. Only in retrospect would he realize Tai had taken it upon himself to execute a ritual that would usher Theo's frightened soul into manhood.

Now Tai Wascomb loomed over his son with dark eyes. He was a wood-carving of a man: a match could be lit on his weathered face if the stroke dodged his bristling beard. His hair was tied in one thick braid that swatted at his back. He wore only tattered jeans and a somber expression.

Psychotropics swirled in Theo's brain. This prehistoric image of his father was becoming less and less strange as the normal elements—the rotting shed, the swaying trees, the dew-gilded grass between his unshod toes—mutated into oddities.

"You've come with nothing?"

Theo nodded, sweating hands twitching in empty pockets. He could not match the weight of his father's gaze, so he examined the drooping willow branches: greens and browns and harmonic motion in the midsummer breeze. His heart rose into his throat, and some new electricity bubbled inward from his fingertips.

"Then you have all you need."

Tai extended his right hand over the fire toward his son. Awe welled up in Theo, fear and a strange sense of intimacy. He was *chosen*, he thought, by secret forces, to map out unexplored regions. He knew in this moment his own being, however flimsy and broken, would lend impetus to the unfolding of some great machine behind the world.

Theo reached. He felt Tai's calloused grasp encapsulated by excruciating heat, and his poisoned brain perceived their hands fusing into one dripping mass of flesh. For a series of terrifying, slow-motion instants Tai's distorted features and the flourishing pain convinced Theo he was becoming one with a monstrous apparition.

And just as the heat became unbearable Tai released his grip and stepped backward into the dark. Theo's hand fell steaming to his side. Tai trudged up to the house, leaving his son to tend the fire alone late into the night.

• • •

Theo is naked and cold in the wicker seat of his rocking chair, shifting his weight forward and back with rhythmic pressures from his toes against the hardwood floor. Beams of streetlamps enter his space. They form a matrix of isoglosses, encasing the contours of thought and sense. *Always as many shadows as light sources*, Jonas might say. It's Theo who gives the beast fangs. By some imaginative reflex, the room divides into capricious geometries that shift as the streetlights convulse on, off, and on again.

The power grid is nervous tonight. He almost speaks those words, just to feel them on his lips. But in recent months he's been trying to escape the habit of talking to himself. The kerosene camping stove hisses and glows behind him, on the four-squared feet of tile floor below the porcelain sink. When he hears the dehydrated peanut soup reach a slow boil he rises, switches off the stove, and takes up the pot and ladle.

He opens the deep window and sets the steaming pot on the sill. Leaning out into a rush of crisp air, patches of unusual color catch his eye. A woman is prone and motionless on the asphalt. She is drunk, or tired, sick or lonely, dying like a whore on the hard black surface, praying for a vehicle to swerve reckless down the road and shatter her skull—the end of everything for one, a muffled thump and momentary loss of traction for another.

Theo sees in this his chance to do something meaningful. He leaves the window and slips into a wrinkled pair of jeans, arms through the sleeves of a dirt-crusting flannel, and runs out the door, down the stairs, and into the outside.

The streetlights waver. The woman is gone. Theo sighs and goes back inside.

An unmarked cardboard box has materialized at the door to his apartment. The sound of heels clicks down the hallway and down the stairs toward the back exit. Theo lifts the package—two cubed feet in volume, incredible weight for its size. He slides all seven locks in place behind him and sets the package down on the desk. From a drawer he draws a pocket knife, slices at the tape that holds the cardboard flaps in place, then folds them open: petals of a brown, angular flower.

The first item inside is a message on an index card. He recognizes the script immediately: tall capitals and low-swooping G's, lowercase R's that reach over the vowel that follows. It is Velvet's handwriting. The cool vanilla timbre of her voice fills his head as he reads through the instructions. Then he places the letter aside, and reaches into the box with both hands to withdraw a monstrous object.

It is solid black, the weight of lead, covered in knobs and gears and all manner of fantastical protrusions—a true marvel of geometry. He holds it between two open palms a foot apart. For all its density the material is soft. Some of its contours feel steel-

stubbled, hairy to the touch. It grows wide and flat at one end, where four large screw holes pierce its dark solidity at the vertices of a flat square. Theo turns it over in his hands, looks into the deep void at the center of the square. A brassy odor rises from that darkness, and he fears for a moment the thing will leap from his grasp and attach to his face.

But it is quiet, still. The hollow is angled such that he cannot see within, even turning it to the light under the kerosene lantern. He feels a desire emanating from the device, a carnal hunger to become one with a larger machine. Theo must carve out a niche for this oddity in the grand scheme.

• • •

Theo was a frightened young man once, listening to the wild breath of the wood. His teeth were clenched in mute nausea—gristly squirrel for two meals running. But the wind weaving through the trees cooled the sweat on his face just enough to keep what was inside inside.

Jonas appeared from the dark of the wood, with a guitar slung over his back on a leather cord and an armful of sticks. He took a seat on a stone across the campfire from Theo.

"What do you want to talk about?" asked Jonas, tossing a few sticks into the flames.

"The soul."

"The what?"

"The soul."

"Oh, you mean the plastic bag full of wind nailed to the back of my head. It'll find its way, I have a strong feeling it's just passing through." Jonas plucked out a dissonant chord. The notes sounded and Theo felt what might have been a new bruise on his diaphragm.

"How do you find out the truth?" asked Theo. "What do *you* use?"

"This thing's not so bad a tool," said Jonas, eyeing the guitar as if seeing it for the first time. "Blunt maybe, but you've got to pick away in chunks. Too sharp an instrument will carve out the gold along with the rock. But let me tell you something about music. There are no gray piano keys." Jonas started into a slow finger-picking roll, knuckles twirling their way through delicate motions. The sound reminded Theo of a lost dog finding its way home.

"How about the soul," said Theo, insistent.

"The what? I can't hear you." The fire lost its tongues and lapsed into a low smolder. Jonas tucked his guitar behind his back and prodded the embers with a branch. The sharpness of the stick was suddenly known to Theo.

"The soul."

"What about that nasty old thing?"

"Truth is found through the soul, right?"

"Truth?" Jonas laughed. "Can't you just feel it? It's like a vibration, or a dull pain, or at least the promise of a headache in the morning. In the end, just a reminder that something broke a long time ago."

Theo groaned and clutched his chest. Jonas chuckled again. His green eyes were alive in the firelight.

"From the look of things, I'd say you're broken right in *there* somewhere." Jonas knocked on his own chest. "But it's good for you. You gotta grow sandpaper for stomach lining to live the life of a man."

Theo's pain intensified as Jonas stirred the ashes with his branch.

"Please stop that. It hurts."

"Did I ever tell you the one story," said Jonas, ignoring him. "Of the man who was born with his ears and mouth sown shut. Had to rip the thread out with his own two hands."

"I've heard it twice."

"What?" The word echoed through the forest. Every living thing seemed to give pause, to ask the same question.

"I've heard it all before," said Theo. The forest defaulted to apathy.

"The hell you have," said Jonas. "The story changes all the time. Try it this way. . . ."

Theo sat on his stone in the forest, doubled over. Jonas began to weave his yarn, and Theo listened only to focus on something other than the pain dancing through his gut. The dying campfire hissed as drops of water fell from the leaves. It had rained that morning, and the weight of the air told him it might rain again.

• • •

Theo stands on the corner of Fourth and Tyler leaning on the cracked wooden handle of a rusty shovel, one foot on the cardboard box that contains the unspeakable device. The bowed laces of his filthy boots sag, and the collar of his dusty leather jacket rustles against the back of his neck, sparking an itch. He stops fiddling with Velvet's note and removes his hand from the warm pocket to scratch just under the hairline. A siren rises in the distance and his eyes dart in that direction, then gravitate back to the package.

He coughs, rolls his shoulders, lifts one hand to the air and feels the night wind gush between his fingers. Clouds tumble across the bluish dark, lit from below by city lights. Theo imagines the sort of man who would drive for this job. He would be a grim sociopath from the professional underground, with more scar tissue than skin and the eyes of a chameleon.

A pair of headlights whip around the corner one block down, speeding up Fourth and trailing exhaust. Theo squints through the glare and sees a familiar pair of plastic bull horns jutting from the bug-spattered grill. The old heap screeches to a stop on the corner. It rumbles there for a few seconds, under the streetlight, before a click sounds and it sputters to sleep. The beige paint is peeling in strips, raked by driver-side mirrors more than once. It looks like a sixties mafia vehicle salvaged from a scrapyard, and if the legends are true that's exactly what it is.

Forty years ago an infamous gangster purchased a dilapidated parking garage due to be torn down on account of a shaky foundation and byzantine design. He would bring his debtors there, and pursue them through the maze at the wheel of this horned vehicle. These classical theatrics would end with the victim either gouged, run over, or dead from a leap out of the upper stories. The legend may have spawned from a series of unrelated suicides performed off the upper floors of the garage—but the tale that stuck was a motorized minotaur and a clumsy Theseus playing cat and mouse. No one bought the story or the car, until one day a plucky musician wandered onto the lot with extra cash from a tour of the eastern seaboard, and decided he'd love to show off this corrugated, mechanistic death-wish.

The door clanks open. The driver walks around the hood to face Theo. His mass of curly hair is tossed around his face, into his eyes and his mouth. He reaches into the right breast pocket of his tweed jacket, removes a shimmering timepiece on a golden chain, flips it open, shut, back into the pocket. Then a broad, insane smile nearly splits his head in two.

"Vince," says Theo. His voice cracks as he says it, and he clears his throat and says again, quieter. "Vince."

"Hello there," says Vince. "Nice night, yeah?"

The two are silent for a moment, both wary and smiling.

"What's with the shovel?" asks Vince.

"Grave robbing. My acting career isn't taking off."

"And the package?"

"Oh, this old thing? It's my lucky box."

The headlight beams cast Vince's face in darkness as his head tilts back to laugh. He reaches into the left breast pocket, removes a cigarette, and sparks it with a worn brass lighter. He drags, lets a plume out from between chapped lips, then gulps down a cloud.

"Grave robbing," says Vince, exhaling a column of smoke soon washed downwind. "That what this gig is about?"

"Then you're in on it."

"This is the corner they gave me. They told me to look for some joker with a shovel and a box."

"So you know where we're going?"

"So you know what we're doing?"

Two solemn nods, and they climb into the car. Theo tosses the shovel and the box in the back, Vince loads a cassette of grainy jazz and they speed off down vacant Fourth, right on Market, and across the bridge toward the expressway, passing bleary-eyed night-shifters cruising slow in the right lane.

"We're not really robbing graves, right?" asks Vince. "Money's money, but I don't screw around with the restless souls of the dead."

"No," says Theo. "Try weirder."

"And why you and me? They know we know each other? Or it's a fluke?"

"Man, I don't know. Where are we going?"

Vince tosses him a wrinkled sheet of notebook paper from the dashboard. Theo reads a few lines of apocalyptic poetry, something about glaciers and foghorns. He blinks. It seems familiar.

"Just some lyrics. Flip it over, directions on the back. Read them off to me when we get somewhere."

They pass over the rolling black river, with its algae-spattered rocks and cottonwoods surrendering leaves to wind and water, and now the neck-straining office buildings rear up ahead, lit windows here and there, square punctures in giant paper lanterns.

For a moment Theo is bewildered. The shapes are impossible, illusory. They couldn't be so tall, or be growing as his reference frame draws near, or withstand this wind, not without . . . something unseen. It seems the Z-axis has slipped away from Theo for one strange moment, and the vectors of buildings have become meaningless placeholders for an unknown dimension, leaving the spacial equation curiously unbalanced.

"Not sure why they wanted a driver and a . . . whatever you do," says Vince.

Theo squeezes his eyes shut and rubs thumb and forefinger into the lids, pressing his eyeballs slightly deeper in their sockets.

"You should definitely be the one driving," says Theo.

"Well yeah." Vince tosses his cigarette and lights up a needle-thin joint. "I'm the qualified one. As such, I will approach this job with honor." Here he takes a deep hit, gags a bit as he holds in the piney smoke, then releases a stream of white translucence out the crack in the window. "And sobriety."

The emphatic engine heaves Vince's car up the curving incline of the expressway. These two lanes arc four stories above Main on concrete pillars, guided by architectural brilliance around a church steeple that juts just above the level of the road. Then they lead back down to earth, into the tumultuous thick of neon and stoplights and shopping carts that fester with weeds in front of the abandoned gas station, where vines crawl in spirals up the old pumps with their rolling analog dials. Scattered groups of men and women walk the streets and loiter outside convenience stores.

They drive on the outskirts of the older residential district. One block to the left and the streets are uneven brick lined with trees and neoclassical townhouses, not one identical, arranged in rows, amounting to a prestigious clutter that reeks of neglect and stray cats.

That missing element, depth, has returned to Theo's surroundings. His head is on tight again, but he can feel the screws wobble if he changes the focus of his eyes too quickly.

"Hey." Vince takes another pull off the joint. "Give the inside a spray of the fragrance in the glove box. I get pulled over for flickering taillights all the time."

Theo pulls out the aerosol can and sprays.

"Sweet cinnamon," says Vince. "Filched that from a gas station bathroom."

"Vince. This is disinfectant."

"A little closer to the abyss every day, my man. Eagle's claws won't save you when the shit goes down, so why not let your grip slip a little?"

Vince looks over at Theo for too long a time, as if he wants Theo to know he doesn't give two halves of a damn about the road. That smile again, a wicked grin of yellowed train tracks, passenger cars full of jostling schizoids, cargo holds dripping with narcotics, coughing along from one ear to the other. Theo remembers seeing that smile before, on the face of an old friend.

But the nostalgic fog lifts from his eyes, and Theo sees that Vince is back to staring into the road, blinking his long blinks, playing chess with himself in his head, who knew what went on up there. And maybe Vince's grin wasn't so much like Jonas's anyway. And maybe Theo would never have to go through it again, watching a person crumble into a mass of sinister absurdities.

• • •

They drive, thirty weary miles west toward the mountains. Theo rattles off the directions when they reach the exit, and they speed on through a dead quiet town nestled in forested nowhere, running a red light at a deserted intersection and rumbling away into the wild. The windshield wipers manage a few groaning death throes before they fizzle and cease to move. Vince doesn't slow as Theo leans out the window and over the hood to brush dead leaves from the glass with one leather sleeve.

Rolling hills appear on either side. Vince sights the destination: a gravel pull-off semicircle where crusty dumpsters gleam in the pale light of the moon.

"Is that a waning gibbous?" asks Theo.

"Who knows," says Vince. "I'm faded to black over here."

Theo climbs out of the car, hoists the heavy package over one shoulder and takes the shovel by the handle. Vince kills the engine and walks out to plant himself on the hood of the car, legs stuck out at an awkward angle, one calf against the base of each horn. He lights up another joint, and Theo sees the blood in his eyes before the flame disappears.

"You got it from here," says Vince.

The smell of rot and old iron emanates from the dumpsters. Theo looks past them, up the hill where a radio tower looms, red and white rungs on a massive ladder, shorter as they ascend, and four beams converging on a point of red light that winks on and off.

"I guess I do." Theo hefts his burdens and climbs the hill, tall grass swiping his elbows and knees like brushstrokes. He feels the prickle of pores opening along his back by the time he crests the rise and meets the chain-link. The razor wire that adorns the top of the fence in a neat spiral is tinged one second out of two by the seeping red light at the tip of the radio tower.

Theo sets down the package and follows the written instructions, memorized during the drive. He rears back with the shovel and brings its blade down on the gate's battered chain. The chain splits and the padlock falls to the ground. He palms the gate open, walks precisely ten paces inside toward the base of the tower, then breaks ground.

The grass-rooted crust is tough. After that the earth yields in satisfying shovelfuls. He digs two feet across, two feet down. With a stroke he feels something solid, and begins to dig out around it.

It seems to be a pipeline running toward the tower, dark and soft, black brass if there were such a thing. Theo recognizes the ominous color. He brings the package to the hole and lifts the device into the moonlight. As the red flashes creep across its surface, it seems to take on the heartbeat of the radio tower, yet alter the tempo within its bristling blackness. Theo senses a resonance between the device and the pipeline, not just in hue.

Closer inspection reveals a square recess on one side of the pipeline, with four holes for heavy screws. Theo crouches and pushes the square end of the device into its slot. It fits perfectly, naturally, and seems to hum in approval. Of *course* it goes there, it was made for this very place, and this very place was prepared for its coming. Once the heavy screws are in he feels a faint vibration, and the red light on the tower skips one flash.

That's when Vince sees high-beams drifting up the backroad toward his position, the ghosts of twins obscured here and there by a half-mile of trees and the winding path of the road. But their glow is unmistakable, building to a fuzzy incandescence that prompts Vince to ditch the joint, hop into the car, and start the engine.

Just as Theo is finished burying his work, patting down the earth and scattering the uprooted grass over the wound, he hears the painful groan of the minotaur down the hill. He runs out of the gate and sets off down the hill with the shovel and the empty cardboard box. He's breathing hard, his footsteps are heavy and the way is steep, and soon he's not trying to run, just trying to catch himself with each fumbling stride that carries him downhill.

Tires squeal on gravel. Vince thunders off and around a bend. Theo bursts out of the grass into the pull-off and slows to a halt just as a second car whizzes by.

"Vincent, goddamn you." Theo takes it out on the dumpsters with his shovel.

After taking every confusing turn he can find at high speed to elude what might be a pursuer, Vince has managed to outwit only himself. The engine idles as he ponders how to reverse engineer his course. It costs him ten minutes and several dents to turn the bulky vehicle around on the narrow dirt road lined with trees, and over two hours to navigate the labyrinth back to its center, gauging his progress by the proximity of the pulsing red point in the sky.

Meanwhile Theo ascends another hill close by, from which he can see the dumpsters below. This hill is a small junkyard littered with decaying curiosities. He feels no terror here, no anger, among forgotten objects. Just a sadness that soothes his nerves, and a vague interest in conjuring up histories for the more peculiar items that keeps him awake: a katana, a whole lamp post, two-thirds of a stop sign, an upside-down tractor.

The sun begins to rise, lighting a fire under the hills to the east. Trees drink the morning luminosity. Empty cardboard box for a footstool, Theo rests in an armchair that leaks springs, the once-smooth felt exterior crispy with grime. It seems placed here, at the top of a heap of bathtubs and pipes and tables and dressers, for the singular

purpose of allowing him to collapse and stay awhile in relative comfort, wait for the minotaur to come from up the road, and watch a new day open itself to be ravaged by old mysteries.

The Lonely Zionist

The young Jonas Talloway, he says. She went up at him that night and
 stood outside watching the clouds for a while. It's only about a
 bright autumn day fifty some hours after the completion of the first part of
 front edge of a massive square building. From a corner of your vantage point
 doorway. The double doors are a little ajar. The light is coming from
 plain and the depressive turned that way. The light is coming from
 there's nothing but of the room that is not intended to be a part of the
 ready a part on his head. It only takes a few minutes to get to the
 way to be like the rest of the world. The light is coming from
 makes part of it.
 for that matter that the better part of the world is the same in part
 a way with a sense of unity and order and a feeling that it is the right
 of day and night and year. It would flip some of the things in the
 of world light and all other things would be inverted and the world
 backward.
 and the world is the same. It will be a part of the world and the world

TWO

the lonely arsonist

Theo stands outside, watching the clouds for a while. It's early afternoon on a bright autumn day, fifty some hours after the completion of the first job. He is near the front steps of a massive square building, four stories of crusty clay-red brick and barred windows. The double doors are waiting. He considers going home, away from this place and the depressive turmoil that wells up in him every time he walks inside. If there's nothing left of the man then it isn't betrayal to leave him behind. But Theo isn't ready to proclaim him dead, if only because either of them could have ended up locked away. So he takes the steps up to the doors, presses a thumb on the cool metal lock, and makes his way in.

He could never shake the feeling that if he passed through the doors in just such a way, with a precise body chemistry and surface area of facial hair, at just the right time of day and season and year, he would flip some ethereal trigger in the teeming viscera of world-fabric—and all colors would be inverted, and the receptionist would speak backwards.

No such voodoo this time, reality holds. The black and white tiles checker away from corner to corner, red cushioned chairs stand empty and the coffee table is stacked with outdated magazines. Florescent lights hum and radiate a white gleam more unsettling than any dark. The acidic odor of antiseptics hangs on the still air. In one corner is a waiting table for children, yellow surface on stubby blue legs with small red chairs: primary colors so aberrant in the gray scale. Metal rods twisted into loops jut out of the plastic tabletop, where small fingers are meant to guide wooden beads from one meaningless point to another.

A young woman occupies the desk on one side of the room, potted cacti on either side of her work space. She is running her fingers down a pencil, flipping it, running them down again as she stares into a computer screen with her face in one palm. As Theo approaches the desk his shoes squeak on the floor and echo around the vacant lobby.

"I'm visiting Jonas Talloway," he says. She peers up at him through glasses and stares for too long. She lifts the corded beige telephone from the receiver and presses a number.

"Visitor for Talloway," she says. A buzzer sounds from the metal door and a deadbolt clicks open. Theo passes through the door and is met by a cheerful psychiatrist who pats him on the back and leads him down the hallway.

"Good of you to come again, mister Wascomb. Right this way."

They move through narrow white corridors. Theo keeps his eyes on the tiles and away from the florescent tubes, but the pale glow reflects off the floor and he cannot stop seeing it. The two men round a corner and the doctor lifts a phone to unlock another door.

"Apologies," says the doctor. "We have to pass through the loud ward."

"I know we do," says Theo.

The doctor leads him through and into the noises that seep from under the steel doors on either side of the hall. Muffled screams and moans—not voluntary, a kind of audible drool. Each case here is a breathing reflex, all response and no process. They are

terrified or angry or miserable, and they have lost sight of any reason to keep impulses in check.

On the wall between heavy doors hang paintings of trees, rivers, and mountains, done in faded impressionist watercolor. They are there, Theo assumes, to generate a soothing effect, more for the doctors than the patients. But the howling drones on, and all Theo can glean from these paintings is that there is no animal life in an ideal nature.

Another door later the air is still. Theo likens occupants of the loud ward to bodies without minds. Here, where the patients stare into walls without end, he imagines minds without bodies. No sounds, but there is a feeling, or the eerie lack of a feeling—a continuous spiraling downward and away from reality. Engraved on room one-twenty-six is a name that fills Theo with memories of fishing trips, yellow summer fields, bar fights, abstruse conversation, and long days, long aimless nights.

"He's been peaceful recently," the doctor says. "He's on a new round of drugs and he's taken a turn inward. We're not always able to tell if that's for better or worse, or just another arm of the cycle. He's always asking for new paintings though. He does seem to find some solace in language, or at least the connection it signifies. I'll tell you, he's been spinning some spectacular yarns."

The doctor smiles, blinks and shakes his head. "Jonas has an astounding mind."

"Doctor," says Theo, looking him dead straight in the eye. "Never let him astound you."

The doctor looks confused, offended. He speaks again in his clinical tone.

"I'll let you in. If anything happens, we're always watching."

Theo catches a hint of voyeurism in that last line, and it sinks into him at an odd angle. All at once he feels a subtle violation, imagines ears in the walls waiting for a Freudian slip. He shivers, lets the fancy pass. But it only bounces back and rolls over him as a wave of despair when he remembers why he is here.

The door swings open on heavy hinges and Theo enters. If not for the searing whiteness and the bars on the window, the room could be mistaken for a modest

apartment. Bathroom to one side, sink and mirror just outside it, a white dresser with rounded corners tucked against the wall.

Inside is Jonas, on top of his provided white sheets in his provided white cloth shirt and pants. A pair of sandals dangle from his toes as his legs kick in a lazy swaying motion. He is absorbed by a painting on the wall, and he turns his head to one side and then the other as if searching for new perspective. It is a painting of a white chess bishop against a background of airbrushed blues and greens, the only piece on a chessboard floating in space.

Theo takes a seat in the cushioned fold-out chair by the bed as the doctor swings the door closed.

"Jonas," says Theo. He thought he was ready for another round of this sad torture, but already he's feeling weak. "Jonas, how are you?"

"Even the color of the canvas is hard to pin down," says Jonas, pupils still glued to the painting. Theo can see them from the side, black discs glistening in the light from the window, so fragile, floating on concentric rings of green.

"The chess piece," says Jonas. "Carved out of soft wood. Rough edges frame obtuse faces, and a shape meant to be smooth becomes three-dimensional. Coated in two, maybe three layers of milky paint. The parabolic gash reminiscent of a . . . brass train whistle. It can only move diagonally on the squares. It always touches the same color. But just as I complete the idea, the bishop is gone. I'm left with an empty pocket of space in the shape of a bishop. The space is space, and so is not anything, and so it disappears too. Only the essence is left. The stuff from which the object vanished. That colorless tasteless *thickness* of things, that makes sure what is not is not."

Jonas shifts his gaze, and now Theo is looking into those green eyes. The jungle depth is still very much alive beneath the melatonin-seeping gray haze that has clouded them in recent months.

"But it all breaks down," says Jonas. "You can see the texture of the canvas underneath, see?" Jonas doubles over with a fit of muffled, wheezing laughter.

"Are you alright?" Theo reaches toward him with an open palm, then pauses just before touching him and retracts the gesture.

"Who needs who?" asks Jonas. "Every I needs a you. I'm the you to your I. Isn't that it? Isn't that all?" Jonas giggles, sniffs. "It's good to see you, Theo."

"You too. They treat you alright?"

"Oh yeah, yeah," says Jonas, nodding and sniffing. "They treat me fine. Better than I ever treated myself. It's the weirdest thing, but I imagine you're in here with me sometimes."

"What do you mean?"

"In the room next to mine," says Jonas, kicking his feet like a child. "And we rap on the walls and spell out huge long stories one letter at a time. It takes a week to get through one. And we just tell each other stories with little taps. Your stories man, they're so good, so real, like we're both out there together living them."

"Jonas. . . ."

"How's your room?" asks Jonas. "Is it like mine? Are you in the one on the right or the left? Because it's so hard to tell some days where the taps come from. Sometimes you're in the ceiling, or the floor. But you're always there, giving me stories." Jonas wipes his face on a white sleeve, looks at the smear and giggles. Theo feels the knot in his heart sprout another hitch.

"I'm not in the ward, Jonas. I'm not in the ward. I'm out in the city, living in my cold little room."

"Of course you're not. I know that. It's just, the stories are phrased just like you would phrase them. Funny and a little sad. So how are you anyway? How are the guys?"

"Everyone's fine. We shot a new short film the other day, out on the island. We went there once, remember?"

"At night. On . . . something. And there were all those fires through the trees and we wandered around between them talking to those backpacking freaks. And that guy." Jonas giggles again, clutches his sides. "The one with the huge beard and two fingers on

one hand. He thought you were his brother, and when he knew you weren't he thought you were some spirit who stole his brother's skin. And he came at you with the knife."

"And you knocked him down. And threw the knife into the woods."

"And then," says Jonas, eyes to ceiling while one tear flows, leaving a faint reflective trail down his cheek. "He called me Apollo and started kissing my shoes."

Theo's laughter rings hollow and doesn't last long. The frantic brilliance of Jonas's voice has faded since his last visit. It must be the new drugs.

"So why do you come to see me?" asks Jonas, as his eyes gravitate back to the painting.

"You know I give a damn."

"But I was so cruel. I almost brought you here with me. And now that I'm here I even wish I had. I wish you were here, and I feel guilty about that."

"Don't think like that."

"Don't think like *that*. Don't think like *this*. Don't think at all."

"That's not what I meant. I miss you too. I was really feeling the weight, you know. Until recently."

"Recently?"

"I got this job." Theo leans closer. "It's gonna get me out of this hole and up on my feet. Get me moving again. And I'm not gonna hate all this anymore, not gonna hate what's happened to you and me and all these. . . ." Theo winces, balls his fists on his knees. "All these fucking *people* that keep falling apart on me."

Jonas reaches out. Theo twitches, almost pulls away from the touch. But he lets the hand settle on his shoulder.

"Hey," says Jonas. "It's okay. I know you."

Theo looks into the green eyes, and he feels his tear ducts swell.

"You told me you were off the lithium and I thought it was a good thing. I thought it was good. Jonas, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Theo squeezes his eyes shut and turns away. "And now your brain's split in half and I'm the last one left together and

this time it'll be me taken apart, and some other poor bastard watching. This time it'll be me."

"It's okay," says Jonas, grip firm on Theo's shoulder. "I know you. I know you."

• • •

"I've thought about it," said Theo. He was thinking about it right then, even as he strode through the high yellow grass. Early summer, and the sun was bright and warm on the meadow, perched on a flat hilltop above the forest from which the mountains could be seen on all sides, blue and solemn, older than life itself and worn smooth with the proof of it. Jonas walked beside him, blonde hair resonant with the color of the swaying stalks. Birdsong echoed in harmony with the omnipresent rushing of the narrow river moving fast through the northern gulf far below, and ashen grasshoppers leapt and scattered before their slow footsteps.

"You know why they're that color," said Jonas.

"The forest fire."

"They stay that way for a few months after a fire. Trauma felt on the genetic level by three or four generations."

"Have you thought about it?"

"Well sure," said Jonas, as his green eyes darted along the landscape. Jonas once told Theo he had been declared farsighted by an optometrist, the opposite of the most common visual disorder. He claimed it was because he was always looking at the landscape, or the sky, and his eyes had grown accustomed. "Everyone thinks about it once in a while. But I'd never do it."

"Why not?" No idle curiosity in the question. Theo asked as if he needed to know, so that Jonas might say something to him he could recite, like an incantation, on the loneliest nights.

"Because it's too easy. Life is about constant metamorphosis. And what takes us from one form to the next is savagery, hunger, madness even. Don't get me wrong, we

should love death. It's closer to us than anything else, all our lives. But it's sacrilege, in my book, to bring it on before your number's called."

"So when would you do it?"

"Never. I'd piece myself together and move across the world."

"When do you think about doing it?"

"Lot of the time. You?"

"Same."

"Just hold on, man. Shake hands with your shadow."

"You seem different," said Theo. By that he meant the violence had roosted again in those green eyes, the darting and twitching.

"I'm off the lithium," said Jonas.

A pause as Theo adjusted to this.

"That's good," said Theo.

"I think it is. I felt okay on the stuff, but crystalline. Too solid."

"You're yourself, again. I think it's good."

"I think it is."

• • •

Vince, Tennyson, and Miles are chaining cigarettes backstage, lounging on armchairs harvested from a dumpster two alleys down from the club. The mirrored wall framed by gleaming bulbs speaks to a time when this was a dressing room for burlesque dancers, powdering their faces and donning exotic outfits for erotic circus acts. Now it's a club called The Penal Colony, a venue for local musicians categorized under delinquent subgenres.

Vince looks more exhausted than usual, but the other two don't pose him any questions. In their circles it is common and encouraged for a man of artistic promise to slowly destroy himself. The set list is on the coffee table in their midst, a folded sheet of graph paper with wide lettering in red pen.

Through the walls they hear the opening act, the beat poetry of fellow bottom-feeding creator Saul Simmons, stage name Saline Solution. They can't make out the words from here, only garbled passages of what might be language filtered through cinderblock walls. The phonemes are distorted but the timbre is not lost. They can feel the emotive rise and fall of his godless sermon.

"Sounds like Saul's on the ball tonight," says Miles as he flicks ash on the carpet.

"He's one slippery cat," says Tennyson. "Got a way with a crowd."

"Gets *away* with the crowd too," says Miles. "Lady-wise."

Vince keeps glancing up at the clock then back to his worn-out moccasins. He's blinking hard in that curious way, holding his eyelids closed for too long, scrunching his face, then flinging them open like he's trying to scare something away.

"Vince," says Tennyson. "You ready for this?"

Vince nods without looking at him. "Sure thing," says Vince, but his mind is somewhere else, way out in the country, under a throbbing red beacon on a lonely hillside.

His thoughts aren't alone out there. Theo sorts through the events himself as he walks along with Jeremy. They're on the north side of town, crossing the median of a broad avenue, passing under crepe myrtles that bear petals turned crisp and brown. Down the road can be seen the stone statue of a dead general, mounted forty feet in the air on a rearing horse. Theo feels estranged from Jeremy by the secrets he has been privy to, the machine part and the inching progress of dawn on the hillside three nights ago. But the two thousand in bills, stashed under his bed, soothes his woes.

Theo is thinking about paying his electric bill, buying a few lightbulbs and a decent meal. But he'll keep the dehydrated backpacking rations and the camping stove. They represent a comforting minimalism that makes him feel prepared for anything.

Jeremy glances at his watch as they touch sidewalk on the other side of the avenue. He's smoking and walking fast.

"We've missed most of Saul's act," says Jeremy.

"Hey Jeremy," says Theo. "I want to buy you a drink." Jeremy gives him a quizzical glance, ignores the statement, starts fiddling with the settings on the camera that hangs from his neck.

"I dig The Penal Colony," says Jeremy. "Nice venue, got a classic feel to it. Wooden bar, plenty of sitting room at the tables, musty lighting. It feels warm. Not like those skeleton clubs with black everything you find in every alley downtown. Can't get a decent shot in one of those, nothing to frame it with."

"Why do we spend time together?" asks Theo. The question catches Jeremy off guard. His pace slows. Theo matches it.

"What the hell kind of question. I don't know. Because no one else wants anything to do with you. You know everyone thinks you're bad luck?"

"I've heard."

"I don't even know why that is."

"I'll let you know when I figure it out." Theo smiles.

"So I think it's cool," says Jeremy. "That aesthetic is really interesting. Like something's stalking you, and because I'm around you it knows my name too. Not that I buy it."

"Well thanks for sticking by me. Giving me the acting jobs. I was . . . inert for a while."

"You were perfect for the part. That's all there was to it."

They turn another corner and walk on under the streetlights. The sidewalk is wider now, and they pass groups of strangers laughing and smoking and cat-calling, the occasional couple huddled together head to shoulder, the conspicuous dealer with bandanna and hooded sweater walking around and around a telephone pole, the bouncer looking tough and heavy outside with his arms behind his back. It's a cool cloudy night. Music and warmth spill out of the bars into the street. Cars flow down Barnes and through the intersections, white lights heading west, red heading east.

Theo and Jeremy approach the entrance of The Penal Colony, above which scrolls by on a diode display: *Damn Them Torpedoes tonight at 10, Saline Solution at 8: a night of*

Poetry and Post-Rock. They flash forged press identification at the bouncer—tampered photocopies of Jeremy's old press pass back when he freelanced for a local music magazine, still warm from recent lamination. The bouncer waves them through.

They take a seat at the bar as Saul's set comes to a close. The young black man is up on stage in a sequined green tuxedo many sizes too large, sleeves drooping down over his thumbs, and his bare feet poking out from where the pant legs bundle in folds on the floor. It's part of his act, some point to be made about superfluous appearances masking spiritual poverty. He's winding down the crowd with a smooth verse:

*I think I maybe could, if I only would,
Keep my stomach full and my eyes open:
I'll breathe fire. . . .
And wildflowers.*

Saul takes a bow and struts off the stage to a chorus of applause from the sizable crowd lingering and swaying on their feet in the dark. The lights come up easy and the speakers pump in delta blues. The crowd meanders toward the bar for drinks between acts. The drum set, bass amp, and violin amp wait on stage for the men who will bring them to life.

"Two somethings, hoppy and dense," Theo says to the bartender. She smiles through too much lipstick and her blonde curls bob as she walks to the tap and back.

"I'll be damned," says Jeremy. "You actually bought me a drink. What'd you do, rob a liquor store? Sell your seed?"

Theo ignores him and takes a sip. The frothy head sloshes on his upper lip, and he comes away with foam on his stubble. It's juicy, bitter, almost creamy. Jeremy taps Theo's shoulder and points to a few curvy silhouettes in a distant corner of the room.

"Eights and nines on your six," says Jeremy. "You just soaking up sound tonight, or are you on the prowl?"

Theo looks over his shoulder. In one pocket of space near the far wall a host of beautiful women linger, some in conventional jeans and blouses, others on the fringe of strange styles that mirror musical tastes. A quiet spite rises in him, a sour taste in the back of his throat. He knows it's irrational and cruel, but he lets the feeling run its course in hopes it will cleanse his system on the way out.

"Crazy snake-women," says Theo, turning back to the bar. He takes a swig of the beer and sets the glass down hard. "You know why they flock together like that? So saps like you and me will give them even more attention. It's a goddamn event horizon of vanity."

"Check yourself, Theo. Your broken heart is showing." Jeremy undoes the top button of his white collared shirt as he eyes a girl down the bar. "Just keep your distance for now. Stay cool, then move in for the kill at the after party."

"No kills tonight," says Theo. Sheryl is in his head now, dancing under the stars in a field, laughing in the passenger seat, pressed against him, then going away with tears in her eyes. He's been thinking about her more in recent weeks, and he hates it, not just the sense of loss but the impotence of nostalgia.

"You're no fun." Jeremy raises his glass and drains half the beer. He wipes his mouth with his wrist, fiddles with the settings on his camera, then starts shooting photos of a girl down the bar. She gives him a confused smile. "It's okay," he says. "I'm with the press."

The lights dim and the crowd wanders back toward the stage. Jeremy tells his new lady he's got work to do, they'll catch up later at the after party. The two men polish off the dregs of their beers and walk toward center stage.

Tennyson is the first to come out, bass slung behind his back. His beard is especially ornate for the occasion, sporting more knots and wooden beads than ever. The spotlight shines on his waxed head, turning the tan skin to a stark white that highlights the pi symbol on his forehead. He plugs in, and over the scattered cheers comes a sludgy riff played with a violin bow on the low B-string, cycling back on itself every ten seconds, grinding on for over two minutes. The riff moves up one half-step as

Vince appears. He snatches the bow from Tennyson's hands on his way to stage right, and takes the fight to his violin. The stage lights make an aura of his curly orb of hair. Tennyson is playing the same passage now with his fingers, more punctuated and rhythmic, while Vince tears up a soaring melody with his eyes tight shut. Another minute in and Miles lumbers into view, dreadlocks swaying as he walks to the drum kit. He blows a kiss to the crowd and takes the throne. The minimal kit looks like a toy, arranged around his shirtless muscular bulk. He jumps into the fray with steady splash cymbal and syncopated snare strikes.

Damn Them Torpedoes is in full swing now. The wall of sound washes over the crowd. Meanwhile Jeremy is leaning under the musicians with torso on the stage, taking shot after shot with his digital. Theo just stands there, swaying with the rest of the crowd, feeling a delightful beery fuzz in his head and hands. He closes his eyes now and then for his favorite passages. He is drowning in the sound, and he feels, along with a rare euphoria, the bonds of place and time that transform the crowd into a single breathing organism.

Near the end of the show Theo's ears, drilled in the art of listening to this particular group, pick up an abnormality. Vince seems to deliberately stray a few cents off from the tuning of the bass. This creates a faint grating effect in the sound difficult to identify, an almost undetected straining-against-itself within the mass of resonant noise.

• • •

Eighteen and impatient, Theo stood on the hillside at two in the morning on a summer night by the road in the front yard of his father's house, hands in pockets, singing to himself. Hours earlier Tai Wascomb had slipped into an unconsciousness sustained by alcohol and medication. His muscles were already beginning to deteriorate, but he wouldn't tell Theo of the disease for another year. He would hold himself high and keep his eyes shining as if he actually had a future.

Fireflies winked and spun in the humid air. Theo imagined them as cameras, flashing to capture him from every angle.

A new light source rumbled into view over a bump in the road. The headlights bounced in harmony with potholes in the asphalt, and the sepia glow they cast overpowered the moonlight. He shielded his eyes as the car rolled to a stop near the mailbox. The driver door opened, and there was Sheryl.

The engine was still running as they stared each other down. She wore a tight flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up past the elbow, loose jeans, and a necklace that suspended an alligator tooth between her breasts. She had a feminine strength about her in poise and form, with modestly toned arms and slightly broad shoulders. But she was curvaceous and she knew it, so she stood with her hips naturally cocked to the side. Her hair was nutmeg brown and chopped at the shoulders. Her soft lips formed a smile, then parted into an ecstatic grin, displaying that delightful warmth he would never forget.

He jogged down the grassy incline and threw his arms around her. They kissed. That was how it began with Sheryl and Theo for the second time, the time that would last, and hurt all the more for it when they drifted apart.

Theo took the wheel. The windows were down and the music was playing: solo piano work on the low octaves.

"Sorry I called so late," said Sheryl. She was leaning back in the passenger seat, sandals cast off, one bare foot on the dashboard and the other perched on the mirror outside the open window. "Wasn't sure if you'd be home but I had to find out." Her voice was tender and gently slurred.

"And here I am." Theo loved his time at the wheel, taking turns just fast enough to keep things interesting. The routine had begun, the late night pickup and the aimless drive to one of ten locales, just to have some small adventure to stash away with the rest of the memories.

"It's strange," she said. "You've been in my dreams."

"You've been in mine." Theo wasn't lying. "That's our connection, our clairvoyance. And you know, we have to use that power only for good."

"Only good? Maybe a little bad?"

"Maybe a little." Theo kept right at a fork heading off toward a public park where he knew no one would be. "Not every moral decision is black and white. There's a sizable gray area."

"Plenty of gray area," she said with a definitive nod and a laugh that made him want to pull over and jump her. The music flowed on through a delicate passage, and Theo recalled a phrase spoken by Jonas that brought with it a hint of unease.

• • •

The stars are droplets of vanilla congealed over black plate glass. The after party drones on inside Jeremy's house while Theo and the host relax on the balcony. The conversation has taken Jeremy through half a pack of smokes, but he's ever ready with another in one of the many pockets on his khaki safari vest, stashed also full of film rolls and matches. His phone's been rattling on the glass table behind him for some time, probably that girl he met at the bar sending messages from inside wondering where he's gone. But he lets the tension build on that front for a little while, enjoying the exchange.

"You know cellphones aren't our style," says Theo.

"Some of us artists actually want to be found." Jeremy drags deep and coughs twice, hocking a wad of throat-decay off the balcony.

"A known avant-garde film director. Sounds mutually exclusive on principle."

"That was my philosophy back in film school. Same philosophy that got me kicked out, and made the failure seem like an accomplishment. You know, you want to be eccentric for the sake of being eccentric, and there you are. It took me a while to see that tautologies are obstacles. So the whole theory kind of collapsed in on itself. But my films still come out in the same style."

"So what's in the practice, once the theory's shot?"

"Maybe it's just too late for me to be good at anything else."

"Then tell me why you do what you do."

"I'm not sure," says Jeremy, as he leans over the railing to look out past the telephone wires and the glowing gas station signs that seem to float in the distance. "All the films and photos. I guess you could chalk it up to the old complex of wanting to make the world stop, keep a few moments from getting away. But really, in that sense, I think what I do is shameful. Almost a sin."

The two men are side by side, facing opposite directions. Theo is listening, back against the railing, facing the window through which he sees the party goers and the fans and the clownish artists drinking, dancing, alive in the moment. He sees Vince in there, showing off spastic dance moves. Theo and Vince have avoided eye contact all night. There's been a bond between them ever since the first job, and they haven't yet learned how to act as if it weren't there.

"What do you mean?" asks Theo. "You do great work. Everyone knows it."

"Great work, sure. But sometimes I feel like the man with the camera . . . he's actually the one who feels powerless. People who are really at home in this world, their art is their life. They let the moments come and go and they don't feel the need to pin them down and tack on fabrications. People like me, we have to step into a microcosm, bury ourselves in it, waste our time creating something other than what's right in front of us. Maybe because I'm a control freak. Or because I don't have faith in anything outside myself. Maybe because I hate this place, deep down."

This place. The words resonate with Theo, whose mind jumps so easily to abstractions: not the balcony, not the city, not the country. He's talking about *this place*.

"Your commitment to pinning something down," says Theo. "That's a choice too. And as long as you're acting on choices, I'd say you're forming a life as good as any."

"Yeah, I've thought of that. But it still eats at me."

Miles stumbles out the kitchen door and onto the balcony. He swigs champagne straight from the bottle, and as he takes it from his lips it foams over and rolls down his knuckles to drip on the wooden boards.

"You know man, you know." Miles is speaking in his drunk voice, a rastafarian drawl that bends each long vowel and slurs short vowels into schwas. "Two years back I crossed the ocean with a drum kit and a dream. A noble, glorious dream." He wraps his long arms around Theo and Jeremy, who glance at one another and laugh. "My father, he was a barrel-maker on the lake plateau in the east, and he slaved away for years to buy me passage."

"And you stepped off the tanker," says Jeremy.

"Without a cent to your name," says Theo.

"Without a cent, gentlemen. And here I am, among friends, making love and music. Ah friends, ah dear brothers, if I knew the name of the almighty I should pray here and now that these days never end."

"Yeah man," says Jeremy, imitating the dialect. "Love to the world."

"Theo," says Miles. "There's this guy wants to meet you. Some kinda shaman I swear, crafting some mad substance. His name's Gabriel. But for God's sake man, have a pull from the bottle first." Miles laughs his infectious laughter, high pitch tee-hees through bright white teeth. Theo complies, then passes the fizzing bottle to Jeremy.

"Sounds like I've got a business call," says Theo, heading for the door to the inside. He calls over his shoulder at Jeremy as the party noise envelopes him. "You better quit moping soon and find that girl."

Theo wades into the sound and dim lighting, nudging through the punks and professionals, showing off their peculiar idiosyncratic flair. Saul is over in one corner, still shoeless and wearing his flamboyant green tuxedo, talking up a group of hip ladies. Theo spies Tennyson on a couch near the speakers, lording over the musical selections, flicking ash from a blunt into the subwoofer and giggling as the particles bounce and spiral into the booming void. Theo catches fragments of conversation as he moves through the apian humming.

"I've never seen eyes like yours. . . ."

"The word *recursive* has really started to penetrate my vocabulary. . . ."

"I swear to you she was completely upside-down. . . ."

"I could make songs like those with a mic and a dying raccoon. . . ."

"Pieces of tuxedo all over the highway. . . ."

Theo is about to drop the name Gabriel to a few strangers when he catches a whiff of something that makes his head spin. It's an evil steam of bitter pungency, vegetable slime and synthetic vapors, and it's coming from down the hall, from the door to the basement. The air grows foggy, a pervasive warm moisture that sticks to the walls and seems to gather behind Theo's eyes in pockets of dizzying pressure. The source is at the bottom of the stairwell behind the door. By the time his hand is on the knob the steam has rushed his bloodstream, and the walls seem to undulate at the peripheries of vision.

Theo steps down into the basement, walls and floors of concrete panels, washer and dryer and water heater off to one side. The concrete floor is inscribed with a clock-face in blue chalk, and three lit candles, the only light sources, rest on its surface. One is at the end of a drawn minute hand, another on the tip of the hour hand, a third at the center of the circle. The air is soupy with mist, and the source is now apparent: a small iron cauldron full of unknown liquids, held at boiling point by a lit can of flammable gel. A lone figure sits cross-legged, bent over the steaming concoction. He wears a black jacket with a wide hood like a cobra's within which the vapors gather, as his shoulders rise and fall with deep-chested inhalations. He breathes like an oracle over a sulfurous fissure.

His head lifts out of the fumes. He is a handsome older man, with bald head and devilish goatee. The candlelight casts wavering shadows from his sharp cheekbones up to his brow. Even through that shadow, black steel rims can be seen, resting in elegant, rounded squares over his bloodshot all-pupil eyes. But the glasses are lensless, and in a daze Theo wonders what the world must look like poised within an ever-present frame.

"I'm Gabriel," he says in a soothing tenor. "Take a seat Theodore, I was waiting for you."

"This is Jeremy's basement." Although Theo begins to disbelieve that. "Were you invited? What the hell is this?"

"Call it fortune telling, geomancy, sand divination." Gabriel's voice is a melody over the cauldron's mirthful gurgling. "They're all just an eloquent blend of mathematics and intuition."

Theo sits on the other side of the illustrated clock. He's wary, though willing to weather these proceedings, if only for the sake of novelty. He notices that the positions of the candles indicate roughly one twenty-five. Theo has never worn a watch, but he knows it's nearly correct. Gabriel sees him eyeing the artwork.

"Maybe I set that time an hour ago, and causal entanglement made you wander in just now. Or maybe I shifted it to that time as you walked down the stairwell. Those two possibilities hint at what you're up against." Gabriel looks at him through the steam, from within that wide hood, behind those empty frames. Maybe it's the fumes, but Theo senses irony there—the dark outline that forever establishes Gabriel's periphery changes nothing before him.

"I found myself one day without a pencil sharpener," says Gabriel. "Pencil shavings everywhere, scattered across the floor. Evidence of its presence. The sharpener itself? Nowhere to be found."

The ceremonial atmosphere has robbed Theo of his humor, the one defense mechanism he has left. So he becomes a reverent listener, happy for now to lapse into the faithful delusion of waltzing into the hands of fate.

"Did you find it?" asks Theo.

"I did. It was in my back pocket the whole time. But during its absence my only option was to etch my thoughts in dull pencil. This was no tragedy. I found my incarnations increased in lyrical density when the words assumed a form analogous to their epistemological content. That is to say, blurred. I never used that sharpener again. And when the tip of my favorite pencil was worn to a smooth plateau of graphite, and my sentences were shapeless streams of gray, all was as clear as it ever would be and I ceased my efforts of expression."

Theo nods, strokes his stubbled cheeks.

"Theodore," says Gabriel. "Do you ever find you don't have the strength to refocus your eyes?"

"Often."

Gabriel shoots discreet glances to either side, as if playing high-stakes poker with unseen demons.

"I'm sorry, where was I? Deep in thought no doubt. But there being depth in all directions I find it a nuisance to rediscover my angle of entry."

Gabriel is silent for a moment, then his face lights up with recollection.

"Ah yes. Your occupation. You are a journeyman of the highest calling. But you are only given one piece at a time, like all the others."

Theo shivers. The radio tower winks in his mind's eye. The heavy device bristles in his hands. The skyward curl of an ironic smile graces Gabriel's expression, breaking at last that cruel stone face. Wrinkles appear on either side of his mouth. He's forty, fifty years old maybe, but he is ageless in this intoxicating haze. He poses a question.

"What happens when the oversoul can't hear itself think?"

• • •

Theo takes the stairs two at a time. He's moving too fast for his clouded mind to keep up, and even as he trips on the last stair and hurtles into the hallway he has a panicked revelation: thought rarely precedes action. He lands hard on the floorboards, grunts, then just lays there with his eyes closed seeing kaleidoscopic fractals wink and spin on the insides of his lids. Someone lifts him to his feet and now he faces Jeremy.

"Had a bit too much," laughs Jeremy. He sniffs the air, glances around. "Hey man, you smell that?"

Theo blathers a description of his experience in the basement. He soon finds his words aren't lining up, so he slows down, catches his breath, and blurts a question.

"Did you invite a guy named Gabriel?"

"Gabriel? The guy funded all my recent projects, he's always welcome. What'd you do, kick the old man out?"

"No, I just. . . ." Theo dusts himself off, prods a scraped elbow with a bony finger. "I never met him before."

"You could say he kept you alive the past six months. Think your salary came out of my pocket?" Jeremy starts walking back to the living room. Theo calls after him.

"You seen Vince? I need to talk to him."

"Left with some girl a couple minutes ago." Then Jeremy walks back into the small crowd and starts dancing with a group of girls. Theo walks up to the end of the hallway and just watches the bodies move for a while. A tall figure leaps up out of the mass and grabs hold of the ceiling fan. It's Miles, swinging back and forth, legs dangling. Cheers all around, until screws strip their sockets and he lands on his ass with the whole mechanism crashing down on him. Jeremy's spewing curse words, and Tennyson laughs hysterically as he turns the music up to overpower the altercation. It's still a slow motion film for Theo, but his head's beginning to clear.

Out the front door and the crisp night air rushes over him. The street is lined with trees and each corner dotted by a lamp post. A whispering autumn breeze rattles the bare branches of cottonwoods, and blows the fallen leaves in low circles across the street. It's the old residential district on the north side, with its columned, narrow, two-story houses nestled in quaint rows. They were built a century ago by an emerging professional class, and now they are divided into two or three apartments each, rented cheap by the lingering youth of the city. Theo lived in one of them once, with Jonas and Sheryl, in what he hopes were happier days.

Two in the morning approaches with unchecked speed, and the moon is obscured by cloud-cover bloody with light pollution that hangs thick over downtown.

Theo is out of place. His legs are two logs of pulsing weight in his jeans, and his head a nest of disturbing thoughts. For one tense moment he realizes he is about to let himself speak out loud to nobody, to let the strange details tumble out so they won't

hold power over him. But he holds back, and swallows the words down into the guttural darkness where they eat away at his insides.

Out of the darkness comes the screeching of rubber break pads on spinning wheels. A figure on a bicycle halts before him and dismounts. He can't be over eighteen, just another miscreant on his way back from a party up the block.

"What's good, brother?" he says. The kid is white and tries hard not to talk like it.

"Not much," says Theo without slowing down.

"What are you up to this fine night?"

"I was thinking about freezing to death. Weather permitting."

The kid laughs. He's flipped his bike around to walk alongside Theo.

"Hey, you're funny man. My name's. . . ."

Theo hears the name and forgets it instantly.

"Listen," says the nameless kid. "You got a cigarette for a brother?"

"I quit."

"That's what they all say."

"I quit alright." Theo is stoic, immersed in trivial memories of Jonas hidden in a cloud of smoke, burning through four packs a day, reading and writing and building down there in the basement. He always offered cigarettes to Theo even though they both knew he quit, maybe because his slow suicide wanted company. Theo's blank stare has the kid frightened and getting ready to mount and pedal far away. But Theo sees the bike and his face goes to stone. He's seen it before, a long time ago.

"Where'd you get that bike?" asks Theo.

"Someone custom built this mother out of scrap pipes. I found it in a dumpster, bent it straight, got new tires and breaks. There's a story or two in here." The kid gives the frame a few affectionate slaps, then takes his leave, carried off into the night by the silver steed.

They're in there alright. In the hollow sections of the steel pipes, pockets of air closed off from the outside—that's where the stories are, waiting to be released when hundreds of erosive years finally chisel a hole in the soft waves of welded lead.

The voice of Jonas meshes with the remnants of the cauldron fumes to cause one last spasm in Theo's brain, spawning an elaborate vision. . . .

Theo *knows* that bicycle. He built it himself, to ride around the countryside town of his origins, in the service of youthful promiscuity. Theo senses that the bike is at this very moment present in two locations at once. In one permutation it is speeding down the road to be struck by a car. In another it is twisted and motionless inside a dumpster in a gravel lot behind a gas station a hundred miles away. That was where Theo left it all those years ago, and there it will rust for twenty years more.

Over that expanse of time something akin to an aching desire will be expressed, as by poetry, in its flat tires and contorted frame. That desire, untainted by the abstractions of thought and language, will grow in strength as a crystal within a stone. Because of the purity of its dream, Theo's bicycle—after being run over once and forgotten, after sinking into obscurity under heaps of broken glass—will create a slippage in time, and will phase through to manifest itself within a place and moment where and when a young man with mechanical knowledge and acute empathy for lost objects will stumble across it. And he will, as he has, fulfill the desire of the bicycle: one last crossing with its loving maker before the end.

• • •

Theo is glazed with sweat beneath the sheets. Headlights that pass through the blinds and glide across the ceiling in narrow lines of dusty orange lull him to sleep, and he begins to dream.

The earth turns to keep the world in perpetual dusk. Summer reigns, and all is tranquil and swaying. Theo and Jonas are two of a band of children carrying driftwood boards, imagined into steel swords. They follow the trampled pathway across the plain, bordered on either side by tall grass and knotted, blossoming trees. Bright yellow stars seem to free themselves from the stalks of wheat and rise to be blown across the sky.

The children are compelled to follow the road, and as they go they climb the old trees and pluck insects from flowers.

Then the living trees disappear, and now the children must bound over obstacles of felled lumber. Then the lumber, too, is gone, built into wooden framework pieced together with rusty nails and bridged by lattices of rope. It is a maze of a playground, and it grows more complex and dangerous as they push onward.

The sky darkens as the wooden platforms become moving parts. Logs and chunks of scrap metal whizz over their heads as they cross precarious bridges over bottomless chasms. And they are no longer dancing through nature but running, sprinting, fighting for survival within an acid-seeping factory, dodging bladed gears and mechanized knives, still clutching the splintering hilts of childish swords that hinder their agility.

All along they were inside the factory, ever since the plains and the trees and the summer grass. The road was an assembly line, funneling them into the black distance where flames lick at the starless sky, where the war wages on.

• • •

It's a long walk on a cold morning, several miles of time to remember, regret, and puzzle. Theo could not manage more than a few hours of sleep. He blames his sour mood and throbbing headache on last night's foggy basement.

He passes through downtown where suited men with briefcases and cellphones strut down the sidewalk, where impatient men and women wait in line at the coffee stands, and where the old couples cluster at the tall wooden doors as church bells chime, a summons to an unknown hereafter. He walks south toward the river and crosses the bridge, looking down on the islands below. Cars roll past. The gray sky hovers and the wind slices through his jacket.

He remembers his hunger just as he reaches home, then forgets it again when he sees the new package outside his apartment door. He hefts the box and goes inside, sets

it on the desk by the typewriter. He wants to see through the cardboard without tearing off the tape. Maybe a bomb is ticking away inside. The thought is comforting. They will find his remains blackened and scattered in the burnt-out building, and his friends will bury him and recite speeches about how he was a good man, about how his potential would have been reached had his life not been cut short. And out of respect no one will mention the possibility that he never had a destiny, or had he one, that he had missed it in favor of crawling into memories and wasting away.

The phone rings from its perch on the wall. Theo lifts it off the hook and up to his ear.

"Is this Theodore Wascomb?"

"Who is this?"

"Name's Robert. Miles is my cousin. He told me last week you had some experience in automative repair, and you might need a job. That right?"

Theo looks down at the package, twirling the phone cord with a finger. He knows the squalor of the room: porcelain sink flecked with shaven stubble, the gas camping stove beneath it on the tile, a few sets of clothes on hangers dangling from the ceiling on pipes. It is a den for wallowing and fading, modeled subconsciously after that of his father.

A possible future flashes through Theo's mind. He throws away the package, forgets the whole frightening business, takes the job in another greasy garage, earns his keep, finds his stride, lets the past be the past, settles in with a new girl in a warm new place, sees Jonas smile as they walk out of the sterile asylum together into the filthy free-flowing air.

But no, that future feels more unreal to him even than the gentle descent that has already begun. Maybe there is too much of Jonas in him still, that frenzied hunger for irregularity, and the creed that sanity and truth are mutually exclusive.

"Thanks," says Theo as he runs his fingers along the cardboard seams. "But I found another job."

Theo snuck into his father's room one night. He was nineteen. Tai had staved off revealing the diagnosis until a few months ago, when the muscle deterioration had accelerated and he had been confined to a wheelchair.

Theo closed the door quietly behind him. The only light sources were the humming grow lamps that hovered over the various strains of medical-grade indica, lined up on the shelves along the wall. The plants radiated a ghostly aura, their star-shaped leaves a bright spring green, sprouting from bushy stems. Theo came to filch a few fuzzy lobes that would not be missed, his own secret yield of the crop. He would smoke it and sell it and stir it into his tea in the mornings.

He had not counted on finding his father semiconscious in the wheelchair in the middle of the room, wheels deep in the shag carpet, as he smoked a joint and listened to a booming voice narrate the adventures of Don Quixote de la Mancha. This was Tai's way now, to let the smoke fill his lungs and weaken the wholeness of mind and body, load a book-on-tape into his speaker system, and drift away.

For a moment Theo paused on his errand to sit behind his father in the smoky room and absorb a fragment of the tale. He fought back a wave of sadness and pity, trying to understand how the transformation took place right before his eyes. From the feet to the cane, from the smile to the scowl, from wisdom to lethargy, from the cane to the wheelchair. Now so little left to see. Just ears and lungs without desire, slipping down into a numb hypnosis where pain and joy could not follow.

Theo fought off the savage helplessness, knowing even then it would resurface without warning countless times in the years to come. He slunk behind his father and picked a few buds. The depression of that opium den followed Theo out of Tai's bedroom, down the stairs, under the sheets, and into twisted dreams.

And the bad feelings followed him still farther, out on the long rides in Jonas's father's sports car which should have felt so alive if it weren't for that dark interior. The knowledge that Tai was withering all alone and would not even accept his son into his

cold, shrinking world to learn its tasteless color, if only that Theo would recognize it when it came for him.

And so Jonas dropped Theo off early one morning after a night of drug-addled galavanting, and they both stepped out of the car to see that the house was burnt to the ground. Firetrucks on damage control soaked the ashes. Emergency responders picked through the rubble. By some incredible defiance of physical law the wheelchair was not buried in the wreckage but rested triumphantly on top of it all. Slouched in that scorched leather seat were the blackened remains of the lonely arsonist.

THREE

hollowing

Tennyson and Miles share a bench on a stretch of the riverside trail between a sloped boardwalk and a long rotten staircase that leads down to the bank. The bench is high above the river, at an overlook built on top of an old stone column with no rail bridge left to give it purpose. The columns proceed at regular intervals across the river, splitting the current into rows, all the way to the other side where the last one is swallowed by the trees on the opposite bank. Here on the south side the swampy land below the overlook is overrun with sinuous kudzu, climbing the cracks in the stone halfway up the column and running along the moist earth. A path is worn into the vines, leading to a gravel strand that meets the canal under the expressway bridge.

The morning's slow fog has not yet evaporated. Tennyson huddles beneath his jacket and layers of flannel, black stocking cap pulled down over his ears and forehead. Miles is in sweat pants and a blue sweater decorated by the silhouette of a tangled tree. His dreadlocks float free around his dark, chiseled face in the light breeze. Their hungry eyes aim across space at the two trucks and six men gathered on the gravel strand. Two months ago they sighted this weekly phenomenon, and since then they've made a

tradition of spending Sunday afternoons with a dose of fuzz in these nosebleed seats to what they assume is scheduled gang activity.

They pass a joint sprinkled with mint and a pinch of salvia. It's getting down to the thick middle now, the cherry a wide orange cone, paper crumpling and drifting off in blackened, dog-chewed shapes turning to smoke before they touch ground.

Meanwhile Theo is strutting up the boardwalk. He sneaks up behind them and pats them on the back. Tennyson jumps, Miles eases his head around.

"Theo," says Tennyson. "Trying to keep my skin tight."

"What's good, Theodore?" says Miles.

"Taking a walk. What are you kooks up to?" Theo takes his place leaning on the railing, hands in his jacket, gray-peppered hair hanging soft over his ears, gray-blue eyes scanning the river.

"Watching some thoroughly mismanaged gang diplomacy," says Tennyson.

"Mismanaged?" says Miles. "Or brilliantly crafted to appear as such?"

"You pass the Reaper on the way?" asks Tennyson.

"The black bum in the purple poncho," says Theo.

"Never speaks," says Miles. "Never even moves. He's in the same spot under that bridge all the damn time."

Theo looks beyond the overgrown bank and out to where the river runs a faintly blue gray, white-veined in the rapids, like a half-mile wide seam of granite. Winter is coming on, and already he can feel in his bones how frigid the water must be.

"Theo, I heard this story the other day," says Tennyson.

"Yeah?"

"So this philosopher in ancient Greece has his students gathered round, and he tells them the world is held up on the back of a giant turtle. One of the students asks him: Well old man, what holds up the turtle? And the old man says: It's turtles all the way down."

Theo has to chuckle at that. Tennyson giggles. Miles is busy watching the men on the strand.

"I thought about it," says Tennyson. "And I found the tragic second punchline. See, the ancients had no idea this world is adrift in an endless void. Those sorry bastards were convinced that every damn thing had to be *grounded* somewhere, that gravity was a universal constant. Now we know the very force that keeps our feet in the dirt is a *variable*, that there's no law says we gotta have a foundation anywhere."

"I get you." Theo looks upriver toward the islets of stone. He is more distant from these two than usual. Ever since the first job he's felt a man apart, elevated by the pride of secrecy.

"What's more," says Tennyson. "I am convinced there is yet a third, four-dimensional punchline hidden in there, some special relativity business, a joke hinged on the principle that gravity warps time. But I sure as hell cannot think that-a-way right now."

Miles broods, then chimes in. "If the laws of nature respected paradox, the physical would evaporate and the spiritual would float off and find something better to do."

A few minutes of silence pass. Theo doesn't want to be here but he doesn't want to be alone. So he lingers on the rail, feeling the first inklings of a downturn in his manic cycle.

"You know whales speak in dialects," says Tennyson.

"We should start a doom-reggae project," says Miles.

"You think they have to alter their accents as they migrate?"

"Slow, heavy offbeats and some melodic screaming about love."

"Theo, if you could be something else," says Tennyson. "If you weren't, you know . . . whatever you are."

"I'd be a cartographer. But there's nothing left to discover."

"I disagree," says Miles. "The earth is ever unfolding. New grottoes and nooks all the time, geographic or otherwise."

"What a tangled web we weave," says Tennyson, and drags on the roach until his fingertips burn, then tosses it over the railing.

Miles and Tennyson stand and stretch, ready to go home and scrounge for more drugs. Theo follows them down the boardwalk and onto the river trail lined with red and yellow foliage and quaking branches. They head toward the path that will lead them up to the street. They climb a flight of stairs and pass over the aluminum-paneled bridge with the chain-link fence that arcs up and over, as if to deter someone from jumping onto the railroad tracks down below.

They pass under a four-lane bridge, where the homeless man stands in a purple poncho with the hood drawn up and over his brow, just his wide nose and broad lips hanging out under the shadow. This is the man they call the Reaper, still as stone, so quiet as to generate a gravity well of silence around him. Theo, Miles, and Tennyson walk by him, careful to avoid eye contact, and for the moment of passage they are immersed in his reverent aura.

• • •

"When I was young, I always imagined souls were shaped like curled-up woodlice."

Jonas said it from his perch among the branches of the young maple tree in the churchyard. Moonbeams shone through the repetitive geometry of green leaves that shielded him from the night breeze. When he struck a match to ignite another cigarette the tree was lit from within, and during those fleeting seconds Theo seemed to hear the voice of the flame.

Phosphorous and friction conceive me. Cold all around, drinking me in. Soft wood feeding me from below. No wind around me, I am sheltered by green. Ah, the taste of tobacco once again.

Jonas sat straddling a branch with his back against the trunk, feet planted on two smaller branches below, elbows on branches to either side like the armrests of a throne. Theo struggled to find a comfortable spot, feet shifting awkwardly among the limbs. Jonas snuffed out the match with two wet fingers.

Each life passes so soon. I will be again. I am smothered, drowned. . . . I rise in a cloud and disperse.

"I just remembered that," said Jonas. "Isn't that strange? A bloated insect about the size of your torso, an organ-less husk, curled into a ball, spindly legs hanging out, not squirming. And when you sleep it drifts out of your ribcage and hovers just over your body, ready to leave but not quite, tied to you somehow. And you can see it there right before you lose consciousness, just floating, waiting to be let go."

Jonas offered the cigarette. Theo waved it away. He looked down to the base where roots, gnarled and twisted, were growing slow and sure through the alternating perpendicularity of hard red bricks set in mortar.

Jonas chuckled over nothing and drank in a gasp of cigarette smoke. Theo shifted, feet now balanced on a thin limb, holding most of his weight with hands wrapped around a thicker branch up above. He was stretched to his full bony length, shaken by the cramps in his joints, pale and out of place among the lush leaves. Jonas meanwhile sank deeper into his roost, green eyes glossed by the soft leaf-filtered moonlight. They experienced together that time-tested state of evasion and pursuit: the endurance of disciplined escapism, and the persistence of hard reality.

"Jonas," said Theo. "I lost my job."

"Why?" Jonas laughed.

"I was missing out on the wider world. There were better uses of my brief time on God's green earth."

"I guess there are."

"That's what you told me."

"Christ, why'd you listen to me?" Jonas paused, rolled his eyes upward to seek a memory. "Was I right? What did we do?"

"I don't remember."

"Diatribes? Explorations? Discoveries?"

"I remember a crowbar."

Recollection in Jonas's face. Then he sank low on his throne, frowning. "A crowbar, yeah. We fought off those bums in that abandoned office building."

"It was scheduled for demolition."

"Man, I really clocked one of them. Bastard wanted to knife us. Then the rest backed off."

"You bet they did. You almost killed him."

"He was . . . bleeding."

"All over his face." Theo turns inward as the images recur, loosening his grip on the upper branch. The thin one below him creaks and he returns to himself, gripping harder than before, a faint ache creeping into his biceps.

"Did I break his nose?" asked Jonas.

"You hit him on the forehead, I think. The blood was all over his face though."

"I wasn't sure. I remember it was all over his face. Hard to tell where it came from. You really think . . . you think I killed him?"

"No," said Theo, voice distant, eyes glazed. "I don't think so."

"He got up after a while. Didn't he?"

"I don't remember. I think we left after that."

"Must have. Yeah, we would have left."

"That's really wrong."

"What?"

Theo shifted again and found a seat on a higher limb. He could feel the knot where the limb met the trunk against his tailbone. "You almost killed a guy and you don't remember."

"I guess we did that."

"Yeah, you did that."

"You think we killed him?"

"I don't think so."

"All up, down and sideways," says Vince. "She was a wild one."

He says it as he leans on the wheel through a hairpin turn. Grunge is on the menu on this brisk midday, crackling out of the speakers in fuzzy gasps as the car makes its way up the mountain. The apparatus rattles in its cardboard box in the back seat, and the sound makes Theo nervous. He's starting to get used to that feeling now, fears anesthetized by the calm pride of being on the inside of the mystery. Maybe Vince feels the same way, spouting clouds of tobacco smoke out the cracked window and babbling on about his sexual exploits as he drives on to the site of the second job.

"What about you? Make off with any foxes?"

"No," says Theo. He looks at Vince's unshaven face, watches him blink hard once, then turns his head toward the window again.

"And why not? You've got minor celebrity status with those freaks. You should be tilling the fields after a night like that."

"Not sure how you can be like that, letting so many someones so close." Theo rubs a little sleep out of his eyes, speaks again. "Say Vince, why'd you take this job?"

"Allow me a lyrical response," says Vince. He clears his throat and sings his answer to a folksy melody: "To the former I say, you gotta get laid. To the latter I say, you gotta get paid." He rounds it off with a little falsetto humming.

"Was it Velvet? Did you meet her?"

"Oh yeah, the smooth broad with the glasses. Species all her own, that one."

"What did she say to you?" Theo is looking at the side of Vince's face, a stern profile against the frosted glass and the blurred woods that pass by outside. His clownish hair is tossed by wind from the cracked window. Sunlight brings out the curvature of his eyelashes.

"No use comparing notes, I don't think," says Vince. "She just gave me some vague words, summarized my tragic existence, told me to wait for instructions and sashayed out the door."

"Sounds about right."

"You know the place?"

"Jonas and I went there once. We were in a strange way, so I won't promise back-of-the-hand familiarity. It's a quarry on the other side of the mountain. No blasting there for a decade, seemed back then. Just a man-made canyon filled with rainwater, piles of gravel, machinery."

Crazy, the stuff of legends. Tearing up Terra. Why do they do it? Enigmas abound. It's the voice of Jonas in Theo's mind, a fragment of the past floating to the surface like a dead fish: cold, lifeless, without excuses, nothing to show for itself but persistent buoyancy.

"So what about you?" asks Vince. "Why'd you get on board with this? There's the money. But you're a frugal guy, you keep things simple."

"I'm just glad something's happening to me. I forgot somethings can do that. You know, happen to people."

"Vague talk."

"I've been fading out for a long time now," says Theo. "And now whatever the reason, I'm out here, going somewhere, maybe building something. I don't know if it's right, but it's worth doing. I'm tired of being another clueless nobody tacked onto the punchline. It's good to be part of the plot."

"Whoa." Vince holds up a palm. "You're gonna make me all crazy saying words like *plot*. You call this a plot? I figured it was some kind of under-the-radar corporate infrastructure war. Those happen, right? They must. World like it is."

"You mean, one guy wants to control say, the radio tower, so they get a couple errand boys to drive around and attach things to it."

"Yeah. There's an economic incentive in there somewhere. Always is. Read that somewhere. And they don't tell us, so we take all the heat if we get busted. We're boots on the ground, plain and simple."

It would set Theo's mind at ease, knowing all this was just seedy corporate work. But he can't believe that. First, because a part of him doesn't want to, because he senses the potential for something a little more miraculous. And then the second reason dawns

on him all at once as he looks out the window, as the car winds down the other side of the mountain, as the breaks eke out an anxious squeaking that can only be interpreted as a cry for help.

That buried pipeline near the radio tower had a slot prepared for the device. Somehow it was built with the addition in mind.

"A slot. . . ." says Theo.

"Don't say *plot*." Vince's frayed nerves are showing. "That word is now prohibited in my vehicle, punishable by ejection."

"Okay, sure. Calm down."

The terrain levels off, and near the base of the mountain they pass through an isolated town, one intersection with a flashing yellow light swinging low on a black wire. Vince stops to fuel up at the local gas station. A black van with the insignia of *Hugo's Plumbing* is the only other vehicle in the lot. Theo walks inside for almonds, comes out with more: a mason jar of moonshine purchased tax-free from a crotchety stranger in the supply closet. He decides to break into it tonight, to silence a demon or two. Vince revs the engine and hits the road again, cursing as he shifts through the clank and rattle of the broken second gear. The black van rumbles to life and follows at a distance.

"I could fix your gearbox," says Theo.

"How much?"

"Your pay for the job."

Vince laughs. "No thanks. I'll leave her as God left her."

They drive down what passes for a main street here, then hang a right off into the woods. Another turn onto a gravel road, up a steep hill where the car loses traction twice, then they crest it and park by one of many earthy dunes, of sand and shale and limestone fragments, scattered around the gravel work area. They step out into the cold air. It is early afternoon. The days have grown short in recent weeks, and from the hilltop they see the sun already falling toward the hazy blue ridge: the spine of the earth worn smooth by the elements.

"I'm coming with you this time," says Vince. "I want to see this."

"Damn right you are." Theo tosses Vince the shovel and hefts the cardboard box up on his shoulder. "Last time I left you with the car you peeled out on me."

"Came back for you, didn't I?"

They walk toward the old machinery, dull silver and angular against the clear blue sky. Conveyor belts are suspended two stories above the ground, paralleled by catwalks. A sweet scent drifts in and out: tar, oil, and exhaust congealed into a film on the metal structures. They walk between the myriad of dunes, arranged by color and texture. They pass iron vats of soil, equipment bristling with meaningful protrusions, and a dormant steam-shovel of faded yellow.

Theo dips into his pocket for the letter that came with the package, refreshes himself on a few details, then proceeds to a nearby tower and up the iron-grating stairs that wind around it and meet the catwalk above.

"I hate stairs like these." Vince from behind. "You can see the ground through them. It's traumatic."

"You have no idea," says Theo.

I'll jump. And if I can't fly, there's no reason I shouldn't be in pieces. A memory of Theo's last visit to this quarry—Jonas leering from the past with his twisted smile.

They take the catwalk around the control room atop the tower to find the rusted door.

"Jeremy would love this place," says Vince. "A lot of disjointed colors."

Theo sets the box down and faces into the wind, hands on the icy railing, looking over the piles of raw earth matter, out over the small lake blasted out of the earth with its unnatural sheer walls cradling placid water. The cold breeze carries away the steam of his breath. He finds beauty in the dilapidation of the machines under the open atmosphere.

Here are the tools of a system, Jonas would say. Artificial forces designed to propel a species out of the karmic circle. The real forces don't have to fight back. They only have to wait for people to leave their junk behind. Then begins the softest repossession. Slow, patient, and

unstoppable. Maybe . . . we can feel it happening. If we touch the rust, if we lick the rust, we'll become a part of the falling-apart.

"So it's in here?" Vince, tapping the shovel blade on the door.

"I guess so."

"Locked."

"Bust it in."

Vince strikes at the door with the shovel. One, two, three times and the hinges give way, the door lands flat on the floor of the control room. Theo picks it up and heaves it over the railing. It lands hard on the gravel and kicks up a cloud of dust.

Inside, thick grime coats the control panel, light sepiated as it passes through the dusty window. A bank of switches shine at the back of the room, and their eyes are drawn to the one red light glowing near the base of the hideous metal rectangle. Theo kicks a large panel under the light and it pops open, revealing a dark hungry space. He gestures to Vince, who hands him the package. When he kneels down and lifts the device from the box Vince stops breathing for a few seconds. Its matte black color catches and bends the light, and its tiny mechanical hairs seem to squirm in the sun, a captive beetle pinched by the wings.

"What the . . . hell is that?" Vince chokes on the question.

Theo gives him the best answer he can, by jamming the device into the slot inside the panel—of course, it fits perfectly—and fastening it into place with the bolts and wrench provided in the package. When he's done, he closes the panel, and the little red light turns green.

They walk down from the tower to the hard packed gravel. Theo takes a detour on the way back to the car to climb on top of the steam-shovel and recite a brief improvised monologue.

"She was like a lover to me, during the Great War," says Theo, patting the cold yellow bulk in mock affection. "Miles behind enemy lines, tearing up the German trenches to the glorious music of blood and iron and adrenaline. She's scrap now,

shoveling granite in Appalachia. But I know somewhere in the bowels of her engine there are a few scars that will never heal, a few memories that will never die."

Vince laughs as Theo climbs down from the treads. The laughter may be forced, to keep the little green light from meaning too much. But then an unsaid signal passes between them, and they're laughing about how forced it is, and then it doesn't matter where it came from. Their boots crunch on gravel on the way back to the car. The engine sputters into motion and the hot air blows through the vents to warm their hands and faces. They lapse into contemplation. They're so caught up in the eerie wordlessness they don't notice the black van parked in the trees on their way back to the road.

• • •

It was a brisk January afternoon, windless and still with frost. Four months after their move to the city, and Theo and Jonas were taking the weekends to explore the back roads in the mountains. Jonas at the wheel, they rolled up the gravel road in Sheryl's truck to park at the quarry. The music was turned down low and the engine was rumbling, metallic heat funneled through vents into the cabin where Jonas and Theo were devouring mushrooms scattered across the dashboard. The raving conversation lost its footing and dropped off into silent euphoria.

A layer of frost encased all textures, its sparkle visible even through the condensation growing in fuzzy patches on the windows. But no flakes descended from the open sky to justify the icy season with delicate beauty, and for that Theo felt winter had cheated him.

"Hey," said Jonas. His voice tumbled low and gritty. "I need space. Let's walk."

"Right and right you are," said Theo.

The instant the doors opened they felt winter hard on their faces. Jonas left the engine running. He walked around the truck and pressed his ear against the hood. His deep green eyes were aimed at the wobbling shape he assumed must be Theo.

"Listen. The engine. It's feeding."

Theo too began to see his companion as a mere apparition, an accidental fold in the fabric of the air that by some miracle could emit decipherable language. Perhaps this thing was even self-aware, but there was no way to be sure. All around him fragments of scenery lost their anchors and drifted away from one another into realms of their own.

"Gasoline," said Jonas. "It feeds on gasoline. Its heart and stomach are one. It consumes, pulses, and feels all with the same organ."

In a disturbing synesthetic twist, the apparition's tone was dissonant with the glimmering forest-green of its eyes. This left Theo unsettled, and he could feel his thoughts sliding into a waking nightmare. He concluded that a nice walk toward that fascinating iron tower over yonder would do him a world of good.

"My legs seem to take me places," said Theo. He walked slow: tenuous steps over the frosted gravel, expecting it to crumble beneath him into so many jigsaw pieces held together with saliva and children's dreams. The crisp air in his lungs and the wide open space of the hilltop began to clear his head. He took a deep breath, flexing the toes in his boots. He stood by the iron-grate stairs at the base of the tower. Up above were the catwalks and conveyor belts. Jonas came up behind him.

"I'm here again," said Theo.

"Yeah, me too. But that engine wanted to love *and* eat me."

"Is that so wrong?"

Without cue they both took to the stairs that wound up and around the tower of pipes and crossbeams. They reached the top and walked along the catwalk, out over open space. Then Jonas stopped short and sat down, let his legs hang off the edge on either side of a railing post. Theo followed suit a few posts down. The cold had made pristine clarity of the atmosphere, from the sharpness of their facial features to the rough texture of mountains on the horizon. Something to do with the motion of particles, thought Theo. Subatomic vibrations slow as temperature drops, so light encounters less resistance. He wasn't too worried about his theory ringing true with special relativity, it just had to feel right.

Maybe those slowed vibrations were the same cause of that piercing quality every noise acquired in this air, as if each sound threatened to hit a key frequency and shatter the eardrum. Theo could hear the truck from here, still running strong. But the horizon drew his eyes, and he strained to see as far as he could, beyond the curvature of the mountains.

Meanwhile Jonas scratched with a thumb against the iron post inches from his face. He squinted hard at the tiny fold of ice that came away on his thumbnail.

"They're crystals," said Jonas, in a reverent mumble. "Each snowdrop magnified is a cluster of tiny gears. A little machine drifting from the sky to the earth. Just to melt, and become shapeless again."

"It's not snowing," said Theo, and he focused on the mountains until they became artificial and depthless.

"I think we're alive," said Jonas. "I'm almost sure."

• • •

Theo flips the light switch, and for the first time in three months current flows behind the walls, enters the dusty bulb in the ceiling fan and sets the tungsten filament aglow. Hot air courses up from the vents in the floor. His apartment feels alive again, though it's lost some personality being back on the grid. He walks to the middle of the floor to shed his clothes. He cracks the shallow window and stands naked in the cold air.

Stay motionless, and feel the wind against you. That's how you know your shape.

Eyes frosty blue in the faint reflection, bright against the brick wall, Theo tries for a moment to remember his mother's face. Then he turns to see an envelope diagonal on the hardwood lines near the door. Just as he bends to take it up, heels click their way up the stairs, and he lays his bare chest on the cold floorboards.

He sees a pair of heels through the crack under the door. A smooth fair-skinned hand, no nail polish, sets a letter down in the hallway, then shoves it under the door. It

slides fast, and one paper corner jabs Theo in the eye. He jerks backward, bites down on his arm to keep from making any noise. He squeezes that eye shut while the tear gland surges and sees with the other the heels twist and head back toward the stairs, clicking away.

Pocketing the letters and donning his clothes and boots, Theo locks the door behind him and goes down to the street. He raises the hood of the sweater underneath his leather jacket, and follows down Fourth at a safe distance. He sees her walking up ahead, swaying with each step, in a long brown coat with a leather bag thrown over one shoulder, scuffing down the sidewalk in high-heeled boots laced up just below the knee. He can tell it's Velvet by the way she walks, the blend of feminine style and abrasive attitude. It's a chilly afternoon and no one else is around. She hangs a left across from the brick office building, before they come to bridge, on Martin. The route feels familiar. It's not long before Theo finds himself standing outside the same coffee shop where he met Velvet over a month ago.

Theo watches through the glass storefront as she takes a seat across from a nervous man with shoulder-length black hair, a sharp beard, and tattooed wrists. Maybe she's giving him the spiel, the part-of-something-greater scheme tumbling out from curvy lips. Then she'll turn compassionate for a few moments to get the hook lodged a few inches deeper. Either that or here's another contact in the chain, a pair of eyes on the street. Hunched over with hood still over his brow, Theo waits for Velvet to make a theatrical exit. Sure enough there she is with the door swung wide, moving down the sidewalk the way she came. Theo tails her for half a block before she whirls around, flips her glasses down the bridge of her nose, and gives him a cold, seductive smile.

"Theodore," she says. "Don't you have anything better to do?" She closes the distance between them with a few ambling strides punctuated by clicks. Her white blouse ruffles out of a tight black business jacket. Theo pulls the hood back and looks her up and down, not sure what to say.

"Did you think you and Vince were the only ones?"

"How big is this thing?" asks Theo. "What's going on?"

She smiles, walks up close to him. Her heels put her face on-level with his.

"We're the good guys, you and me."

"And the machines?"

"The machines are your task," says Velvet, breathing words against Theo's face.

"They'll do what they were made to do. Something to do with the communications grid. If you figure it out, let me know."

Theo looks straight into her eyes and catches a sugary scent, ripe fruit dipped in oil.

"I suggest you read your letter," says Velvet, backing away, easing the tension.

"The game has changed, and you and Vince have a job to do." A sleek black car appears out of nowhere and pulls up to the curb. The passenger door pops open. Velvet stands with her hand on the door, not getting inside yet, waiting for Theo to speak.

"Velvet Artha Gates." Theo tastes the syllables. "Nice pseudonym."

She smiles, genuine this time, and speaks in her soothing alto.

"When we finally clock out of this thing, let's go for a walk, you and me."

Then she's in the car and down the road, and Theo is left behind, pulling the two letters from the inside pocket of his leather jacket, glancing over the orthography of each envelope on the way home. One is clearly in Velvet's hand. The other presents an unfamiliar style of glyphs, blockish and angular, an enormous capital T, top bar reaching over the rest of the letters of Theo's full name. In the upper left, in place of a return address, is a neatly drawn symbol: a fish-hook arching down from its top loop, a curly cloud skewered as bait, barbed point jutting out of the fluff.

When Theo returns to his apartment he opens the stranger letter first. It is written on yellow notepad paper in double-spaced text, in blocky, ninety-degree vertex lettering, and it tells Theo to follow a gutter to a concrete storm drain under the bridge by the train-yard, to be there tomorrow night at six. The last sentence is a vague promise of answers to gnawing questions, and it is signed by Gabriel.

That summer Theo was a flicker of life on the edge of the world. His legs hung over the end of the wharf, and he listened to the heavy black waves slap against the wooden beams below. He felt terrified, lost, and deeply at home. The scent of brine was thick on the wind, and the salt water at night was darker than anything. The bay was a black mystery. It swelled and fell like the musculature of a restless animal.

Theo was twelve. Virginia had claimed him for the summer months, so he had come to stay with her on the shores of the bay. She was always trying to wrestle him away from Tai. As a boy he could not understand her distrust.

Even then he got the feeling he was more of a presence to her than her child. It was enough for her to know that he was within her sphere of influence, and not her ex-husband's. She sat on a bench under the roofed section of the wharf, chain-smoking and flipping through photography magazines. Her reddish hair flailed in the wind around her wide, dark sunglasses. The radio gushed baseball statistics and the cables that held the motorboat above the water quaked in the wind.

Theo swam nearby in the greenish waters, teaching a golden retriever to climb the ladder to the wharf. He sought hermit crabs at low tide, dropping them in buckets with sand and water to watch them claw in circles, marveling at the subtle geometry of conical spirals on their backs and the segmented legs twirling and sifting in the sand like the fingers of a flautist.

The daytime belonged to Virginia, and he played the role of the frolicking child on the periphery of her vision. The nights were his. He didn't have to act once the sun went down, he didn't have to be anyone. He walked the beach, exploring the neighboring wharves, clambering up ropes and ladders to stand on tile roofs and look out over moonlit water. He crawled into bed as the sun rose and woke in the afternoon.

Virginia hosted parties for fashionable artists at the beach house, where she strutted into the room wearing a gold dress and black lipstick, three cameras from different decades dangling around her neck. On these nights Theo was called upon to

be in character. He filched a few glasses of wine and sat quietly, absorbing a bewildering vocabulary, watching his mother prance and smile. She was a beautiful woman with a vibrant laugh, wielding a curious magnetism that kept her guests revolving around her.

She barely spoke to Theo. But there was always bread and butter near the toaster when he woke in the afternoons, always fresh fruit on the table, and every once in a while a new picture of him taken from a great distance, framed and hung in the sunroom.

• • •

Theo walks along the sidewalk, on his way to the gutter that will lead him to the storm drain. It's five o' clock and dark will fall soon. His right hand is in his pocket, left with outstretched fingers that catch and bounce off the chain-link fence, line of sight square ahead and unfocused. His steps are quick and heavy, heel to toe rolling over cracks in the concrete. He's hungry for a dose of bad luck, or any kind of sign that will link choices as trivial as foot placement to a grander causal scheme. But no symbols glimmer in the pale sunlight, and the traffic lights pulse lifeless algorithms.

I'd rather lose my mind to the myriad than the monotony. Jonas in his head, choosing between flavors of madness. That choice, thinks Theo. Maybe that's what landed Jonas in the quiet ward instead of the loud ward.

Four blocks skirting the vacant parking lots and brick warehouses here on the south side of the river, and no weight of stride can chase away the feeling he's being watched. Comes with the territory, that's what he tells himself. He feels already oncoming hours of aimless introspection, a masochistic ritual to satisfy a few haywire glands upstairs.

A misplaced shape catches his eye, and he strikes off toward it, hopping from the sidewalk over a short brick wall and onto a wide open space, new to his eyes, new to his boots. An old factory took up half this block, not a month ago, and now the construction crews have thundered through with wrecking balls and diesel fumes to

leave a great open concrete space spotted with weeds. The shape looms before him, cast colorless against the riverbank trees and the golden red, clouded sky. He can see down to the river from the lot, on either side of the shape. As he approaches he finds it to be a section of wall without a building. Old brick and mortar, it seems to defy gravity, balanced on ten bricks at the base and widening out to more than thirty in the middle, edges pixelated. It has been tagged with the familiar image of a cloud piercing a fish hook.

The wall, left unscathed for reasons unknown, is a tranquil monstrosity to Theo's bloodshot eyes. It is defiant, without purpose, beautiful and erect in the fading autumn light. He stands in its shade, bewildered by its corpuscular geometry. Something digital about those rectangles, he thinks. He raps his knuckles on the wall. Solid, rough. That shouldn't be a surprise, but it almost amazes him. He drags his palms along the wall and feels the grainy surface, and imagines minuscule red clay fragments working their way under his skin.

He takes a few steps back, to admire the shape again. Then he runs up and throws both palms against the wall. A few chips of mortar sprinkle down into his hair. He steps back again, runs and throws his shoulder against it. It's swaying, he tells himself. Cracks are spreading inside, from capillaries to arteries. His impact is scrambled, by natural law, into a network of force vectors that seek out weakness. And that is proof, Theo tells himself as he steps backward for a third and last running start, that physics is wired for acts of destruction.

Theo runs, pumping his long skinny legs, kicking up gravel in his wake. He jumps into the wall with everything he's got, and pushes off with all four limbs just as he hits the brick, to land scrambling on the ground.

It's falling, it's toppling, it has reared its last against this skyline and now it must sink backward and strike the earth and shatter into a million. . . .

No, the wall stands strong, shape intact, rigid and heavy and flat, so damn *flat*. With the sun in his eyes it's just an angular chunk removed from the sky, not a wall now but an omission. Theo swallows down a bubble of stomach acid, scared of what might

have been glimpsed beyond that chasm in the horizon, had the wall not held, and the omission been of something other than sky.

• • •

"Slip it on," says Gabriel, holding out a wetsuit, black and shriveled like a vestigial organ. "Don't worry Theo, one size fits all."

Gabriel has his on already, and he stands there in the fading light, just a shadow with a touch of volition capped by an oval of bearded face. The black hood clings to his cheeks and head, holding the lensless frames against his face. He is perched on two feet on the concrete rim of the wide, rushing storm drain, where a fast stream of waste water vanishes underground, rolling toward the river. The train tracks are behind him, and the river is hidden beyond the leafless branches that sprout from the bank. Echoing with the passage of wheeled tonnage is the expressway bridge overhead, sharp against the clouded sky, leading over and across the river to buildings of similar nature.

Theo doesn't hesitate here, just takes the wetsuit and stretches it over his long, bony frame, overtop of his clothes. He's come to enjoy these bizarre moments. They leave his spirit free to dangle in new, eerie freedoms.

"So where are we going?" Theo pulls the zipper up under his chin. It catches a few facial hairs, and he winces, pulls it down a ways, and carefully zips it up again.

"I want to show you who I am," says Gabriel, with a wink from behind those empty frames. "Your . . . covert mechanical repairs. They are only a primary exposure. A step forward, and not an end in themselves. Velvet will never understand that."

"You know Velvet?" asks Theo, all eyebrows.

"Miss Gates is very well known, in my circles. In particular to me. We were lovers." Gabriel plays it as an offhand comment, brushing it aside as he speaks.

"Theo, you are being indoctrinated into a certain world." Gabriel steps down into the storm drain to stand with feet on the sloped planes of concrete that border the

rushing stream. "It's the world I belong to. Consider me Charon, your loving guide, receiving his humble compensation in the form of fresh, open ears."

"Open," says Theo.

"Your first lesson," says Gabriel as he points down at the water. "Don't just see the world. *Read it.*"

Algae sways beneath the clear current of V-ripples that run beneath Gabriel's splayed legs. The V's point down and forward, down and forward. Theo thinks: a greater-than sign, each greater quantity being the altitude just behind each V, an indication of sinking, a following of gravity. Nothing ghostly about the symbolic expression. It's all there, physical and solid and glaring, daring him to follow the arrows, forward and down.

"Wait four seconds after me," says Gabriel. "Hold your breath, make two lefts and a right, then hold out your arms."

With that Gabriel is gone, slithering feet first, frictionless on the algae and speeded by the current, forward and down, fed to the dark of the drain.

Theo counts out loud.

"One." He climbs down into the drain.

"Two." The sun falls below the skyline.

"Three." A distant train howls.

"Four." He slips into the stream and is carried forward and down, into the inky dark of the concrete tunnel. Theo feels only the rushing sound, the sweetly nauseating scent of decaying fruit, and the terrifying sensation of gathering momentum.

A burst of adrenaline and frenzied thoughts. The first turn must be coming. Is it a sharp point of concrete dividing the river in two? Is there a danger of catching the point between his legs and shattering his testicles? No time to speculate on the architecture of the place, just lean hard to the left, get close to the wall. He tries to slow down with his hands, but the concrete wall just scrapes his palms all to hell. So he brings his arms in tight to luge on through the tunnel.

He hears the watery echo of a passage to his right, there and gone in a split second. That was the first turn. He keeps to the left until he hears it again, then pushes off the left wall with one foot and rolls to the right side of the stream. He hears the echo on the left, then he lets his arms away from his sides to flail behind him with fingers outstretched. There's a light up ahead.

A broad hand snatches Theo's right wrist, and he feels a jerk from his forearm down to his toes. Gabriel pulls him to the right side of the tunnel until Theo feels the concrete ledge. Theo scrambles up on it, coughs, vomits into the stream, wipes his mouth and blinks in the light of a single bulb, suspended over the cascade of street-side waste water.

Gabriel is crouched on his knees, shuffling down a corridor of uneven stone that runs perpendicular to the drain tunnel, lit by bulbs hanging from a wire every couple of yards, all fed by the same thick cable that disappears down the tunnel, on parallel circuit with the one that hangs over the water. Gabriel beckons Theo with a wave.

"Your second lesson," says Gabriel. His raspy voice echoes, bounces, and mingles with the drone of rushing water. "If you react, you've already lost. Always anticipate. That goes hand-in-hand with lesson one." With this he continues to scuttle down the corridor. Theo follows. After a dozen yards or so the ceiling rises, and soon Gabriel is standing at his full height. Theo remains hunched at the lower back.

"That was a hell of a grab," says Theo. "I think you elongated my skeleton by half an inch."

"We're here," says Gabriel. At the end of the corridor is a common wooden house door, hinges fastened to the stone wall. The passage is oblong, rounded, so the door doesn't fit it properly, and through the uncovered space at the top and bottom of the door shines red light. A fuzzy, undulating noise can be heard from behind the door, vaguely rhythmic.

Theo's eyes widen, and a slow smile spreads across his tight-boned face.

"Music."

It is music, a windy desert soundscape cycling through three melodic minor chords, divided into measures of varying time signatures by the gentle lope of an electronic drum machine. Gabriel turns the brass handle and steps forward and down. The door opens on an oval-shaped cavern, stone ceiling twelve feet up, stone floor a step down from door level, smooth rounded walls. It's a small room, maximum comfortable capacity thirty. Sixteen are inside now, some laughing and mingling among the red lightbulbs that dangle from the ceiling, men and women with glinting eyes and swaying hips, strange tribal dances, fluid motions. Others are hunched in groups of two over sketchpads, discussing speculative engineering and the possibility of pulling energy out of the vacuum of space. One woman sits in full lotus against the wall, breathing deeply, her mind perhaps lightyears distant from her flesh, drifting on some cosmic wind. Wetsuits hang on hooks that circle the room on the natural stone walls, and between each hook burns a stick of lavender incense to ward off the odor of gutter water. The lightbulbs are wired to a main cable that disappears under the door—the same electrical source powering the keyboard and drum machine, two instruments that seem to be patchworks of old computer circuitry and the ivory keys from some unfortunate grand piano set on springs. A short scruffy man with a traffic cone on his head works one set of keys, and a tall, curvaceous black woman in a frilled, dark blue hoop skirt works the other.

"Hang up your wetsuit," says Gabriel. "Then we'll talk."

The two men climb out of their wetsuits and hang them on the hooks. Gabriel has a tuxedo under his, Theo his regular jeans and buttoned denim shirt. They move to the back of the room, passing through the modest crowd, everyone nodding respectfully to Gabriel. Then the two lean with backs to the wall, faces cast in the red ambiance. The music is soft, and they speak easily over it.

"The tunnel is the only way in," says Gabriel. "And the only way out is down the tunnel and into the river. Everything here is built from scratch, from materials harvested and brought in through the tunnel."

"Was this place found or made?" asks Theo.

"Both," says Gabriel. "Sometimes people make mistakes. In design, or in construction. Mistakes that translate into entirely new facets of a given architecture that have nothing to do with the structure's purpose. In this case, the construction of the storm drain led to the discovery of a small cavern in the riverbank. A passage was built toward it, but the cavern itself was left alone and forgotten. Until I found it here. I dedicate my life to finding places like this, built without purpose, a spontaneous act of love or confusion, and then neglected. I have a certain talent—some might call it a sixth sense, though I'd never say as much—a talent for finding these locations."

"Did you bring these people here?" asks Theo.

"In a manner of speaking. I left clues. Specific graffiti tags around the city that would lead them here, if they were reading the world. Bits of suggestive poetry. Abstractions that could be read as maps. Longitude and latitude translated into the numerical system of a dead language. Things only the brilliant could translate, and only the strange would follow. It's a way people in our circles have of gathering together, finding one another. We discover places, and then we leave clues in plain sight."

Theo's eyes trace the room, follow motions and lips and the parallel circuit cable held to the stone ceiling by steel staples that snakes its way overtop of the door and down the passage to the streaming drain flow. Everyone is smiling, moving, talking, thinking. There's a focused energy about them.

"I made the graffiti, then left the city for a few years," says Gabriel. "And when I returned a few months ago I found *this*. A small club of sorts, powered by homemade hydroelectric generators in the drain passageways, experimental music and high-brow conversation. It's the most rewarding moment for me, when I return to one of my discoveries to find it populated. And you never know what sort will be there. Here, it was the underground scene, the amateur intellectuals, the exiled innovators. Now literally underground."

"Now it's known," says Theo. "Isn't there a danger that it will be . . . corrupted? By outsiders?"

"Corrupted? By who? More men and women willing to put on a wetsuit and jump into a storm drain?"

Theo laughs, snaps his fingers to the beat. He begins to feel very peaceful, under his head of hair disheveled by the hood of the wetsuit, in the smoky incensed redness. And Theo feels—standing beside this ageless man who sports a pair of lensless glasses, who smiles wrinkly smiles, who talks of the world as if he still knows nothing of it—that he is in the company of humble genius.

"So why am I here?" asks Theo.

"I wanted you to glimpse the other side," says Gabriel. "Your job puts you on the front lines. Here, *this place*, is the home front. Your home front. You're on our side, and now you have some idea as to what that means."

"So the machine parts. . . ."

"I don't know what you're building, Theo. All I know is that thousands are helping to build it, some more aware than you and some less."

"Who's paying for it? Where do the parts come from?"

Gabriel smiles, shakes his head with eyes closed, then looks square at Theo. "All of it happens just like this place," he says, speaking slow, thinking it over himself. "There's a mistake, a coincidence, a preposterous act of spontaneity, a discovery, an accidental gathering of like-minded strangers, then a thousand individually inspired acts of creation. You're missing the point, the glorious exuberant *point*, if you assume there is a system in control, a plan to execute, a blueprint to follow. It's all just thoughts and sensations coalescing, from smoke to solidity, making themselves real and known through a quiet army of cognizant people."

"Yeah," says Theo with the music in his ears and the eyes of the small crowd trained on him. "I think I can see that."

"Take this," says Gabriel, and he passes Theo a crumpled napkin. The soft paper is red in the light, and the letters appear in bold, thick marker. It is the address of a place in the middle of nowhere over two thousand miles west of here. No name, just the number thirty-four, a place called Red Crossing, and a lonely zip code.

"Just in case you need to know more," says Gabriel. "If anything goes wrong. That's your best bet. He'll set you straight. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to say hello to a few friends. Do mingle, Theo. These are fascinating people."

Gabriel takes a few steps away, then snaps his fingers and whirls around on one heel.

"When you have to leave, just follow the flow out to the river. You can find your way home from there, can't you?" Gabriel walks away after that, over to a group of three strangers dancing near the musicians. Each hugs him in turn and shakes his hand. Theo is left at the back wall. He tries to look serious. But stronger than his stoicism is the bubble of joy rising in his chest.

• • •

The dream presents a cubical room. No claustrophobia here, but enough depth to inspire a feeling of shrinking. The walls are seamless gray. Through the iron lattice of the floor, diamond-shaped holes wreathed with teeth for traction, is only darkness. No doors can be found in the walls and Theo recalls—the memories are worn by time or some distance even more threatening to clarity—a series of sensations that occurred between the last time he was here and now. The loudspeakers groan from the four corners where the walls meet the ceiling.

"Make sure all walls sound the same."

As Theo walks, the teeth on the lattice ride up into his chest from his feet in small red waves. This is entirely reasonable. Just as it is reasonable to be walking along the perimeter of the room and knocking each square inch of gray with one ear pressed to the wall.

Theo thinks for a while that the loudspeakers have a different interpretation of the command in mind. Until a disgusting feeling of satisfaction begins to drip from the ceiling. They are getting off on his obedience.

He has toured the perimeter but the loudspeakers don't want him to stop, so he goes on, rapping the walls with his knuckles and hearing that airy clank over and over. All walls *do* sound the same. But now there are other noises, deeper than the clanks: the slithering of serpents gliding through spaces between pipes and wires.

Theo is to make sure that all walls sound the same so that the creatures can move inside them with glimmering eyes and pulsing antennae. They want him to know they're there, squirming and following his every movement from behind opaque gray.

"Make sure all walls sound the same." Diseased humor in the voice this time. They want him to know that the walls are hollow.

• • •

Theo and Vince brood at a wooden picnic table in the fenced-off backyard of a classy three-man bachelor pad on the north side of town. Live music blares inside, and a weird crowd of drinkers and smokers in vests and fedoras navigate bizarre conversations. The party is funded by one Arthur Granger, a moneyed resident who considers himself an artistic authority of the new age: fresh meat for the merciless soul-searching bums of the city. Outside, the poetry slam is going strong. Saline Solution is on next, and he stands over the microphone, clearing his throat, adjusting his flashy oversized green suit.

"You got one from her too?" says Vince.

"Yeah," says Theo. "Sounds dangerous."

"Hence the three-grand bonus," says Vince, scratching where the tweed collar rubs the back of his neck.

"I'm not sure about it," says Theo. "Sounds like someone's on to this thing, whatever it is. Sounds like we might be . . . absconded with, or something."

"C'mon man, no one's going to abscond with us. We're just a couple dudes in a car with horns, driving around with a goddamn cardboard box."

Theo is silent. Vince gets suspicious.

"Know something I don't? Now's the time to spill."

"I just think this is bigger than we know," says Theo. "Whirlwind slipping through the cracks."

"What? Look. There's no harm in driving by the spot, scouting it out. That's all we have to do. This heightened risk factor she wrote about, what does that matter to us, two innocents cruising on a backroad?"

"Yeah, alright," says Theo. "We do it on one condition. She gave us the return address to let her know what we find, right? When we send it in, you wait at the PO box and follow her, find out what she's up to. Deal?"

"Second step sounds more dangerous than the first," says Vince. "Why me?"

"I already followed her once. It's your turn."

"Alright. I'm game."

Saul raises the microphone stand to its maximum extension, and he stands on top of the amplifier stack with the mesh steel sphere pressed against his thick lips. His weird green brightness is stark against the dull brown of the picket fence. He begins to recite his newest poem, entitled Crooked Zoetrope.

Putting together the weather

To tether these feathers,

Wonder whether or not they'll

Fly me to a netherworld.

Too soft to hold, too dark to tell,

Velvet, velvet are the gates of hell. . . .

FOUR

something wicked

Soft light seeps through the frosted window. Jonas is on the white sheets, propped up with back to the wall, neck loose and head swaying in lazy circles. His hair is golden in the light, gleaming green eyes aimed at the window and focused for distance. But the crisp layer of translucence is woven tight with sharp geometry, and all colors and shapes on the other side are contorted into shapeless gray.

Jonas tilts back with eyes and mouth open, as if to catch raindrops. His crippled mind stumbles into remembrance. Car alarms and searing lights. Blood and shattered glass. Through the din and the pain an awkward pair of arms close around him just as his bones seem to liquify. He falls, laughing and spitting, looking into the gray-blue eyes, orbs of granite or of a cloudy sky, bright in the white heat of searchlights.

To the absent eyes above and the frosted window beside, Jonas whispers.

"It was too loud. Theo, it was all too loud."

• • •

His leg kicks a wall and he wakes up, shaking. This night of blurred images and syncopated consciousness is taking its toll on Theo's nerves. Each brief period of sleep is a small step into welcomed, albeit unpleasant illusion. The beginnings of a nightmare play themselves out within a throbbing frame, then a sudden urgency thrusts him from one darkness to another, back into familiar skin dotted with beads of cold sweat.

Now the where and when are falling apart. He relaxes, at long last, and falls into the folds.

Sick and tired, he lies on his bed. Strange colors shift on the walls and he knows he is asleep again. He cannot get up, and Jonas, his good friend Jonas is telling him to get up. Jonas sits on the other end of the bed, stretching out a hand.

The bed is covered in spikes, green and bulging, quaking with carnivorous desire, all framed in braided green vines and fleshy leaves that twitch in the tropical air. It's a living trap from a poisonous world, and it folds gently together to devour Theo. The spikes ooze glue and toxins over his legs. He is numb and can only move the arm with great effort, the arm that no longer seems to belong to him. Jonas reaches for the hand. Theo's fingers fan out and quiver.

Theo wakes on another layer. His arm finds leverage and he pulls himself up. Upright on the bed, bare feet brushing on the wooden boards, his hand, drenched in sweat and otherworldly poison, is clasped in the hand of another.

"Have we made it through?"

"The spikes are there," says Jonas.

Theo looks down, and the spikes are still there. The fleshy green blades pierce his thighs, and their red tips gleam and vibrate and drip acid. Theo is being digested and Jonas is impervious.

"My bed is alive," says Theo. "It's trying to eat us."

"Our bed is alive," Jonas says. "It's trying to eat you."

"How do you not feel the spikes?"

"I'm here. I'll stay with you to the end." With that Jonas evaporates and Theo is alone. The bed is devouring him, spikes interlocking above as the thing folds together. Theo has to stand up.

He wakes to another layer. The colors are still moving in the walls. He knows he will wake up for good soon, but for now it doesn't matter. He walks to the deep window and breathes a voiceless nocturn into the uncharted land beyond the pane.

"I want nothing to do with so much that hasn't even happened yet."

Calm gaze taking in the deckside torches and hundred sails of a windblown schooner churning upriver, Theo glances now and then over his shoulder toward the bed, to watch the teeth and vines of the giant flytrap writhe and salivate.

• • •

Theo descended the creaking wooden stairs to the musty basement. Whitewashed cinderblock walls and a solid concrete floor absorbed the glow from a banker's lamp that hung upside-down, its base screwed into a ceiling crossbeam. A queen mattress made with crinkled blue flannel sheets lay in the middle of the floor. To one side was a small bathroom, washer and dryer and water heater against one wall. On the other an acoustic guitar hung by its headstock from two coat hooks fitted to the wall with drilled holes and dowels. A long bookshelf was against the other wall, books spilled from the upper shelves scattered across the floor.

Jonas was slumped in his swivel chair, snoring face-down on the desk. The desktop was half landfill, half toolbox: carving knives, empty cigarette packs, screwdrivers, paintbrushes with faded spectra dried into wooden handles, pencils and chalk, strike-anywhere matches with phosphorous tips. Yellowing tomes such as *The Joy of Chemistry*, *A Comprehensive Guide to Post-Structuralism*, and *The Sea of Energy* lay open, marked up with pen and riddled with bookmarks. A crater was carved into one corner of the desk, bottom charred black, holding a few bent cigarette butts and a roach. The

entire careless topography was dusted with an odorous layer of rolling tobacco, cinnamon powder, and chewed marijuana stems.

Jonas shot awake when Theo tapped him on the shoulder. The dark, sweet smelling detritus of spices was plastered with cold sweat on one side of his face. He rubbed his eyes, recognized Theo. His quaking fingers took the roach from the ashtray, fixed it to a can tab, struck a match off the side of the desk and lit it with the tip of the flame. Then he reached into a drawer and drew out a hip flask, took a quick gulp, and tossed it to Theo.

"And a fine morning it is," said Jonas.

"It's six in the afternoon," said Theo. He screwed open the flask, sniffed the contents: some concoction distilled under the stairs in a gallon jug. He closed the flask and set it on the desk. "How's the basement?"

"Well enough. Except for the spiders. Evil little creatures. They slip out the cracks and march in rows, dripping venom and trailing silk. They're mobilizing for a new campaign. It'll be a strategic miscalculation, if I have a say."

Theo chuckled and wandered over to the bookshelf to peruse the titles. Jonas dragged on the roach, then offered the can tab with its last hot ember up to Theo, who waved it away.

"Damn," said Jonas as the nub of paper vanished in a puff of steam.

"You've got all kinds of smokable trash on your face," said Theo. "Scrape it off and roll it up."

"Sure, sure." Jonas brushed the stuff from his face onto the desk.

Theo glanced toward a corner of the room where a modified engine, naked and sprouting with tubes and pistons, was gathering dust and leaking oil that pooled in rainbow-tinted blackness on the floor. Theo's nose wrinkled as he approached the thing.

"Bleeding heart."

"Don't rush genius," said Jonas, as he looked tenderly at the oozing machine. "Give it another couple months, I'll have that motherfucker running on anything. Vegetable oil, peanut oil, olive oil. . . . How's the upstairs? Sheryl?"

"The rooms are alright. Comfortable and pretty spacious. I suspect the house'll leak like a sieve come winter. But we'll see. Sheryl's doing great. She loves tending bar. She's thinking about art school here. And I found a good garage, some good guys working. You should come out and apply with me."

"Yeah, soon. Give it another cycle of moon phases. The acclimation process is draining, you know."

Jonas lit up a cigarette butt. He was smoking mostly filter. Theo looked him up and down, then walked back toward the stairs.

"I'll be topside cooking," said Theo.

"Right, sure. Thanks for stopping in on the cave. I was thinking about rigging up a fake flame and some shadow puppets. Form in content, how's that?"

Theo laughed, turned to go upstairs.

"Hey," said Jonas. "Let's go out and get crazy one of these nights, yeah?"

"Yeah." Theo started up again.

"Hey Theo."

Jonas said it with urgency. Theo stopped again on the stairs and looked down. Jonas had a glint of fear in his green eyes, and his head was tilted to one side. He looked crooked and forlorn, older than his years, confused as if he were being left down there to suffer without knowing his crime. Theo felt a distance between them, Jonas shrinking away into a discreet reality. Jonas spoke again, the slightest hint of warbling panic in his voice.

"We need to do something about these spiders."

• • •

They're in Vince's car for another out-of-town ride on a blustery afternoon, following the directions in Velvet's letter. They should be close now, another half mile. Vince is in good spirits today, that toothy smile rarely leaves his face. Theo wonders if it's chemical. He looks over from the passenger seat. Bloodshot eyes, involuntary flexing

in the nostrils, smoke curling out the cracked window from the cigarette held between two shifty fingers. Probably chemical.

"No machine this time?" asks Vince, again.

"Just a look around," says Theo. "And then we're gone."

It seems to Theo that Vince has gotten worse since the jobs began, his blink lengthened by another microsecond and jowls taken to gnawing nothing. Then again Theo has never been around the guy this often before. And it's true, Theo muses, that everyone has their cracks, and you see more the closer you get. But not everyone shatters. That's a special fate, reserved for an unlucky few.

"That's gotta be it," says Vince, and he leans right to park in the gravel pull-off by the transformer substation surrounded by chain-link fence. Thick black cables arch over the road from the dull gray towers, down toward the river and into the roof of the old hydro plant, where cold water churns under brick vaults as it passes through unseen turbines. Tall gothic windows set above the vaults face upriver, iron-lattice panes and musty glass. The windows of a nocturnal ballroom, Theo could believe, for Gabriel's mischievous underground.

They step out of the car. Vince lights up another cigarette, shuffles around in the gravel in his trusty fur-lined loafers, lets the wind toss his heavy hair. Theo takes a long breath through his nose. It's hard to smell anything on a day like this, the air is cold and moving fast through the mountain pass, just a faint burning sensation in the nostrils. He looks up, a reflex as old as the human neck, not expecting to find anything. All he can see, besides the craggy spruce-coated mountain lost in fog and plumes of woodstove smoke and the graying sky, is a section of the same road they took to get here winding its way around the slope a little ways in the distance.

"We good?" says Vince. He seems calm, shuffling around in the gravel. But he keeps glancing at his pocket watch.

"We have to walk around a bit," says Theo. "Let's just loop around the station, see what we can see."

"Alright."

They walk up to the substation. The scaffolds, cones, and towers are all the same light gray. Theo is beginning to see such places—radio towers, telephone poles, power stations—with a mystic's eye. They are metallic phalli of an otherwise invisible underground labyrinth, thrust above surface to be seen and experienced as distinct entities.

Theo runs his fingers over a small section of chain-link that's been severed with cable cutters. Not enough space for anyone to squeeze through.

"So someone was here," says Theo. "But they didn't break in. Not quite."

"Looks like the kind of place they'd send us. There's probably a space in there waiting for one of those machines."

Ah yes, Theo to himself. The problem of the slot. When whoever made the original structure, did they have the augmentation in mind? There must be many machinists, all over the city and the countryside, on call for the same jobs he performs with Vince.

"They were stopped," says Theo.

"What?"

"Stopped. Or turned away. Chased off maybe."

"Who?"

"They."

"Who's they?"

"There are more of us, Vince. More like us."

"Sure, of course. Who chased them off?"

"Cops maybe."

"Yeah, could be."

"It's a big operation."

"These are corporate sabotage errands," says Vince, going through it in his head. "Some invested mastermind who hired a couple engineers to build him devices that would take control of satellites, right?"

"I'm not so sure anymore," says Theo. It seems to Theo this is bigger than money. It's not a plan but a random and disorganized spasm of consciousnesses. At least that's what it should be.

It's all so loud.

"Theo," says Vince, who shakes on the gravel near the trees.

Two bodies are splayed on the ground at Vince's feet, shoddily hidden with fallen leaves. A man and a woman, one shot in the heart and the other in the head. The woman's face is splashed with coagulated blood, eyes open and crusted, and she has a strange look on her face, embouchure contorted over gripped teeth, like a clown miming shock. The man's face expresses a vague longing, his moon-pale skin taut on the bones of his cheeks.

• • •

The moon was a white hot sliver sailing through clouds. Jonas, seventeen years old, stood by the side of the highway feeling the tilted axis of the world and tasting the gravel between his toes. Mostly trucks on the road this time of night, long shapes lined with orange points that inscribed their volume on the dark space through which they passed. They were screaming and gliding, and each burst of headlights that came over the rise reached through his wild green eyes and crashed against his brain. The wind the trucks carried behind them was a humid blast that sucked the smog away. His face clenched, fighting back laughter.

The edge of the highway was the first step in a long flight of black stairs, coagulated in winding shapes that insulted gravity and reason. Jonas knew this because the shadows told him. He knew what the shadows said was true because the bright lights were telling him otherwise, and the bright lights hurt him.

As soon as he took the first step up onto the pavement the trucks screamed louder, in tones that exploded high and curved low as they swerved around him. His eyes narrowed with focus, his lips were tight and bloodless. Each step on the staircase

was higher and darker, and out of the corner of his eye he saw its spiraling form leading all the way up, arcing straight into the black center of the moon, the invisible focus of the crescent, where the lights and the noises would never touch him again.

The cars kept screaming and swerving. Jonas put one foot in the front of the other, across the pavement, up the second stair. It was a long and narrow way, and he needed to concentrate, to keep his balance.

• • •

The two dead faces carve out pockets of memory. Whether from the shock of the image or a series of draining, dreamful nights catching up to him, Theo is now exhausted. The enervation catches him bone-deep, and he imagines the chemical bonds holding him together could give way and leave him to dissolve into organic sludge. His feet are frozen in place. He tries to see it as a photograph or a painting, but the illusion won't hold. He's not afraid. That will come later. For now it's a swelling numbness enclosing a needle-sharp heat and a fast pulse.

After long moments of silence Theo kneels to check their pockets. They seem to have been searched clean, no wallets or key-rings or phones. But in the breast pocket of the shirt the man wears under the sweatshirt, Theo finds a scrap of paper, jagged at the edges. It is Velvet's signature, torn off from the end of a letter. Theo is not surprised, just closes his eyes and nods to himself. He rises to his feet and passes the note to Vince.

"God," says Vince, holding the scrap between thumb and forefinger, while his palms begin to sweat. "God, what?"

Theo holds one hand against his face and bites down on the skin of his thumb, eyes narrowed, feet uneasy in his shoes. He returns to the car for the shovel, suddenly convinced that he must bury the bodies, not thinking about how or why, a reflex stemming perhaps from the need for repetitive physical motion to lull his demons to sleep. Vince just lies on the hood of the car, back against the windshield and legs splayed over the bull horns, smoking cigarette after cigarette in a mindless daze while

Theo struggles to break cold ground among the trees. The earth is too hard and his hands are slipping. After a while he realizes there's no need for this, so he walks back to the car and takes a drag off Vince's cigarette.

"You alright?" asks Theo.

"So what was that? What is that?"

"You know what it was." Theo kicks at the gravel.

"We need to go. We're entangled in a fucking world-ending conspiracy. Let's go."

"You should put in an anonymous tip. About the bodies."

"How do you do that?"

"I don't know. Call nine one one and ask."

"Sure. I'll use a pay-phone. Once we leave. After we get into town."

"And we both need to go." Theo looks Vince in the eye. Vince avoids his gaze, just watches his cigarette waste away.

"You're damn right. Let's go."

"I mean leave the city. Go somewhere else."

"Alright. Let's leave from here, right now. Pick a direction and just go."

"No, not from here. We go separate ways. One of us takes the car. One of us hops a train. We do it tonight."

"I'll take my car."

"These people might know your car," says Theo. "They might follow your car."

"I'll take my car," says Vince.

• • •

"Have you noticed?" said Jonas. "Just how *loud* it all is?"

"It's not so bad a night," said Theo.

"No," said Jonas. He groped for words, kneading fingers near his face, head tilted to the side, playing an invisible fife. "All the branches, scattered in the road, on the sidewalk. What brought them down?"

"Hurricane remnants that came up the coast last week. Wind damage."

"No. Something more demonic. The wind was just an element in the scheme. The culprit is gravity. And gravity is goddamn *loud*. Can't you hear it, feel it? A million arrows whining in dissonance, pointing and falling down, rushing down, splashing over your shoulders and trying to drag you into the dust."

Jonas snatched a tall, heavy branch from the sidewalk. It became his walking stick. He drove it into the sidewalk with each left stride forward. He spoke again.

"And that's not the end of it, not even the beginning. So many sounds. Colors for instance. The blues and blacks in the sky, the streetlights, the browns and greens in the trees, the brick, the cars, the endless lines of cars all parked here, just on this street alone, take a look for yourself. Colors are loud. Wet running paint and dry flaking paint. These are noises that you feel, like bass too low for the human ear."

Theo watched, listened as Jonas strung his own nerves out like piano wire. His eyes were wide and bulging, taking in the world around him in shallow hyperventilations. Theo was fascinated by how much Jonas could swallow with his senses, the details he could notice and capture and put to use. Here was another moment of pushing back against the walls of reality that would carry them both a further step toward being aware.

"The haze is the loudest of it all," said Jonas. "This aching crepuscule all around us. The streetlights, from dim to a searing fanfare. The windows, from faint to burning. And it'd be glorious, all the cacophonous detail, if it didn't *hurt*."

Voice rising in pitch and volume, Jonas turned his head to one side and the other, walking faster down the street, Theo hastening to keep up with him. Jonas sang a song he had written, filling the air with his crackling tenor.

Glass walls near and far.

Up above, punctured stars.

Locked my shadow in a jar,

Turns out shadow is all we are. . . .

He ended the phrase on a note too high for his vocal chords, and the final word slipped into a brittle falsetto. He stopped walking. They had come to the intersection of Greenwood and Burnside. The dark corridor of houses and trees opened up into a wide boulevard of swift headlights and tall buildings and a broad ribbon of empty red-stained sky. Jonas took it in one draught.

"Look at this," said Jonas. "We blanket ourselves in noise. I need to. . . ." He turned this way and that, green eyes frantic. "They're *on* me dammit." And he tore off his shirt, buttons popping and skipping along the ground, and threw the thing away into the street like it was saturated with disease. Then his shaking hands began fumbling with his belt.

"Jonas," said Theo. "What are you . . . Jonas goddammit stop this."

"That's what I'm doing. Are you going to help me, Theo?" And Jonas's belt came off, and the shoes and socks and pants, and he threw them in the heap on the street and the look in his eyes meant he wished he had some way of setting fire to them, and he stood there on the edge of the road as naked as he was born, waving the branch over his head and yelling out into space.

"Help me, man. Help me stop the noise. Stop the noise!" Horns sounded as cars sped by. Theo backed away slow, cringing and afraid. Jonas leapt on top of the nearest parked car. One heavy blow with the walking stick sent spideweb-cracks rippling through the windshield. Three more brought the branch through the glass. The car alarm blared and Jonas rose to his full height and screamed. He leapt along the tops of the parked cars, battering windshields with his branch, bellowing all the while the chorus line of his song.

Make the dark afraid!

Make the dark afraid!

Cars stopped in the middle of the boulevard, cameras flashed. Jonas was oblivious, floating miles above it all with swift feet, boiling eyes, booming voice. Theo walked with reverent strides behind the row of cars, spellbound, all mesmerized legs and awestruck face following in the shadow of a joyful, wrathful creature waging war and screaming incantations.

Jonas jumped down from the cars, into a crystalline splash of broken glass, leaving bloody footprints as he paced inside the barricade of vehicles that had materialized out of the dark. Through lighthouse beams of red and blue, a dozen spotlights converged on him. He held the branch in one fist, walking in slow circles with arms spread wide, eyes raised to the heavens in challenge.

Then Jonas stopped. His arms slid to his sides, the branch fell from his hands. Theo walked out from behind the row of parked cars, into the piercing white light, and the spotlights fell on him too, and distorted voices called to him through megaphones but he could not hear them. All he could see was Jonas. Broad and muscular Jonas framed against the light, a soft void in the roaring violence of the world.

And Theo, no longer thinking but only *there*, saw that Jonas was about to fall. So he ran, and the megaphones thundered wordless demands, and Theo came from behind just in time to catch Jonas under his arms and land heavy together there on the broken glass in the road.

"It was all so fucking loud. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. Theo, it was all so loud." Jonas wept. His green eyes were clouded. The ghost of a smile played along the corners of his lips.

"It's alright. I know you, Jonas. I know you."

"It's getting quieter," said Jonas. "Oh God, yes. It is quieter now."

FIVE

look west

With a sputter, the engine falters toward inanimacy.

"I need to go inside and die for a while," says Vince. Theo has heard and spoken the phrase before, an idiom for sleep first uttered by Jonas that began to penetrate his vocabulary years ago, and from there it spread to those around him. These semantic echoes make him feel he's been walking in circles all his life.

Vince trudges across the parking lot and up the stairs to the door of his apartment complex, another nameless brick rectangle on the south side, a converted matchbook factory from bygone days of industry. Theo watches him punch in the door code and vanish into the hallway, then begins his walk home. But halfway down the block Theo is caught and held by a sinking feeling. It evolves from a visceral fear into calm determination, and he spins on his heel to double back. The collar of his leather jacket is upturned, his dark hair disheveled and greasy, and his spindly form, swaying from exhaustion, is poised before the door.

For ten minutes the scene does not change, but for a few passing cars, a black van for a plumbing service that doesn't exist, and swift clouds miles above. By now, Theo

guesses, Vince has taken a large quantity of sleeping pills and is moments away from losing all contact with reality. So Theo punches in the code and slips through the door, boots thumping down the tile hallway. He comes to Vince's apartment door, finds the rusty copy on his keyring acquired in secret some time ago for the purpose of removing all cocaine from the premises. It's from back when Vince's friends still gave a damn about his affliction, before they realized he would always have another pocket, another loose floorboard.

Theo unlocks the door and steps into the musty room. The curtains are drawn and he must feel his way through mounds of clothes, books, electronics, instruments, peanut shells and other flotsam in various stages of decomposition. A sweet smell comes to him, seemingly through a faint sting in his eyes. More scented disinfectant. Visual purple accumulates, and shapes appear before him. He recognizes the fully clothed body of Vince supine on the bare mattress, and the bedside table covered in spare change, rolling papers, and matchbooks. Theo lifts from this table a keyring on a carabiner, and with quaking fingers removes Vince's car key. Then he is out of the moldy darkness, into the hallway, across the parking lot, stepping on flailing weeds that sprout from cracks in the asphalt. He climbs into the vehicle and starts the engine. Second gear catches and rattles on his way out of the parking lot, then he shifts up and speeds on toward the bridge.

The crooked faces of the corpses at the substation flash into view each time he blinks. He presses hard on the accelerator. He feels tricked into flight, and trapped inside the vehicle: the outside seems unreal until he rolls down the windows and feels the cold wind. Dirty hands on the wheel, ink from some unremembered scrawling sinking into his fingertips, he senses wind in his sails, a fearful pressure urging him away.

Halfway out of town, after crossing the river and cruising the expressway under tall buildings, he cracks open the center console and plunges his hand into six inches of garbage. He pulls out a plastic bag of marijuana remnants, opens it, and tosses a few stems in his mouth to chew. He expects only a calming sativa effect to counter his

trigger-happy nerves, but in his haste he has forgotten these are the weed stems of Vincent Disraeli, the remains of a strain so pungent that the stems themselves are riddled with psychoactive crystals. Fifteen miles later a lopsided butterfly spawns to spin in aimless circles in his stomach, and the scumbled colors of the outside pop from their objects and through the windshield. It may not be a fog to quell his twitchings, but in this state he can at least believe that all around him might be as illusory as it feels.

Fifty miles pass by, the city an hour behind him, and bright green signs warn that the highway will split in two. The towns listed mean little to him. His addled brain cannot link the words to any meaningful notion of place. So he focuses instead on the cardinal directions.

"East or west?" He mumbles to himself. But he cannot hear his own question over the wind flapping against the car frame. As if expecting an answer from the naked trees on either side and the rubber, asphalt, and tumbling friction of his speed, Theo rolls down the window, thrusts his head outside, and howls into the cold rushing as his ears burn and his eyes water.

"East or west, east or west, make up your mind and pass the test, maybe best to live and learn, to take a chance and take a turn, or it might be best, it may be best, to crash the car and join the rest!"

East. A little over a hundred miles and he would end up at the bay with no farther to go, unless he took a ferry out to the peninsula, found his mother's old beach house there on the other side, or got a job on a ship bound south or north along the coast or even across the ocean. No, if he struck out east there wasn't far enough to go.

West. Vast open lands in that direction, the vacant plain, so flat and empty a man can see to the limits of his vision. *It's all so loud.* Not out there, where the rain can be seen from thirty miles off as a wavering sheet coming fast over the open land. If Theo goes west there are over three thousand miles before an ocean will block his retreat.

Theo scavenges from the console a bent cigarette, sparks up a brass lighter and takes a deep drag. The split in the road rushes up to meet him. He leans gently on the wheel and strikes off westward.

• • •

The next morning Vince drops off the letter at the post office and waits outside in a terrible disguise. He watches Velvet go inside and tails her as she leaves. She opens the letter without slowing her pace, and reads about the two bodies found at the substation. Vince wonders whether his handwriting is legible. She tears the paper into pieces and tosses them in a storm drain. Six blocks later she turns down an alleyway leading to the warehouse entrance of one of the old south side factories. He notes a strange exception to the rule: there's smoke coming out of its smokestack.

Only when he returns home does he realize his car has been stolen.

• • •

Between the trees and the brick street Jonas and Theo walked back from the churchyard, through the cool spring air. These were the elegantly housed corridors on the north side, a series of uneven brick streets extending radially from one downtown block and fanning out eastward. They laughed and pondered, and for a while even sang. They came to the townhouse, one of many on this road, kept afloat by narrow, gangly architecture. They ascended the concrete stairs to the front porch. Ivy ran over the ground, cresting just over the edge of the porch and ascending the fluted wooden columns, shambling up the brick walls on brittle roots.

Two doors stood side by side on the front porch. The right led to the apartment on the upper floor, the left to the lower apartment shared by Theo, Jonas, and Sheryl. It was long past midnight and the light was on in the window to the left of the door. Sheryl was awake.

They crept inside. Jonas made as if to say something, then an idea came over his face and he shuffled down the corridor without a word and disappeared through the door at the end of the hall, down to his basement. Theo slipped through the bedroom

door. Sheryl was there on the bed fully dressed, not doing anything, testing the colors of her assorted paintings and sketches on the wall with her liquid gaze. It took her a few minutes to acknowledge Theo's presence, and during these he sat down on the bed, facing away from her.

No yelling could have disturbed him like her calm, the shallowness of her voice, drained of feeling as it was.

"So how long does this go on?"

Theo felt naked the moment she spoke. He soothed himself with the thought that she was feeling the same, and the assumption that nakedness for a woman is more a dangerous loss of control than for a man.

"What happened to you, Theo? You've been away with Jonas every night."

"I lost my job."

"You lost your job."

"Yeah."

Theo sat on Sheryl's side of the bed, and as he listened and replied, words on autopilot, outside of himself, his eyes scanned her bedside table. A cubist wristwatch, a half-empty cup of camomile tea, scented candles, number five pencils, and a lump of charcoal for rough sketching. Her next words were hushed and trembling.

"Wake up. You can't live like this."

Theo sought in vain for a fiber of empathy. He was strangely cold. Her message was humbling, but all it inspired in him was a silent film montage of coitus set to a forgotten slow-dance tune.

"Sheryl." Mouthing her name solved nothing, did not make the film burn up or the record crack.

"It's me or Jonas," said Sheryl.

"I won't make that decision."

"Then you've made it." She stood and walked out. A weight was lifted from the room. Now he was free to drift, to think through the meeting as many times as needed to transform it into a bearable memory and erase the silent montage that was still

droning between his ears. It only took half an hour, but the job was not thoroughly done—he could feel the oncoming weeks would be punctuated by moments of shame and sharp cognitive cringes.

When he walked down to the basement he found Jonas with his guitar in his lap, tweaking the brass knobs on the headstock, aiming for some half-diminished variation tuning to make a few hair-raising open chords.

"Something wrong?" Jonas, without even a look at him.

"Somethings."

"So I met these musicians recently."

"Huh."

"Fascinating people. Apparently they're filming a music video in a couple days. Down at the dock beach on the south bank. We're invited."

"Okay."

"You're elsewhere, Theo. Take a load off."

Theo took a seat at Jonas's desk chair. They looked at one another for a moment, unvoiced questions passing between them. Then Jonas looked away, and Theo followed his gaze, and for a while they were absorbed by the same patch of wall, where the white paint had worn away and the cinderblocks were exposed.

"I think. . . ." said Jonas.

"God forbid."

"I think I'll put in a window. Tomorrow."

• • •

"No smoking on the fueling pad, sir."

Theo looks up from his wallet. He has it angled toward himself for discretion. So many large bills in there, best keep them out of sight. A smoldering cigarette hangs from his lip, cherry gleaming orange under a half-inch of unflicked ash. He's been off tobacco

for a year and he's forgotten the conventions of the habit, forgotten that gas is highly combustible, that flammable and inflammable mean the same thing.

"Sir. No smoking on the fueling pad."

The attendant is a teenager with poorly done wrist tattoos of crosses, one upside down, one right side up, encircled in barbed wire. He speaks to Theo through a chrome microphone that carries his voice through the bulletproof glass of the cashier hut. He is surrounded by colorful tins of chewing tobacco and cans of lukewarm energy drinks.

Theo takes the cigarette from his mouth, pinches off the cherry out of view of the attendant, then grinds the unlit end into his wrist in plain sight. The attendant cringes, looks into Theo's tired eyes with derision. Theo cracks a masochistic smile, remembering when he was sixteen, when Jonas taught him the trick.

"Forty on number three," says Theo.

"Whatever, you sick bastard."

Theo fuels up Vince's car, eyeing the vacant parking lot under the anemic fluorescents, waiting for the first signs of danger, wondering what form they might take. He finds a curious pleasure in seeing his own breath as column after column of fog. He jumps when the pump clangs off, shakes himself and climbs back into the driver's seat. Three frictionless groans before the engine rumbles to life. He reaches into the narrow legroom of the passenger seat, unearths a full water bottle, and pours its contents into the water boiler wired to the cigarette-lighter through a chain of three adapters held at the nodes with electrical tape. He learned the hard way to angle the spout toward the cracked window, else the windshield would suddenly become opaque with steam. The orange light flickers when he switches it on, but it seems to get enough power. He reaches down again to grab two apples from the burlap sack with one long hand, and ready one of three gallon containers of dehydrated coffee. *Enough caffeine to buzz a herd of elephants, folks.* He lets slip a nervous laugh, and learns by its origin of the cracks in his constitution.

From out of the dark comes a stranger in track pants and a gray sweatshirt who jogs to the car and taps the window with the underside of a silver ring on a knobby

forefinger. Theo jumps at the sound, calms himself, then rolls down the window and listens to a hooded face croak out words.

"Got a need, brother? Sticky greenery for crisp green."

"Gave that up."

"Why's that?"

"Used to inspire me." Theo sighs, looks at the clock on the dashboard. Just past midnight, if its correct. He turns a few knobs and gets the hot air blasting up into the windshield to diffuse the icy fog. "Now it's just depressing."

"You know what that means. Means you got a guilty conscience."

"No revelation there."

With that Theo is out of the parking lot and down the road, cruising away through the outer limits of this nowhere town, past car dealerships and fast food joints and glowing signs promising to buy gold and jewelry, no questions asked. Five minutes and he's back on the highway, northbound through the rolling hills of coal country. The two lanes of road wind and dip along the contours of the riverbank below, some cold gray flow of water Theo cannot name. On the opposite bank trains loaded down with raw materials scraped out of the earth churn along the rails through paths carved out of the mountainside. Winter has claimed this swath of land in recent weeks. Naked maples and oaks, tragically deciduous, sprout like sterile dendrites from the hillside, earth textured by fallen leaves of reddish brown.

The water comes to a boil. Theo reaches for the handle of the boiler, eyes on the road. He pours the steaming water into the mug in the center console cup holder, over the coffee crystals. Some hot water splashes into his lap and he welcomes the jolt that comes with the pain. One final touch: a dash of pepper to give the nasty stuff some spice.

The road departs from the riverbank and straightens itself, and a long riverside trailer-park signals the approach of a factory, brick and stone in brutal angularity against the smooth chaos of the landscape. Smoke billows into the atmosphere from its towers. Signs indicate that coal mines are near. And it seems to Theo he has traveled

back to an age of feudalism, not so crude as before, now calculated into existence and sustained by draconian equations. The trailers where the workers live, the factory where they slave away for loose change, the mine where they are paid to rape the land, and the crowning achievement of this self-perpetuating economy: twenty-four hour casinos flashing neon creeds, promising ascension.

These sights nauseate him, and Theo feels for a moment what it might be like to be ensnared by such a system, unable for lack of context to smell the foul breath of the place. He drives on, northbound, and when he passes out of the mountains and into open space to continue west on the interstate he senses the lessening of some invisible weight.

• • •

Jonas and Theo lay sprawled out on the smooth rocks off the shores of the island. Sirens were echoing from within the city on either side, but here in the midst of the river they found a calm space. Their veins were hot with chemical stimulation, and they rode the tides of brooding and laughter that passed with ease between them. But Jonas grew dark, as he was prone to do. Even and especially in the happiest moments, as he had once told Theo, he would feel the memory forming, and was often gripped by preemptive nostalgia. It was a moment such as this that trawled the story from the depths of his past, and Jonas told it with a distant look on his face. He told of the day he followed a blood trail to the bank of a stream near his father's house. He stood there, squinting in the cold, and a patch of color took shape on the opposite bank. It was a horse, brown hide and unkempt mane peppered with dirt clods. From the look of him he must have been away from his keeper for weeks. Jonas felt the beast's soulless gaze and knew with all certainty it was Joker. Theo horse he learned to ride on as a boy, whose burial taught him the meaning of death.

So Jonas ran into the river and forged across through the bitterly cold water, taking one plunging stride after another, calling the horse's name. He scraped his knees

on jagged rocks below the surface and could not feel pain over the cold. He lost his balance and tumbled face first into the current, then rose and kept on. The nearer he came, the more blurred Joker's image, and he thought then it was because of the first delirious stage of hypothermia. But when he scrambled ashore and stood before the trees, Joker vanished and had never been there.

Jonas told Theo, there on the rocks, that he might have seen a ghost that day. But Theo saw the story as the first instance of a terrible sickness that he could not name. Theo kept that theory to himself, in hopes it would become untrue and the story along with the rest of the signs would simply evaporate.

Capillaries constricted twice over by nicotine and caffeine, Theo unearths Vince's atlas from the newspapers and pages of garbled tablature under the driver's seat. The car is pulled off the highway, emergency lights winking, plastic bull horns on the grill tinted orange in the last haze of dusk. Theo sits on the hood with the atlas spread out and the napkin with the address, given to him by Gabriel and recently discovered in one pocket of his jacket, unfolded over the map. He follows its coordinates to the best of his ability, tracing with his finger a narrow route that runs west-by-southwest from his current location through a thousand miles of dry wasteland. Without any other destination he decides to seek answers there, or at least sanctuary, whether from a pursuer or from his own exhaustion.

Back on the road he finds his speed matched by a rumbling locomotive that rides the rails not ten yards from the right lane of the vacant highway. For three long hours they follow the same line, straight and narrow across the plains, two pairs of headlights making yellow haze of the space before them, one edging into the lead and then the other. But when those two-hundred miles of silent companionship and shared momentum have elapsed, the hurtling train, steaming along beside him through the

night, veers from the parallel and away into the dark, blaring its horn in what could only be a gesture of fond farewell.

• • •

"I've been awake for three days now."

Jonas said it bleary-eyed, dark circles under his lower lashes. He was skinnier than a month ago and Theo noticed. Weeks of quiet desperation masked as a philosophical going-under, but they were both eighteen and the distinction eluded them. They'd spent an hour in the graveyard mocking death and scrawling bad haikus on the tombstones with chalk. Fourteen months beyond this day Theo buried his father in this cemetery, reading a speech off a tattered yellow notepad to a crowd of four, choking on his words. In the absence of a will, and in memoriam of time spent among these graves and trees, he had a haiku of his own composition inscribed as the epitaph:

*A good simple man
He takes you under his wing
And shows you the world.*

"What does it say about us," said Jonas on the bench beneath the white-blossomed dogwood with hands flailing in arbitrary gesticulation, blonde hair lightly tossed by the breeze, green eyes unfocused. Theo's bare feet were on the grass, toes flexing on the cool green, taking in the bright sky with one eye at a time, feeling his center shift by inches each time he closes one eye and opens the other.

"What does it say that we can only handle consciousness in small doses. We're cowards. You close your eyes in sleep and miss glimpses of entire worlds, flashing right there in front of you as clear and strange as a second sun. Around hour seventy of being awake something incredible happens, you pass out of yourself, not all the way, not astral projection but something similar. . . . You become a second translucent form of

yourself, skewed a little bit against your body, overlapping for the most part but vaguely off-center. When you move you feel those motions happening *after* you make them happen, you feel the time delay. And after moving, you exist as that skewed after-image, or maybe a before-image, a few millimeters into the future from where you stand."

"You need sleep," said Theo. The green eyes were a vacuum and Theo was afraid, now aware of the mouldering caskets beneath his feet. "You need to sleep, Jonas."

"When you're awake this long, you see time for what it is. An endless strand, plodding, indifferent. All the divisions of days and hours just arbitrary designations made by broken minds in need of a projected brokenness. It has no reason to be segmented, or to end. I'm convinced, after all these weird sensations. I really am convinced for the first time. It won't end. I'll always wake up somewhere."

• • •

Theo is awake somewhere in the empty midwest. His spine is disjointed and the metal beneath him is cold. The wind whistles over the circular opening to his mechanical cavern and the sun shines on his dirty face. Four days of growth from those crusty follicles. He takes one hand from the pocket of his jacket and runs it along slanted metal blades, bloodshot eyes tracing the numb fingers as they go round and round. Tones ring from the blades, muffled xylophone keys all of one length and frequency arranged radially around a protruding axel painted with a red spiral.

Crawling out of the chrome cylinder, Theo falls a body's length to the flat earth. He stands, brushes off dirt and grass, and clears his nostrils with a few snorts. He turns to take one final look inside the jet engine. The old beast once bore soldiers over strange lands to drop ton after ton of bombs on factories and encampments, and now it slumbers here, obsolete and forgotten in a fenced-off picnic ground here in the far reaches of the plain.

Theo stumbles back to the car, parked on the yellow grass in the shade of a lonely evergreen. Before he climbs inside he pauses to listen for a quiet sound. Soft wingbeats, audible on this bleak morning, carry a single crow low overhead. He follows its passage over the fence, then catches sight of a black van through the chain-link. The windows are tinted and the words *Hugo's Plumbing* appear in elegant typography across the side. His mind leaps backward eight days, his knees quiver, the flesh under his right eye clenches.

The engine starts on the fifth try. He fishtails over the grass as he whirls around, onto the gravel, out the gate and back toward the road with gas pedal to the floor.

"Who the hell. . . ?"

The van doesn't follow. Theo watches it dwindle to a dark speck in the rearview just before he skids back onto the highway. A truck horn blares and passes wide left. He is back on the road and eating up distance.

Ten miles later Theo finds his cool and lapses into the groove of the road, convinced for now that the van was a fluke. It might have glided by sheer coincidence through a gap in the substance of things, that brought it naturally into the proximity one who knew of its having been somewhere before. That seems like justice to Theo. If anything, this is an indication that his journey is blessed by forces that challenge the sovereign cohesion of time and space.

He cracks the window to remind himself of his speed and of the outside, then he reaches under the seat, finds a tape, and pushes it into the tape deck, hoping for sounds that will ground him again. A swift riffling backward as the tape rewinds, then it begins. Theo recognizes it as a mix-tape of fuzzy avant-garde psychedelia composed and performed by Vince at the age of sixteen for the express purpose of seducing a beautiful folk singer named Alva ten years his senior. The album is a running joke with Vince's bandmates, who often make facetious claims about it being the juvenilia of a prodigy. Although Theo made contributions to the lore of the joke, he nonetheless finds now if not before a vein of unmatched sincerity in the four garish tracks. So the dirty urban punk kid weaves Pachelbel's Canon into his twelve-minute grunge epic, and who

could blame him? We are united first and foremost—Theo knows it in his bones—by common indignities. All connections beyond these are footnotes.

The young voice of Vince, looped over itself threefold, crackles into being in a time and place very distinct from the attic bedroom and boyish love that gave it shape. Through the windshield Theo watches trucks weave around one another in diesel-powered ballet. The road, stone grey, runs on into the hazy west as far as Theo can see.

Then a switch is thrown and the haze is closer, like a film on his eyes. The motion of the trucks passing in front of one another no longer makes spacial sense. Theo reads the long road before him as a painting, flat on its canvas and drained of all perspective. Sweat growing from the pores on his back, nausea swelling in his gut, he swerves onto the shoulder and steps out of the car. He vomits brown water that pools in the rumble-strip cracks, then he climbs on top of the car to lie flat on his stomach and close his eyes, stubbled cheek cool on the beige surface. The black on the inside of his eyelids, requiring no depth to appear as it is, calms him.

Then a surge of courage brings him to his feet, there on top of the car, looking out over endless miles of empty plain, and for lack of a third dimension he faces the world as a smooth wall before him, into which he dips his hands. Without origin the wind is only a sensation.

• • •

The shed built off the horse barn was untethered, drifting in space. Tetrahydrocannabinol constricting neural capillaries, the decades-old space heater, and candles flickering on the wooden ledge that ran along the wall at chest level all made this possible. The clarity, silence, and chill of midwinter night was forgotten. Two boys in their fifteenth year believed they were nearing an extrasensory exuberance never before felt, as they danced on the layer of hay in scarves and bathrobes and boots, feeling new presences, seeing odd creatures in each other's eyes.

After a round of shadow boxing Jonas took his seat in the iron chair, sank down with wide eyes fixed on the floor, mesmerized by a sensation of terminal velocity carrying him down through tunnels of color.

Theo was on his feet with his face pressed against a crack in the boards, tasting the cold wind on his face from the outside. When he looked back to Jonas he felt a strengthening bond, and prayed breathlessly that one day the chance would come to defend him from anything. With clearer eyes Theo might have seen even then forking paths taking shape on a timeline, dark tangles rooted in the murk where the two companions would meet for the last time before veering away into irreconcilable distances.

• • •

If ever a road led to the end of the world, Theo drives on it now. The landscape is flat desert but for the sparse shrubs drying in the sun. Winter is behind him now, for the daytime. But Theo knows, without humidity the heat will drain from the air as soon as the sun glides under the faraway red-stained hills.

This is the road written on Gabriel's napkin, but now Theo realizes the words are less an address and more a geographic riddle. They imply, as far as he can tell, a turn-off at the thirty-fourth mile past the little town of Red Crossing. The odometer on Vince's car runs in both numerical directions, spastic clicks signaling the change from addition to subtraction and back again, either by mechanical failure or a salesman's sabotage. So Theo gauges the distance as best he can, overlaying the afterimage of highway mile-markers he has seen for so long onto the bleak dirt road before him, counting tenths of a mile.

Somewhere in the twenties Theo abandons the imaginative exercise, when he sees two objects just off the road up ahead. One is a fence that traces the square perimeter of a half-acre on the right, and what appears to be a wooden toolshed on the inside. On the other side is the second, a black shape, familiar contours even from this

distance. It's the van from the jet grounds and the quarry before that, parked on the side of the road. Theo slows his car to a crawl, then pulls over gently and steps into the dry outside.

The moment his feet touch the dust two men in black and white suits, black trench coats, and sunglasses emerge from the sliding door of the van and walk quickly toward him. The taller of the two, with a sharp face and black goatee is at the lead, and as he walks he checks a watch under his leather glove. The second, short and thick, clean-shaven with red hair slicked back, is just behind, taking faster steps to match his companion's long stride. Theo is frozen. His eyes dart along the ground for a rock, a stick, a weapon of any kind. He thinks to jump inside the car but he knows it won't start in time. When they are ten yards away they reach into their coats and draw heavy handguns. They come to a stop at five yards. Their guns are aimed squarely at Theo's chest.

The taller opens his mouth to speak. Before his vocal chords can vibrate so much as a curse into the dry air a thunderous sound cracks out, and then another. The sounds echo among the hills, traveling miles and back again four times over before dissolving. Theo watches the two men collapse and bleed in the dust.

"Twisted fuckers." A gruff voice from nearby. It belongs to a bear-like man, broad and tall with thick white sideburns, beard, and a long braid that dangles at his thighs, leaning on the gate of the fence across the road, sniffing the barrel of a steaming shotgun. He is old in the eyes, but maybe only a decade beyond Theo, wearing black everything, the ensemble offset by woven hemp sandals.

The man's sandals flop in the dust as he walks to the bodies, a great weight in his eyes. "Death and taxes." Talking to himself with a guttural drawl, shaking his head. He's close now, and he looks at Theo with sky-blue eyes, sizing him up with one slow arching and straightening of his neck, clavicles bulging in the open V of the black denim shirt.

"You'd best come inside."

The words don't register. Theo stands still in the dust, under the sun, by the side of the road. The shots came so quick, the men dropped so fast and made no sounds as they fell. Two strokes of thunder and two living beings tumbled down like sandbags. No spirit in them now if there ever was. Just soiled coats, shattered sunglasses, empty gazes upturned, and strange colors inside their chests—moist and gleaming seen through a scatterplot of dark red tears in white shirts, soon scumbled by windblown reddish dust. *Pieces of tuxedo all over the highway. . . .*

"You'd best come inside," he says again.

Theo follows him in a daze through the gate of the fenced enclosure. They walk alongside a low, curved concrete wall toward the tin-roofed toolshed. The man kicks open the door. The yellow and black-striped caution sign reads a weight limit of four-hundred pounds. The man punches a red button with one huge hand as they step onto the steel platform, and the two are borne underground by the rumble of hidden gears and pulleys. Theo looks out over the dusty ground as it rises from the level of his shins to his shoulders.

A flat rooster is perched with iron claws on the crosshairs of a rusty wind-vane, squawking crude divinations of air currents from the pivoting joint fastened to the concrete wall that circumscribes the hatch of the missile silo.

SIX

off the grid

Down through the shaft they go as metallic clanks echo and shake the platform, into the bowels of clockwork that shift in the dark. A natural buzz shares this space, some misguided insect it seems, ramming itself in a blind stupor against the walls. The elevator touches bottom and the mesh-steel carriage rattles open. They step out onto a catwalk, into humid air and warm yellow light.

Theo's eyes adjust and he bears witness to wonders. The catwalk circumscribes the inside of a three-story cylinder. The rounded iron wall, perforated by jagged hand-crafted nooks, is the trellis of a fantastic garden of wisteria vines. Cones of purple flowers hang like grape-clusters from winding wooden tendrils, downy watercolor forms dangling and swaying in artificial air currents. Tiny yellow and black shapes are at play in the suspended garden: bees streaming from man-made shelved hives ensconced in the feathery pastel of fresh greenery, circling the room in the frenzy of a bizarre feast. Their thousand whispering oscillations harmonize into one ethereal hum.

Towering in stone silence in the center of the room, the missile slumbers, painted with pixelated desert camouflage, four sharp tail-fins at its base, topped by a smooth aerodynamic cone that contains the obsolete warhead.

The huge man sighs through his bristling white beard, happy to be home, strutting along the catwalk with his shotgun slung over one shoulder. Theo follows him down a ladder to the second sublevel, flower clusters brushing against his face, and he can almost taste their sweet ambrosia through his cheeks. Their footsteps make dull echoes on the iron lattice as they walk around the silo and through an open elliptical naval door. The small room has a desk and chair, a walk-in kitchen with grime-crusting burners and a refrigerator painted in the garish yellow that was the style of the day when the silo was constructed, a plate-glass window through which the missile and vines can be seen, and two army bunks hanging off the walls on chains.

"Get some sleep. I've got work to do."

Theo makes no objections as the man closes the hatch behind him and spins the wheel to lock it in place. Half a minute later a gyrating rumble signals the elevator has come to life and is carrying the stranger back to the surface. Theo throws off his jacket and collapses on the bottom bunk. His mind's eye takes one swift turn through the last half hour, discovers no meaning, then switches off as he falls into trembling, dreamless sleep.

• • •

After three savage days of heavy dosage and haunted thoughts, Vince stands again at the mouth of the alleyway down which Velvet disappeared. It is midmorning and a cold fog has descended on the city. Vince is in full attire: tweed suit, leather vest, and striped tie. He flips open the watch on its golden chain and peers into its secrets, the tiny polished gears turning under the transparent half of the clock-face. Once it is closed he realizes he didn't even read the time. Vince slips it back into his breast pocket anyway, and down the alleyway he goes with his aristocratic sashay: the confident

stride that always keeps those around him from asking too many questions, keeps them unaware of his consuming depression, ravenous addictions, and sad misanthropy.

"Theodore Wascomb you car-jacking bastard," he mumbles to the alley shadows.

"This one's for you."

• • •

Just past noon Theo's eyes flutter open. He stretches, does a few shaky pushups on the tile floor to get his blood moving, then turns the wheel on the hatch and pulls it open. He steps out onto the catwalk and breathes deep the warm humid air. Gentle natural sunshine in here somehow. Across the silo on this level he sees light seeping through another window set in the wall among the vines. Bees lazily orbit his head as he walks around toward the window, and he gazes down between his feet through the iron lattice to the third sublevel. A layer of soil down below brims with soft green moss. The cold phallic shape of the missile seems to sprout from this same earth where the densely knotted wisteria trunks hold fast.

He reaches the other side and turns open another hatchway. He steps into a new environment, smells of mildew and incense blending into a dank sweetness, walls lined with full bookshelves. A broad mahogany desk bears a typewriter, a HAM radio and microphone at least four decades past their prime, a turntable wired to a pair of wood-cased speakers, stacks of leather-bound notebooks, and a telegraph that is eerily motionless.

The old man is at the desk hunched over some crumbling tome lit by a banker's lamp, one crooked finger tracing the lines of text, wire-frames holding two thin lenses between his eyes and the page. His white braided ponytail is looped twice around his neck, slack hanging over one black-denimed shoulder. He is framed against the tinted glass, and on the other side the silo apiary breathes and lives, too strange to be real.

"I should thank you," says Theo.

"Damn right," not looking up from the book, licking two fingers and flipping the page.

"Thanks."

Silence. Theo wanders among the shelves, skimming titles and authors. For the most part the library consists of books on history and engineering. The only exception is a collection of poetry: the classical epics, plus some transcendentalist free-verse. Meanwhile the old man finishes his chapter, marks his place with the cardboard flap of a matchbook, flips the spectacles down the bridge of his nose. His piercing blue eyes focus on Theo's reflection in the glass.

"You got no clue what kinda trouble you were in, do you?" His face is stern, eyes knowing, anger in folds on his brow. "Let me tell you what kinda trouble. I went back up there and found a goddamn tracking beacon magnetically attached to your undercarriage. I tossed the beacon and the two dead spooks in the van, locked the steering wheel with duct tape and locked down the accelerator. And I did it all with gloves on. Yeah, you were in *that* kinda trouble. And you better call in every last favor you've got with the supreme being and pray that van went a hundred fucking miles before it crashed."

Theo just stands there, chewing his lip, feeling worthless. The old man's expression hasn't changed.

"You know who those guys were?"

"I don't know. Agents or something."

"Or something is right. And you led them right to me, you stupid bastard. With any luck they'll just pass by when they come out here looking for the source of the last transmission, maybe follow the beacon signal out into the desert. But these are thorough fuckers on your trail, son. Thorough as all hell."

"Gabriel sent me out here." Theo's reply is stuttered, and it seems a moot point even to him.

The old man sighs, removes the spectacles and massages both temples with the thumb and middle finger of one huge hand. He leans back and faces Theo.

"What's your name?"

"Theo."

"Gabe gave you my address."

"On a napkin."

"Sounds about right." The old man chuckles, and zen-like serenity flows into his expression. Theo breathes freely again. "It's done. And we're not enemies. I guess you gotta call me something. Try Tobias. Has a ring to it."

"Okay, Tobias."

"Why don't you sit on down, Theo." Tobias pulls a wheeled stool from under the desk and slides it across the room. Theo takes his seat.

"Me and Gabriel go way back. Call him my real estate agent. He's got a knack for that sort of thing, kind of an archeologist of the modern. Finds all the forgotten spaces in the middle of nowhere. Don't ask me how he does it. And don't ask him either, he'll give you some wild juju speak about reading the world. He found me out on the west coast, back when I was young, confused, stumbling my way through a doctorate in entomology."

"You're a beekeeper."

"Yeah. Took a couple years but I brought in the soil, planted the vines, carved out the trellis, got my first hive going. Place has its own well and filtration system too. Not bad right? They abandoned it to satisfy some treaty but they never pulled out the wiring. No one comes out to read the damn meter, I'll tell you that much. All I had to do was rewire the systems to a solar array."

"It's beautiful in there. And the air feels so good."

"The wonders of climate control. I studied up on antiquated programming. Set the system to go through temperate zone seasons. Only I tightened up the cycle. We go through a year in five months down here. Keeps the honey flowing. This month is spring, if you hadn't guessed."

Theo is about to ask why Tobias is down here. But then the old man turns to look out on the garden through the window, drinking it all in for a second first time. Tobias's eyes soften with love, and Theo knows there's no reason to ask.

"Gabriel told me to come here if something went wrong."

"With what?" Tobias is still fixated on his garden, conjuring daydreams from the whirling clouds of bees.

"The machine."

The way Tobias jolts back into himself tells Theo he should start spelling it with a capital M.

"So you're one of the machinists. It's a grand mystery, don't you think? I can't wait to see the thing switched on."

"What the hell is it?"

At this Tobias slides open a drawer on the side of the desk and lifts from its depth one of the machine parts. He handles it with care, setting it gently on the table.

"Lovely, isn't it?"

"Where did you . . . ?"

"From the van. The spooks must have found one. Not good."

The two corpses by the transformer station along the river flash through Theo's mind, overlaid now with the lacerated bodies of the agents. Justice?

"What we're looking at," says Tobias, "is one piece of a big something long in the making." He is stroking the thing as he says it, calloused fingers against the stubbled steel texture. Theo stares, lifts an eyebrow, tries to channel his profound confusion into a look of dignified curiosity.

"I think you've got the wrong idea. Maybe you still see the thing as some big conspiracy. That may be the only way it makes sense in your head. Tell me, did Gabriel ever say anything to you about the oversoul?"

"There was something." Theo expels the images of corpses and delves into his memories of the foggy basement scene, Gabriel before him on the concrete floor tending

to his chemistry. "He asked a question. He asked me what happens when the oversoul can't hear itself think."

"Yeah, okay." Tobias sets an elbow on the desk and rests his head in one palm. "Now I don't know how much of this stuff I believe. But I've seen a thing or two. Really it's just that one word. Oversoul. Makes it sound strange. Disregard the semantics, and consider for a moment there's a *music* behind things. Those bees out there, they labor in absolute harmony, they communicate without language, their dances convey complex mathematical ideas. They have a music to them, each creature a single note in the symphony. Chaotic though it may be . . . consider that the music is vital to the proper fulfillment of life, or evolution, or ascension, what have you. And consider there are ways to disrupt the music, if some organism is severed from it, loses that natural clairvoyance that ties it to the emotive fluctuations of things. There are types of fungi that can drive bees insane, make them lose their sense of direction, fly away in circles. Imagine the mind of an insane bee. It lapses into its own solipsistic rhythm, a purposeless chaos separate from the greater purposeful chaos. Not only is the bee lost but the music it was a part of has been damaged, a single note in the melody gone. And the symphony falters however slightly."

Tobias pauses, runs his splayed fingers over the machine part. It occurs to Theo that this man may not have spoken to anyone for months. Tobias continues.

"So imagine a massive disruption. A viral fungus that began to permeate the atmosphere just as the music was beginning to be heard. By us, that is. Imagine an invisible rainbow of spectral noise. All of us lost in the cloud, spinning away from good chaos to bad. It's all too loud for the music to get through, except for little squawks here and there, now and then."

"The way Gabriel told it," says Theo. "He said that the machine was being built spontaneously. Many hands unaware of the whole picture."

"That's the music. Reaching out to draw in a few notes that have gone insane, lost their place. And the beauty is, the communications grid, the source of the disruption, will be the vehicle for the amplification of the music. As it was always meant to be."

"When we installed the devices there were spaces ready for them. Is that what you mean?"

"As it was always meant to be. Even as we walled ourselves off with all this garbage the music was making sure it would be able to reconnect with us. Little suggestions here and there planted in the minds of engineers. A space here, a slot there."

"So what will it do, when it's complete?"

"It's being built by the music, and that means no one knows. Maybe it will shut off the whole grid. But there's one thing to keep in mind. Anything the music wants is a soft desire. I mean, whatever the thing is isn't about controlling anything or anyone. It's about guiding us home, teaching us to listen again."

"But there are people like you and me, who know about it. If the machine turns out to be what it seems to be . . . radio towers, power transformers. The pieces must be everywhere by now. And if there's something like an on switch, there may be something like a control room. And that means people could try to use it for something."

"That's a valid concern. But if this thing really does come from where we think it does—a thousand coincidences, little brain spasms here and there, blank checks signed off and left on the street . . . it won't really have an on switch or a control room. It'll just go and do what it has to do, and we can trust that what it does is for the best. But a single hand exacting the slightest iota of control on the actual *function* of the devices could bring the whole project to the ground. Or worse, the machine could be given a human purpose."

Tobias lifts the device tenderly between two broad palms and places it on top of a bookshelf, next to a two-foot long ship in a bottle—a nineteenth century transatlantic schooner, Theo notes with interest, in a rare remembrance of an encyclopedia entry. Tobias takes a step back, cocks his head to the right and left. Satisfied with the placement, he turns to Theo and speaks again.

"I think you need to break your fast, friend. Hope you like dehydrated rations."

Jeremy paces behind the last row of seats in the small theater, watching images captured at the ancient hydroelectric plant on the island two months earlier crackle on the big screen between swaths of red curtain. His eyes dart among the backs of numerous heads, pondering what thoughts may be at play inside them. Were they moved, fascinated, inspired, bored? He scratches the nape of his neck beneath the white collar of the tuxedo shirt, feeling awkward and exposed like an organ grinder's monkey, and he chews the inside of his cheek for lack of anything to smoke.

The vintage category of the film festival has been going on all day, with periodic breaks for coffee and exotic sandwiches. During these Jeremy is meant to mingle and form artistic relationships with others. Instead he has walked out of the theater every time to chain cigarettes in front of the pawn shop, squinting through filthy glass and prison bars to drool over a silver trumpet, dented and scuffed but shining like justice on the purple velvet display shelf. Jeremy would buy the thing, if he hadn't burned the last of his grant driving this far north.

On screen in shades of gray, Theo and the members of Damn Them Torpedoes look unreal, the last survivors of some cataclysmic erasure that spared the freaks or made freaks out of the spared. There was Tennyson as the postmodern gothic norseman, nostrils flaring, rough face scowling. Miles as the east-indies shaman, eyes closed and dreadlocks flailing as an afterimage of his rhythmic contortions.

And Vince as the tweed-suited watch-chained Victorian gentleman, thrashing forward and back with the momentum of his bowing hand. And Theo as the leather-jacketed roadhouse existentialist, shambling in the dust, craning his neck toward the rusty crossbeams in the dark of the ceiling. Vince and Theo vanished almost a week ago. This is not so unusual. But Jeremy, shuffling in stolen bowling shoes at the back of the theater, begins to wonder if this film will be the last anyone sees of them.

The wavering tones of Damn Them Torpedoes fill the theater, rising and falling tides of overdriven symphonic sludge. Jeremy strains to see the faces of Theodore and Vincent through the crackling gray haze of old celluloid, wishing he had filmed one

lucid instant, so he could truly see into their eyes one more time, without the deliberate obscurity. Besides, a single flash of color and clarity might have been a good aesthetic choice. Just a blip near the end. Two or three frames at most.

• • •

"Let's go for a drink," says Tobias.

Together they descend to the lowest level of the silo. Theo's feet are bare and his toes clench on the moist carpet of moss around the base of the missile.

"That window there below my study, that's the control room. And over here, I think this was a fallout shelter. Standard for the period. Makes for a perfect mead cellar."

They enter the dark room. It smells of mold, honey, and alcohol. Tobias produces a kerosene lantern from some hidden corner, lights it and twists the knob to feed the flame.

"Take this," he says. And Theo holds the lantern by its iron handle. It feels familiar. The pulsing light fills the room, revealing rack upon rack of heavy oak barrels and shelves of canned food. Tobias lifts two tankards from a shelf, turns the valve on a tap, and fills them to the brim with a pale yellow, frothy liquid.

"Might be a little yeasty, so don't just guzzle the stuff. This is one serious brew. Should be around twenty percent."

Theo dials down the lamp and sets it by the hatchway on the way out. They walk out into the silo again and sit on the moss by the fins of the missile. Tobias hands Theo a tankard.

"To the traveler," says Tobias. "May he find himself welcome and find his way home."

"To the beekeeper," says Theo. "May he always have a card to play."

They toast and take a few swallows each. The honeyed sweetness foams around Theo's tongue, and beyond the calming burn of alcohol he imagines he can taste the nectar of the wisteria flowers, soft purple blossoms in his nostrils.

"Invented my own crop rotation," says Tobias, patting the soft green beneath them. "We're on moss for the springtime, keeps the air oxygen-rich. Near spring's end I'll plant some peanuts and drag out summer for an extra week to get the nitrogen back in the soil."

"Is this real sunlight in here?"

"That's a little innovation of mine. Look up at the ceiling."

Theo looks up along the shaft of the missile and is blinded by a single burning circle on the ceiling's mirrored surface.

"Bees need a moving sun to function naturally," says Tobias. "They use calculus, the clever bitches. The workers are all neutered females, you know. Anyway, I set up a series of vertical tunnels that feed in real sunlight. Light rays get concentrated and angled down into them with parabolic mirrors, the same kind I use to feed the solar array. Then the light bounces off a flat mirror at the bottom of each tunnel and is sent diagonally up to the mirrored ceiling of the silo. The flat ones are motorized, so with a little programming and a little electricity from the solar array I can imitate the rising and setting of the sun, making it arc just the way it should across the ceiling depending on what season we're in. The same can be done with moonlight. . . . Speaking of, I've been trying to design flexible mirrors to replace the flat ones in the tunnels. If I can motorize their flexibility, I could conceivably reproduce the phases of the moon down here. I think the bees would really dig that. I mean, the moon on the ceiling is always a full circle, it must be so confusing."

Tobias is twitching with excitement over his own speculations, dunking the paintbrush tip of his braided ponytail into the mead and sucking on it as he thinks. Theo sees him for a moment as an ingenious child.

"You would've been a hell of a pool player," says Theo.

"Think so? Yeah, you know what. Now that you say that, I *was* a hell of a pool player. I cleaned a few guys out back in college." Tobias smiles, squints into his artificial sun. "Man, I forgot about that."

"Tobias," says Theo. He's finished his tankard, and the booze is thick in his veins already. "I admire you. Look at what you've built. It's surreal. This kind of ingenuity, it's all that's good about our species. You know, I was a mechanic."

Tobias spews a bit of drink into the moss.

"No shit! Hold that thought. Let's have another round on me."

Tobias takes both tankards and goes into the dark of the cellar. Theo meanwhile watches the oncoming artificial sunset taking place in the mirrored ceiling. All at once he realizes the mirrored sunlight is just as red and deep as a sunset from the surface, and it is vanishing into the wall just as the sun outside is falling into the horizon.

"You're a mechanic?" asks Tobias, offering Theo a replenished frothing tankard.

"Was a mechanic."

"Come on, you never *stop* being a mechanic. It's like a terminal illness. Trust me, I know."

"Yeah, maybe. I do miss it sometimes."

"You worked on cars?"

"Yeah, cars mostly. Usually just simple stuff, nothing to write home about. Engine repair and whatever else. And it was pretty miserable sometimes. You're breathing in all kinds of chemicals, carbon monoxide and antifreeze and god-knows-what, not making much money, getting burned and cut up and cursed at every day."

"You say you miss it though."

"Yeah well, there were these moments, in a garage. Once you'd worked there for a while, once you knew the guys and you knew where all the tools were and you had your bearings, you'd start feeling these moments happen. . . . Say you've got your arm elbow-deep in a broken engine, afraid the thing'll just cut on for no reason, and sparks are flying all over your back from the guy who's carving into some tubing a couple feet behind you and you're not sure if your oil-drenched shirt will catch fire, and everyone's

screaming at each other over the grinding and the howling and the only words you can make out are swear words and then you make out a joke and yell it on down the line. It was those filthy moments where you felt everything anyone can feel all at once. And through it all the work got done."

"Theo, you might not believe it but I know just what you mean."

"That's just the yarn of a lowly auto-mechanic. You're miles over my head. Sun-mirrors and beehives and crop rotation."

"I've got a yarn for you."

"Let's hear it."

"I started an insect collection when I was twelve," says Tobias. "Started with butterflies. Endless patterns in those wings. Texture, symmetry, geometric forces of nature. I saw them and I boiled the grand mystery down into a simple question. Chance or design? But I had another thought, looking over my collection. And I didn't know how to word it then, so it just skipped off my mind and left an imprint. But I think it went something like this. . . . If by a freak mutation, brought about by the sheer variability of genetics, an animal was made to *want death*, wouldn't it be a triumph if the entire species dissolved into history? Or further, if that species desired above all things to *never have been*, wouldn't such a species evolve toward a perfect erasure of all evidence that it ever was?"

Tobias takes a swig and laughs to himself. Theo sees shyness in the man.

"It's a been a while since I had company. Sorry to get all metaphysical on you."

"There are two topics of conversation: sex organs and metaphysics. All else is gray scale."

Tobias laughs long and loud over that one. Theo wears a face-splitting grin and clutches his sides, convulsing in silent laughter along with him.

"Oh fuck," says Tobias, wiping a tear from his eye. "Man, that's really good."

"I can't take credit. It's this thing my friend used to say. He'd say all kinds of crazy things. That was something he said one time, just *once*. And he'd come up with

these things six times a day, I swear. The man had me carrying a notebook around." Theo laughs just thinking about it.

"Sounds like one perceptive son of a bitch."

"Christ, you've got no idea. The words that came out of his mouth. He was brilliant, just brilliant. He was my best friend." Theo takes a deep swallow of the mead.

"Was?"

"Yeah, he was."

"What happened to him?"

"Had always been happening. Schizophrenia."

"Damn sorry to hear that."

"So was I."

Silence for a few minutes as Theo and Tobias both watch the reflected sunset. The bees are flitting around, polishing off their business and returning home. The sunlight dissipates into a red-orange haze as the circle of light seems to set within the flowers, and for a few seconds the whole silo is aglow with a bloody hue. Then the sun is gone and the motorized mirrors zero in on the moon, and the inside of the silo is tinted by white softness.

"I wonder if I could get it to snow in here," says Tobias.

"Look," says Theo. He gulps down a mouthful and closes his eyes. "I'm sorry I made you kill them."

"It's alright," says Tobias.

"I don't think it is."

"It's alright, Theo. I know you."

SEVEN

viscosity

Theo stands under the sepia light of a humming streetlamp with his feet sunk in gravel, the parking lot of a twenty-four hour country store, the sole proprietor to this township in the midst of the western plain. The signpost three miles back on the eastbound highway read *Population 6*, blue text in bold font against chalk-white steel. Some resident new to the guises of fatherhood had crossed out the six with red spray-paint and tagged a jagged seven in the margin.

One other vehicle occupies the lot beside Vince's car, a scratched-up van with a gypsy vibe, celtic knots on the drawn curtains. From inside oozes monotonous music, the quartered frequency of two creaking hinges aiming for resonance and never finding it. The scene and its soundtrack strike a chord in Theo's mind, and as he mimes a golf swing to stretch his spine, he broods.

The image of Gabriel comes to him, stirring his cauldron in Jeremy's basement, and the perverse confusion and sophisticated indiscipline of this new era seems clear. How self-mystified, crowded and lonely, danger never leaping from the bushes but gliding with soft fangs and slow poison. He feels for the first time at home in this

historical context, at peace with his own confusion. The cauldron seethes, yet the chemicals never blend and no one tends the flames.

Theo climbs into Vince's car. The engine purrs to life. Just then a gristly hitchhiker taps on the windshield. Theo cranks down his window.

"Where you headed?"

"East, I guess."

Theo looks him over. He's a wild man, somewhere in his forties or else just old in the bones. He seems familiar, and Theo can't pin him to any face he's seen before until he glances at his own eyes in the rearview. Odd, but this man could be his older brother.

"Hop in."

They sail along the highway, engine humming in the mist between earth and sky. The hitchhiker makes only grunts for the first thirty miles, but now he crafts the the air from his lungs into mumbled syllables, slurred and slow.

"I used to be afraid of dying, because of the ghosts."

"The ghosts?" asks Theo. This man is close and could be insane. But the anxiety vanishes when Theo remembers this may be his brother.

"I would feel them everywhere. It took me a while to understand what they were. It took me a while away from home before I could recognize the ghosts I grew up with. They're in every building, on every floor, and outside too. All over."

"Do they say things?"

"Say? They only sputter. Words are just sounds to them. But they're not dead or alive. Ghosts aren't people."

"What are they?"

"Ghosts are sensations left behind in places. Emotions that were felt so strongly that when the people left or died, the emotions didn't go with them. They're still here, like a smoke behind every landscape, every object in a room. If you go to a hillside where young lovers met night after night a hundred years ago, there's an air of serenity, unity, devotion. These are ghosts, and we make them every day."

"The stronger the emotion, the stronger the feeling left behind."

"That's why I keep moving. That's why I can't stop. I need to collect the feelings of as many ghosts as I can find, and sow my ghosts all over the world. Spiritual insemination. It's the same urge that takes the rudder when you see a lonely tree in the distance, and act on the desire to climb it and scream from the highest branch. So tell me, man. What ghosts do you leave behind? What sort of children have you begotten?"

They ride the highway for one long mile before Theo can hazard a reply.

"They would be cold and rained on." Theo sighs, and squares himself in the driver's seat. "Knowing my feelings will affect people who go to places I've been makes everything heavier. I could at least be content in that any misery I feel is self-contained. But if what you say is true. How can I live a free life if even what I feel becomes a responsibility?"

The hitchhiker is quiet. Theo looks up into the rearview, and for a moment sees an army of translucent afterimages in the car's wake, lined up in twos stretching backward on the road to the limit of the eye's focus, each one bearing a foaming halo of memories. It must be exhaustion juggling his mind. He jumps when the hitchhiker taps him on the shoulder.

"Let me out here," he says.

"It's just more road."

"Right here. This is where I need to be."

Two young girls giggling in the bushes across the street see Theo sliding lazily out of the rusty vehicle and into the morning sunshine. His quiet ordeal of unloading his few belongings armful by armful, carrying them up the stairs and out of sight, is also seen, as he steps back down and outside wearing fewer articles of clothing with each disappearance.

The asymmetrical tan of his left arm implies great distance driven in the daylight, either southward in the morning or northward in the evening, or even farther heading

east or west. The bags under his eyes are a clue that night also has been no stranger to his travels. Heavy paces and rolling shoulders suggest a lack of conventional sleeping space, and once his shirt is removed after his third or fourth journey up and down the stairwell, it can be known, with the proper experience, that the red pressure marks on his back as the result of sweaty back-seat insomnia.

But from the secret reference frame of two young girls giggling in the bushes across the street, Theo is without past or future. He is a gravel-crackling silent film that has lost track of its plot, immortalized by a cameraman turning the crank on the black box in his sleep—to capture motion just slightly faster than it truly occurs, imbuing Theo's mundane strides with an awkward twist of comedy.

After his last ascension up the stairwell Theo collapses in his bed, entangled in grimy sheets. He tastes copper on his tongue and waits for sleep. Every time he closes his eyes the face of Jonas looms out of the dark, black empty sockets set in translucent white skin like a cloud of milk drifting in water. His face flows from one corner of vision to the other, whispering secrets that are hidden to most on this side of death.

The flowing face lulls Theo into the deepest sleep of his life.

• • •

All night long he crawls through the layers, living lifetimes in the depths. One path leads him to a grotesque mansion and the backyard of his childhood overrun with pulsing vines and darkness. Another takes him to the shore of a lake that boils with monsters, each with its own name and mythology. Yet another leads him to the workshop where he builds flying machines out of golden clockwork.

But someone, not from this place, desires his abdication. A voice comes to him from the clouds.

You should not be there.

He has gone too far and now he can never escape. Somewhere on the surface of the ocean he has plunged into, he becomes aware of a room. What may have once been

his physical prison is supine on a bed of sterile white, and all around has gathered everyone who knew that prison as something precious. They are sobbing and calling to him.

Why have you left, Theodore? What went wrong? Have you lost your love for our reality?

Fear grips him. He is so far down, with so many layers between what is truly him and that heap of water and fleshy fibers. The voice reaches again for his static-filled ears.

You should not be there.

Then the conflict. Why scramble for the surface when the depths are so warm? Sink further, abandon the surface. All it gives him is an endless stream of nauseous confusion. That is no place for one so free. Yet he feels himself climbing. For the sake of others, not for his own.

Now the moment of terror. No, *their* reality doesn't scare him anymore. He has abandoned every hope he had for the world on the surface, and his faith in those sensations has wasted away with the change of seasons. His fear of losing himself is waning.

• • •

Theo ascends, and finds himself on another layer. The inability to rise farther—that is the only way he knows he is awake. Another hour yet before the sun rises. Nothing to do until then. And what to do after the sun rises, until the old bitch dies in the west?

Theo is convinced he has not emerged into the real, only reached a new layer of dream fabric. But this layer has a different texture. What is strange to him is that he always wakes up on this layer as the same person, and that he remembers who he is—that he can recall, if through leagues of fog and sadness, the events that have brought him to be who, where, when, and what he is.

Why is everyone else here? It's subtle, but suddenly apparent. This layer is thicker with the *stuff* of things. It is the most viscous. Things *stick* here. Everything in the room is exactly where he left it. Time has passed, the sun has moved under the earth. Even while unconscious, this layer continued to rebuild itself moment by moment. Theo can only glimpse his own fragment, only twist his own fingers. But by some miracle the world will not disintegrate when he turns away.

His thoughts find the drain again, they are spiraling down to the rusty darkness as sure as death. The manic cycles are growing tighter, one go-round less than fifteen seconds. He knows what's coming: an hour or more of sublime nausea. But just when he knows what to dread, he trips a rigged wire not in his brain but in his eyes. The nickel suspended in the slot by that wire jiggles free and drops into the machine, and the mechanical puppet show begins.

It is an instant or three of intense lucidity. Now what there *is* is only what he sees—he loses the strand of faith that makes him believe there are other physical sides to buildings and people and street signs and clouds and the sun. All things are cardboard cutouts painted from behind, poised to crack or drop or wither from rain. When he moves, the cutouts shift with him, wiggling slightly with comedic intent, staying perpendicular to his line of sight, trying their damndest—oh lord yes, they have minds of their own—not to collapse and reveal whatever is behind.

No oneness here, no vast and beautiful oversoul conducting the orchestra. Here everything is leaning in on him, the cardboard cutouts are close and staggering, and the smallest number he can deconstruct this place to is two: Theodore and cardboard, not quite a mystical wholeness and miles away from a trinity.

He is terrified of the moment, any minute now, any second, when one or two of those cardboard falsehoods will lose their tenuous balance and he will see and never forget what is on the other side.

EIGHT

the beekeeper's last card

A foghorn explodes in the dark. Theo answers the telephone not quite awake. The voice of a young man skips across the wire into his ear, strung out and crazy like a vat of quivering fleshy cords in a soupy medium of caffeine, amphetamine, cocaine, alcohol, and hallucinogens.

"Have you seen my flying wall?" says the voice. In the groans Theo hears knotted throat veins. The voice is difficult to distinguish from the sound of them gnawing.

"It's been following me around for years," says Theo. "I was wondering whose it was."

"Bring it to me."

"Where are you Vince?"

He sputters a few disjointed syllables and a hotel room number.

"I'm on my way." The line goes dead and the tone sings dry until he claps the phone back on the wall. Theo is so damn tired. But he'll go to him.

Jeremy burns through half a pack while Theo rattles off the whole tale. When he finishes Jeremy just leans back in the passenger seat, head tossed to the side, eyes tracing the guardrail and reading the mile markers through the cracked window as he smokes too far into the filter.

"I thought you were dead," says Jeremy. "Would have made more sense if you'd both been dead. And that's grand theft auto. A decade in federal or something."

"But listen," says Theo. "Saving Vince from himself is not nonsense." Theo is at the wheel of Vince's car again. If the odometer were functional it would read more than four thousand over what it was a week ago. His eyes are bloodshot and his nerves, wound up tight for so long, finally abandon all that quivering exertion and let out some slack.

"It was one of those joint hallucinations," says Jeremy, but he says it more as a joke than a possibility. "I think the exit's coming up. Damn I'm tired."

"You ain't got the least retched idea, man."

"Hey so, I brought my camera."

"Why the hell would you do that?"

"I want to document this. *The Sobering of Vincent Disraeli*. It's downright historic."

"Whatever, just have one arm free for his legs."

Ten minutes later they are there on the grotesque carpet pattern under the plastic chandeliers on the third floor of the hotel. The door is propped open and from its handle swings a do not disturb sign with *fuck off* scrawled in dull pencil across the lettering. Jeremy and Theo exchange a nervous glance.

"This must be the place," says Theo.

Jeremy unsheathes his hand-camera from the black bag slung over his shoulder and uncaps the lens.

"When the camera rolls, kick in the door."

"Have some decency."

"Theo, are you my lead man or not? Okay. Three, two, one. . . ."

Theo kicks the door open and it bounces off the wall and back into his nose as he goes inside. Jeremy follows behind him, and on his film is impressed the image of a dark and smoky room. Spilled ashtrays, cigarette packs, and empty whisky bottles cover the floor. Theo wades through the flotsam, cringing as he sees a razor blade glint from the carpet. He wonders for a moment if all this junk just materializes wherever Vince happens to be. They see him sprawled out on the bed with eyes on the ceiling wearing only a striped tie and plaid boxers. Even his broad shoulders seem drained and thin. Theo has seen Vince in this style of wreckage before, but it still turns his stomach just like the first time.

"Vince," says Jeremy, going for the close-up on his dilated pupils. "Wake up."

Theo slaps him. Vince stirs, blinks, moans and rolls over on his side.

"We're getting you the hell out of here," says Theo. And he takes Vince under the armpits and lifts him up. "Jeremy, get his legs."

Jeremy records a quick panorama of the room, then moves in and scoops up Vince's ankles under one arm, camera still clasped in the other hand. As they haul him feet-first over the floor toward the hallway Vince sings a slurred folkish melody.

Leave me to die,

In the land of my fathers.

Leave me to waste away,

Alone and depraved. . .

After the first verse the words become a garbled humming. They are almost to the door when Jeremy flicks his head toward the bathroom and mouths the words *cold shower*.

"Oh come on," says Theo, arms under Vince's armpits.

Jeremy nods silently, and starts backing in there. "Time to get you cleaned up," he says.

Theo rolls his eyes and follows him in. They drop Vince in the bathtub. Theo goes to retrieve the rest of Vince's clothing while Jeremy films his own hand slowly turning the cold water dial to full pressure and switching on the shower. Theo hears running water followed by a horrific falsetto scream. He runs in to see Vince upright in the tub, clutching his sides and shivering, blinking that long strange blink.

"You scoundrels," is all he manages to say before he collapses in the bathtub and cracks his head on the porcelain with a solid thud.

Jeremy switches off the water and says, "Let's go."

They carry Vince's slow-breathing body into the elevator, suffer three floors of airy pseudo-jazz, then make for the exit through the lobby. Vince vomits on the tile floor just before automatic glass doors. Jeremy deftly turns the camera toward the receptionist for half a second to capture for posterity the man's bewildered disgust. Jeremy grins a wicked grin, then zooms in for a close-up of Vince's bile-dripping lips on their way out the door.

They toss him in the back seat with his clothing. Theo is at the wheel in a flash, burning off a little rubber as he reverses, then speeding away down the road and back onto the highway heading toward the city. Jeremy takes one last shot of Vince's soaking body, making sure to get a frame full of his face: spasmodic eyelids, blood-crusting nostrils and all. Then he switches off the camera.

"Vince," says Theo. "Tell me you didn't use your real name."

"My name. . . ." Vince coughs and moans, rolling in the back seat with his eyes closed.

"Did you use your real name at the hotel, Vince?"

"My name is . . . Arthur Granger," he mutters, then he throws up a mouthful of bitter sludge on the floor.

"Oh thank God," says Theo. "Wait. Do we know an Arthur Granger?"

"Yeah," says Jeremy, scratching under his chin. "He was that new rich guy in town. Threw the party with the bands and the poetry slam in his backyard."

From the back seat they hear a sadistic chuckle that gurgles into a spine-twisting coughing fit. Once Vince settles down he makes like he's got something to say.

"That you Theo?"

"It's me."

"Velvet."

"What about Velvet?"

"The factory."

"Get some rest, we'll talk soon."

"Theo, she's got lights. Buttons. Guys in. . . ." Vince clenches up, gargles phlegm, and exhales: ". . . lab coats." Then his feeble consciousness powers down.

• • •

"So I went down the alley and up to the door," says Vince. His hands are quaking less than before, the handle of the clay mug clasped in his hand, ripples on the surface of the honeyed tea. He is on the bed in his apartment. Theo is seated on a drum stool by the bedside, one hand running through his thick stubble: lots of new gray in there, almost a beard now. He listens and pretends that Jeremy is not filming from the corner of the room and stretching around in an endless search for the most striking angle.

"I walked really cool so it seemed like I knew what I was doing. Some sweaty guy in a yellow hard-hat let me inside. I told him I was there for a job interview and he pointed down a hallway and said something about the offices. I walked that way. The inside of the place was spotless, smelled brand new. I heard some heavy machinery behind the walls. I came to a double door with windows, the kind with criss-crossing metal threads between glass panes. All these people were in there, moving around with clipboards and wheeling equipment back and forth. I thought, why not, and I went inside. God damn you Jeremy."

He's crouched low by the bedside for a dramatic shot with the hand-camera, getting way too close to Vince's face, keeping Theo in the frame.

"Can you please shut it off," says Theo. Jeremy does more word-mouthing. Theo can't quite read his lips, but it's probably something like *no way man, this is gold right here*.

Vince looks square into the camera and says, "None of this is true." Then he looks back at the wall and continues.

"So I went through the doors into this big rectangular room, sharp white light in there like a hospital. I went up a stairway to get a good view. No one stopped me. Then I looked over the railing and saw the assembly line down there."

Vince takes a nervous gulp of the tea, runs a hand through his dense frizzled hair, and weathers a few chills that have his spine twisting slightly.

"You alright, Vince?" asks Theo.

"Got the shudders, man. Nothing new. I'll be fine."

Jeremy climbs on top of a table for an aerial view, panning back and forth between the two faces. Vince continues.

"There were dozens of those weird black machines, looked like. Maybe it didn't bother me too much right then. I mean, they had to come from somewhere. But it was strange, to see them churning off a conveyor belt like that and being boxed up in cardboard. Just looked like a shipment assembly line. I don't think they were making them in there. I got out before anyone asked any questions and kept going down the hall. Then I saw another big double door on the left. This one was locked with a keypad and the windows were dark. Dunno why I did it but I punched in four ones and hit pound. The lock clicked open, no joke."

"That's the default setting on most of them," says Jeremy, swaying on the table.

"So I go into this room, and this one is totally different. There are these huge banks of computers, bundles of red and yellow wire everywhere. All these lab-coated scientist types are fiddling with keyboards, lights winking on and off, and there's this big screen on one wall. That screen, it put a nasty hook in me. It was a huge map of the whole damn country, with a network of red and green lines extending between blinking nodes, mostly in the east but spreading, and even while I was watching a new node

appeared and new lines stretched out to it. And over to one side there's this table, transparent plastic draped all around it and some guys inside wearing white gloves. Like they were performing surgery. It was one of the machine parts, cut into pieces. Reverse engineering or some shit. And they were changing out the insides, putting something else in there, a little device that wasn't made out of the black metal. Just a small gray box with an antenna on it. They were testing something, flipping switches on a remote, checking to see if the box responded somehow. I was only in there for half a minute before some guy in a lab coat with a welding visor told me I needed security clearance and sent me out. I told him I was looking for the offices and he pointed down the hallway. So I kept going."

Vince pauses, scratches himself. Jeremy is zooming in on Vince's face. Every blink is heavier than the last, until his eyes squeeze shut for several seconds. Then they flick open, and Vince talks faster than before.

"I told the secretary something about a job interview. Then I walked past the offices. And I saw a plaque that had her name on it. Different last name, I don't remember what it was, I guess I should have gone in sober. I had to be sure so I peaked through the cracked door. It was Velvet, sitting at her desk, drinking coffee and tapping at a keyboard in front of a computer screen. She looked up and saw me and then I just started running. I ran outside, back out of the alleyway, most of the way back to my place. And I knew she knew where I live and my car was gone. Because you fucking stole it. So I gathered up my escape fund and caught the first train anywhere. Checked in and then tuned out. I had to take myself out of the equation for a while. So I brought all the drugs, and a couple books I never cracked open."

Theo inhales slow through his mouth, stomach deep, then lets it out through his nose and says, "There's someone we need to find."

• • •

Gabriel raises the forest-camouflage relic transceiver to his lips, clicks down the talk button and spouts off two lines of bad poetry on either side of a string of numbers. Every word and numeral is repeated slowly back to him through foamy static. Gabriel clicks the talk button once and then smashes the transceiver on the stone rooftop between his feet.

"And now we wait," he says beneath the hood of his black sweater, examining one hair at a time of his bristling goatee with idle fingers. On either side of him stand Theo and Vince. Theo has his leather jacket collar upturned, and the wind plays with his unkempt hair as he leans out toward open space, forearms at rest on the brick wall that runs the perimeter of the roof. Vince has his hands in his tweed coat pockets with his hips stuck out, leaning back on his heels, bulbous hair bouncing.

They look oddly handsome there against the clear winter sky, the city all around them and skyscrapers off to one side, a shifting cloud of grackles moving as one weightless amoeba over the expanse. This strange sight is not squandered by Jeremy, whose film rolls on from behind them absorbing the full scope of the vista. He rarely films in color but he can't pass this up: the stark blue, the faded red warehouses, the shining frames of the distant skyscrapers and their pale yellow windows, the lingering vestiges of dark green, and the cold bluish flow of the river.

All eyes are focused on the factory two blocks down the street. All eyes but those of Jeremy, who doesn't seem to give two halves of a damn about what's going on.

"How long?" asks Theo. Jeremy zeroes in on the bright blue of Theo's eyes when he turns toward Gabriel, and wishes he could levitate off the side of the building for an angle that would give him the faces of all three. But the hooded figure and the two mysterious hooligans to the left and right make for a sufficient vibe of eerie suspense.

"Roughly twenty-five hundred miles. Antiquated intermediate range ballistic missile, let's say mach fifteen. Accounting for launch prep and deceleration before impact. . . ." Gabriel clicks his tongue. "Fifteen minutes, give or take."

Under the hood Theo sees the corner of that crazy Jonas smile on Gabriel's face, toothy and manic. Vince flips open his pocket watch. Jeremy moves in for a close-up on the minute hand.

• • •

Tobias is sketching away at his flexible mirror diagrams with pencil and protractor when the telegraph emits a sharp buzz. He is stark upright, sudden terror in his eyes. Then it begins to beep in high-pitched longs and shorts and he is focused, translating the code into frantic jagged lettering.

The coordinates are preceded by the first line of a crude poem Tobias composed in his younger days, and followed by the last: a bizarre incantation of thirteen syllables per line. Tobias despises his own poetry, and has only ever shown it to one man.

While the vile experiments of nature kill and birth. . . .

Where monsters brood and hatch plans to steal the fleeting day.

True to his word, Tobias seals all hatches on all levels and descends to the control room behind the heat-shielded glass to begin programming the coordinates.

He breaks three panes of glass on the control panel and throws the three switches. The alarm howls as the ceiling opens to the desert sky. The mirrored sun vanishes, replaced by a column of dry heat and unfocused light. His hand holds two ignition keys in one trembling fist. Then he inserts them into their locks on either end of the control panel, too far from each other for one man to turn both. Unless he happens to have constructed a length of tubing for just that purpose, with two magnetic slots for the key heads at either end and a simple system of minute pulleys and gears inside to transfer one twisting motion in two directions.

He recalls a series of experiments he ran some twenty years ago on the speed of hymenopteran repopulation after forest fires. The numbers are reassuring, but do not

ease his guilt. It will be a brief summer and winter in the silo, this cycle. And if he lets the spring linger for a while and polishes the heat damage off the mirrors a few of the vines just might sprout anew, nourished by their own ashes.

He gives the central knob of the mechanism one gentle turn.

• • •

The first half of the instant is utterly silent. Within a fraction of the second half the factory explodes into a billowing cloud of hot smoke and debris that radiates outward and overtakes the rooftop. Theo, Gabriel, and Vince duck beneath the wall, while Jeremy stands strong, leaning into the shockwave, grinning like a maniac with camera raised to capture a full minute of meaningless static. The sound comes a few moments after, an awesome rushing that builds from a squeal to a low omnipresent rumble, and as it dissipates and the gale slows to a dusty haze they hear a bright tone singing through the air: hollow metal scaffolding along the north wall of the building resonating in memory of the missile's roar.

Jeremy, still on his feet, ecstatic that he has not been cleaved in two by a rogue piece of debris, is already running for the stairwell door. The other three get to their feet slowly and look out over the wall. What was once the factory, one quarter of the block, is now a gaping crater of ashes, chunks of wall, bristling serrated edges of torn machinery, and thousands of stray bricks. The other buildings on the block and the warehouses and streets around them, though coated in a film of steaming dust, are intact.

"Remarkable accuracy," says Gabriel. "And a damn good thing the warhead was disarmed."

"You knew it was disarmed," says Vince. "Didn't you?"

Gabriel just looks at him through the lensless frames. Vince's eyes go wide, then he shakes his head and turns away, spits into his hands to smear the dirt from his face.

"You should be aware there will be a few loose ends," says Gabriel. Theo looks over at him. Gabriel's lips are tight, brow furrowed.

"Velvet?" says Theo.

"Now she knows what happens when you tango with the freaks. But there will always be more like her, of that I've no doubt."

"The machine parts are still in place," says Theo.

"Yes. I suppose all control has been severed. And I'm confident they were not able to mimic the design of our little creatures. So it remains to be seen whether the machine will have any effect at all on the grid. If its . . . transcendental purpose will be realized. Investigation is not my business, and I won't touch this matter further. But I think we've brought into being today a necessary unfolding."

"What sort of effect are we talking?" asks Theo. Vince is off to one side, shaking his head and looking into the crater.

"No one can say," says Gabriel. "But I might speculate, grains of salt and all, that Tobias may have been right in suggesting a kind of musical amplification. Or perhaps a silencing of all rival sounds, to allow vocalization and passage of the true music. We are disconnected, you and I and all of us, from something magnificent. Even if this one scheme fails, I am confident that the sublime undercurrents will find their way into us and act through us once again."

"Until then?" asks Theo.

"I suggest we return to our respective apiaries." Gabriel looses a laugh like gravel tumbling over piano strings. "Relax, Theo. It's just another permutation of the monomyth."

With that Gabriel spits over the roof ledge and wheels around. He skips across the pebbled rooftop, hands in his pockets, whistling the melody of an old jazz ballad, then slips into the shadows beyond the threshold of the stairwell door and is gone and gone away.

Theo and Vince gaze down at the wreckage and see Jeremy sprinting down the middle of the street, camera stretched out before him in one hand. He runs across the

hoods of parked cars and leaps over fissures in the road. He comes to the crater where the concrete and asphalt end in a jagged circular ridge. Sirens howl, closing in from every corner of the city. Jeremy giggles like a child as he hops around the perimeter of ground zero, filming and filming as the unearthed wires down below, rubber melted clean off, spew sparks that light up the rising pool of green sewage pouring in from splintered pipelines deep in the bowl of smoking rubble.

NINE

the escape of the cage gypsy

Dear Theo,

I've gone away. They don't seem to care about holding me anymore. They've all lost their minds. So I left.

The city has grown old to my eyes. Maybe it's because I'm so tired. But I can't stay here, and I have a feeling you won't be here for long either.

I still don't understand how all this came together, how it all stays together. That's you and me, Theo. We do that.

Something tells me we'll collide out there in the wide world. In the viscosity of some eloquent nowhere our paths will cross. I can't be sure, but I have to know it in my heart or it may not happen. So I know it, in the dying depths of me I know it.

—Jonas

• • •

"How's it coming?"

Theo pulls himself from the depths of the engine and wipes the sweat from his brow, leaving a smear of oil across his face from one filthy forearm. The dawn is lukewarm and balmy, not so strange for late winter, and Vince is coming around the side of the twelve-seater van with his violin case and amplifier.

"We'll have to replace the duct tape every couple hundred miles," says Theo. "But she'll hold. Sure as death she will."

"Jonas built the thing?"

"He was at it for a whole year, trying to maximize the efficiency. Should take us twenty miles per gallon. Not bad for a peanut oil diesel engine. The exhaust will smell like rotten shit, but she'll run smooth."

"She better," says Vince. "We gotta get the hell out of this town." In recent days the city has swollen with news crews, federal investigators, speculators, and stone-cold suited men who never speak. Theo and Vince feel the jaws of some massive, hungry monstrosity closing over the city, in perverse imitation of justice or destiny. Vince has resolved to slip through a gap in its toothy jowls and run the gauntlet up the east coast under the honest guise of a tour with Damn Them Torpedoes.

"What about Jonas?" asks Vince.

"He's gone." Theo looks up the street. The three-story tent, which materialized at ground zero overnight, can be seen on the horizon, its black tarp walls undulating in the wind, strange among the somber, motionless factories.

"Gone?"

"He escaped. Not sure how. Maybe when the missile struck."

A slow nod from Vince as he blinks abstractly into the sun. Theo closes the hood of the van, spits into his palms and wipes off the oil with a dishrag.

Tennyson and Miles stow the drums and bass in the back with a few haphazard tosses, then sit on the three-seater couch that has been removed from the van and now rests there on the asphalt of the vacant parking lot. They share a smoke, jabbering on in idle speculation, grasping for meaning in the story they were told by Theo, Vince, and

Jeremy. They laugh it off for the most part, but they still can't explain away the mysterious crater and black tent not two blocks from here, and the cacophonous howl that brought them to their senses for a brief moment eight days ago as they wheeled the engineless van out of a scrapheap three miles out of town.

They see Jeremy coming up the street with a backpack, camera case, a small television tucked under one arm and his trusty reel-to-reel and video player under the other. He tosses it all in the back except the television, which he sets up in the space between driver and passenger seat and plugs into a floor outlet connected to the battery.

"Ready to hit the road gentlemen?" says Jeremy, dusting off his hands.

"Let's get this circus act on the road," says Vince, smiling like a loon.

"Where we playing?" asks Miles.

"Any damn where," says Vince. "Where there's people and debauchery and a need for freaks with sound we'll be there."

"Good on me," says Tennyson.

They climb into the van: Miles at the wheel, Tennyson in the passenger seat, Jeremy and Vince in the back. Theo stands outside the open sliding door, dirty hands in the pockets of his jacket while the engine idles. His scruff has become thick and gristly, bristling from his cheeks and chin. One bead of sweat rolls down his neck and along the ridges of his spine. He feels it there, focuses on it, reading in its slow passage the promise of spring.

"Hey Theo," says Vince. "I hear you work magic with a soundboard."

Theo takes a look around at the brick warehouses, the crusty eaves of anarchistic architecture, the train-yard across the river where a locomotive is steaming along at a steady pace, the birds in the leafless trees along one side of the lot, the cracked pavement and the transformers with their thick fleshy bundles of wire that arch down nearly to street level. He sees them all as veins of some slumbering leviathan, dreaming in the depths of the earth.

"What the hell else am I gonna do," says Theo. And he climbs in to take the center back seat and rolls the door shut behind him.

"Let's rock and roll," says Miles, and he plunges his foot down on the gas. The top-heavy van swerves in a tight circle, and for the split second it rides on two left wheels they fear the old beast will roll. But the right side comes down hard and Miles guides her out into the street, going strong toward the bridge, exhaust pipes spewing a wake of noxious odors.

"Theo, I want to show you something," says Jeremy, and he pulls a videotape from his bag.

"What is it?"

"I was up at that film festival right. And by the way, *The Hydroelectric Isle* was awarded best music video, and runner up for best in show. Got enough cash to keep this heap filled with peanut oil across half the country. Anyway, day before I left to go north I got a letter from Jonas. He sent me a screenplay he wrote in the madhouse. You believe that? The man wrote a screenplay. There were plenty of bored actors up at the festival, so I pulled a few aside and went ahead and made the damn thing."

"Spin it," says Theo. Hoots of approval all around.

Jeremy wires up the player to the dusty television and throws in the tape. The screen winks on with a sickening zap. Jeremy presses play and leans back with a critic's eye and a fresh cigarette. Behind a haze of gentle static two men appear on the screen, crouched in a stone alley, leaning on a network of pipes that jut out of the walls, the whole scene cast in shadowy black and white. There are sirens in the distance. The first actor is drunk and starstruck, the second grave and sober. The dialogue begins.

• • •

"Congratulations on revealing the impregnable walls of solitude to a generation of free thinkers."

"Thanks."

"No, I'm serious. It's something they need to know. They felt it already, but now they know it. One of the few things we can really know. So now they know something.

What else can we know, cage gypsy? I know you know. I heard you. You have things to say."

"I have nothing to say."

"No, really. Tell me what you have to say."

"Words are just bare hands rattling the cage bars. Blood running over callouses, scars opening up all over again. There is only one story, and it's been told. But that doesn't blunt the edge. No, they still open up old wounds, even make fresh scars. Plenty left to be damaged, plenty of skin that hasn't been split."

"I hear you friend. I always say to my friends, you know, the ones that are still around, the ones that haven't been murdered or married, I say to them, this is a new era. People need new ideas. That's why we're here."

"That's one reason. The others are friction, love, loneliness, and carpentry. Take those four, toss your heart in for spice, and you've made yourself a delicacy. Delicacies don't have to taste good. They just have to be rare."

"I hear you, brother. I always say to my brothers, the ones that haven't fallen asleep you know, I say to them that the soul is a series of acid vats, pouring into the ready-made veins of the heart."

"Other way round."

"No. No, I wouldn't say that. But tell me, cage gypsy. Where have you been?"

"I was running from room to room for a while, looking for the place where the shadows are thick enough to build with."

"Did you find them? The thick shadows?"

"I ran for a long time, searching. Then I ran around the world searching for a cure for my aching legs. I ran until my legs couldn't move anymore, and it was then I finally noticed—I was wondering why my legs gave out so soon—I'd been casting the densest shadow myself and dragging it around behind me like a hollow log on an iron chain."

"So what did you do with it? The shadow log?"

"I cut it up and looked inside. It was ancient, decomposed, dripping soil. The fungi had eaten the centipedes and the centipedes had eaten the fungi until it was all

just carnivorous smoke. Only smoke. And I broke the pieces into pieces of pieces and I made them into shapes I could recognize, geometric solids I could work with. And I started to build."

"What did you make? Tell me, cage gypsy. What came of it all?"

"I toiled for days. Weeks, months. But most of all I toiled for seconds. Millions of them. And when I finally stepped back, I saw a log of shadow. Product and material were one and the same. Only the centipedes and fungi had been resurrected, and they were eating each other all over again. So I rested, and I watched the smoke gather."

"I see what you're saying. I used to tell people, just random people on the street, I would stop them and tell them that an assumption can only cycle back to prove itself. And I would say of time, I would say things."

"What would you say?"

"I would say a lot of things. I would say that seconds are what kill me. What really kill me. Minutes are just long enough, you can ignore them. Anything shorter than a second is too short to worry about. But one single, solid second. Ever hate yourself for accidentally speaking alliterative phrases? Tell you what I hate, cage gypsy. I hate my infatuation with analog clocks. Because you can see the seconds go by. And even worse, they don't go by, they go *around*. I know you know. So tell me something else. Tell me where you're going."

"I'm going somewhere in the hills, to be utterly alone. To see how far inside myself I can sink and outside myself I can soar. See how far I can reach and in how many directions at once before I find the breaking point, when my extremities will be severed and my limbs will coil in on themselves like splitting ends of rubber, forming spirals around each locus I could never reach as a whole. I will touch everything I have ever wanted to touch, all at once, all the things I couldn't touch as a single self."

"Cytoplasmic suicide. That suits you, cage gypsy. The magic for the feat must be in your dances. You dance so lightly with your eyes so wide. It must be in your dances. Answer me one last question. Cage gypsy, how will you be remembered?"

"I'll pass from this world like a spider web in a forest fire. And I plan to leave no traces, I plan to never have been by the time my being is over. The memories will fade and the colors will drain. And I'll sleep."

"You'll wake up somewhere, cage gypsy."

• • •

Theo and Jonas were nine years old, bundled up in scarves and coats and stocking caps, laughing as they slid frictionless across the surface of a frozen lake in the midst of a moonlit forest.

Jonas slipped and fell on his back, cracking the ice beneath him. Theo skidded over and extended a hand. Jonas did not reach for it—he was entranced by the glittering arm of the galaxy that cut across the sky.

Theo looked into Jonas's bristling green eyes, watching the white columns of breath from their mouths cross paths diagonally in the air and tracing with his gaze the sinuous cracks in the ice. Jonas looked past Theo and up and away. He forgot the hungry depths of frigid water below and imagined for a little while shapes in the void between stars.

Companion Postscript

to *The Cardboard Sublime*

Jack Burks

I. Process

a. From Theory to Practice: Fragmentary Beginnings, Structure

I began work on the collection of fragments that would evolve into *The Cardboard Sublime* three years ago. At first the collection was little more than a patchwork of ideas and passages, a repository for concepts and paragraphs of text that I had not used in short stories. It wasn't long after I began compiling them that I started to see the potential for a cohesive story. Gradually, in between work on short fiction, I reworked the fragments and gave them a rough narrative order and outline. When I began work on this novella as my Honors Thesis, I had 30,000 words of loosely connected fragments. The final product uses less than 10,000 words of the original fragments, and those it does use are heavily edited from their original form.

At the outset of my work on the novella, I had a specific, rigid structure in mind. I intended to set up each chapter as a trio of fragments: one present event, one memory, and one dream, all from the mind of a single protagonist. The concept was to begin with the three as a tight-knit triad all focused on the same reality, and then gradually allow them to unravel and bleed into each other. I wanted to include within this structure a multitude of character interactions that represented dialogues between different philosophies.

When my thesis advisor Rod Smith first saw my thesis proposal, he was quick to inform me of the limitations and dangers of beginning a literary work with such an inflexible structure and an emphasis on the idea, rather than the people and the story. His initial response to my proposal stuck with me

throughout my thesis work: "Even the idea-maelstrom that is Hamlet begins with the words, 'Who's there?'"

As predicted, it quickly became apparent that my proposed structure would be completely at odds with narrative flow, dramatic tension, and the construction of a viable, comprehensive fictional world. It also placed the protagonist in a situation too solipsistic to allow any kind of meaningful interaction with the world or others, making him less a human being and more of a thought experiment. So I tossed out my opening passages, took a step back, reexamined my goals, and set about tempering the style and language of the novella within a more flexible version of the proposed structure.

I stuck with the alternation between present events and memories, making that structure relevant to the plot by drawing a definitive line between past and present, marked by one key traumatic event: Theo's loss of Jonas. Eventually I came to see the Theo/Jonas friendship as the absolute empathetic and thematic center of the narrative.

The experience of writing this novella has taught me numerous lessons in disciplined creativity. I encountered the difficulty of portraying a detailed environment and creating characters who resonate with and react to that environment. There was the challenge of expressing the inherent convolutions of motive and emotion in multiple characters. Maintaining a coherent narrative voice, and maintaining individually coherent voices for each character while establishing them within the same vocabulary and social splinter group, was a significant obstacle. Perhaps the greatest challenge was attempting to achieve the same narrative cohesion with my shifting structure that other stories achieve more efficiently with the straight-and-narrow approach.

The Cardboard Sublime emerged as an entirely different and more poignant story than originally intended. As the work of a young author, I accept that it is somewhat coarse, not as subtle as a more mature work of literature. Nonetheless I believe it achieves its goals.

b. Genre Theory: The Novella

The novella is perhaps the least discussed of literary forms among scholars. One study my advisor recommended had outlined four central elements present in the genre.¹

First, the story is framed by a beginning and an end that mirror one another. In the case of *The Cardboard Sublime*, the opening scene and the concluding scene are populated by the same characters engaged in roughly the same activity: adventurous band business. Much has happened between the two scenes, especially with respect to how the characters relate to one another and to their world. Nonetheless the two scenes reflect each other (the characters even show up at the meeting place in the opposite order).

Second, novellas are meant to revolve around or lead up to one crucial decision made by the protagonist. *The Cardboard Sublime* puts a twist on this genre theme. The catastrophe of Theo's life has already occurred, but the developing present-tense story and the un-chronological memories are meant to reveal the nature and context of that event from both temporal angles as the narrative progresses. However, Theo's present-tense story does lead up to a second destructive event, which seems to signal the cleaning of his slate. He emerges from that

¹ Hunter Liguore, "Middle Birth: The Novella as an Art Form," featured in *The Writer's Chronicle*, December 2012.

event freed by the haunting images of Jonas, and feels he may be able to begin anew.

Third, the main character of a novella is isolated. Relative to a stronger connectivity of characters to be found in the novel, the brevity of a novella demands a more focused approach, meaning an emphasis on one or two specific relationships. The central relationship of *The Cardboard Sublime* is that between Theo and Jonas, a relationship that only truly exists in the past. This is another twist on a genre theme, as the core relationship is one that lies beneath the action of the story, haunting the protagonist and influencing his thought and action without being explicitly present.²

Fourth, novellas often contain a single unusual encounter that turns the tide of events. *The Cardboard Sublime* is in no short supply of unusual encounters, to the point where they become the norm. Part of the reason for this is that the story opens at a weird time in Theo's life: this is his transitional period from depression/lethargy to inspiration/activity. The frequency of the "unusual" could be considered a weakness of the story. But it may prove more touching, when the moments that are the most unusual in the story are those of simple, heartfelt exchange.

c. Editing

I spent more time and energy editing *The Cardboard Sublime* than I have spent editing any previous work. In fact, I spent more time and energy in the process of editing (and rewriting)

² The first scene in Chapter 2 is the only time Theo encounters Jonas in the present-tense branch of the story. The core relationship being discussed here is not pictured in that scene, as the destructive events that severed the relationship and proved Jonas a schizophrenic have already occurred, and therefore Theo no longer relates to Jonas as a trusted source of knowledge and behavior.

the novella than in the process of writing it. When it comes to establishing a coherent narrative voice, as well as inserting and removing passages, plot elements, and characters, editing is an art. I would say the act of writing—filling empty space with an imagined world—is the more taxing of the two. But editing, in terms of the precision necessary, is the more difficult.

I edited three full drafts (plus multiple drafts of every chapter) before arriving at the final version. The final manuscript is roughly 50,000 words in length. I estimate that all written work related to this thesis—the novella, outlines, character sketches, research notes, scribblings, and preliminary fragments—is in total upwards of 120,000 words.

d. Gratitude

Special thanks to Professor Michael Crowley, who first introduced me to the work of Thomas Pynchon in a spring course on *Gravity's Rainbow*. He encouraged me to write a Pynchon pastiche for the final paper. That short story later evolved into the machinery plot arc of *The Cardboard Sublime*.

Thanks also to the pseudonymous Captain America, who read my work and wrote notes on the final draft with an emphasis on clarity and grammar.

Thanks to my second reader, Professor Jim Warren, who lent his perspective on several chapters of the novella, as well as providing general notes on the final draft. His feedback helped me temper the style and story.

I owe the most to my thesis advisor Rod Smith. His guidance was invaluable to the entire process. Although this novella may not have been in his vein of stylistic expertise, he always had an eye for clarity and structure in every aspect of the work. As teacher, mentor, and editor, he poured enormous time and effort

into overseeing the growth of this novella from concept into narrative. Without him, *The Cardboard Sublime* would exist as a far more juvenile work, or not exist at all.

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II. Product

a. Influences

The work of Thomas Pynchon may have had the most profound influence on the style and themes of *The Cardboard Sublime*. Reading *Gravity's Rainbow* and studying the origins of its many references during a spring course gave me a profound respect for Pynchon's all-inclusive intellect and improvisational prose. Idiosyncratic subcultures, paranoia at the possibility of mysterious plots, undertones of a self-destructive system beneath civilization, and a love of the organic over the synthetic are all staples of Pynchon which found their way into *The Cardboard Sublime*.

I confess that I had not read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* until *The Cardboard Sublime* was almost complete. Nonetheless I was familiar with the themes of Conrad's novella through classroom discourse and excessive exposure to Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. That being said, *The Cardboard Sublime* borrows from *Heart of Darkness* one key psychological aspect: the protagonist's obsession with the insanity of his oldest friend, Jonas.³ Just as Marlow seems to be in constant conversation with Kurtz, so Theo is haunted by memories of Jonas, and often unwittingly becomes Jonas's mouthpiece.⁴

Although Kafka's brand of modernism is not overtly present in this work, I consider him a primary influence. The pointless

³ "[. . .] the violence had roosted again in those green eyes, the darting and twitching." *tCS*, Chapter 2. Frequent descriptions of Jonas's eyes as "jungle green" were also inspired by ideas from *Heart of Darkness*, regarding the animalistic nature of man when cast into the wilderness.

⁴ "It's the voice of Jonas in Theo's mind, a fragment of the past floating to the surface like a dead fish: cold, lifeless, without excuses, nothing to show for itself but persistent buoyancy." *tCS*, Chapter 3.

interconnectivity of the grid and the alienation of the protagonist echoes Kafka-inspired sentiments. Themes of manufacturing also call for Kafka comparisons. In the one explicit reference to Kafka in *The Cardboard Sublime*, the focal characters gather at a night club called The Penal Colony.⁵ First meant as a joke, it later gained more significance for me. Among the thematic principles of "In the Penal Colony" is a fetishistic affectation for a broken machine, built for the purpose of torture. That theme is reflected in the plot element of the mysterious new machine being built into the grid. Portrayals of intricate organic and mechanical systems were also inspired by the short fiction of Jorge Luis Borges.⁶

The setting of the American south, the prevalence of memory, and the elasticity of time in this novella can be traced to the works of Faulkner. I had Faulkner in mind as I struggled with how best to express a singular story through multiple perspectives. In the case of *The Cardboard Sublime*, these were the perspectives of present experience and memory. Such frequent shifts cause problems with narrative pacing. *As I Lay Dying* exemplifies how Faulkner avoids such problems by employing an overarching thematic and empathetic development that spans across all perspectives.

As my favorite writer of dialogue, Samuel Beckett influenced the way I wrote conversations between characters. A few instances of wordplay, the use of nostalgic anecdote within conversation, key phrases echoed repetitively, inane

⁵ *tCS*, Chapter 2.

⁶ In particular, the short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" wherein a conspiracy is undertaken to remake the world, and the story "The Garden of Forking Paths," the focus of which is a labyrinthine novel meant to contain infinite possibilities.

conversation used to pass the time,⁷ and the attempt at an immersion within a sort of subcultural dialect, are all elements drawn from Beckett's prose and plays.⁸

T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* was influential to the environment of the novella. The decaying city, with its grungy industrial complex and patches of plant life, is similar to the modern wasteland portrayed in the poem. The mythological connotations of the poem also find expression in passages of the novella.⁹ The final uplifting incantation of *The Waste Land* inspired one of the vital phrases in *The Cardboard Sublime*: "You'll wake up somewhere."

Vince's "heavy blink" was inspired by a section of *The Art of Living* by Alexander Nehamas, in which he discusses the significance of the character Hans Castorp's head-tilting gesture in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.¹⁰ Theo's sublime attacks were inspired by the work of Edmund Burke, William Wordsworth, and Jean-Paul Sartre.¹¹ Jonas's talk of Theo tapping out stories through the walls in the asylum was inspired by Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. The font used for titles in the text has its origins in the sixties British television show *The Prisoner*,¹² which also inspired some of the dream sequences and psychological aspects of the story.

⁷ "You know whales speak in dialects." Tennyson, *tCS*, Chapter 3.

⁸ Gabriel's anecdote about the pencil sharpener in Chapter 3 was especially inspired by themes in Beckett's work. Theo's dream of the windowless room with loudspeakers was inspired by the Beckett play *What Where*.

⁹ The description of Vince's car in Chapter 2.

¹⁰ Nehamas identifies Castorp's head-tilt as a distanced, silent contemplation of death and the unknown.

¹¹ These authors and their works discussed below in the Philosophy section.

¹² Written and directed by Patrick McGoohan, et. al.

b. World: Richmond, Post-Industry, Characters

Despite the lack of explicit place names, most of the story is set in Richmond, Virginia, a city which I have explored extensively. Although I have experience with the area and its artistic culture, I admit to being an outsider looking in.

All the fictional events in the city take place in real locations: the residential district known as "the fan," warehouses and factories converted into apartment complexes on the south side of the James river, the financial district on the north side, the ruins of a hydroelectric plant on Belle isle, and the train-yards on the banks of the river.¹³

The setting is not an accident. Not only does Richmond contain the subculture with which the novella engages, its architectural and geographic features capture an aesthetic which is magnified in the characters. My intention was to have the characters both disenchanted and inspired by their environment. Their artistic taste is a natural extension of the city,¹⁴ and their lifestyle is a chosen imitation of that environment.¹⁵

Richmond has many dilapidated buildings and factories. A vein of post-apocalyptic motifs can be found in the novella, but this is less a fantasy element and more a chosen perspective (for narrator and characters alike) on real surroundings. The theme of decay can be traced from the city into the characters; in particular the protagonist Theo, who struggles in the aftermath of a self-destructive, drug-oriented lifestyle.

¹³ There is even a reference to a certain non-fictional, infamous homeless man known as The Reaper in Chapter 3.

¹⁴ "It reeks of your sound." Jeremy, *tCS*, Chapter 1.

¹⁵ "In their circles it is common and encouraged for a man of artistic promise to slowly destroy himself." *tCS*, Chapter 2.

Certain subcultural splinter groups in Richmond provided the model for the focal characters. The quirky stylistic tastes found in the novella are not rare among the young artistic cliques of the city. Band members Vince, Miles, and Tennyson represent three real countercultural styles: Vince as the neo-Victorian, Miles as the rastafarian, and Tennyson as the tribal hipster. Their behavior exemplifies these stylistic choices. Vince is withdrawn, disturbed, yet classy. Miles is spiritual and compassionate. Tennyson is hedonistic and harmless.

The musician characters are wrapped up in a self-destructive lifestyle which reminds Theo of Jonas's past behavior. Theo avoids this lifestyle to some extent, as far as the use of narcotics. More importantly, as the story opens he is avoiding any intimate friendship with these characters,¹⁶ due to his experiences with Jonas.

c. Cast

Theodore 'Theo' Wascomb: Theodore comes from two Greek roots, translating to "gift from God". In a word, the name presents the possibility of a destiny. That possibility is played upon in certain passages, such as the scene of Theo's manhood initiation ritual with his father.¹⁷ As the story progresses, Theo frees himself from lethargy and becomes engaged in his world, and more compassionate toward his friends. By the end of the story he has shed his obsession with Jonas and forged a new identity free of past tragedies.

¹⁶ "So many issues with this crowd, psychological and chemical. They don't shake hands often." *tCS*, Chapter 1.

¹⁷ "He was *chosen*, he thought, by secret forces, to map out unexplored regions." *tCS*, Chapter 1.

Jonas Talloway: Jonas is closely related to the biblical name Jonah. The name choice analogizes Jonas's descent into a mystical form of madness with Jonah's trial of faith. The concept of being swallowed is emphasized during encounters with Jonas.¹⁸ Throughout the memory sequences, Jonas observes the tendencies of a schizophrenic, amplified by drug use. By the time Theo encounters Jonas in the present-tense story, he has become a static character.

Theo & Jonas: The younger Theo is spellbound by Jonas's philosophical insights, and his bond of trust with Jonas is a deep part of his own identity. When Jonas's psychological aberrations prove him an unreliable source of knowledge, Theo is left to wonder whether the beauty and truth of a world Jonas allowed him to see was all a hallucination.

Vincent 'Vince' Disraeli: The last name is a tribute to the Cream album *Disraeli Gears* (which in turn was a tribute to 19th century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli). Vince, as a musician with drug problems and a quiet melancholy, matches the album's psychedelic take on blues.¹⁹ In the beginning Vince seems to stand alone as an eccentric musical prodigy, but by the end it becomes apparent that he is shielded from his own destructive tendencies by the concern of his friends.

Vincent & Theodore: It was not until the book was halfway complete that I realized Vincent Van Gogh had a brother named Theodore. I chose to keep the names, as the reference compliments the relationship between the two characters. Vince,

¹⁸ "Theo was fascinated by how much Jonas could swallow with his senses [. . .]" *tCS*, Chapter 4.

¹⁹ "Theo recognizes it as a mix-tape of fuzzy avant-garde psychedelia composed and performed by Vince at the age of sixteen [. . .]" *tCS*, Chapter 5.

the unstable artist, is held in check by Theodore, one of the few who respects the former's creative work.

Gabriel: Biblically, Gabriel is a trumpet-wielding archangel. In the novella, Gabriel is a mysterious, chaotic character seeking to reunite humanity with a transcendental harmony referred to as "music." These musical, spiritual connotations, and his esoteric mysticism,²⁰ relate him to his namesake. When first encountered, Gabriel is portrayed with reference to the oracle at Delphi, who would breathe sulfurous fumes before speaking a prophecy. Gabriel's last words are inspired by the final line of Voltaire's *Candide*.

Velvet Artha Gates: Velvet's pseudonym is a combination of the vaginal and the transcendental, i.e. birth and death.²¹ The over-the-top literary nature of the name is a joke in itself. As a character, she is both commanding and seductive.²² Velvet is proven by the end to be a negative force, attempting to control for her own purposes the machine parts, which according to Gabriel and Tobias were never meant to be controlled.

Jeremy: Jeremy is an artist in the business of capturing moments. This is the opposite kind of temporal fascination expressed by the members of Damn Them Torpedoes: as musicians, their business is to fill moments, and let them pass. Jeremy is often set apart from the others, tagging along not for the sake of experiencing events, but to capture them.²³ Jeremy has

²⁰ "Bits of suggestive poetry. Abstractions that could be read as maps. Longitude and latitude translated into the numerical system of a dead language. Things only the brilliant could translate, and only the strange would follow." Gabriel, *tCS*, Chapter 3. Such arcane symbolism is meant as a reference to alchemy. Gabriel's conflation of music and spirituality is inspired by Pythagorean ideas.

²¹ "Velvet, velvet are the gates of hell." Saul, *tCS*, Chapter 3.

²² "Oh yeah, the smooth broad with the glasses. Species all her own, that one." Vince, *tCS*, Chapter 3.

²³ "Goddamn you Jeremy." Vince, *tCS*, Chapter 8.

anxieties about the form of art he has chosen, which mirror artistic anxieties many authors have encountered.²⁴

Miles: Naming a black musician character after Miles Davis may be cliché, but I hoped to put a humorous spin on that by giving the name to a rastafarian. Miles has a way of speaking that is more openly compassionate than the other characters.²⁵

Tennyson: This character is an amalgam of several real musicians, amplified *ad absurdum* for comic effect.²⁶ The pi symbol tattoo on his forehead represents a numerological mysticism,²⁷ and also his resignation of ever living a typical life of gainful employment. This is a character who, in all his abstruse intellectualism,²⁸ chose his own nickname. The character inherits from the poetry of his namesake a friction between narcotic daze and adventurous will.²⁹

Tobias: This character is the embodiment of noble ingenuity,³⁰ sage-like and yet more down-to-earth than Gabriel. The name has Jewish roots, its original form meaning "Yahweh is good." He is first introduced when he kills the "spooks" stalking Theo. Theo sees in him compassion and child-like genius. Killing the agents brands Tobias as a revolutionary, but

²⁴ "People like me, we have to step into a microcosm, bury ourselves in it, waste our time creating something other than what's right in front of us. Maybe because I'm a control freak. Or because I don't have faith in anything outside myself. Maybe because I hate this place, deep down." Jeremy, *tCS*, Chapter 2.

²⁵ "And here I am, among friends, making love and music. Ah friends, ah dear brothers, if I knew the name of the almighty I should pray here and now that these days never end." Miles, *tCS*, Chapter 2.

²⁶ "That nasal giggle is at odds with his urban viking look." *tCS*, Chapter 1.

²⁷ The mystical wholeness of math, music, and the cosmos, explored by Pythagoras.

²⁸ "I am convinced there is yet a third, four-dimensional punchline hidden in there, some special relativity business, a joke hinged on the principle that gravity warps time. But I sure as hell cannot think that-a-way right now." Tennyson, *tCS*, Chapter 3.

²⁹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Lotos-Eaters versus Ulysses*.

³⁰ Discussed below in the Moral Compass section.

one who chooses to remove himself from oppositional forces and create his own utopia. Near the end of the story, he sacrifices his personal paradise for the belief in a universal one.

Tai Wascomb: Theo's father begins as adventurous, spiritual, and eccentric. But as the story develops, Tai enters a downward spiral spurred by a muscular disease. Tai burns down the house around him while Theo is away. He can be read as the root of both Theo's self-destruction and eccentricity.

Virginia (formerly Wascomb): Theo's mother, mentioned only twice. Her name is the only indication that the story takes place in Virginia, and a play on the fact that Theo was raised there. The glimpse the reader is given of her shows a free spirit, loving yet distant, and flighty enough to vanish completely from the lives of Tai and Theo. That loss is Theo's first, later to be echoed in the loss of Tai, Sheryl, and Jonas.

Saul Simmons: Saul is a beat poet who lurks within the same artistic clique as the band Damn Them Torpedoes. His name and the themes of his poems are references to beat poet Saul Williams. He performs twice in the story.

c. Counterculture: Voiceless Protest, Aimlessness, Hope

Post-rock is an underground genre of music that first evolved in the early nineties. There is speculation on the origin of the term, but the implications range from post-modern to post-apocalyptic. The genre is characterized by song structures that grow increasingly complex, long and slow crescendos, and extremely lengthy tracks: in a word, cinematic.

Post-rock originated as an instrumental genre. Despite the lack of lyrics, its thematic origins are strongly countercultural.³¹

I recently became acquainted with an album by a Chinese musician working within the genre.³² Shortly after I found one of his songs, all his work became inaccessible on the internet. Keeping in mind the censorship employed by the Chinese government, I began to picture his music as more than avant-garde sonic experimentation. Was this lyric-less protest music?

The band Godspeed You! Black Emperor is known as the epitome of the post-rock mentality. Their droning, nightmarish soundscapes have been interpreted as a portrayal of oppressive government, wasted environments, and unjustified warfare. They achieve all of this without lyrics. However, the core members have long asserted that their sonic wastelands are not without a spark of hope, a faith in the human spirit.

In this way, the music of the fictional band Damn Them Torpedoes is both an expression of and a reaction against the decaying environment that surrounds them.³³ It also represents a reaching out for a communal faith in creativity, even within an Eliot-esque wasteland.³⁴

The behavior of the band members is the product of an observation of contemporary youth culture: the desire to become a counterculture, without an idea as to what they are counter to. The drug-driven eccentricity of the band members and of

³¹ There is no existing scholarship on post-rock. The following claims regarding its nature must be taken as the views of an audiophile with four years of obsessive experience in the genre.

³² Li Jianhong, *Lovers with Cloisonné Bracelet*.

³³ "They produce a fuzzy crescendo on a diminished chord that grows in volume and tempo until it crashes into a head-banging quarter-time breakdown. Then the sludgy groove melts into feedback and a cymbal vamp before dying all at once." tCS, Chapter 1.

³⁴ This relates to ingenuity as a moral principle, discussed in the Moral Compass section below.

Jonas mirrors their ideological aimlessness.³⁵ They are unable to give a name to the aspects of society that they dislike, thus preventing them from actualizing their ideals.³⁶ The variance between the band members' personal styles is an indication that there is little ideological solidarity among them. Yet, they overcome that distance through collective creative expression.

The countercultural force represented by Gabriel and the seemingly origin-less machine parts is a purposeful, principled counterculture to which all the characters might aspire, were they of sounder mind. The storm drain cave and Tobias's missile silo present a more active countercultural atmosphere: confusion sublimated into the creation of a new, meaningful environment outside of common society.

d. Philosophy: The Sublime, Absence, Dream, Nausea

Within the discourse of perceptual phenomenology, the term *adumbration* means the ability to infer the unseen sides of objects. There are several instances in the novella when Theo experiences the state to which the title is a reference. In this state Theo loses adumbration, and all things appear two-dimensional.³⁷ These instances are a play on the experience of "the sublime," as outlined by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Burke had a profound impact on poets of the Romantic period. Burke presents the sublime as an experience which both

³⁵ "You know, you want to be eccentric for the sake of being eccentric, and there you are. It took me a while to see that tautologies are obstacles. So the whole theory kind of collapsed in on itself." Jeremy, *tCS*, Chapter 2.

³⁶ There is some direction to be found in their dislike of modern technology, but for the most part that preference stems from a nostalgia for an idealized lost era (black and white film, et cetera).

³⁷ Perhaps due to an acid flashback, but the phenomenon is never fully explained.

that allows it to continue whether or not it is observed. This relates to the phenomenological principle of the world as a wealth of sensations and objects which spring forth toward the perceiver. In some philosophies, such as atheistic existentialism, there is a danger of straying toward solipsism. In phenomenology, this danger is avoided by the assertion that consciousness is a relation to the world, and cannot be such without a world to be conscious of.⁴³

Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* influenced the language involved with Theo's attacks. Further, every use of the word "nausea" in *The Cardboard Sublime* implies one of two philosophical meanings. The first, drawn from Sartre's novel, implies a deep existential discomfort.⁴⁴ The second was drawn from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which nausea is invoked as a state of despair which guides the individual toward a stronger selfhood.

e. The Moral Compass: Empathy, Ingenuity, Faith

Aristotle claimed that the purpose of art is to delight and to instruct. In dealing with the latter, it is necessary to consider the virtues advocated by a work of literature.

At first glance of the opening chapters, it may appear that the moral compass of *The Cardboard Sublime* is the perspective granted by counterculture. But that idea is challenged by Theo's memories with Jonas, and by the ambivalence of the focal characters. Jonas's perspective first appeared to Theo as a kind

⁴³ All phenomenological allusions draw from the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, specifically the work *Phenomenology of Perception*.

⁴⁴ In one of the most compelling passages of *Nausea*, the protagonist muses that if he witnessed someone's tongue transform into a centipede, he would not be surprised and would find it humorous. During his sublime attacks, Theo perceives a similar fragility in reality, and is in awe that it holds together.

of secret truth.⁴⁵ But when Jonas was proven to be schizophrenic, Theo had to look back on his past of self-creation, and consider that those methods were in fact self-destructive.

There are three aspects of the novella's moral center. The first is empathy. It is proven in the end that despite their vices, Theo and his crew are willing to make sacrifices for one another. Theo also discovers sincere compassion in his past friendship with Jonas. This grants a meaning to the relationship that is untainted by Jonas's madness.

The second moral aspect is ingenuity. The theme of combining broken parts to form a functioning whole, be they pieces of machinery or an identity, runs throughout the novella.⁴⁶ Theo is a mechanic, Tobias is an engineer, Jeremy uses jerry-rigged vintage filming equipment. Besides the physical aspect, ingenuity also implies the importance of emotional, psychological, and empathetic "repair." The skill with the greatest value in the world of *The Cardboard Sublime* is the ability to make something useful, precious, and meaningful out of the incomprehensible multitude.⁴⁷

It is by no means a religious story, but *The Cardboard Sublime* contains mystical expressions that offer the possibility of transcendental ascent. The mysticism that frames the story allows for the existence of something akin to an oversoul (which has been imitated and disrupted by the grid). The third aspect of virtue in this story is faith, no matter how irrational, in

⁴⁵ "Jonas had always possessed a certain gravity that resonated with Theo's darker reveries." *tCS*, Chapter 1.

⁴⁶ "[. . .] the tools of his art worn to pieces with love and stitched together again with the same." *tCS*, Chapter 1.

⁴⁷ "It was those filthy moments where you felt everything anyone can feel all at once. And through it all the work got done." Theo, *tCS*, Chapter 6. This passage was inspired by an interview with Efrim Menuck (composer for Godspeed You! Black Emperor), in which he relates the cacophony of artistic collaboration to an auto-mechanic garage.

the empathetic web. Jonas would be the first to say, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the most bizarre philosophies. When Jonas was proven insane, Theo cast away that idea with all the rest. I would like to think that by the end of the story, Theo has reclaimed that perspective.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ "Theo takes a look around at the brick warehouses, the crusty eaves of anarchistic architecture, the train-yard across the river where a locomotive is steaming along at a steady pace, the birds in the leafless trees along one side of the lot, the cracked pavement and the transformers with their thick fleshy bundles of wire that arch down nearly to street level. He sees them all as veins of some slumbering leviathan, dreaming in the depths of the earth." tCS, Chapter 9.

III. Reading List

- Samuel Beckett: *Molloy* (1951), *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Watt* (1953), *What Where* (1983)
- Jorge Luis Borges: "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940), "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941)
- Edmund Burke: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757)
- Joseph Conrad: *Heart of Darkness* (1899)
- Cream: *Disraeli Gears* (album, 1967)
- T. S. Eliot: *The Waste Land* (1922)
- William Faulkner: *The Sound & the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930)
- Godspeed You! Black Emperor: *F#A#∞* (album, 1997)
- Li Jianhong: *Lovers with Cloisonné Bracelet* (album, 2009)
- Franz Kafka: "In the Penal Colony" (1919)
- Arthur Koestler: *Darkness at Noon* (1940)
- Thomas Mann: *The Magic Mountain* (1924)
- Patrick McGoohan: *The Prisoner* (television series, 1967-68)
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945)
- Alexander Nehamas: *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (1989)
- Friedrich Nietzsche: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883)
- Thomas Pynchon: *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)
- Jean-Paul Sartre: *Nausea* (1938), *Being & Nothingness* (1943)
- Alfred Lord Tennyson: *The Lotos-Eaters* (1832), *Ulysses* (1842)
- Voltaire: *Candide* (1759)
- Saul Williams: "Ohm" (1999)
- William Wordsworth: "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1815), *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* (1850)