

DREAMSCAPE: SELECTED FICTION

by

Nicholas Becher

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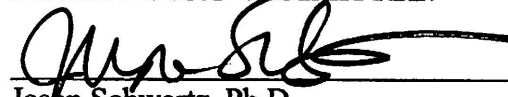
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Professor Jason Schwartz, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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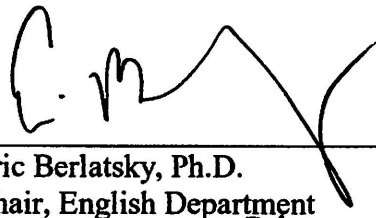
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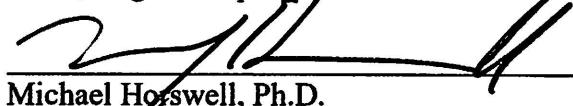
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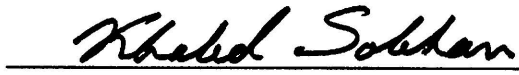
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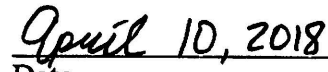
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ABSTRACT

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Included is a collection of speculative fiction by author Nicholas Becher that incorporates research from Cherokee folklore as well as experimental perspectives of place and tone.

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INTRODUCTION

My style of fiction in this collection can best be described as a hybrid of the folkloric/mythic and the speculative, in prose that aims to disorient the reader and immerse him or her in its mystery. At the most basic level, I set out in every piece to achieve a juxtaposition of the beautiful and the horrifying. This style, which I'll call Literary Horror or Neo-Folklore, is an amalgamation of my influences, discovered through my traveling experience and my literary interests.

The specific influences I will elaborate on in this introductory essay are as follows: rural Missouri and the turn of seasons against an industrial backdrop in the Midwest; economic divide and cultural cross-sections on the Hawaiian island of Oahu; escapism to South Florida from middle America; my grandmother's death in the winter of 2016 and the subsequent discovery of Cherokee ancestors in her family tree; the Cherokee reservation in the mountains of North Carolina, both its residents and the overall ambiance of the region; Cherokee oratory, folklore, and myth in conversation with canonized Western literature; and, finally, the impact of global warming, climate change, and over-industrialization on the abovementioned landscapes.

First and foremost, where I live and where I travel have always had an incredible impact on the tone of my writing. Having been raised in St. Louis, Missouri, I grew up with an appreciation for color in the changing of seasons. When I began writing, I used poetry as a framework to focus on the natural world – there was something about the sky and the weather in Missouri that felt like an unmoving grey cloud, so even when spring hit and

everything turned white and green, it was always tinged with a layer of grey. My first attempt at a short story was for a small community college workshop in St. Louis, where I was praised for my eerie juxtaposition of the beautiful and the grotesque. Partially, I believe this has to do with the industrialized areas of St. Louis and the smog shooting off from landfills in the outlying counties (the West Lake Landfill in Bridgeton, MO comes to mind). Recurring themes of weather and color in this collection can be directly associated with my upbringing in the Midwest that mirror my interest in both the beautiful and the horrifying. For example, in “Weatherhead” I delve into my fascination with stormfronts and growing up in tornado alley by presenting a narrator who feels that his bloodline allows him some form of control over the changing weather.

After being accepted into the undergraduate English program at Hawaii Pacific University, I moved to Honolulu in the spring of 2012, largely to escape the lull of the Midwest. My experience in Hawaii was incredibly influential on my writing style, in that I found myself unfulfilled by the beautiful sunsets, immaculate beaches, and incomparable natural beauty of the mountainside there. I began writing short stories and poetry that largely focused on the contrast between incredible wealth and incredible poverty, the vividly beautiful against the offputtingly ugly, prosperity vs. disparity both in nature and culture. While other writers on the island carried this sense of calm in their prose that reflected some vague and detached utopian paradise, I found a darker beauty in the realities of this place that others didn’t seem to care for, and it was something I adapted into my writing that had clearly been built out of my prior fascination with despair in the Midwest.

The influence location had on me during my writing process had not become apparent until I moved out of a congested apartment with my ex-fiancé in Kaneohe to a

four-bedroom house with two college friends in the mountains in Hawaii Kai. What I was faced with were two vastly different island landscapes, and the effect was obvious in my work. Poems written in the old place were about dust piling up, rain drumming eternally on plantation shutters, a group of homeless women that fashioned flowers out of palm leaves, articulations of where I was seeing my mood reflected in the world around me. And from the new place, in the richest area of the island, each night a view of one of the most famous sunsets in the world, my writing seemed to shift into the more otherworldly, ghostly, and even supernatural style. It occurred to me then that I wanted to position my writing somewhere between these points, and my most powerful writing comes when I am able to place my reader in these same landscapes and mindsets, simultaneously. Location and mood became the driving forces in my craft and remain so to this day.

Of course, geography would not matter without history, and soon after I moved off the island for graduate school at Florida Atlantic, my grandmother's death would spark a dive into my family history that impacted my writing in ways I could not have anticipated. After her funeral, my sisters and I were rummaging through a hope chest for old pictures and any information we could find on my grandmother's past. In this collection, recurring images of a withering grandmother are largely built around memories of my own grandmother and can be seen in stories such as "Wolf" and "Birth." In the hope chest was a stack of vintage photographs that dated all the way back to the mid 1800's. A particular photograph caught my eye of a Native American woman donning an almost Puritan-style white dress next to a light-skinned man in a suit to fit the times. Scribbled on the back of this photo in my grandmother's handwriting are the words Cherokee, North Carolina.

I was always skeptical of claiming ownership of my bloodlines; there's a big difference in having a minuscule amount of Cherokee blood and understanding the Cherokee experience, culture, history, etc. Even now, after reading hundreds of Cherokee legends and myths and historical accounts of their relocation, after visiting the Cherokee reservation and interviewing residents about their experiences, I still feel no sense of ownership over this culture. And for this reason, I am extremely cautious not to appropriate this culture for my own benefit. It's important to note specifically how I avoid doing this in my writing, and it primarily deals with closely examining Cherokee legend to fully understand what makes it meaningful within the Cherokee canon. Ultimately, it is not the stories themselves that create meaning for the culture, but the way they are presented, spoken, or acted out. The inherent tone of these stories reflects both the tragedy in Cherokee history and the means of overcoming that tragedy, all expressed through the speaker. Much of what the reader/listener is meant to learn comes through the impact of the story's delivery, specifically my use of voice. The clearest example of this can be found in "Wolf" where I utilize a detached narrator to evoke distance and eeriness from the subject, allowing the tone to imply a sort of creation myth. This became the greatest lesson I could learn from my exploration into the Cherokee roots in my family. After shrouding myself in Cherokee legend for months, I found great value in the use of tone/voice to walk the thin line between what is unsettling and what is beautiful or inspiring.

A secondary, but equally important realization from researching Cherokee folklore was the simple fact that what you read impacts what you write. It may seem obvious, but I hadn't quite connected this to my own process before delving into my family research. Prior to my graduate studies, my influences were primarily white male authors such as

Denis Johnson and Sam Lipsyte. I found myself emulating their work early on, albeit unintentionally at times. Perhaps my greatest influences prior to developing this thesis would have been H.P. Lovecraft and Kurt Vonnegut – two authors I particularly admired for the absurdity and weirdness in their prose. In all four of these authors’ work, I found an initial draw to their ability to subvert expectations and disorient the reader. Johnson’s writing often drifts through perspectives with an unreliable narrator, while Lipsyte tends to throw the reader off by juxtaposing dark humor with profoundly disturbing, yet inevitably beautiful images or turns in plot. This same disorientation had always been a staple of Lovecraft’s work. And Vonnegut’s direct approach to literary sci-fi always read to me as functioning within this same disorienting space (the breaking of the fourth wall in *Breakfast of Champions* comes to mind).

Which is to say that something significant was missing in my repertoire: actual perspectives of the Cherokee people. My interest in Native American history reaches far back, but my knowledge largely consisted of factual narratives and stories of forced relocation. After a bit of looking around, I found two collections that ultimately became the root of the stories in this collection. All work generated for this thesis is taking a step beyond the earlier work I had generated, in that my voice and direction are much more clearly oriented in the mythos of the story. *Aunt Mary, Tell Me a Story* and *Living Stories of the Cherokee* are two collections of Cherokee oratory told and transcribed by natives. The legends compiled in these collections are equally haunting and prophetic, and my concept of the reachers in “Wolf” is largely a reimagination of the mythical Spearhead, one of the “little people” in these legends (often amorphous figures) that pop up in most Cherokee stories. My intention here was not to steal or copy the idea of these mythical

“little people,” but to understand what is haunting and powerful about them and reimagine the legend so that the same effect surfaces in my work.

In *Living Stories of the Cherokee*, Barbara Duncan describes how to achieve the Cherokee worldview: “And how does one [find balance]? By taking time to dream; by understanding our nature and our needs and taking care of them; by doing ceremonies that keep us in balance like going to water and using the sweat lodge; by listening and praying; by recognizing our dark and light sides; by having the support of family, extended family, clan and tribe” (25). I aim to adopt these principles into each plot and each character’s development. While this worldview may seem to echo other religious or spiritual mantras (there’s a certain zen-Buddhist vibe to the Cherokee ethos), I found this excerpt particularly helpful because of its emphasis on the interconnectivity of nature, self, and tribe, and it provided me with a framework for this collection. Overwhelming myself with stories from the Cherokee canon became the most fruitful decision I could have made. The sometimes sinister and haunting legends in these two collections are told often in the collective voice, using *we* and *us* and *our* to make the listener/reader a part of the story. The sonic elements of the collective voice strike me as a useful tool in establishing tone and mood in most of these Cherokee myths: “Turn on your light at anytime, and the monsters are gone. It’s just in our imagination. But a long time ago, those monsters were real” (62). Particularly in the stories “Wolf” and “Birth,” I began experimenting with the effect of the collective voice, utilized in the background. I aimed to create an immersive tone in these sections by limiting the distance between the reader and the action. In other words, this is not happening to Wolf out there in the woods; it is happening to the reader as if they were walking into the woods with him, experiencing the terror with him, creating the illusion of a shared

experience. This is a trick I noticed in cinematic horror, where the camera stays extremely close (but still separate from) a single character. Forcing the audience into the setting, almost as a part of the setting, creates a sense of immediacy requisite in horror stories.

To compound the effect, and ultimately to round out my style for this project, I began experimenting with language on a much smaller scale, looking closely at the function of the sentence and the word. In nearly all the stories in this collection, I attempt to complicate language through verbing nouns, nouning verbs, or by inventing new phrases that I feel force the reader into an unfamiliar headspace. This sort of invention is not merely a parlor trick, but a calculated risk. After reading the novel *Impossible Object* by Nicholas Mosley, I seemed to have found a bridge-point between my old influences (Johnson, Lovecraft, etc.) and my newer influences (Chilitoskey, Kathi Smith Littlejohn, Barbara Duncan, etc.). The significance of objects in all of these authors' work was striking for me. I was seeing overlaps in how Cherokee myth and speculative fiction focused on the strangeness of things: the object as a vessel for characterization; the object as a medium for philosophizing or creating nuanced perspectives (one character sees an object one way, another sees it as a different object entirely); the use of smaller objects (corn husks, blowguns, a rubber hose, a lap full of baby bunnies, etc.) to build a much larger metaphorical object (a maze, a castle, a hospital full of drug addicts, etc.). I wanted to experiment with the object in terms of syntax, using nouns as verbs to disorient on the micro-level to (hopefully) create the sense of continuity or theme on the macro-level. Some examples of how I experimented with these sentence forms and verbing of nouns can be found in "Birth" in moments such as "jungling the roots like vines" and "earth kilns black heat to gestate the dark."

To those who ask, I use the term Literary Horror to classify my work, although this is a bit of a misnomer. None of the pieces in this collection were intended to be horror. That is, I did not set out to write horror stories in the vein of Stephen King or H.P. Lovecraft. Rather, I discovered a unique style and tone, born out of my disparate interests, that seems to haunt and disorient the audience, much like that of a horror piece. The genrefication of my work into Horror was more a happy and terrifying coincidence than an intentional move on my part. Recognizing the value of tone and mood in a horror story – and how suspense or mystery in a plot structure can sustain these shifts in mood – led me to appreciate the genre in a new light and begin seeing themes take shape in a way I hadn't expected. What started as a pseudo-noir ghost story called "Blood" flowered into a handful of storylines in this collection: the haunting in-between world of the reachers; Selah and her brothers' reunification; the investigation into Vectre Co. The plotlines I'd established from writing "Blood" and researching Cherokee culture merged to solidify my style in this thesis.

What follows is a mosaic of writing that portrays my larger intention: to disorient the reader by using objects, setting, and tone, with the ultimate aim of disrupting the reader's understanding of myth and legend, reorienting them in the strange and unknown parts of the world they often try to escape. The goal is not to disorient for the sake of chaos, but to question the nature of those things that make us most uncomfortable (i.e. losing a child, dealing with the fallout of natural disasters, feeling haunted by our dead relatives, etc.). When readers face a conflict in fiction (or a disorientation), this conflict has the potential of throwing them out of the world or dragging them deeper in. I use conflict to attain the goal of disorientation, forcing the reader to face conflict through every line,

whether that's a conflict between characters; a conflict of images against language (describing the horrific in poetic terms); a conflict in form (e.g. framing things in a list to force the reader to question how to read the piece); even a conflict in theme (industrial vs. natural). When my work is at its most successful, my audience will feel disoriented from a certain word, line, theme, or character that resonates with them, but this disorientation ends up being so much a part of the piece that it goes unnoticed. Much of the meticulous line-level work I've done for this collection was in figuring out those phrasings that make a reader both interested in what comes next and curious about what came before. And, as a result of this editing on the micro-level, the ideal thematic framework and style came into focus.

WOLF

Wolf knows from his father that the haunt begins in winter. Follow the herd and the yowling, the echo through the mountainside. “You know a deer when you hear it,” his father says as the knife cuts the fawn’s throat. The mother doe wallops viciously at the two bodies cowered over her kin. The crack of his father’s tomahawk against her skull rattles into the woods. Thrumming in Wolf’s head now is a mother’s whimper on white melt. “Roots drink the blood,” his father says. Winter grows and sings the reachers out of their sleep.

Longing. An empty crib in spring, or the buzz of hummingbirds outside a closed nursery window. A father in mourning against unmoving clock hammers. While the home is dissonant between each room, the mobile is stilled by lifeless air. Mother waits for music to whisper in from the forest.

“Here, rinse them in water,” Wolf says as he pulls a pail from the well. His wife claws wildly at her eyelids before plunging her face into the wet. “There’s no light!” She cries. Wolf thinks that his hands are branches on a rotten tree. He found her in the bellflowers, the muck caked deep in the hollows of her eyes, dissolving what little vision was left therein.

She sings in the afternoons until the boy is four months. He does not hear her, but he feels the vibrato of motherhood and the boom in Wolf’s cough. A song floats somewhere between the three: Spirit in soil, sleep children of rain.

“Firewood’s buried in snow,” Wolf tells her. She spends the morning washing her child in the bath and humming to feel an echo out of the washbasin. Outside, the pale violence of a blizzard entombs the hillside. “He’ll freeze. You’ve killed him,” she says. Bundled, the child does not cry or shiver in his sickening. “We slow burn what’s left,” Wolf says. Pneumonia stills the child after three days.

A fugue leads her across snowmelt under a canopy of dense evergreen and oak. When she finds the purple glow of bellflowers, there are no songs ringing in her head, only time galloping further away. Their long fingers reach down from the canopy, black with rot and foliage, dripping root onto the infant’s forehead. Coil the legs to push the child through. She kisses blue lips before letting go.

Open his mouth to dirt his breath. Make his lungs new again out of earth. Roots needle into veins and pipe fresh blood; music wriggles through every porous gap in the forest floor. The sound of passage is a decomposition. The reachers pull the child from underground into a damp cave, far from Wolf or the cadence of motherhood.

They tower into the trees on stilted legs, eyes white and skin silted, tendril fingers retracting upward like branches after pushing the boy through. She doesn’t know where to look for her son, only that his scent is buried. “It’s all gone b-black,” she stutters before coughing out the bile inside her. Her stomach heaves noise into a puddle; hidden figures skreigh overhead like bats in a fire, growing more distant with each turn of her stomach. Spirit in the soil. She sings resolutely into the empty woodland.

The couple sit wrapped in fur blankets on their corner porch, listening for a herd moving in the snow. How long had it been since they emptied the room? She doesn’t bother to ask. The stags enter in droves, their eyes somnolent. He stalks them from a distance,

then deep into black forest toward the mountain base. Mother has not been left alone for over a year, although her song carries through to him even in the thick.

Without light, she learns the world by sound. Mornings are spent shaping the corners of each room in song, save the nursery. Every note is a memory of contour or color, a blind recomposition of home. The door to the nursery is boarded shut from within. All the noise she throws at this door is swallowed from inside, as if they are nested there in the quiet, incubated by the void.

“The boy,” he says to the dreamscape of branches overhead. His wife’s song mutes suddenly, the herd of stags collapsing into snow, their panicked breath kicking fog about the patch of bellflowers (radiant still despite the winter and dark). Wolf begins the bludgeoning of skulls in a fit of madness, confettying antlers with each throw of his father’s tomahawk. Hours pass and the massacre turns each carcass into pulp and refuse, the forest floor spattered deep red. Roots drink the blood. Wolf awaits.

On the porch now there is no music or light. She moves to the bannister for a handful of snow and presses it to her scars. The cold against her scabbed eyelids reminds her of waking up after childbirth. Inside, the empty room remains silent and she listens through the door for them to let her back in, now that she is by herself. Three planks of wood thud on the other side before the door creaks open. Days pass as she stands waiting in the nursery, listening for the hummingbird’s song to welcome spring.

In the midst of decay, while the blood and soil bubble and seep into the earth, devoured by the bellflower patch, Wolf feels the reachers descend. “Her child and her eyes,” he says to their hidden faces. “Blood for blood.” They wrap their root fingers first

around his throat, then his arms and ankles. As he sinks into the purple, the reachers sound to him like newborns wailing in the night.

BIRTH

The forest births each child from soot, nameless under a crescent moon. Underground, beneath layers the foliage, a labyrinth of roots fuses tendril to vein, soiling in new blood. The reacher dredges through this hollow, collecting seeds to socket eyes, worms to innard their bowels.

It sludges back and forth. Twisted sloth arms jungling over roots like vines.

Gather; grow – the ancient clockwork. The bodies, rolled from clay, dangle by those threads of tree root. The reacher sets pieces of them in place until the dolls of utero are complete.

Here in the oldest womb, earth kilns black heat to gestate the dark. These tunnels that move under everything also vestige the beginnings of time, pulsing life between lives. A throat swallowing the dead and choking bodies back reconstructed.

Do not gaze down this throat to see how you were made.

Three have been assembled for harvest: the brothers and the girl, pushed through what settles above and what stirs under the surface. They are pushed up into the bright terror of moonlight and cold mountain wind. With them floods a surge of oil as thick as blood, spitting refuse and afterbirth across the forest floor.

Starting a leakage that could not be diked.

It tars the children together into morning; the reacher furthering back into its labyrinth.

*

“A lot can happen in a day,” says Marcus from the workbench inside the family barn. “It isn’t always up to you.”

“What are you going off about?” Beau says from beneath the hood of a ’67 Stingray.

“The dam. All of it. Think how much will change in the time we clean this place up. Or how the last five years seems like a second ago, or even how much is gonna happen by the time I’m done talking,” says Marcus.

“Nothing’s ever going to happen then,” Beau says.

“Seems like everything passed us by,” says Marcus. “One day we’re together, we’re a family, me and you throwing corn husks like hand grenades – then it’s all just gone, smothered. Fucked. Everything getting tossed from one storm to the next. Funnel clouds coming in three at a time. And the mother of all of ‘em comes through – and you know those dams weren’t built to hold against that kind of wind. Nobody thought about it? A giant fucking tornado in the heart of tornado alley? What’re the odds? Now the whole goddamn valley’s washed black with the Shepherd’s family photos and bits of furniture from Scotty’s place and a whole fucking town’s worth of history. What a waste.”

“It wasn’t all that great before,” says Beau from beneath the hood. “Not the way I remember. Nothing passed that we didn’t watch fly by. So, if you’re feeling sorry for yourself it’ll get you about as far as you can piss it.”

Marcus’s ramblings came regularly after their parents’ death, around the same time he started smoking opium for survival instead of recreation. The brothers rebuilt the family barn into a chop shop of sorts after the levelling, a three-year onslaught of torrential storms that splintered the valley. Flipping abandoned cars had proven lucrative in the wake of these storms. Marcus thinks (but cannot say to his brother) about the color from before,

and how each storm diluted this to grey. About the dreams of a distant sister and the phantom grandmother and their faces folding into each other. He wonders if Beau's thoughts had been steeped in the same black and yellow mire. Or if the memory of their grandmother on the floor, bedside, digging out her own forearm, still haunts Beau the way it haunts him.

"Remember how Grandma used to talk cornfields like they were the ocean?" Marcus asks, as if his brother's memory had leached its way into his own head. "If you never seen the ocean, it's the next closest thing, you know? It's like ghosts coming up for air through these muck waves and shit piles and trash heaps. Or when the wind cuts through at that angle the oil-grass gets yanked up. Looks like these dead fingers keep reaching up for edges that aint there no more."

It'd been ten years since they lost their parents to the storms. Eleven since the dam gave way. Twenty-five since Vectre Chemical opened the waste management facility only a few miles from the family land, in the valley beyond the hills. Thirty-six since the brothers were born and separated from their sister. Hundreds since the wars between men with different skins. And further still, before language or lust, when life bubbled out through the pores of an unscathed earth.

Beau asks, "You trying to get any work done or just bullshit around all day?"

Marcus dismounts the workbench and opens two beers from the refrigerator. Chains dangle from the rafters, makeshift into a pulley and hoist for setting engines in the block. They share the loft overhead as a bedroom, filled only with two sheetless mattresses lain cattycorner. Little remains of their family's uprooted home. The brothers made quick work scouring the acreage and bonfiring those things that reminded them of the departed.

Marcus asks, “When’s the last time you dreamt about grandma?” He begins throwing tools into drawers with little regard.

Beau says, “Hard to know. Gets me down thinking about what dreams mean. They’re strange. Her face is all fucked up. Like it’s getting older real fast, but over and over again. Wrinkles looked like centipedes almost, crawling under her cheeks. And I love her but I’m terrified and my foot is getting sucked down a puddle of this black mud shit. And she’s just staring at me with her face going.”

While they speak, reminders trickle in through the scant rafters overhead: a low howl, building then fading. Sporadic metalling; shrieks and screams, or the whir of engine exhaust choking the breeze. Mechanical animals sparring in an industrial zoo. Smokestacks peek over the tree-line outside where Vectre Chemical erected a waste management facility, the central headquarters for the region’s clearing and reconstruction project, four massive filtering plants to cover the 150,000-acre slurry cleanup.

For some time after their parents’ death, Marcus’s hands tremored outside the opium haze. Memories for him now float around in that blue-grey cloud. He feels his brother speculating about where he’d gone and who was there to keep him alive during this time, like finding the edge pieces to a liquid puzzle. Nothing is certain or clear and Beau’s concern for Marcus is never thwarted.

Sunlight comes in sideways through slits in aluminum siding. The day is fading. Beau slams the hood on the Stingray and Marcus empties a foaming beer down his throat without touching can to lips. It splashes out onto an already oil-stained beard.

“This is done,” Beau says. “I gotta drop it off and get the pickup.”

“Right,” Marcus says and opens another beer. “You want me to finish cleaning this shit up?”

“No,” Beau says. “You’re shit at cleaning. I’ll have to go and do it over again anyway.”

At this, Marcus shrugs and kneels to tie his boots, spilling the fresh beer across the dirt floor. He wipes his face in a dirty rag, leaving the mess, while Beau washes his hands in the washbasin. Beau enters the driver side and clouds the barn in dust and exhaust as he kicks on the engine.

Marcus gets in the passenger seat and says, “Don’t want to cross Big Slur again, cops’ll have it swarming. Just cut up through the backwoods and I’ll show you the turn when we get close.”

The red-orange light of evening fades while they drive, patient over the valley’s slow hills, eastward toward a smog-cloaked city. The valley ends in forest, winding them up the two lane mountainway edged with debris and felled brushwood. Guardrail stumps have been twisted like taffy from the shoulder. Foliage blankets the forest floor. Overhead, the browning leaves hold to their weak branches, enough to darken back the sun.

“We’ll be square with Timmy after we drop this off,” Beau says.

“And then what?” Marcus asks, finishing another before dropping it out the window.

“We should have enough to pay him for Selah,” Beau says. “Or figure where she is, at least.”

“Finally,” says Marcus. “And what about Timmy?”

“What about him? I’m not trying to cause more problems than we already got.”

“Ain’t that simple the way I see it,” Marcus says. “Dude’s been blackmailing us for months and I’m fucking pissed.”

“It’s not exactly blackmail, Marc,” says Beau. “He’s got information on Selah and we’re working for him to give it to us. Quid pro quo or whatever the thing is.”

“Quid pro fuck yourself,” says Marcus, showing his drunkenness in veering across the centerline on the two lane highway and jolting the car to correct. “Timmy could’ve told us where our sister was who we’ve been looking for our whole lives and tries to use us? Tries to make a buck on that? He’s testing our limits to see how much she’s worth to us. We should fuck him up. Bury him in the woods.”

“I think you had enough,” says Beau, reaching toward Marcus’s lap for the remainder of the six-pack.

“I’m fine,” says Marcus, intercepting the pack by one of its plastic rungs.

“You’re done,” repeats Beau.

“I’m done when I’m out,” says Marcus, unwilling to loosen the shared clutch.

“You’re done when you start swerving all over the fucking road,” Beau says, now raising his voice. The Stingray wobbles around curves and forest bends, while the brothers’ knuckles whiten in the tug-of-war.

Marcus breaks and releases the grip, then slows the Stingray over a hilltop before the crawl downward toward the city.

“He’s got money in that house somewhere. You know we could use it is all I’m saying,” says Marcus.

“We got our land and we’re getting by,” says Beau. “You should be grateful.”

“Land ain’t money,” says Marcus.

“You mean land ain’t drugs,” says Beau.

“Fuck you,” says Marcus, throwing a right fist at his brother and clipping his arm.

“No, fuck you,” says Beau, returning with a left and sending the car into a swerving fit.

Marcus finds the center line and straightens out, deflated at what his brother had said. He sighs deeply and waits for Beau to drown in his own guilt over the low blow.

“People got to survive out here somehow,” says Beau. “And we can’t go starting shit where we don’t need to. Finding Selah isn’t no easy deal for Timmy, either. We really just can’t do it on our own. Government put her in witness protection and I don’t know anyone else who can even use a computer anymore, much less get around all that.”

Marcus is quiet, unwilling to break again.

“Look Marc, I’m sorry. But this is serious, brother. I need to know you’re not going to go around starting shit, especially with Timmy. He’s connected. We don’t want to be on that motherfucker’s shit list, is all I’m saying. We lay low, find Selah, make sure she’s okay. That’s the plan, right?”

“That’s the plan,” says Marcus.

Beau pops the final two beers from the plastic liner and opens them. He hands one to his brother and they touch the brims, nodding to the other.

Silence and motion score the descent cityward, out from the woods unto acre upon acre of oil-stained farmland. Spotlights from the reconstruction zone skyscraper into the clouds, haloing the neighboring valley. The slurry reservoir wasn’t built to sustain such constant and unforgiving floods. Thus, a dam bursts and vomits thirty billion gallons of oil-mud down into the valley below, smothering families under a tarmac of industrial

waste, the earth consuming them in its spoil. The billboards along the main highway depict an opportunity for growth and employment in cleaning the spill site, a win-win for those impacted by the spill. Most that were hired were never paid. Those that refused turned to scavenging or theft, or they moved west into the dustbowl to dry up with the rest of the country.

Beau churns in the shine of industry from across the valley. From the darkness, a billboard folds into view: businessmen in suits and tie, congratulating each other on thorough and expeditious disaster relief efforts. *Come One Come All to the Grand Re-Opening of Big Slur National Industrial Park.*

“I used to see her when I shot up,” Marcus says, breaking his lull.

“Who?” Beau asks, still lost in thought.

“Grandma,” says Marcus.

“See her how, like hallucinating?” Asks Beau.

“Maybe. Maybe more than that, though,” says Marcus. “Harder to remember because it ain’t really a memory. I’m half in and half out, like one foot in my body and another somewhere else. And that’s where everything is. Somewhere else. I can feel that place even right now but it’s like I was feeling from inside grandma’s mind. Fading out was this endless freefall, everything floating around with me and me floating around everything else. And the whispers. I know I was just passed out there on the bed. But also, I know I wasn’t. Not really.”

“It’s all behind us, now” says Beau.

“I guess. I was fucked up. And I’m sorry I put you through it,” Marcus says, admitting fault for the first time to his brother.

There is only the long stretch of highway in front of them now, reaching ever-past the high-beams. Marcus finishes the last beer and throws it into the night.

“Wake me up when we pass the quarry,” Beau says, resting his head on the glass.

Marcus shuts off the radio and the road consumes him. City-glow fills the void beyond a stretching highway. He remembers how the rain caught fire as they burned the wreckage of their family estate, how the wind lashed his ears from both directions, how he’d drowned exhaustion in whiskey during the clean-up and knew in this delirium that hell had earthed and God had damned what was left of the Midwest.

Before the slurry burst and the dam spilled out on to everything, Marcus would drive alone to overlook the bluffs for sunset, to watch the wheat shimmers and corn rows fold into waves. He thinks of his mother pouring whiskey into his father’s coffee, the way the mug shook in his father’s hands. He remembers his father fidgeting with a block of half-whittled basswood, struggling to keep it steady. He teaches Marcus to keep his blades ever-sharp, and how a pare cut with a firm grip allows optimum control and contour.

Marcus drives with the bluffs in his rearview. Now, they pedestal a one hundred-foot steel tower, its’ industrial spotlights illuminating the black spillage below.

*

The newborns do not cry on the forest floor. Nor does the cold pile atop them, saved by heat and birth, mothering a small circle around them.

Reachers wait above; fledglings. They are slicking from limb to limb. Glazing each branch in an ooze of black slaver; the sap of time icicling off its slow drip. They move back and forth to stalactite the puss off their arms and legs. Slow, the columns seep down into

earth and spread. To feed the children, milk drains through these siphons into the surrounding dirt, where the roots will emerge and pierce into child veins.

Wait for a night with no moon, when the girl will open her eyes to see the bellflowers in bloom, when the brothers unleash each other from an infantile clutch, stretch their arms worldly, wait for a tremor that shakes the mountain and brings someone to carry them away.

This is how it has always gone, but for the curiosity of man.

Trouble; whispers. Something gazing into the throat of life.

You have forsaken the children, sealed the reachers fate in withering, beckoned in a leakage they can no longer dyke or salve, welcomed in the rot of a new age.

For this, her blood will never be clean from the filth of passage. She will spread this filth to her brothers, and them to those women they love and infect, and so on, until nothing inside grows.

*

Selah hears a mothersong flittering about, as if jailed in a dark birdcage. It's familiar, one she hears only when truly alone. She turns her gaze oceanward during a hike down the ridge, a weeknight ritual and one of the few places she's left unattended.

A violet evening band of light curtains the island, pinking the windward sands. The gusts are violent, lunging at her. She leans into their heave, but with this comes a vertigo, as if stepping off the edge of the world into the sea. Behind her, city lights flicker off and on again from the other side of the mountains, gasping through another surge. The wind-stripped, frondless palm trees needle permanently inland, porcupining the ridgelines.

The gale passes and sets Selah forward, falling into the overgrowth alongside the trail. Brush and twig scrape her knees raw, sparking memory from sudden and exact pain. The first time she watched anything die: following the boy and a trail of blood. It leads them dark unto tufts of hair strewn wild, early rot stinking from beneath a patch of brush, the forest darker now than the rest of the world, so dark the growling is upon them with rabid teeth, the coyote flaying the boy's wrist and soaking in his blood, he wraps his free arm around to snap the neck in its own recoil, and the last desperate yelp.

Selah feels the flinch from this sound now.

The blood out from her knees drips thick rivulets down her veins, as if it pulled them out to the wrong side of her skin. The flashback panics her. To oust her nightmares of childhood, Selah tries to hold her breath until her mind clears.

Things she does not want to remember: the first weeks alone in a dark cabin, the middle of an unending forest, the cackles of time, the howls of hunger inside her or outside with the wolves, a boy repeating lessons from his father about the hunt, women with grey straw hair wrapping rubber ties around her wrist, needles emptied of their yellow ooze, gasping herself awake under their smothering and losing her grip again on consciousness just as soon, the strobing of gnarled faces and grunts and sweat and corporeal slosh.

Tamping these memories back had become a matter of survival. While holding her breath, Selah imagines the roots in her stomach pushing themselves upward over her lungs, spindling around her neck and jaw to lasso the horrors inside her head. Only then does she swallow them back down into that dark cabin and let herself breathe.

She stands from the overgrowth and fights the wind down the mountainside, wondering about the boy in her visions.

When Selah finally returns from her hike, the twins sit with Selah's guardian Alex on the lanai. The hapa-haole brothers had been raised on the island their entire lives. When they spoke (which wasn't often) Selah always found their high-pitched voices a hilarious contrast to their size.

Selah moves through the plantation home's open atrium, out to the lanai where the three men pass around an opium pipe.

"Bloodied up my knees," she says, "Goddamn wind again."

Alex points the twins toward the house, saying, "One of you grab the first aid shit from the bathroom for her."

The twins stand in unison and do a short dance before they both turn and go inside. One of them asks in his helium octave: "Just band-aids or what?"

Alex says, "You can see she's bleeding, right? Get the whole fucking kit so we can clean her up."

The twins turn, say sorry, and begin a long, slow search, as if dizzied by their own orbit around the other.

"Sit down," Alex says.

"It hurts to bend," Selah says, looking down at the dried blood turning her skin rotten. Alex stands from the lawn chair and runs his thumb and fingers across the sweat on his brow.

"I need to talk to you about something," he says. "Sorry to tell you like this."

She feels him trying to pry into her with his eyes as he'd never been able to do, pilfering for a tell in her stoic aspect.

"Okay," She says.

“I got a call today from an old friend about you. Apparently, you have brothers out in Missouri that have been trying to find you. You know anything about that?”

“I mean that’s where I was born. I know that much,” she says, picking at the drying blood on her knee. There were few chances in her past to learn about her birth parents, although she’d always felt a pull back to that vague memory of home. She’d made stories up to pass the time: of some siblings playing with her in the corn, or shoeing mules for a trek up the mountain.

The twins come back with their arms spilling over: rolls of paper towels, boxes of gauze, rubbing alcohol and peroxide and antiseptic creams, sutures, medical tape, band-aids.

“Couldn’t find the kit so we just grabbed everything we could,” a twin says to Alex.

“Set it down there,” Alex says. “And get out of here we need some privacy.”

“What do you want us to do, boss?” Another twin asks.

“I want you to fuck off. Go make yourselves some food or take a nap or swallow some rat poison for all I care. Just get the fuck out of here.”

The brothers slink away dismayed and dragging, the opium pooling inside them.

Selah leans back in one of the four sea-green lawn chairs, painted to match the exterior walls of the plantation home. The first few years were spent painting over whatever she could get her hands on. She could not spend too much time in any place that stayed the same color. As Alex rifles through the pile of medical equipment, whispering under his breath at the twins’ idiocy, Selah thinks about each color in reverse, tracing back a decade spent on this island, wondering if she missed a chance to get out somewhere along the way, and if she’d pick away at the loose skin on her knees, what colors she’d find flaking off.

Kneeling beside her, Alex tweezes splinters from each gash. She does not wince, instead focused on the elasticity of her gnarled flesh, the skin around it gripping the splinter points as if they'd taken root on the inside. He takes great care with each pluck, watchful for a grimace or baulk. Of course, she feels him attempting to look inside her again, to no avail. His stare perpetual, begging.

"Do you want to leave?" Alex asks.

Selah, looking to him finally, says "What?"

"I mean, it doesn't seem like you want to be here. I realize you didn't choose to move out here or to be with me or any of it. I knew you wouldn't just fall in love with me and be happy right off the bat. I figured I'd grow on you, you know? We've been trying for a kid for five years now. Five fucking years and it never seemed like you really wanted it. I know it isn't your fault but I actually fell in love with you. I want you happy, and I feel like if we could've had a baby you would've seen that I'm a good person. That I can take care."

He pours alcohol over her wound and the sting seems to hurt him more than her.

"Where would I even go?" Asks Selah. "I don't have anyone else."

"They offered a trade," Alex says, his blonde hair slicked against his temple. "I send you home and I keep your trust."

Selah resists her impulse to claw his face. "That's *my* money," she says.

"It hasn't been your money for a long time," says Alex. "Look, Sel, it's simple. You're safe here. Nobody knows where to find you. I don't hit you and I barely yell. The guys keep an eye on you but more to protect you than anything. Truth is, I don't need to let you go. I'm asking you if you *want* to leave. If you can walk away from everything here

and it still doesn't matter to you after all this time... well, I guess I'm tired of trying to get you to love me."

He threads a suture over one of the deeper cuts. She chokes down her anger from his shortsightedness, then wonders to herself whether or not he has a point. She'd grown familiar with the island, lullabied in its routine beauty. It is her only home, and she'd become prolific in forgetting freedom to guarantee safety.

"I don't understand how you could think I would ever be able to love you," Selah says. "Or have your children. I don't want any of it. I'm a slave. I feel like a slave here, honestly. And that's what I am. You took advantage of me when I was desperate and I'll never forgive you for it."

"Please," Alex says, looking sternly into her face. "You're hardly a fucking *slave*. I don't ask you to do anything around here. You spend all day doing your own thing and all I ask is for a family and a little gratitude. I provide. You aren't wanting for anything."

"Because you took everything I had," she says, raising her voice. "You stole all my money and made it so I couldn't leave. And trust me, I *want*. I just don't want this. You don't get to tell me how I feel."

Alex has stopped stitching her, his fingers starting to writhe in frustration. The wind picks up suddenly and blows the medical supplies into a chaos across the lanai. He lunges to collect the strewing.

"Is that really what you think?" He asks.

She says, "I'm sorry but yes. I've wanted to leave for a long time now."

"How long?" He asks, looking more broken now than she'd seen him before.

Selah says, "Forever."

“Finish stitching up your own fucking leg then,” he says, and marches inside.

The twins wake her the next morning. They’ve packed her clothes into a suitcase near her bed, her journals into a stitch knapsack. On the end table, a passport, itinerary, and an envelope full of cash.

“Boss said he don’t want to see you again,” a twin says.

“Just to get you and go,” the other says.

Wrapped in the morning’s blanket, she looks at them like beaten dogs. She stands to wrap her arms around each for a moment in silent comfort. Their hulking bodies feel delicate and pathetic in her embrace; she holds them as a mother and they weep at this loss.

They say, “We’re sorry. So sorry. Please come back.”

Selah has lived with them on the plantation since she was seventeen, or close to it (she never learns her true age). Over the last decade, Alex and the twins had been her only contact with the outside world. Letting go of them bruises her like the skin beneath a shackle. And the permission to leave proves more difficult to accept than she’d anticipated. She understands this feigned attachment, this desperate love that clings to any ledge within reach, like the phantoms moving inside her, or an opium haze. Or what could not grow inside her womb, boiled lifeless in the rot.

*

The forest cradles three children in soot, through weeks of snow and ice. They hunger, but will not drink of spoiled milk. And with the moon upon them, the reachers cower to light, foisted away from this seepage. Purged by a quaking underground, or between dreams.

From the wolves out in that cold dark. From a perch that guards the ancient clockwork.

The children are not whole when the haunt begins.

Listen to the howls encroaching. Watch the bellflowers wither. Find a clearing through which you can see them torn apart. Teeth and eyes flickering in the wooden smear. Follow the rustling of underbrush, the splash in a puddle of detritus, and the man's booming voice frightens the animals, scattering back to the den.

Acloak in the hides of bears, he enters a clearing where the children sleep. Kneels to wipe soot from their frozen skin; no breath or heat escapes them, their seams unweaving out of the earth, their pulp drained.

He spans the thick around him but cannot see you out there gazing back.

He picks her from the vine. Carries her away.

BAZEL

In the postmortem, the extracted specimen is burrowed in Bazel's brain tissue. Unlike other victims, he indicates no feeling of electric pain moving down his spine and into the corners of his body. After falling from a catwalk in the factory, he'd been paralyzed and bedridden for the better part of his adult life. Typically, in a fester case, rot begins in the feet or hands and, left untreated, spreads to the brain to consume what's left of the host's motor functioning. Not so with Bazel, who never reported pain to the doctor during his visits. The infection was reported as a result of his pre-existing condition. Dead at sixty-seven, Bazel leaves behind five daughters from separate marriages, none of whom are mentioned in his final will and testament, save Heather, the youngest of the five. She'd absorbed all the caretaking responsibilities after her father's accident.

I first meet with the eldest sister, Juniper, in a dingy downtown loft. In the entryway, a painting of a yellow rooster hangs slightly off tilt. The place smells newborn, and as we enter the flat I feel myself breathing heavily out (over what, I couldn't be certain at the time). Her child doesn't cry once during my stay, but to give Juniper this compliment seems grotesque and unprofessional. Best to keep quiet in times of doubt. The wallpaper pines to hold itself up, and the corners of the room are browned from leakage or rust or time, but there is this early glow of October that's baking the room orange through a kitchenette window over the sink. And something about the glare of the place sets me back. Like I'm being hoisted through a wormhole into myself as a child. I'm eating dinner with my family.

It's dusk. My mother and father butter their bread in silence, looking to me. I feel their love again now.

Juniper shows patience with me as I collect myself in the restroom and wash my eyes. I hope she will not pry. Is it so strange to weep at the color of your childhood? Surely my highers would not approve. There is one yellow towel hanging on the wall rack that reeks of mildew. The sort of musk that will not leave your fingertips for the remainder of the day, no matter how hard you scrub or bleed. I cower at the stink of anything too familiar.

Drying my hands on the inside of my pockets, I exit the restroom, but she's there to block me in the hall.

"Dee-Dee says you're the real deal," Juniper says.

"I'm sorry about all that," I say, calling attention to what I feared would give me away.

"Well, you going to be alright? We can reschedule." She still has me pinned and I'm feeling anxious enough about it to fake a heart attack or a bowel movement coming on or something drastic, but this passes and I just as soon recognize how ridiculous I must seem to her and collect myself.

"No, no. Just fine. Can we take a seat in the living room? I just have a few questions and I'll get out of your hair."

"I don't know why you need to drag me into all of this bullshit." She turns and exits the hall as I withhold the urge to gasp for air as if loosed from a vacuum. From the kitchen, dropping ice-cubes in a mug, she says, "Haven't been in touch with my sisters other than Dee-Dee since pop got sick all them years ago."

I take a seat in the living room on a brown checkered couch, unable to recall the questions that needed answering. I'd been briefed that Juniper's husband drowned himself only a year prior and left her with a small but significant life insurance payout. It seems obvious to me that they planned it all out, and at times during our conversation I cannot see what I'd expected to see in Juniper's expressions: malaise, despondence, volatility, etc. I shouldn't pass judgement. These are dire times. And she isn't the focus of my case, anyway.

She picks up the conversation where I cannot. "My sister said you think someone murdered pop," she says. "She thinks Heather did it. I don't buy that for a second. Heather wouldn't kill for a million dollars. 'Specially kin. And Dee-Dee, god bless her heart, she'd gossip about you at your own funeral."

"Well ma'am," I've found my bearings, "I just need to know when about was the last time you spoke with your father."

"Lord knows." She's holding two coffee mugs that clink as she moves toward the sofa, each dripping condensation across the floor. I can almost hear the droplets, the room feels so hollow. Like sound passing through a tunnel. I take my mug from her and the jolt of whiskey catches me off guard and Juniper sees it in my face. She chuckles, then goes on about her father. "He got hurt so long ago and didn't want nothing to do with us. I think he was ashamed of it, being stuck in bed. Like it was his own fault somehow. But it turned him mean and I couldn't do much about it. Had to live my own life. Met Marti and we got into our own problems and I just lost touch with the family. Should feel worse about it than I do, honestly."

“Do you recall the last conversation with your father?” Generally speaking, I don’t drink during these sorts of interviews. Liquor leads me in unpredictable directions. So far, so good. But I knew she hadn’t forgotten about me breaking into tears in her foyer before even introducing myself.

“Fuck off stupid cunt. Something to that effect.”

“Could you elaborate a little? What did that conversation entail?” I ask.

“Look, I called him on his birthday almost twenty years ago and he didn’t want to talk to anybody. Heather and him were screaming back and forth with me on the line, and I mean really screaming.”

“Do you remember anything they might have said?” Through the window, I can see the sun low on the horizon behind a tooth-line of skyscrapers. The room holds light like a sponge. A cradle rocks near the window, calming the home with that glowing, silent back-and-forth. It’s slowing down the world for me, pointing out those things I so often overlooked.

“Bugs,” she says. “They were yelling about bugs. Bugs in the house. He got a bug, she got a bug. She gave him the bug, or he gave it to her. Who knows, could’ve been bed bugs or roaches or the flu. But that’s the way our family works. Shit just explodes. Start blaming each other and work ourselves into a shouting match. Before you know it, it’s all-out war. A bug’s a bomb where I come from. Any little thing, really. Heather put up with him best and she stayed. So that was that.”

She’d arranged her daughter’s binkies on the coffee table according to color. I set my sweating mug on a ceramic coaster between a blue and a light green. The drip spot

from the drink on my pants makes it look like I pissed myself, but even if Juniper takes notice, I don't get the sense she wants to embarrass me further.

I ask, "And what was the nature of your relationship to your father after this phone call?"

"Nothing. Like I said that was that," she says. "Talked to Dee-Dee and Heather here and there when they called but hardly ever about pop. Until he died. Don't get me wrong now, I love my father. But after he got sick he wasn't my father anymore. Whatever it was, that turned him into a vile creature." She speaks with a patience that reminds me of my own mother, and it feels to me like her late husband was more a burden than a blessing. Maybe I am picking up on something that isn't there, but I find it difficult to distinguish grief and relief in times of loss and love.

"Were you ever given a cause of death directly from the coroner?" This is the only bit I need, and I might have jumped the gun. If I weren't off kilter, my prep questions would come to me like scripture. Surely this interview is less than flawless, and the thought comes into my mind that I'm simply not good at this job.

I'm trying not to let her see it.

"Only from Dee-Dee. You're the first to ask me anything about dad other than my sisters since he died. I know there was money out there he stashed away. But I'm no vulture. I never wanted to be rich like they wanted so bad. I'm fine figuring it out for myself. That's how it should be. My Marti died over money and I told him every day, you're gonna work yourself to death. Rest his soul."

I'd forgotten her age somewhere along the way. And I'm trying to get a good look at her while she talks, shuffling around in my seat, pivoting against her silhouette. At a

certain angle, the shadows under her eyes make her both young and old, or lost in the middle like she'd never stopped crying after she was born. Like she'd kicked time back just enough so it wouldn't turn her grey.

"Aside from Dee-Dee, do you stay in touch with your other sisters?" I was supposed to ask this sooner. The whole thing had become a real mess and I can really feel myself getting anxious in my fingertips.

"I don't stay in touch with anybody," she says before a long pause. She stands and walks toward her child. The window light hits her from behind and turns her into a negative of herself, her sundress darkening purple to black for those few short seconds. She is careful not to let her heels clomp across the mustard-yellow linoleum floor. She hovers over her child, "It's me and my daughter and I'm happy with that."

I got what I needed. I'd done my job, somehow. Juniper was cleared of risk, and this was the prime operative. Regret over my haphazard emotional unfurling made everything feel bigger than it really was, like I'd let everyone down again and the chopping block was in view. Protocol requires, of course, that I detail the encounter in triage. The orange glow of the living room. My outburst. The binkies, even. Best to divulge for the greater good. They strap you down, obviously, so the convulsions that come with recollection don't snap any bones. It's more calming than it sounds, that metallic embrace. My anxieties subside after debriefing when they give me the regimented psych patch, unleashing a river through my mind to current away the distracting colors of Juniper's home.

In my office, photos of each fester are blown up and pinned to the wall. I'd seen the changes over the years from a handful of victims, nothing close to Bazel's case. These

samples are different, no longer nesting in the tissue but gnawing. They'd been feeding on Bazel for thirty-four years. Obviously – and this is what I kept telling them upstairs – they are evolving beyond our means of containment, and all of us keep on reporting it in, and days go by.

Ten years back, around the time we switched from pills to patches, they started giving us these data-log packets (we call them packs in the business) for our assignments. Understandably, most of the old guys started going rogue in their lines of question. Prying where they shouldn't. Day one, we learn the key is to stay elusive. The wrong question could upend *the whole goddamn operation* (as the trainers put it). So, after that if we went off pack it was akin to treason and they'd fry our brains and toss us in a quarry somewhere.

A lot can happen in a day. I heard that, but it was somewhere I can't remember. They schedule the meeting with daughters Euquilla and Sadie on the same morning, as the two share a home in Billow Brook, just past the factory lines. Everything feels grey out here. The sky's been washed out by cloud cover. I have to repeat the pack audio four times while I'm parked in their driveway, unable to find my focus in the slush of all those meds they patch me with. Maybe that's the point, something akin to autopilot.

The sisters (well, half-sisters technically) like everything to be in order. I can tell from the way they wear their work uniforms, even on a day off. They're committed to the company and they've done well for themselves, by the looks of the place. The home is nestled in the center of a grid-block of rigidly aligned pine trees. Any direction you look out from the front porch is like staring down an endless hallway.

"They harvest every five years," one of the sisters explains. She's caught me panning my head back and forth in a slow scan, feeling like the center of an empty vortex

where everything out there comes rushing in. “The soil here is enriched. We get a credit for tending to and re-sowing the land.”

“Pardon me, it’s a beautiful view,” I say. “I’m here to ask you and your sister a few questions. You should have received a notice.”

“Yes. We were expecting you. My name is Sadie, but everyone calls me Dee-Dee. Euquilla is inside making coffee.”

“Coffee sounds just fine,” I say. I enter the home behind her, noting some distinct features: a commanding gait; her heavy thud-step through the foyer; coifed brown hair pinned tightly to the scalp; lacquered black fingernails reflecting the purple-blue glow from the fish tank. I have the urge to tell her about fish, a fact about piranha’s or tanks, but I come up dry. I’m thinking one direction and walking another, and the smell of hazelnut coffee overwhelms the urge to commit treason and just start hitting her with every question I’ve never found the answer to.

I start scrolling through my patch to find the proper line of questions, and there’s a scratching noise in the audio feed. In comes Euquilla, a bulkier but also uniformed woman, from the kitchen with a crystal carafe and three tall champagne flutes. Whether this was coincidence or some kismet joke, I am violently off-put by the absurdity an estranged family who’s only link is that they cannot match the proper drinkware with the proper beverage. I don’t mean to sound elitist. But, it has me quite distracted. She pours coffee from the carafe into the flute and it’s the only thing I can see. *Get the mugs for fuck’s sake.* I’m losing the thread and those questions I need from my pack along with it.

Now she’s handing me the flute and suddenly I’m imagining it shattering between our fingertips from the heat of the coffee, and for a moment all of that starts happening and

then un-happening like I'm spinning a dial between reality and something else, reveling in the maybe of it, the un-webbing and re-webbing of shattered glass and suspended coffee bubbles, unbound from time.

"The notice was unclear about who you work for," says Euquilla, her deep voice thwarting me out of the fugue.

"It's important we keep the questions focused on your father," I say. It's right off the script. The sisters look at each other suspiciously and they see me noticing. "Let me clarify," I say. "I'm here to investigate your father's death and make sure there was no foul play, mishandling, etc. Mostly trying to wrap up any loose ends, at this point." I get two nods of acceptance, signs I'd assuaged what I hoped would be the last of their curiosity.

Things are going more or less by the book so far, I realize. And this gives me the ground I need to finally take a look around the room, get a sense of where they'd given everything its place. The room has sharp edges and a sleek, modern décor: four black leather sofas (where we sat) arranged facing inward in a square around a too-large and too-low and too-clean glass coffee table. Beneath it, a white fur rug. Above, a crystalline chandelier. I resist the urge to bat at it like a mobile over my crib.

A question falls from the ceiling and I ask, "When was the last time you spoke with him?"

They pause to determine which of them would answer.

"January of last year," says Dee-Dee. "A month or so before he passed."

"Same time," Euquilla says. "We called about a personal matter with Heather. A family affair we were trying to settle."

"I'll need some elaboration on that phone call," I say.

Euquilla sits stern and upright during the interview, intermittently sliding her palm down her abdomen and holding a deep breath, as if to straighten herself out. Dee-Dee is simultaneously forthright and desperate for my approval. Chances are she thinks I'm a government man, but she knows asking me again about the nature of my employer would certainly ruin her chances of a good word. She's way off base, of course. But it's hard to tell when someone knows something you don't.

"My father owned a great deal of wealth," says Dee-Dee. "Most of it had been promised to us and then taken away time and again over the years. In a lot of ways that's what kept me and Euquilla close for so long. We're the same age, born within a month of the other but we always liked to call ourselves twins growing up. Our childhood was... unconventional."

"That's putting it lightly," says Euquilla before pursing her lips to cool her coffee and sip.

Dee-Dee laughs emphatically at this, then says, "I'm sure you've reviewed the family tree." I have, but I'm also having trouble remembering any of it. I wonder if my patch had been rubbed loose sometime after the last post-op. Then again, it's hard to remember now if this is how I felt during every investigation. Maybe I just picked the wrong profession.

"Were you able to reach a compromise with Heather?" I keep all doubt at bay by lifting my coffee by the flute stem and making a show of keeping the liquid line level. The illusion of control *is* control.

"The two of us decided to write ourselves out of the will," says Dee-Dee. "As you can see, our positions at the factory have treated us kindly. We want for very little by

comparison to our upbringing. Despite his wealth, Bazel raised my siblings and I in near poverty-like conditions. You will see when you visit, if you haven't already."

Euquilla does her palm slide and clears her throat.

"What my sister is saying," Euquilla interjects, "is that – yes, we did come to a compromise. We agreed never to ask Heather about Bazel's wealth if she agreed to allow us to visit them once a month."

"And as fate would have it," Dee-Dee says, "nearly a month later he passed away."

"Do either of you find this suspicious?" I ask.

"No sir," says Euquilla without pause.

"At first, I did," says Dee-Dee, drawing a glare from her sister. "At first I thought Heather might have done something. It was only a sneaking suspicion."

"What gave you cause for this suspicion, other than the timing of your father's death?" I ask. It's like once I have the line, I can balance long enough to get another foot forward. But where am I headed? What is my endgame? Like the context around all of it started to dull, tamped back into a blank space in my head.

"Heather had always been the violent one," Dee-Dee explains, to her sister's chagrin. "When we were kids she would lash out. Biting, scratching, the like. It went away mostly as we grew older. Until the incident with Selah. Have you met with Selah yet?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," I say. "I'm sorry."

"Do you know where she is?" Dee-Dee persists.

"Dee-Dee, that's enough," says Euquilla. "You'll have to forgive my sister. We understand you couldn't tell us where she was even if you knew."

I find it helpful how much they are filling in for themselves. Sadly – and I truly am saddened by this bit – I’d met with Selah only a week prior, out on the islands, which flashes vividly into my mind. So much so that it is all I can think about. I remember the flight coming in at dawn and how clean the air felt before the storm that night. I remember Selah’s black, knotted hair tied loosely behind her ears. And the unpleasanties with her husband. Except, when I try to tap the recall, get the results of the meeting, the actual breakdown and write-up, I’m coming up blank. Worse than blank. Static. Visceral, distorted static.

“I’m unable able to comment on Selah, unfortunately,” I say to them. I stand abruptly from the sofa and realize how the distantly situated furniture had us nearly yelling to each other from across the room. As I step toward them, they stand in unison. “But I can assure you both that your sister Heather is not a murderer. We’ve put this rumor to rest, medically speaking. Bazel’s physical deterioration was a symptom of his paralysis. It was a gradual decline, and totally in line with his ailments. I need to make sure you are both understanding me here.”

“Yes, of course,” they each nod and shake my hand, thanking me for my service. What service they’re referring to, none of us can be certain.

It’s one thing to do the job and another to do it well. Which is the point of oversight, if you think about it. My highers keep a tight grip on the operation because they have their own highers to answer to, but a lot of that is built on trust. I trust they’re keeping an eye on me and won’t steer me wrong, I’m keeping an eye on the sisters, the sisters keep an eye on their factory line, and so on until you can’t see where it ends in either direction.

Triage feels a little bit like a dream. Closer to anesthesia, I guess. It's hard for me to imagine what it must look like on their end. Essentially, they're just watching my memories through the patch like a movie, the way I understand it. But it's much more complicated than that. Readers look at the raw data and have to build a story out of it to fact-check us, keep us honest. Most of the readers around the office cheat the process and listen to the investigator's post-op interview. That way, they don't have to do the hard labor (which is what they get paid for) of reimagining from scratch. The readers and the investigators have an understanding, and this is how we keep our department rating at the top, as well as cultivating a sense of community around the office. On paper, Vectre™ is the most secure, efficient, and transparent pharmaceutical insurance firm in the country.

When it's time for my meeting with the last sister, Heather, I'm in the thralls of an internal affairs case. I won't get too deep into it, but a conversation arose with one reader of keen interest to me, over the rise in ferment cases, and it ended up escalating into a full-scale shouting match between the two factions. There was a lot of blame being thrown around, and the investigators were already on edge about reports of an internal fester case. Rot from the inside. The reader in question claims she'd seen worms in an investigator's system. A serious accusation. Worms are a precursor to rot. And the implication I may be vulnerable because of these goddamn patches violates the very trust on which the whole operation had been built.

It's weighing on me the entire train ride out to Husker Country, where Heather had taken to cropping the family farm after her father's death. Out there, it's corn as far as the eye can see. I'm on a bullet through the yellow heartland, and I'm pulsing rage while trying to relax in my seat. What the world doesn't see doesn't really matter. I start thumbing at

the skin-flap over this new patch in my wrist, trying to rub loose some of the adhesive and get a look at it for myself. Believe it or not, I've never seen a patch actually installed before. They seal it over after every post-op.

From the train station, it's still an hour drive westward through the endless maize. Nearing the farmhouse, I'd really done a number on my wrist and try my best to stop the blood. Parked at the end of the drive, I tear a strip of fabric from my extra suit in the trunk and tie myself off. The sleeve of my suit jacket certainly appears misshapen, but it'll have to do. I can clean it up on the way home. Finally, I'm up the drive with Heather waving from the porch.

And upon stepping out of the car, it dawns on me that I hadn't even listened to the pre-op for this interview. With my nerves scattered, and given the state of things at the office, I'm not feeling very confident about those patches. My injection regimen clearly details medication for anger and anxiety, but it isn't working. I'm writhing.

"You're Heather," I say.

"You're right," she says.

"I'm here to talk to you about our father. He's dead. I mean, you know your father is dead, right?"

"Excuse me?" Heather's staring at me, befuddled.

"I'm sorry. It was a long drive. You should have received...."

"Yeah, yeah," she cuts me off. "I was expecting you. You're late. Letter said you'd be here by noon and it's quarter after."

"Again, ma'am. I'm very sorry for the delay."

"Come in and have some tea," she says.

“Only if you give it to me in a normal fucking glass,” I say. But she doesn’t hear me. She’s already through the screen door. I stand and let the sun hit my face until I remember what I’m doing there.

Inside, I remember the walls from the pre-investigation photos from over a year ago. In fact, everything is the same in here down to the corncob furniture and wicker ceiling decorations. A conversation with Selah seeps into my mind about tying and weaving the willow twigs into spirals and hanging them from the ceiling. Cigarette smoke fills the room like a fog, and I see something unfamiliar through the cloud. A mask made of black feathers dangling amidst the wicker ornaments.

Heather sees me seeing it and says, “It’s from a story my father used to tell me. The Old Man and the Birds. I made it when I was a little girl. Pop wanted me to fish it out of the attic. So he could die with it on.”

“What’s the story?” I ask.

“You want me to tell you The Old Man and the Birds?” She smokes a cigarette over the kitchen sink. “If you mind the smoke, we can go outside. I haven’t been making my own rules for very long, but I like to smoke inside.”

“I don’t mind,” I say, and I don’t.

“Aren’t there more important matters?” she asks. “You didn’t spend your day traveling to hear some old folktale.” I hadn’t gotten a good glimpse of her yet, with all the distractions. The smoke swirls behind her like milk and I follow her into it. She keeps her hair short, just below the ears, and her attire was farm appropriate. In her ruggedness, I am drawn to her.

“If I’m being honest with you, ma’am,” I say. This can’t have been on script. “I could use a break from work for a moment. Excuse me if this is in any way unprofessional. Last month something very alarming took place at work and, while I cannot give you any specific details, I am in a state of deep, and often disturbing, personal reflection. In that, I am reflecting upon some initial career decisions made in haste, with reckless shortsightedness. Further, I am feeling lightheaded from the heat.”

She turns around and ousts her cigarette in a pot full of soil on the kitchen table, moving past me to the kitchen where she’d forgotten the iced tea. She comes back and hands me tea in a regular drinking glass, and this fills me with a great sense of calm.

“Why are you holding your arm?” She asks. I hadn’t realized it.

“Had a bit of a mishap on the ride in,” I say.

“Show me,” she says.

“It’s nothing,” I say.

“Show me now,” she says, and I get the sense that I don’t have a say in the matter. Lose the illusion, lose the control. I take off my suit jacket and the piece of cloth is soaked black with blood. “For fuck’s sake,” she says.

“Hey, that’s what I say.”

“What? Look at your arm, man. This is bad.” She disappears down the hall before I get a chance to protest, emerging a few minutes later with a box of sutures and thread.

“I knew you had one of those patches in. Could tell by the way you drove up and scoped out the place. Like you were recording it for later.”

She knows more than she's supposed to. And if I wasn't unconcerned with protocol, I'd call her in. These are state of the art patches, as in banned-from-the-public. I'm still piecing things together.

"This is bad. I'm not going to lie, this is real bad," she says. "I'm going to have to take the whole thing off."

"No," I say. "There's a failsafe. I'll die. It's in the contract." The blood is bubbling out onto the corncob seat.

"I've bypassed a failsafe before. It was a different model but should be the same principle. You're festering, buddy. You don't get it. You're dead either way."

She's right. The smoke is all out of the room.

"There was an old man" she starts telling me while arranging two scalpels on a metal dish. "He'd become feeble and weak, and he was too old to hunt anymore, too old to go to the river and fish. He was afraid he might fall from the rocks and hurt himself. All he was able to do was to go out and tend his garden each day. And this was the only food he was able to get for himself." Using a long pair of forceps, she pinches a flap of skin and peels it back from its fused wires. My vision blurs and I snap a knuckle bone clenching against the pain, albeit instantaneous.

"Do you want something for the pain?" she asks.

"Get it off," I say. "Get it over with." My vision is in and out and I see the worm-hooks moving underneath the patch. It isn't rooted yet and she can extract it if she knows what she's doing. The rot is still manageable at this phase. It's dawning on me now how bad I let it get. How bad *they* let it get, rather.

With one pair of forceps holding the skin, Heather uses the scalpel to slice and sever the infected area, lifting the patch carefully to expose the wire-vein infusions below. The smell of rotting pus is like boiled sewage, and it discharges from the hole in green-white globs.

“Story,” I say. “It’s keeping me level.”

“Okay,” she says. “Fuck man, maybe I should call someone. It’s really bad.”

“Your bedside manner is *really bad*, Heather,” I’m raising my voice and I can’t remember the last time it happened. The last time anything happened. There’s nothing. The fester in my arm pushes me out of myself and I see myself out there like another body, one that used to be my own, one that I could reach out to but never inhabit. Then I start to hear her like I’m a ghost, or like I’m part of the lingering cigarette smoke somewhere in one of the corners of the room. That smoke and her voice are the only things holding this house together.

“So, he knew the vegetables in his garden were good for him and would sustain life, but he craved the taste for meat in with his vegetables. And he prayed, asking the maker if she could help in his quest to have something other than what grew in his garden. In his dreams that night, the maker sent her little ones. They entered into the dream world of this old man. In his dream they showed him how to make a blowgun, how to fashion darts. And they tell him that if he would go out into his cornfields and sit and wait, the birds that were coming to steal his corn would be the victims of the new blowgun he made.”

I’m there in the field, waiting for morning. I’m in the endless maize with my head just below the breach. There’s a flock of them out there on the horizon and the sun sends them here. She’s with me and she’s perfectly still.

“The next morning, when the old man awoke, he fashioned a blowgun. Tied the darts. Then he hobbled out into his cornfield, sat down still and waited for the birds to come. Regular as clockwork, here came the birds. After weeks of practice, when they got into the corn he was able to dart them through the breast. He would take the birds back to his house, clean them, wash them, roast them in front of the fireplace. He would roast them so long they were nearly too hard to bite into, like a piece of jerky or dried meat.”

I’m back inside now, the room I just left. I’m hungry to be in my own body again. It’s there, on the floor. She’s cutting out the black from its arm, pressing it with salves, bandaging it back to normalcy.

“He would store them until he needed them. The way he prepared these, he would take these charred birds out and pound them up in his pounding block he made cornmeal in, pound them up into a fine powder. And in the mornings, when he made his porridge out of the corn, he would season it with some of this bird powder. This was the finest food he had ever tasted. He began to really enjoy this.”

I’m slowing myself back into my body on the floor, lining up my phantom limbs with my actual body. Her hands are bloodied and she’s puffing cigarette smoke into her own eyes.

“Soon he was eating it every day, powdered bird from his own cornfield. But – there’s always a but in these stories – each day he would kill more birds than he needed, so he stored these extra birds in the corner next to the fireplace where they would stay dry. Things went on this way for some time, and he was enjoying his food and felt the maker had showed him the way he would have meat with his vegetables. It went on, until one day a man passing smelled the birds and corn soup cooking. And he went over to ask the old

man if he could enjoy some of the fine-smelling food. But this stranger was a thief, and he looked around and saw the pile of dried birds and big baskets of corn stacked in the corner next to the fireplace. The thief thought *this old man isn't going to live much longer, he doesn't need all this food.*' So he killed the old man in his sleep."

I can't open my eyes. I wonder if she thinks she might've killed me. I feel the last stitch through my wrist and the wiping away of blood. I smell alcohol and cigarettes. A long silence ensues. I hear her walk into the kitchen and back again. I'm jolted awake by the punch of smelling salt.

"You're alive," she says. I'm having trouble speaking, though my thoughts are here.

I manage a nod.

"I used to do this with my father, you know. We spent all his money on contraband treatments. Had to figure out how to do it all myself. See, dad didn't get sick from being paralyzed. Dad got sick from trying to get the cure. What we didn't know was how shitty you all were at your jobs. The fester is out of Vectre's control, you realize that right?"

It makes sense. But I'm still piecing it together. I've just been carved up, so give me a break. I realize the injection regimen must have been repressing my critical reasoning. The ends of the rope are much closer than I thought. I was distracted by protocol. By the goddamn operation. Rot from the inside.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions," Heather says.

I nod in compliance, still finding my voice.

"What is your name?" She asks.

I shake my head no. I can't remember.

"What is my name?"

“Heather,” I say.

“Okay, good. Again, what is your name?”

“Bazel,” I say.

“No, that’s my father’s name. Let’s try something else. What month is it?”

“October.” It comes to me right away. “I work for Vectre. I’m thirty-eight years old. I was born in Tallahassee.”

“And what about your name,” she asks again.

“I don’t know,” I’m embarrassed to say.

“Maybe we should get some fresh air,” she says. She helps me to my feet and we walk out to the back patio overlooking miles of flat cornfield. She sits me in a rocking chair and tells me to keep my arm elevated.

“I think I died in there,” I say.

“You just passed out,” she says. “You were mumbling and moving the whole time. I had your pulse. It was fine, I promise.”

“Did you get it all out?” I ask.

“There’s no way to know if you have more in you without a scanner. Judging by the size of the one I pulled out, there are more. It’s just a matter of time.”

“How advanced was it?” I ask.

“Bad,” she says. “Really bad. It looks like it was collecting your regimen and using the chemicals to dodge the scan. If you stop taking the regimen, and if there are more inside you, they’ll run out eventually. And that’s going to hurt worse than today.”

“I can’t go back to work without a patch in,” I say.

“Lucky for you, I wasn’t planning on letting you leave in the first place. That fucking company of yours takes us all for fools. They sent me a letter for a meeting like I couldn’t guess who’d still have a stake in the matter. The coroner came and went. The doctors came and went. The cops came and went. The feds came and went. The lawyers came and went. My sisters came and went.”

“I’m in the business of tying up loose ends,” I say.

“You’re in the business of covering Vectre’s ass,” she says.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

There’s a long silence and the air cools with sunset. She’d spent the day carving away at my arm and I wanted to thank her.

“I can take you to Selah,” I say.

“You know where she is?” She asks.

“I met with her. It was over a year ago, and the recall kept malfunctioning. I couldn’t remember the interview all the way through. And I can’t be sure, but I think it’s because she gave me the infection. She figured me out the same as you did and wanted me to spread it from within. For all I know it might’ve worked.”

“We have to get her,” Heather says. “Selah isn’t like the rest of us. We hid her away and you weren’t supposed to find her.”

“I can take you to the islands,” I say. “She’s there with a man that doesn’t treat her well, I could see it in her eyes.”

She stands and rushes inside to pack. I take one of her cigarettes. There are pots rimmed with cigarette butts circling the perimeter of the patio, as if she’d been saving them

up her entire life. She comes back outside as the night takes over and I add my ousted butt to her collection.

“Let’s go,” she says. “We can still make the midnight train if I drive like hell.”

And there I was. In the passenger seat, rocketing down a corn-tunnel toward the train station, with a woman named Heather in the driver’s seat.

“Is that really how the story ends?” I ask.

“What story?” She asks.

“The Old Man and the Birds,” I say. “He just dies and that’s it?”

“Wow, I didn’t think you heard any of that. But no, that’s not the end. The end is even worse, though,” she laughs at this, rolling the window up after tossing a cigarette to the void.

“Let’s hear it,” I say. We’re going as fast as this thing can take us.

“Okay,” she says, fixing her windblown hair. “So, after the thief killed the old man, he tried to make his own soup, a soup that tasted as good as the old man’s. But each time he would try to fix the birds, he made the mistake of putting the whole bird in the soup. And when he was ready to eat, he tried to put the whole thing in his mouth, and it would change back into a live bird and fly away. This was the way the little ones had of tricking the thief. And in the end, the thief wasn’t able to eat any of the food he stole from the old man, and he starved to death and died.”

“That’s it?” I ask.

“That’s it,” she says.

MOONDANCE

Exterior. Day. Poolside. Two cement blocks. A length of rope. The Carolina anole lizard tomahawks its red dewlap toward the sun. Fire alarms screech from inside the house. Saliva bubbles from the sides of a duct taped mouth. A new star is born out of blue-black gaseous muck hundreds of thousands of lightyears away.

If Timothy were a color, he would be copper.

This is, of course, what he learns at age five as his grandmother, in her final stages of chemotherapy, slits her wrists in the kitchen. The frayed carpet edges from the living room creep over the kitchen tiles like earthworms. He believes in God but is raised atheist. His best friend will become a prominent figurehead in the New National Socialist Movement based in Toledo, Ohio.

This conversation, or one like it, is held between Timothy and Kaili in 2025, just an hour before they are drowned:

“There is the sacred art, etched onto the walls of lost caves. The more they discover, the less they understand,” says Timothy.

Kaili asks, “What happens when they figure us out? I mean, have you even kept track of how many bodies have been burnt?”

“I know my number.”

“My tits are going to freeze off. I need a blanket. Or can we just go inside?”

“They’ve seen all they needed to. These people understand that it’s not a joke. We’re dealing with some dangerous shit here.”

“They just want a transcript.”

“I can’t do that. It should die with me anyway.”

“They don’t even seem to understand it.”

“I think the Skinheads are working for the government. No way to prove it. And the Indians are just trying to keep it hidden. Either way, they want me out of the picture.”

“There’s no way out? Go public or something.”

“I don’t think anyone would know what to do with it. It would just be another war.”

“Can’t the world use a little faith? To know magic; to feel hope? It seems selfish to let it die out.”

“They would eat each other alive.”

“As soon as you call attention to something beautiful, you lose the mystery that caught you in the first place. Show them the facts, destroy their desires. At 13 years old I stared at a painting for hours in the Art Museum back home. I think it was a Monet, but I had no clue at the time. *Agapanthus*.”

“That’s a mouthful.”

“It took up the entirety of this wall, must have been 100 feet wide. And I was looking into space. I could see the universe and it wasn’t a vacuum or an empty valley of dark energy or this endless void. It was a blend of blue-green and purple-white. I didn’t believe a painter could have done it. But mom finds me eventually and says, ‘Are you still looking at those flowers?’”

If Kaili were a color, she would be blue.

This is, of course, how she comes to see herself when she is adopted at age eleven. She loves to dip her mango in cinnamon sugar. Secretly, in high school, she publishes

poetry in University Literary Magazines under the alias Sarah Peterson, feeling deeply that a Polynesian name would distract from the true message of her work. She laughs at herself now for having once told a man she loved, “Dance with me in the ocean tonight, even the sharks can’t rip us apart.”

She practices her elocution using these phrases: Yellow circus. Orange daffodil. Green fox. Black sky.

She keeps a diary with entries similar (but not necessarily identical) to this:

The cliff by the ocean, where a little ledge jutted out. A Japanese man, elderly and brittle, inched toward the drop-off. I imagine his skin falling away from his bones. He looks down to the black-green sea. I imagine him growing feathers out of that skin. I imagine him becoming a seabird and flying away. He looks out toward the horizon and thinks how simple the circle is. He looks up through the glow, past the sun, until he sees the stars in his mind’s eye. Then he looks, finally, back to me looking down at him. He mouths something to me, a word without sound. Breathe. He closes his eyes and steps out over the ledge.

If Timothy were a shape, he would be a helix.

This is, of course, the shape he imagines whilst travelling at the speed of light, only macroseconds before his birth. ‘Within thirty years,’ he tells her, ‘we are going to Mars - it’s all I want.’ As a teenager, his idea of fun is jacking off onto Victoria’s Secret magazines before burning them. He is dispassionate about his career as a drone pilot and once dreamt of becoming an astronaut.

In his free time he will study the universe and record facts such as: *Time on Mars, similar to Earth, is divided into days based on its rotation rate, and years based on its*

orbit. Sols are only 39 minutes and 35 seconds longer than Earth days, and there are 668 sols (or 684 Earth days) in a Martian year.

Kaili will ask him to practice his elocution with her using these phrases: Purple horse. Red roses. Blue firefly. White moon.

If Kaili were a drug, she would be Dimethyltryptamine.

This is, of course, what she thinks at fifteen to her own glazy-eyed reflection during her first dream-trip. Described as an entheogen (God generated within), she is told that doing DMT in life will obliterate the natural purpose of the chemical in her body. She enjoys winter when the island trade-winds are quiet, and also the county fair because of the waffle cone smell. Her legs kick wildly forward when she is born, running into the foreign terror of first gravity and the fluorescent shine of a new world.

She writes again: *White fathers believe there is always money to be made. White mothers believe there is more time the longer you wait. Poetry becomes the voice of dead natives. Use the hands of ghosts to preserve traditions in blood. Proliferate the abstract; the stage is already set. Brown, black, yellow, red; the spotlight will always whitewash.*

Timothy recites the following from memory during a dinner date with Kaili, who despondently peels steamed shrimp before dipping them in lemon-butter: “Systematic reasoning is something we could not, as a species or as individuals, possibly do without. But neither, if we are to remain sane, can we possibly do without direct perception, the more unsystematic the better, of the inner and outer worlds into which we have been born. This given reality is an infinity which passes all understanding and yet admits of being directly and in some sort totally apprehended. It is a transcendence belonging to another order than the human. And yet it may be present to us as a felt immanence, an experienced

participation. To be enlightened is to be aware, always, of total reality in its immanent otherness - to be aware of it and yet to remain in a condition to survive as an animal, to think and feel as a human being. Our goal is to discover that we have always been right where we ought to be.”

She writes again, without regard: *We were made of water before we found land. Then our bodies blistered in the sun and sand. Soon, the atmosphere would stop holding us together. All the bodies would get loaded up into poorly built machines (will they still call them Spaceships?). Defunct, broken vessels, drifting toward the moon. Like capsules from a pill bottle, we will be scattered across the surface. There, the blistering is no easier. Will they be silver on our moonskin? Soundless explosions will set the tempo of space. Asteroid yesterday; comet tomorrow. Flash and fade. Binary white. Hum of silence and the pale ether; the final dance on the moon.*

Exterior. Night. Alleyway behind *Bill's Tavern* in Jupiter, Florida. An intentional headlight flashes on and then off. A man and woman in Aloha shirts and sandals exchange a bowling ball bag full of one hundred thousand dollars cash for a pair of keys on a Bart Simpson keychain. Semi-hollow cicada shells uncling from a nearby wall as a van playing disco music drives by with the bass at maximum volume.

If Timothy took after a family member, it would be his Uncle Wolf.

This is how he comes to enjoy the smell of burning pine needles by himself in the forest. He holds no blood tie to this uncle, but they skin a deer together in the winter of 2003. Timothy and Kaili are tied back-to-back by the wrists, the cement blocks anchoring them to the pool floor. Timothy watches the moon dance through the surface ripples and knows that these angles of the world are only beholden by the lotus or the damned.

This clipping is carried in the uncle's billfold: "In one home, death had come during the night, a little sad faced child had died and was lying on a bear skin couch and some women were preparing the little body for burial. All were arrested and driven out leaving the child in the cabin. I don't know who buried the body."

If Kaili heard voices, they would have been escaping the pull of gravity from another universe.

This is her idea of the internal monologue, a notion instilled by a month-long visit with a Buddhist monk at the Waiahole Forest Reserve. They will carry a conversation similar, but not identical, to this:

She says, "The rain is relentless."

"And yet you are here."

"Without the ayahuasca this time."

"Some eternalists give it the name *self*."

"I just want to dream again."

"Pious attendants call it *selflessness of the individual*."

Kaili says nothing.

"Cittamātrins call it *mind*."

"This feels rehearsed."

"*Perfection of Discriminative Awareness or Nucleus of the Sugata*."

"I'm here to dream again. Not to have some ex-dealer turned Dalai Lama recite proverbs."

"Some call it the *Great Seal* or the *Unique Seminal Point* or the *Expanse of Reality*."

"You're more burnt out than I expected."

“Some call it the *Ground-of-all*.”

Kaili again says nothing.

“And some call it just plain ordinary, unfabricated consciousness.”

“So what is *it*?”

“The self. An indivisible union of emptiness and radiance. This itself is actual reality. The indication that this is the actual reality is that all phenomenal existence is perceived in the single nature of one’s own mind. To lose this is to be lost in the dreamscape.”

She practices her inflection in the mirror by stressing different syllables of the following sentence: *Dreams tether us to the universe, memories tether us to one another*. Underwater, teeth grind against teeth; she chews into the towel until the world is a pinhole.

The same clipping from Uncle Wolf’s billfold continues: “The Cherokee death toll directly attributable to the removal has been estimated at approximately four thousand, or one-fourth of the entire population. Today one can look at a map of the United States showing the whereabouts of American Indian lands and see that east of the Mississippi it remains almost blank. This was accomplished by the 1840s by relentless and often ruthless American pressure against people who no longer had the means of physical resistance. Indeed, east of the Mississippi, what the United States would continue to refer to as ‘the Indian problem’ did not, as far as anyone could see, exist.”

The man holds the carcass by its hind legs and, using a perforated blade, slits horizontally at the neck, letting the blood pool into amorphous black. Once gutted, the entrails are draped over a branch to char and consume afterward. Orange and yellow breaths pulse out of the fire. Marble-colored bones loose sinew in the boiling water. A

smell of pine; people humming, or children. The woman reaches down into the blood, through the forest floor, and grips a hand on the other side. She is pulled through. He dips his mouth until all the blood is swallowed. Here is where the boy learned to howl, to wrap himself in pelts, to cross from side to side, to pass the savage and the sacred onto his sons and nephews.

What color are the dead?

Interior. Night. The *Extra Space Storage Facility* unit in Jupiter holds the halo of a fluorescent bulb over a corpse. Timothy has the feeling he is being followed. His uncle's body lays face first in a puddle of blood and motor oil. Above him hangs his scalp, dripping, tied by his long ponytail to a bungee cord from the rafters. Kaili places the bones of rodents into a bowl of hot water. As he reaches his hand through the blood and down into the concrete, there are footsteps from the outside and the sound of talk radio echoing distantly. Wolf finds Timothy's hand and is pulled back. Just outside the stratosphere, satellites track the coordinates of a GPS signal relayed from the inside of a Bart Simpson keychain.

Timothy writes: *The Martian moons Phobos (fear) and Deimos (panic) were named after the horses that pulled the chariot of the Greek war god Ares, the counterpart to the Roman war god Mars. Both Phobos and Deimos were discovered in 1877 by American astronomer Asaph Hall. The moons appear to have surface materials similar to many asteroids in the outer asteroid belt, which leads most scientists to believe that Phobos and Deimos are captured asteroids.*

From the beginning of her drowning, she feels the disparation of matter - the differencing of like things. The hands appear before her with transparent edges. These are her hands from another side. She is groped and rearranged, DMT pulses from her pineal

gland into the roundings of her fingertips. She thinks that these tiny parts of her have been pieced together elsewhere. Timothy watches her dissolve, the flakes of skin slowly shedded. If he shares her fate, she never knows for certain. Bound and airless, Timothy thinks that God is picking her apart, flaying the flesh and moving the bits of her to a safer dream. By the end, Timothy has fragmented together the stray facts. The New National Socialist Movement (NNSM) gains knowledge of bewitchment, a magic preserved in bloodlines that trickles backward to the children of men. The United States Government cages those with proven ability to transcend and corrupt and necromance, to move inward to the next place and outward to the prior. The government funds the NNSM, and organizations like it, to capture and destroy any citizen crossing from here to there unregulated. Timothy assumes these ties are intentionally obscured and incredible, dismissed publically as quack conspiracy.

Talk radio reverberates through *The Extra Space Storage Facility*: “If I am at the extremity of the heaven of the fixed stars, can I stretch outward my hand? It is absurd to think that I cannot, and if I can, what is outside must be either body or space. We may then in the same way get to the outside of that, again. And so on. And if there is always a new place to which the hand can be held out, this clearly involves extension without limit.”

If Timothy were afraid of anything, it would be the last whimper.

This is, of course, what he realizes when his grandmother tells him to remember her songs and to sing them every night before he falls asleep. Underwater, the soundlessness reigns.

An unpublished poem by Sarah Peterson is found in the smoldering rubble of her home:

I had always been careless with my heart.
One minute I'm choking on his tongue;
the next I'm asking him to hit me in the teeth with a hammer.
What's the difference?
If I were God I'd wipe everyone out so we could have it to ourselves,
I would hold him until we turned to skeletons.
What I'm saying is
I already swallowed my teeth.

Ulterior. Now. She passes inward to the kaleidoscope.

FOLD

Something is missing. There is only one wall, folded into the shape of your room. Each night in this room is passage to a new life, chosen by you at random. No life is yours to control. Your sisters have been in their own rooms, and your mother and father and so on. In the morning you will not remember having been here, or the taste of any other life.

You start to take your shoes off alone in the dark. You know there is solace in a bed or a coffin. You stood at your kitchen sink this morning in prayer. Asking what your hand would feel like against the blades of the garbage disposal, and how easily you will lose count of your breaths inside the refrigerator.

Or the cadence of a Florida night. There were hurricanes and you heard about them and you talked about them with your friends. But to you they are silent, benign. Rumbles lost out over the ocean.

You never fear a drowning.

Tell no one of your earlier bloodlines, or whether you remember the language of blood and water.

Your mother was nice to you, and gentle. But also mean when she wanted to be. Hard to talk to. Hard to disagree with. You find a way to talk to your mother. To show her that you love her. And your father's job is to know that you love him, and to never need to ask.

Your sisters have grown. They were people with whom you became human. You didn't know your sisters until they knew love. But when you saw how they knew love, you knew how to love them.

Only in the abstract can you connect the same love you have for your sisters with the love you feel for a dying stranger ravaged by bullets in the street. Would you pressure their wounds as if they were carrying your niece? Your own daughter?

Is there a difference between blood and rain? Do each of them hide colors you haven't seen? Is that an easier question to answer than: What is the difference between each woman you have loved?

There is no thought here that hasn't been thought before.

And in this way, you have never loved; there is no such thing. You, along with the others, obsess over this to the point that nothing has value, meaning, etc. Substance (i.e. life), etc.

Your time alone is your time with God, but your time with God is not yours alone. They build religions to try to explain what you do with this time. To make sure it isn't wasted.

After all, what are you looking for when you look for God but a simple answer to whether or not you matter? Nor is it in what God says to you that you find this answer, but in the fact that God is there in your mind at all. Whether or not there is a God matters very little; you have yourself convinced.

This in-and-of itself you find potent, strange. A force you want badly to name (you will never call it what it is: masturbation).

Over time, you are more inclined to converse with intelligent women over intelligent men, you've seen too candidly where a man's mind ends. You were raised to believe in justice served. Your father would have wanted things to be right, for all the kids to get an equal shot. You and your sisters.

So, you become aware of yourself as something that is not a man or a woman. Nothing at all. As something that is not (mention this to your father and he is not interested in abstraction or the arts the way that you have come to know them in reading your grandmother's journals and stowaway leather-bounds, although your father's hands carry the nicks of a carpenter's hammer).

Is there a simple conclusion to anything? Is there a clear connection between any two points?

You understand that every thought, although previously thought, still needs thinking. So easily you lose sight of this simple premise that you can't make sense of the definitions of things.

Your throat hurts. You open the cabinet to get out a glass. You open the freezer and get some ice. You go to the faucet. You have a drink. In that time, your sister has had a child next October and your grandmother passed away last Christmas in her sleep. Tomorrow, your father is having a nightmare about a leaking faucet. You are in the bathroom. You stand there trying to piss for one minute. And then two minutes. And then three minutes. You listen to yourself piss. The sound of pissing puts you at ease. Time doesn't pass the way everybody thinks. Sometimes three minutes is just a quick piss. You notice the sound the pipes make when they move in the walls. You flushed away your twenties listening for this same sound.

Instead, you wonder if there are scientists upstairs (agents?) listening to you talk to yourself.

It had been three hours and there weren't any colors.

Nor any scary monsters. Children wrapped in oil blankets.

No wavering lines.

No ghosts. No abyss.

Octopuses, squids.

Blue bubbles.

Sliding through an ocean of glass and mirrors.

The rain makes you think about life underwater. And if everything were upside down, would you love the sound of the wind as if it were the rain? Every bubble is a raindrop on a glassless window.

Your lungs are black, but only when you vomit. Which has let up a bit the past few months. You're careful not to tell anyone what you've been doing for the past twenty years. And to whom you've lied. And from whom you've stolen.

Ask about the taste in your mouth after brushing your teeth. Of course, it's going to taste like toothpaste. But that's not your mouth. That is not the taste of your yellow teeth.

The dark watches you through the rain, and only after you've been told what colors make sense, and decide which ones belong to which people, red for your mother, blue for your father, no, purple for your mother, gold for your father, pink for one sister, teal for the other, and what color will they give to you and what color would you give yourself and why aren't those the same color?

It would be easier to box them all up.

What is the sound of nothing? What is the sound of a colorless box?

It would be easier to be your own ghost. To see the ceiling (or your shadow across it) as the monster with a twisted face and trumpets for hands.

Of course you would believe in ghosts if you were a ghost. But you do not believe in humans because you are human.

You hear the timer go off telling you the soup is done.

There is no timer, but the soup is done.

And you wonder if this is convenient. A byproduct, maybe, of convenience.

Maybe.

Maybe all that belief, and all that color, and all that swimming around, and all those bubbles, and the sound of your words against the wall, they've all kicked in now to tell you more about God. God is your voice in an empty room. The newest prophets are the loudest.

Going into these worlds, you are electricity, a spark meant to find another to push the edges of everything back around the torus. Each layer of you compounds upon the last.

Your sisters are happy (you've heard it). They're both married now. One to a lawyer, a good man. The other to a pastor, a good man.

You don't know the name that your niece will be given, but you know it will be beautiful and you know she will be loved.

You don't know the name that you were given, but you know it was beautiful and you know you were loved.

You start to feel it more in your stomach before it hits your head. Before it lassoes around your eyes from behind. From the inside. Takes ahold like a charioteer. Now, that ghost you became, the one that made you believe in ghosts, is steering you further and further into the abstract.

Because there are colors, even in peril. You know this because you look for the center. For the meaning of things. You know theoretically that it is empty and that there is nothing. But you only know this because you are allowed to know. And if you are nothing, there is nothing to know.

So, in the center, in the middle of this abstract, there is the same conversation with your father about the proper way to arrange stones into the patio so the sand won't push them apart over time.

Rearrange these stones again in your head.

There is, of course, the music of dolphins or whales outside your window. Your neighbors are children outside in the storm playing with PVC pipes as if they were trumpets. You wonder how their parents bathed them as infants, who held their head above water, who had to wipe the shit from their asses, in what room they were dressed in human clothes again and again, when they will learn to swim underwater like they swim outside your window. You wonder if they will be the first to find a room without music.

What does it mean to play a first note?

Or think a first thought.

You don't learn until you are twenty-nine about the cyclical nature of everything you think about yourself. And how much harder it becomes to have a conversation where

you can remember who you are. Or your favorite color (you wonder now if your sisters could have seen the green in you).

You're sure it has had no effect. Other than the color of these sounds, you are supposed to matter, but don't.

It's as if you were told about this mysterious warping behind the walls of a room you've lived in for years. And you believe the warping exists because you've seen it before, somewhere in your periphery. For too long you've been leaning toward the edge of what is just out of sight.

Some of your blind spots are full of color, others are not. Both are dark and timeless.

But on the other side, if you could just stick your hand through. It's there, in your wall. Right there. Look at it. Reach through it. On the inside, where it's warping, where it's rippling, feel around in there.

You can feel the other side. Some kind of jelly. You feel that it is black and empty but you cannot stop reaching for a child's hand. There is noise in there. Noise you can feel but cannot hear. Like the colors you cannot see that others can. Or the mirrors at the bottom of the ocean where you see yourself for the last time.

You will think about a woman who doesn't understand why you have been treating her nicely. Not a year earlier you were asked by a different woman to be choked by a belt. Then when you were twelve years old you had sex for the first time on a waterbed and wished you were more of an animal, something that knew color without language or logic.

You are an animal. A human animal, but an animal nonetheless.

You are still awake.

Your shoes are tied and the sun is coming up.

RAINBOW EUCALYPTUS, OR THE WOMAN GIVING BIRTH STANDING UP

The following sculptures rest at the bottom of Corkscrew Swamp in Naples, Florida.

Eagle

The eagle wasn't always headless. Sixteen inches from wing to wing. As it sank, the tail held the bulk, thus plunging its feathers deep in the muck. Kaili's first visit to the Sullivan County Wildlife Preservation was when she lost her first tooth, fleeing the talons of an uncaged eagle, tripping on her mother's shoelace before tasting asphalt.

After the boa constrictor escaped into their kitchen cabinets, her first husband would not allow Kaili to buy another exotic animal. Instead, he suggests she return to sculpting.

Four years pass before Kaili's suicide attempt.

The following fall, she begins a high dosage of experimental antidepressants, designed to relieve night terrors within 24 hours, the ultimate goal being complete eradication of sleep paralysis. Afterward, waking in the morning is like walking out of an empty room in her head. She doesn't believe the medication works.

Her first husband discerns little from her descriptions of the world: Photons with yellow eyes dance between us on sunrays. A cold, black, twenty-cubic-inch block of clay is placed in the study for Kaili to mold or massacre. In the empty room in her head, where those dreams of passing between universes disappear each night, she sees only the shapes of animals as shadow puppets on her eyelids. An eagle perches there in prayer, or famine.

So begins the scaling back of clay corners into feathered wings. The aquiline shaping of the beak takes her only hours to perfect. The swamp breath of Florida morning oscillates in and out of the room. Her husband had cracked both windows in the study to save on the electric bill.

He says, “Look here, I could kill this woman now, or give her a long and happy life filled with the tonics of love. Why does she deserve either? Moreover, if I write here that a gazelle were set loose in the public library, would it be my burden to decide the fate of the librarian? Do you see, K, how stories are a big responsibility? Of course you don’t. You are a stupid, sad woman.”

Footstool

“Why a footstool?” asks her grandmother. Kaili rotates the statuette so that its tilt is visible.

“Caddywhompus,” Kaili says. “I thought I messed it up the first time around. Then I just kept making it smaller and smaller. Now it’s three inches tall and the angle is still off.”

At this moment, her grandmother dies.

The air outside the hospital tastes of pine needles. Kaili grips the miniature footstool tight against the shock of cold wind. This is the last week of her fifteen year life spent in Missouri, as custody passes from grandmother to aunt, a hapa-haole tour guide working on Oahu.

It was the statuette of the footstool where Kaili found her love for oblique angles and exotic animals (although on the plane ride over she told the soldier with a window

seat that the world feels more rigid from heaven, and that to truly make sense of physics it's better to get as far away from things as possible). This footstool was imperfect and therefore (for Kaili) animalistic.

Twenty-seven years later, in a violent outburst, her third husband steps on the footstool, breaking two of its three leg pieces off. While Kaili glues the pieces back together to obscure the legs, he applies pressure to the hole in his heel. The next morning he puts his gym shoes on to water the lawn and his foot becomes infected. At the same time, in the living room, she unfolds newspaper across the coffee table, positioning the sculpture for maximum obscurity. The remaining leg piece is now stained red from his blood.

“Why a footstool?” he asks from the hospital bed.

“Have you ever thought about how small you can make the world? How far away you can get and if that would make things any clearer? My first husband was a writer. Not a great one. He didn't drink. What kind of writer doesn't drink? And still beats the shit out of me? He asked about my sculptures once and I told him I think they're cursed but they're mine and I shouldn't have to give them up.”

“This is the guy who wrote the story about a kid with twelve assholes?”

“Yeah. Riveting stuff I know,” she says.

Kaili does not believe her husband has been faithful because she has not been faithful to him.

“If I die, will you remarry?” Her third husband asks without tears.

“You're not going to die. It's just a minor infection,” she says.

“Every time I'm in a hospital I feel that I will die.”

In the waiting room, Kaili discusses her affairs with the janitor mopping up a child's vomit. She tells the man about the hole in her third husband's foot and about her first husband's dive off of the balcony and how bits of his skull were coming out of his ears and about the smell of her grandmother's hospital room and the taste of ocean air over the Pacific and before she is finished the janitor hands her a picture of his daughter as a young woman at a school dance.

"She passed last year," he says.

When he lifts the mop, Kaili wonders if that pile of vomit could have been his own, or that it wasn't vomit at all but the sludge trail of someone passing through the floor to another space, somewhere behind this room where translucent bodies build an armature or scaffolding to repair those broken things about her past that she can no longer reach.

"I'm sorry," she whimpers, not because she cannot think of anything better to say, but because the photograph reminds her that she is barren.

At this, the janitor begins his quest for proof of men passing between dimensions, or for strangers to befriend over a pool of child's vomit.

Rainbow Eucalyptus, or the Woman Giving Birth Standing Up

In the garden, a business of mongooses chase after the same green anole lizard. The mountains steep over from Kamehame Ridge down into the Kamiloiki Valley. These rises and falls feel to Kaili like the most honest retelling of history, as if the folds in each pass, even down to the particles of red dirt, had been carefully detailed by nonhuman

hands. There is no way for her to describe a more peaceful salting of the air than to breathe in the island.

The aunt's garden is unkempt, although the wild mongooses seem to enjoy the chaos and debris. Here, the fallen rainbow eucalyptus from a nearby park was dragged and propped up against a wooden terrace. It was her aunt's idea in the first place and the whole island was talking about the lightning strike. For months, locals visited the garden often asking Kaili to photograph them next to the felled eucalyptus. Her aunt would explain eventually that this is the closest most of them would come to holding lightning in their hand (each lied about finding God there).

On her seventeenth birthday, Kaili slowly ascends four thousand stairs made of plywood and scrap metal. The hike is known as the Stairway to Heaven or Haiku Trail, depending on whose God is calling the shots. Kaili was not especially worried about falling, although her friends tell her she is taking too many breaks. When they reach the top it is still twilight and a teenage boy drips the acid on to sugar cubes. By dawn, the yellows and oranges and blues and pinks of the island spin around each other and reveal to them all the nature of this universe. Each division of color seamlessly hues Kaili into a silhouette of the pieces of life she will never understand: departure, stardust, cocooning, shark-fin soup, etc.

Eastward, she sees shadows of buildings waning with the rising sun. And these shadows begin to stretch backward toward her, like her mother's fingers before a feeding. There, a line of hotels on Waikiki Beach, well-oiled tourist machinations taking on the shape of spreading thighs. Kaili cannot help but think of the tree in her aunt's garden. She wondered about the poetry, and when her mother was tying off her arm on the thirty-

eighth day of rain, did the island give her some strange new language? Had it strapped her down to the mattress in her sleep and stalked around her bedroom in the dark?

When Kaili arrives home that evening, she asks her aunt if it is alright to make the rainbow eucalyptus into an art piece. It has been months since the lightning strike and the locals have lost interest.

The following morning, her aunt asks: “How long do you think before it rots away?”

“Years, I hope. But I’m going to sculpt it regardless.” She molds this out of clay and chicken wire.

The mongooses will make the rainbow eucalyptus tree into their new den. The sculpture, Woman Giving Birth Standing Up - oil paint on ceramic, is placed on display in the University of Hawaii Art Gallery for nine months while Kaili works on her graduate degree.

While she unwraps it out of newspaper and slides the dolly from under its base, a young man asks if this work is hers. In a year they will both finish their Masters in Fine Arts (her for sculpting, him for creative writing) and get married on Makapu’u Beach. Before her first husband accepts a teaching position in South Florida, Kaili asks that her aunt spend time each morning with the mongooses, and to call immediately in case of another lightning strike.

No such call has been made.

Period

Of the seven sculptures thrown into Corkscrew Swamp, the ball she calls Period is the easiest to move and the hardest to sink. As Kaili rolls it off the truck bed, she swats at the swarm of mosquitos near her face. Hollowed and buoyant, she ties a rope horizontally and then vertically around the circumference of the orb, which is connected to a duffle bag full of bricks. At sixty-two years old, she pauses frequently to catch her breath and weep about these pieces of her lost at the bottom of the world.

Her third husband died the previous week from esophageal cancer and now she was sure she would have to remarry, or worse.

At twelve years old, the doctors tell her grandmother that Kaili has been diagnosed with menorrhagia (heavy menstrual bleeding) and that this would likely continue without hormone therapy. Her grandmother sees the therapy as a serious risk to Kaili's wellbeing and chooses not to disclose the information to her. Thus, Kaili spends the entirety of her teenage life ashamed of her frequent excuses to use the restroom, to avoid showering in the girls' locker room, to date boys, to dress seductively or allow herself to feel wanted. Instead, she makes friends with a gay couple at a skate park in Hawaii Kai and acquires a healthy marijuana habit to complement her sculpting.

As she hoists the bag of bricks into the water, it becomes grossly apparent to her that she hasn't had a period in twenty years. Period was designed after she opted into hormone therapy and her cycles stopped for good. Although she never read the list of possible side effects, Kaili associates this treatment with her violent shifts in mood, her erratic urges to pray, and her dreams spent in a liquid forest.

She thinks about most of this that night as she is held down by monsters and eaten alive, forced catatonic by her sleep paralysis and the accompanying hallucinations. Kaili is not asleep, but she is certainly not awake. To her credit, she no longer fears these monsters (usually they look like porcupines with tentacles, or a blanket covered in oil then wrapped around a young boy).

Over time, there are no things more familiar to her than an empty room.

Coral

Her second husband works underwater. While Kaili loves the ocean, her worst fear is being attacked by a shark and surviving (if she died she did not think she would care that much). For three months, the entirety of their marriage, the couple only speak at night before bed. On the evening before his drowning, he gives Kaili a piece of coral and tells her about the rise of ocean temperatures across the globe and describes the process of coral bleaching, in which algae is expelled because the water is too warm. Because this is the only remnant of their life together, Kaili buys a block of white marble out of which she crafts the sculpture of this memorabilia.

The piece is sold at auction for a large amount of money, but is returned to Kaili by an anonymous collector years later. Kaili never found this suspicious. And so it stands in the study until her third husband walks in on her with a man half his age. In the chaos and embarrassment, her third husband reaches for the closest projectile, which happens to be the coral reef sculpture (not an easy feat as the piece weighs in at over fifty pounds). Items are knocked to the floor in the cuckolding (trinkets, statuettes, jewelry,

pill bottles, etc.). Fashioned with incredible durability, the coral reef statue does not break.

As her third husband chases her lover out of the house, Kaili begins cleaning up the blood. She imagines the tracings of each man, apparitions running about in the study. She thinks that if her second husband hadn't drowned she would never have ended up in Florida again (in thought it was clear that this was selfish of her). A tidal pull from the Atlantic (or the Gulf maybe) seemed to keep her from moving back into her aunt's house on Kamehame Ridge. Each life short lived on the island was answered with some seeming damnation back to the muck of South Florida.

Gazelle vs. Librarian

The morning started with thunder in a clear sky. The novel he describes to her involves characters with little depth, although her criticism has always fallen upon deaf ears. Most of their conversations start and end with his contemplations on the mundane and (in Kaili's opinion) frivolous intricacies of their life, how small the potatoes need to be diced for the perfect hashbrowns, or the synchronization of the oven clock with the grandfather clock in the hallway. What was once endearing had slowly become to her the worst part of him.

And so after a long, one-sided conversation in which her first husband attempts to explain the significance and evolution of the antler in the animal kingdom, Kaili decides to have a go at suicide. And to explain to him where he had gone wrong, and because of the way he says sculpting as if she were a child throwing a tantrum, a plan is hatched to complete her final sculpture.

The sculpting lasts nearly a year, during which she solidified her decision to kill herself. Careful attention is paid to the antlers, particularly how they enter and exit the librarian's stomach.

A letter in an envelope sits on the plinth of Gazelle vs. Librarian. Her first husband reads the letter and studies the statue, contemplating the end. Kaili waits for the bottle of Prozac to guide her into the lulls of death, but she awakens in a hospital bed with a tube down her throat, unaware of any happenings in the interim. The knowledge that this sculpture would not actually be her last fills her with spite.

"Where is my husband?" Kaili asks the nurse.

"No visitors since you came in," she says.

After being held three days in the facility, Kaili returns to an empty house. She does not see her first husband again until the following summer when he throws himself from the third floor balcony having never finished a novel.

"You're back," Kaili tells him as he lifts his foot to the ledge.

"Not for long," he says.

"What did you think of the statue?"

"Perfect," he says, leaning forward into gravity.

Room

"Did you do anything today?" he asks.

"No," Kaili says. "There was no rain."

"Oh you can only work when it's raining?"

"It helps a lot. Walking in the rain puts me in the right headspace."

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I thought that’s what I was supposed to say.”

“Well what about your day?” She asks, rolling onto her back and pulling the covers to her chin.

“Sea turtles, a moray. Had a guy flip his shit underwater and had to do an emergency ascent. But got a sweet tip out of it so that was nice.”

“Do you ever worry about drowning?” She touches his earlobe with the tip of her finger.

“Nah.”

“I need to talk to you about something,” she says.

“Okay.”

“I don’t love you and I never will.”

“That’s fine,” he says.

“I’ve never loved a man. Or anyone for that matter,” Kaili says this with a distance in her voice.

“What about your aunt? Or your grandma, you talk about her sometimes.”

“I’m cursed,” she says.

He chuckles and falls asleep.

After her second husband drowns, this conversation she commits to memory. She makes a list of quandaries about that night:

- Were the monsters inside my walls listening?

- If the air turned green, how fast was I moving? Or, if blue, how quickly should I have disappeared for him to survive?

- Did he know the distance from the bed to the walls, or if they had shifted during their conversation?

- Have my sculptures been designed by the same architects, and how many of them are covered in the same sludge?

- What does it mean to die? To drown?

- How many mongooses are left in the garden? How many are in this room?

The sculpture, at its widest point, stretches five feet. Each epoxy coated ribbon juts in a black and random direction around a splintered staff, a chaotic re-imagining of the sleep-creature she could never name. When viewed from above, these ribbon fingers twist to form a perfect corkscrew. After lowering it into the swamp, the tip of the staff is still visible above the surface.

“What do you do?” asks the barfly as Kaili contemplates escape, the island and the mountains, lightning, the sound of a creeping night-lurk, folds in a sunrise, blue and green, unread and unwritten novels, skull bones, mothers blessing and damning their daughters with bloodlines unexplored, ghosts and shadows repairing the background, infidelity (or virility), marriage, despondency, creatures with amorphous skeletons at the bottom of the Pacific ocean, mopping up the insides of your children from a hospital floor, heat shimmers on asphalt and the search for new points of view, the tearing apart of uterine walls, empty rooms and the porcupine mutants hiding under the bed, her grandmother’s yellowing fingernails, sulfur in the swamp, lying and loving, senility, birds of prey in a fog, husbands without names, the smallest parts of the universe (quarks,

neutrinos, protons, electrons, spirits, explosions, etc.), how her smile feels to a stranger in an unfamiliar place, cornerless walls, diced potatoes, alligators or boas, what life would be like without eyes or hands, lava rock scarring the soles of her feet, pill after pill after pill, lucid nightmares and conversations with translucent men, plywood stairway toward faithless conversations with God, altitude forcing the Marine to sleep, .

“I’m a sculptor,” she says.

“Any good at it?” He finishes his drink and moves one stool closer.

“Not really,” she says.

“Don’t say that, I’m sure you do great work,” she tastes the gin in his breath.

“Do you want to see?”

WEATHERHEAD

I only smoke cigarettes when it rains. The storm winds hit my patio at a peculiar angle, spiraling smoke through the mesh screen. This is beautiful to me. Sometimes, I just let the cigarette burn in the ashtray.

As it ghosts through the patio enclosure, I see lightning touch the ground for the third time in my life. The neon-purple aftershock pulls me back into the fetal self. The body isn't mine. Time feels stale, bright, frozen in a heliotropic eternity. The silence of the womb revisited reminds me that love is primordial. And in this, I feel I have never known true darkness. Even before midwife fingers pried me out of utero, there were the crimson-mauve lights from the universe dancing on the backs of my eyelids.

There is clarity in the schism. A lightning strike connects storm cloud to the volleyball court in my backyard, the atmosphere to the lithosphere, mind to body. In this brief and infinite pocket, electrons unzip the tangible, the human is no longer jacketed; I am freed for an instantaneous forever. What is the taste of timelessness? Will it leave a copper stink? This is where I've hidden my memory. In the mouths of storms.

But time and sound will catch up. Replace the pause (or is this the collapse?) with recombinations of that moment and the ones to follow. Time crackles and sound shakes. Birth out of an electric womb. Tendrils of light leave black burn-trails in the vitrifying sand, swollen purple fingers reach toward me through the screen. From underneath, fulgurite tubes sing the chords of some profound energy, a protocrystalline choir. These fingers pull me inward to every moment in the ether, unbound and spun about the other in

a twisting kaleidoscope. As if through the electric currents threaded about the lightning's arm, I am tethered to the inside of a dream life, free to roam. Lucid; unfettered.

Take a step toward the center.

Zee says, "Well, I like punk music from the early 2000's. And when grocery store clerks know the difference between enharmonics and inharmonics. When people accidentally say the word nigger too loud, then check to see if I heard. Knife fights and sad anecdotes about dying politicians. Glimpses of strangers with horrible facial disfigurements holding their child's hand. And heroin. Heroin is my first real love. There are all kinds of heroin people don't even think about. Of course you can shoot it into your veins and all that, but I'm talking about the reality TV binge junkies and true crime documentaries and interracial pornos and pepperoni pizza by the slice and subreddit data mainlines and new Christian Louboutin spiked heels and BDSM and Tesla coils and so on. Stop me if I'm rambling."

I say nothing.

"Then, of course, when people walk into rooms with some premeditated sound byte, cocked and loaded for whatever conversation they've been contriving in the abstract for the last twenty-four hours, and then jumping in to interrupt them by derailing the conversation with some obscure non-sequitur. My god. The looks on their faces. You think those people have ever made love with their bodies? A deep guttural fuck from within? I like to think what that kind of disruption can do to a person."

I say, "I've never tried heroin."

"Which kind?"

"There are different kinds?" I couldn't be sure.

“Apparently.”

“I was raised on slow conversations and cliches and overstated proverbs. A bird in the hand. Stick to your guns. Follow your heart. Let ‘em down easy. Good boys walk straight on white lines. Where there’s smoke there’s fire. Real men keep quiet. Kill your darlings. Be part of the solution. When it rains it pours. There’s God and there’s me and there’s everything in between. Anyway, I don’t know much about H.”

“I get it.”

“Sorry. I mean, my father used to take me to school late on purpose, said it would help me with the girls. Looking back I’m not sure. I used to hold doors for people, before I was so tired. Of course, I miss home cooked meals. Sunday brunch with the family, one hour of television a night, thirty proof sunblock - is that how you say it?”

I shrug.

“We had Golden Labs with Bond villain names - Mr. Big. Drax. Colonel Moon was my favorite. He had a tumor on his eye and sometimes he’d get caught running in circles to the right, stuck in an endless loop, numbed by insanity. The ranch home had dirt paths cut through the woods, which is where I worked it out about death. Mom showed me afterward in a book with cartoon animals how everything is a circle. She always said, ‘People love their circles.’ Now that’s all she calls me about. Do you think there could be another Buddha? Mom can’t shut up about it.”

“Who is that screaming woman? She seems to be trying for your attention.”

“My ex-fiance. She’s been following me around the island. Works with sharks. You know the type.”

“Intelligent?”

“Sometimes.”

“What was it about her, then?”

“I couldn’t say. She was a world traveler. I was more of a mind traveler.”

“Yours sounds cheaper.”

My father lies on his back for twenty minutes the first time he is struck by lightning; the rain clouds spark blue and purple while they shower him on the roof. He never fully loses consciousness, instead holding my mother in his mind with her wedding cake smile. She warned him about the weather. But the gutters had dams of leaves and this would flood their basement in the country home. With my mother, there is always hell to pay. He is thrown from the roof. The exit wounds wrap white scars around his leg. The air hums and speaks to him about the empty parts of space, where they keep the souls of children, what the black viscera inside our bodies has been shuffling around and mixing into dangerous chemicals, how there will be sons to hold his place until he is ready again.

The truth is written in veins, iterated between pulses. Is there a direction? Outward to a great-grandfather’s gut-rot liver; inward to an unborn grandson’s taste for gin?

The blood is not the vessel, not in Tornado Alley. We huddle in the basement around candles and try to hum in key with the sirens outside. My sisters tap the edges of ceramic bowls with butter knives and keep tempo with the thunder. We pretend we have quilt wings. My father lays still on the roof, catching his breath and drinking the storm.

This both happened and is happening.

We are safe in the family room, funnel cloud overhead buttressing another apocalypse. I am on the patio still, pinned to a moment by a piece of lightning. And on the island, drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon from the can with Zee, watching her finger her bowie knife with an eye on my ex-fiancée.

In April I go west into the Missouri grey. The rain hasn't stopped this year. Kaili wears cut-off jean shorts and a YMCA Midwest Regional Youth Camp T-shirt. The abandoned campground is ours to debauch. We make love on the jungle-gym, my back sponging rain as I press her into the yellow slide.

Afterward, she drives into town to buy ground beef and whiskey while I stay back to assemble the tent. Funnel clouds have a way of sneaking up on a person. My hands are muddied brown, mopped hair in my eyes. I hammer stakes through plastic-tarp anchor points. As the cloud whispers a flash, I see lightning touch the ground for the second time in my life. I feel the hollow sound beforehand and hear a whisper from my father. The forest holds its breath and the rain waits to fall. Emptiness, calm, reverie.

Then - her lips on my lips. Or raindrops. And when she asks how I burned a hole in the polyester canvas, I reach for the whiskey. Later, while she sleeps in the backseat of her car, I try to explain the sound of nothing - of nothingness. But there is nothing to explain, and worse, nobody to listen.

Rain carries in the morning.

She asks, "When did you learn to crawl?" This is the way her mind works.

I say, "Before my parents even met." This is the way my mind works - or is it the other way around?

"Why do you want to get married?"

“I don’t think I want to get married.”

“Then why are we engaged?”

“To prove a point.”

She says, “I don’t think I want to get married either.”

I say, “But will we keep the engagement?”

“Of course. There are points to prove.”

There’s nothing I can think to say.

She says, “There were wolves last night.”

“By the car?”

“In the woods. Silver eyes between the trees and those terrible howls.”

“I didn’t think you were awake.”

“I was up all night.”

“You were listening to me, then.”

“No, you were asleep the whole night through.”

“I talked about slicing open the silence. Holding on to the soundless, to keep it locked up somewhere safe. I couldn’t sleep.”

She says nothing.

I say, “Are you hungry?”

She says, “I could eat. I could always eat.”

“What about God?”

“I’m still working on it. I’d rather eat.”

I can’t get a sense of what she wants.

“You know,” she says, “sharks have something called the lateral line. On each side of their body, there’s a line of small pores - all fish have this. But sharks are hyper-sensitive, which is what makes them beautiful.”

I don’t know enough to respond intelligently.

“They sense the low pressure from weather systems in tiny hair cells from the lateral line. Those hair cells detect drops in barometric pressure and shifts in water columns. Sharks use them to hunt too, they feel vibrations from wounded fish miles away. And they can tell when big storms are coming.”

She’s on it now.

“The bigger sharks, the great whites, they dive deep into the ocean before the storm catches them. That’s how the researchers figured it out. This lady - something Smith, I can’t remember her name - she studied them with acoustic sensors. Science at its best, if you ask me.”

In her car, watch black clouds roll themselves upward across the interstate, the campground is a glimmer in the rearview. My grandfather’s farm, watch the tractor jolt while he bails hay in the back field. A moment of lightning holds me still by electric fingers on the patio, cigarette smoke still-framed, mid-siphon.

From my grandfather: Seventeen days of rain. Struck by lightning - third time this year. Playing tricks with my eyes. Flash blue, purple brain. No sleep. Visions. Angels. No doctor, no money. Mother sends her love.

Take another step toward the center.

“Hold your right hand tight around your bicep. Underneath, where the vein meets the elbow.” This is the way Zee got herself in the mood for intercourse. “Hold it. After I put my lips on your veins, let go.”

“Are you going to bite down?” I ask.

“No. The pulse. I want to taste the pulse through your skin.”

She presses her tongue to my left forearm, then eyes me. The levee breaks behind my thumb, blood surging into my sleeping hands. I grip her neck and she slides her fingers between her thighs. There is the howling of wolves, the quake of thunder. The slow burn of cigarettes.

Afterward, she says, “It’s like I want to taste the spark from your center. That copper current. You know there are energies in us? Flashes, like contact with something deep inside ourselves. Heartbeats into fingertips, lightning in an ancient storm.”

I know.

“That’s what gets me off. It’s something base and pure. Like carbon or white roses. I get exhausted defending the things I love. I wish you could know the urge to taste the core, that torment I’ve hidden from the world. If I am anything but unreadable, they see that I am wild and untamed. They fear this because freedom is theirs to worship. This is exactly why I have to leave.”

“And the trial?” I ask.

“I don’t stand a chance. Assault with a deadly weapon. On a white woman, nonetheless. With island law, they’d ship me straight to New Mexico or Colorado and lock me in a box. Re-enslavement. There’s just so much left to do.”

“If you make yourself a target, you’re bound to get shot.”

“Will you come with me?”

“Of course.”

“You don’t know where I’m going.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It will when you hear it.”

It won’t make a difference to me.

“Honduras. Back to the heart. There is a Mayan temple where I want to have a baby. I want her to be as close to the beginning of the world as she can.”

“We won’t be able to come back.”

“I don’t care. There isn’t much left for me here.”

“What about money?”

“We’ll sell my stash. There will be more than enough. And I have savings.”

“I can sell my guitars. And the bike.”

“A question first.”

I wait for the question.

“Do you love her still?”

“Sure. There are pieces of me that love her still. But they’ve been scrambled in her womb. I saw the ultrasound speck and a future I wanted. Deep inside of her, I saw her and me colliding and growing into a new us. Is that selfish? To love her because she carried a part of me? And am I wrong to loathe her for the choice she made? It was her choice to make, but she didn’t consider the fallout. There was love, but the life was ousted. Without life, there is no love.”

She says, “I know the choice. And I wouldn’t blame you for the anger. I slept with foreign men and never learned their names. After my first surgery, I felt that I was complicit in a mass genocide. The extermination of the mulatto. This was before things really changed in the west. A mixed child with a single black mother, this was a death sentence. I wish I could say it was the last time I sold my body.”

This both happened and is happening.

I write to my father from a post office in the rainforest: *You know how they talk about the calm before the storm? I never believed in that. I never really believed in anything. The night before I left, I was feeling the way I normally feel. And there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. I wanted to ask you, have you ever held the lightning in your hand? Or do you think you gave it to me, like your father did for you? I only ask because I think I am getting the hang of it. I dreamt I was at the quarry and I could bring the clouds in from our distant abyss. I could hold the lightning rod up and make the world glow. I was in control. But now, as I write this, I think that it wasn’t a dream at all. I think our ghosts might be down in the void. Electric, sublime. Alone.*

As my father walks up the driveway to his new home, he tears open a letter that he will never finish. There are black clouds but no rain, no rumble, no howl. The second time he is struck by the offshoot - the bolt clutches a small lamppost in the front yard, snakes outward on the ground like fingers from a fist, then throws him forward twenty feet.

As he regains consciousness, he sees his sandals in the same place he had been standing before. He grips the burnt remnants of a letter from his son. Weeks later, my mother scoffs, the doctor warns them about memory loss from lightning due to damage in

the frontal lobe. There are white scars on my father's ankle where he was grabbed and thrown by the electric lasso. He asks if the lightning is looking for him, or if it's the other way around.

The doctor's hands on my father's skull. The pattering of rain against a tin roof in the Guatemalan jungle. My grandfather falling from a tractor that swivels his spine around the axle. My patio and the frozen cigarette smoke.

I say, "Most days, I am thinking about the clouds. I've always felt cloudy. My head is in the clouds, as they say. I am a distant, hovering mass of empty air. I hold myself over the earth and, more often than not, dissipate to nothing. No rain, no flash. There is talk, here and there, of feeling present, of being fully in the moment. I never figured that one out."

Kaili said, "What are you always on about? There is a storm on Jupiter three times the size of Earth. These clouds, here, are nothing. Whispers. On the edge of The Great Red Spot, the wind is almost 700 kilometers per hour. Sorry, about 400 miles per hour. You think these clouds are prolific or titanic, that they hold some wisdom. What about space? What about the black ocean we've been drifting through, all the storms from exploding stars and supernovas, all the energy expelled from the Big Bang and collapsing from the Big Crunch, every asteroid and comet free falling aimlessly through the void, the volcanoes erupting on Io and Enceladus, billions upon billions of possible disasters - disasters only to people like you. The universe is indifferent to destiny or fate or preordination. I wish you would get your head out of the clouds for once and think about what's on the other side of them."

This is the last conversation I will have with her as my fiancée. The next morning, she will find a doctor and I will disappear.

My grandfather - or is it my father now? - speaks from the grey rumble overhead: You won't grow old until your loved ones die. Hold the coils, tie them to the earth. You are purple and black, white and yellow. I have hoped, with tears in my eyes, for a thread from heaven. To sew me into my grave. Night terrors bedevil and weigh. Pastor says pray. I pray for rain. Can't sleep without rain. The weather is in my head.

I stand on a crossbeam to the bridge upstream when I see lightning touch the ground for the first time in my life. Its neon branches spiral across the metal as I leap out of its path. The impact with the water, 40 feet below, knocks me unconscious. My father will dive and lift me out of the black river, but not before I sink to the bottom.

When this happens, I see nothing. But as I trace the memory of my drowning through the strand of lightning that holds me to the dreamscape, the white glow of my soul takes its own shape in the water. It shakes off the casing that was my body and wriggles its tail from my mouth. The fish begin to school around the spectacle, irradiating green-white light across the riverbed. The soul sees these fish and copies them, moving upward and losing its grip on the current. Until finally, with newborn precariousness, swims downstream, out to an estuary, outward to the ocean, ad infinitum.

It only rains when I smoke cigarettes - or is it the other way around?

Zee and I drink coffee at a local shop in Morales, Guatemala, on our way north from Honduras. Rain falls in sheets, the wind cupping gallons at a time and throwing it down at angles.

Zee says, “Listen to this: ‘Alas, now as the intermediate state of dreams arises before me, renouncing the corpse-like, insensitive sleep of delusion, I must enter, free from distracting memories, the state of the abiding nature of reality. Cultivating the experience of inner radiance, through recognition, emanation, and transformation of dreams, I must not sleep like a beast, but cherish the experiential cultivation which mingles sleep with actual realization.’”

I say, “Is that a new book?”

“Ancient, actually. The Tibetan Book of the Dead. In Thailand, I could make twenty grand in a week because I was American. Businessmen, mostly, going from Japan or China to Africa, or to Europe. Believe it or not, most of them just wanted me to shoot them up and keep them company. I used to read to them from this book while they faded out.”

I ask, “Where will we go?”

“Tikal. It’s only a day’s drive from here.”

“And when we get there?”

She doesn’t seem to know.

I say, “Maybe it’s me. Maybe there is a curse. A jinx. Karma, possibly. Kaili must have felt the poison or sensed it somewhere along the way. I’m sorry I did this to you.”

“I think you have it wrong about Karma. For me, it isn’t that we feel the waves of right and wrong from each other. It isn’t stealing from the rich to give to the poor. They are speaking about lifetimes, centuries, eons of the karmatic. These bodies are utilitarian, for transportation and storage. And this body - this life - is a segment of a grander experience. Karma is an idea. One that lets us taste and smell and savor the particulars -

honeysuckles, tangerines, blueberry jam, pumpkin pie. Through the sensory, we are given a chance to understand. And we will die and return until there is real understanding.”

I ask, “And what understanding is there in stillbirth? How many unborn sons and daughters is enough to open my eyes?”

She cannot answer this.

“Understanding is only part of it,” I say. “Do you ever really think about the weather? Where it comes from, where it ends up? In my family, they pass the lightning down from father to son. We tell stories over campfires of great-grandparents on beaches with lightning rods. But they are just stories. Dead ends. My father told me once - and he sounded unsure - that he wanted rain every day. That he wanted to be able to walk outside and pick a piece of lightning from the clouds, like fresh fruit. And he thought this just weeks before my mother got pregnant with my older sister.”

“And you think he went out and somehow grabbed a piece of lightning?”

“I think it’s curious.”

“To hold the weather in your hand?”

“To hold the weather in my head. To hold that much energy. Isn’t that what karma is all about, really? The energies in all of us?”

“There is a metaphor in all this. And there is the reality. The reality of a lifeless body in my womb. At this very moment, you talk about energy while our daughter floats in the dark. She will never love. She will never feel. How could we know if she ever had a soul in the first place?”

A long silence holds us together.

I say, “I have to try. At Tikal, I want to go to the top and grab the electricity and give her this spark. Before they cut her out of you, I have to try.”

This both happened and is happening.

The Colombian coffee warming the two of us in a rainforest dystopia. My white-green soul wading into the ocean and evaporating into the clouds. The mother and daughter resting in the same pile of ash. My hands finally released from the lightning grip on my patio.

The scars on my fingers are shaped like question marks.

I hold my fingers to my eyes, pull them out of their sockets. Reach out, touch the jelly of my dream.

Are the mother and daughter holding hands, balancing themselves like trapeze artists on the ancient walls of Tikal? Will they reach inward to touch the father’s spark?

The truth is written in the veins, spoken between pulses.

Rain carries in the morning.

DREAMSCAPE

These are the relevant details:

- at three a.m. there will be a hissing sound outside the living room window;
- when the contrast is adjusted in a photograph of leaves and branches from below, they will begin to take the form of galaxies and nebula in black and white;
- the swamp hug of Florida dawn is a mother's bosom to the barfly;
- somebody decided there are right ways and wrong ways;
- - that same person invented the list;
- the sister will never call first as it is the job of the brother to keep in touch. After all, his life is easier;
- a beach parking lot in Hawai'i Kai is swarmed by dozens of feral cats, the thin Pacific twilight so clear it magnifies the moonbeams into silver pinholes frozen at the crux of their stalk-gaze;
- inside of the brother and sister's blood-cells are smaller and smaller and smaller moving pieces that compress into flattened layers of electricity, sparking sideways inward and outward into a new universe that births new galaxies that birth new solar systems that birth new earths that birth new brothers and new sisters;
- - they hear echoes of this infinite loop, but only the feedback (they call it 'love');
- in the future, projection of a writer's neuroses into her/his fiction will be a technique often frowned upon in bougie academic circles;

- the sister weeps into pillows at a young age before falling into a relentless sleep, she dreams of snake scales wrapping and sliding around her throat and when she wakes she can't breathe until the snake disappears;

- caught beneath the mangroves, a body will slowly decompose and deliquesce for months before a Florida State Patrolman pulls the waterlogged cadaver through muck-soaked roots;

- in Suburban Humdrumia, lives are camera lenses turned in on themselves, mundanity packed so full of meaning and purpose and truth that the drones rejoice: *All Hail Netflix!*

- the sister's bedsheets savagely sponge her roofied sweat while she lay helplessly beneath a face that warped in and out of monstrosity;

- the father taught the sister to hide a hammer in the crack between her mattress and the bed frame;

- when they were children the brother and sister worshipped the same God on Christmas and Easter, but the brother's relationship with God was slowly sexualized by an absent mother-figure;

- - the brother prayed to a blind woman in the clouds that could control the ocean waves and would often lose control of the tide when she made love;

- the Honolulu National Airport is primarily outdoors but the Transportation Security Administration agents and Dunkin Donuts employees and Lei Weavers must pass in and out of the security terminal to spend 10 minutes in a smoking pit where they will dream about all the airplanes they will never board and all the landlocked lives they will never live.

These are lyrics:

“Fuck-Piss” by The Ratfucks

What’s that smell?

It’s The Ratfucks.

Fucking and pissing

Down the elevator shaft-fucks.

Hey motherfuckers

You’re all full of piss.

Hey cocksuckers

You’re all full of fucks.

Fuck. Piss.

Piss. Fuck.

These are people:

- Annabelle started her fall into a heroin addiction after years of quitting and restarting regular cannabis usage. She believed, however, that nicotine was her biggest vice despite smoking only two cigarettes a week;

- Nate, a CIA Drone Pilot, is now married to a Filipina woman nearly 10 years his senior, whom he met on a business-related trip to Hawai’i. The first thing he thought when his plane touched the tarmac was “I wonder if they have Waffle House here.”;

- - They don’t.

- Sarah changed her name from its Polynesian roots after gaining US citizenship and fame, feeling pressure from her publicist to be more marketable to a white audience;

- Phillip was an unemployed astronomer making money as a freelance handyman. His wife was murdered in 1985 purchasing a pack of Lucky Strikes at a Circle-K in Jupiter, Florida. His children are twins and were buckled into their carseats when they heard the gunshots;

- Hezekiah toured with a punk band from 2003 to 2006. On a drug-induced hallucinatory trip, he convinced himself that he was actually a renowned essayist from the future whose stories often took the form of lists.

This is a suicide note:

There's a sickness I've been fighting off. A confusion of language and syntax. I'm cloudy. I'm alone. How many times will I write those words before I know what they mean? The challenge isn't finding love, it's detaching from the addiction to loneliness. I befriended that feeling some time ago, maybe in an attempt to prove that I was better than I used to be. See, we spend our time as scientists trying to stave off abstractions. Realistically my 'mind' is an abstraction. All words are an abstraction. The mind is not a singular apparatus. The brain, maybe. But the mind is a complicated abstract. It isn't really mine. Yet it defines me. It is the most identifiable piece of me. Because it orders my language. My words. It organizes itself and filters. But it is outside of me. The brain - interior. The mind - exterior. It isn't mine at all. 'I' am just skin and bones and muscle and tissue. 'I' am made of tangible matter. 'I' am a physical object. 'I' am made of physical pieces that can be extracted and held in your hand to drip the blue blood until it oxygenates to redness. But you cannot hold my mind. It is intangible. That which I am defined by - my emotions and language that has made 'me' - all intangible. Non-physical. So I am an

intangible being. But I am also here. These words are here. On this page. I am duplicitous by nature. I am an idea *and* a body. I am the matrix of myself. A larger apparatus. A thinking and non-thinking presence in a thinking and non-thinking world. So I lie and I think. And this makes me human.

Signed: P.P.

This is a conversation:

“Tantalus?”

“Once you get to the top, I’m telling you babe - a sunrise that will make your dick hard.”

“Better than Stairway?”

“Well no. Nothing is better than Stairway. But that’s a commitment. 4,000 fucking stairs? Your legs are jelly for a week afterward. And half of it isn’t even stairs, just metal slabs or two by fours.”

“It’s worth it, though. I mean I fucking cried when the sun came up. I thought there were fingers stretching through the clouds. Holding us up over the whole island. And on the way up in the twilight, I never felt so close to space. Like I could step out right on to the moon.”

“Did you see they’re ripping up the Catwalk?”

“Why?”

“A girl killed herself up there. But people talk.”

“On purpose?”

“People talk on purpose, yeah babe.”

“No I mean did she kill herself on purpose?”

“Oh. Probably. That’s the place to do it. Walk right off the edge of the world. Let the ocean eat you up.”

“When we get back I want to go up there again and check. That’s my spot. Five minutes from my house. And at night there are no guards.”

“Why is everything off-limits in Hawaii?”

“Because of assholes like me who try to pretend they aren’t tourists.”

“Set him down here and open the trunk.”

“Jesus, this motherfucker is heavy for a junkie that never eats.”

“No kidding. God my back is going to be so sore tomorrow.”

“You’re going to have to break his leg.”

“I think I can get him in.”

“Knees don’t bend that way, sweetheart. He isn’t going to fit. Just break his leg.”

“He’ll fit.”

“I’m telling you, just break his leg.”

“It’ll splatter shit all over me.”

“Who cares? Your shirt’s soaked in sweat and blood already. It’s not going to make much of a difference.”

“But my pants. Do you know how hard it is to find pants that fit right as a short dude?”

“Will you just smack his goddamn leg with the hammer, so we can get out of here?”

“What, you don’t like Florida?”

“It’s muggy. There are fucking gnats inside my eyeballs. It smells like a watery fart. Not to mention the sprinklers. No, I don’t like Florida. Why do you think...”

“Alright give me the hammer.”

These are less relevant details:

- the brother was in a tree at the age of ten reaching outward to loose a Badminton Birdie from a horizontal branch when his weight shifted against a rotted limb, sending him plummeting face first to the blacktop of his neighbor’s driveway;

- - the street name is Bennington;

- - a psychologist will tell the brother later in his life that this fall was the source of his obsession with television, attributed to a subtle yet all-consuming fear of the natural world;

- for five minutes that last 100 billion years, Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) will trickle down the brainstem tunnel with feathered bristles, painting the nervous system kaleidoscopically into parallel universes where life takes the form of hollow, crystalline wraiths dancing around solar systems dangling like chandeliers from the ether;

- the hammer is a versatile tool and has been reshaped for a variety of jobs:

- - the brick hammer has a chisel end to crack or shatter bricks into smaller pieces;

- - the body mechanic’s hammer has a curved anvil known as a dolly to remove dents from automobile panels;

- - the Lineman’s hammer is designed to drive lag-screws and bolts into utility or telephone poles;

- - the Chasing hammer is used for shaping and remolding metal jewelry;

- - the Welder's hammer has a coil-shaped spring-handle built for comfort and dissipation of heat;

- - the ball-peen hammer is used to form the head of a rivet or reach into small crevices;

- - the Tinner's hammer is sharpened cross-peen and can complete a folded seam or set a rolled edge;

- - the Prospector's hammer has a head to break rocks apart and a pick to split them cleanly across pre-existing cracks;

- - the drywall hammer has a hatchet-like tail to chisel out errant pieces of drywall, while the round-edged flat-head avoids extraneous nicks or dents in the fragile drywall surface;

- - the sledgehammer is large and weighty, often used to drive wedges or for demolition;

- - the Bushing hammer resembles an oversize meat tenderizer and is used primarily to add rough texture to stone;

- the appeal of island sunsets will fade gradually from a lifetime of overexposure;

- the barfly will inevitably seek out the syringes, the pill bottles, the prostitutes, the LSD, the spirit molecules, the bumps, the ridges, the sleeplessness, the fire, the fuel, the farce, the coffee-houses, the bloody noses, the track, the tables, the races, the rat poison, the nicotine, the noise, the rock, the roll, the drums of forever, the shattered glass, the slit wrists, and (most importantly) the partner to share it with;

- the sister will look out the window at the hissing snakes which have taken the form of an in-ground automatic sprinkler system set to a three a.m. timer;

This is a poem:

Wharf

I daydream across a sunken harbor on Oahu
In a sailor's tavern wreaking of dead fish
Waiting for a brunette waitress to finish reading a poem of mine,
And I see the track-marks in the varicose veins
Of a dirty, drunken seaman. His forehead presses
To the rim of a bottle of Jameson.
In the fall, he weeps without tears
As The Wailers play through the jukebox.
Out of the heroin-hole in his sun-soaked arm
Spews a puff of blue-green gas.
This doesn't even rhyme, says the waitress,
Soaked up in a teal glow.

The sailor leaks out
Into every drowned corner of the wharf
Before he finds the nerve to plug his arm
With a spittle-soaked napkin wad.

He stands from his chair and stumbles toward me,
Whiskey-sweat seeping down over his swollen eyes.
“They don't need pirates anymore, baby.
You best find a high bridge to jump from,
Before this all soaks up into that big, fiery sponge.”
He hobbles over the promenade to the water's edge
And collapses on the rotting dock.
He breaks into laughter, and I smile again;
Every blue and green cloud sifted through a pirate's guffaw.

Signed: Mililani

This is a timeline:

- 1969: A man and woman run into each other accidentally on a sidewalk in Wallkill, New York on their way to a free music festival;
- 1971: The first PhD in Astronomy at the University of Florida is awarded;
- 1975: A young girl from a distant island has an epileptic seizure waiting in line for the opening of Space Mountain in Disneyland;
- 1976: The last batch of C-rationed Lucky Strike cigarettes is sent to Vietnam, long after a majority of US troops had withdrawn and returned home;
- 1979: Underground operation codenamed *Honeysuckle* continues experimentation methods enlisted by *Project MKUltra*, *Edgewood Arsenal*, and *Project 112* - CIA, U.S. Army Chemical Corps, and Department of Defense (respectively) trials enacted to test the unknown effects of over 250 chemical reagents on the human body;
- 1983: Mount Kīlauea's Pu‘u‘ Ō‘ō eruption begins on the island of Hawai‘i;
- 1984: A woman pregnant with twins is found in stable condition after being forcibly injected with LSD;
- 1990: The Hubble Space Telescope is launched;
- 1993: After taking a job at the Midwest Aerospace Research Institute in St. Louis, Missouri, astronomer Philip Peterson, PhD is left stranded and destitute as mass flooding obliterates his home and belongings;
- 1994: Charles Bukowski dies of leukemia, his gravestone reads simply: “Don’t try”;
- 1999: Despite public discontent, the world does not end;

- 2007: North African terrorist Jamal Zougam, responsible for planning the Cercanías bombings in Madrid in 2004, is the survivor of a drone strike that obliterates half the population of his small African village;

- 2008: Band members of the once slightly popular underground punk-rock group The Ratfucks attempt to contact their lead singer for a reunion tour but never hear back from him;

- 2010: Blockbuster, a corporate-sized video rental service, goes bankrupt after years of battling neo-tech market trends such as live-streaming video services and DVD/BluRay by mail;

- 2013: The 14th moon of Neptune, only 19 kilometers (12 miles) across, is photographed for the first time by the Hubble Space Telescope;

- 2018: Esteemed poet laureate Sarah Peterson announces on her deathbed that she is ashamed of her decision to change her birth name, as well as adopting her husband's surname, claiming that she was a perfect example of the colonized mind;

- 2019: The FBI ends a nation-wide manhunt for an alleged serial killer after officials deem the brutal killings in Florida, Missouri, Hawai'i, Washington, and Colorado unrelated.

This is a dreamscape:



This is a recorded wiretap conversation from the CIA database:

“I guess I just wanted to call and say thank you for everything. For getting me into the hospital. And paying for rehab.”

“Of course, you’re family.”

(Scratching sounds.)

“I never heard from him again. Do you think he’s alright?”

“Does it matter?”

“I hit him pretty hard.”

“Good.”

(Coughing.)

“What is this letter?”

“From mom.”

“Why?”

“Couldn’t say. Got it from dad’s desk.”

“That explains the blood drops.”

“Did you read it?”

“Not yet.”

“Read it now.”

“Out loud?”

“Sure.”

“To Phil, my learned astronomer:

I found this newspaper clipping in an old suitcase. It reminded me of you:

Lightning in Jupiter, FL strikes near three men who were installing lightning rods.

One of them fell into the soot from 135 feet up and survived.

I hope your new life keeps you out of the storm.

I’ll kiss the twins for you. Love always.”

(Long silence.)

“So, what now?”

(Heavy scratching sounds.)

“Your phone is breaking up.”

“I said, what now?”

“Nate? Hello?”

“You could come out here. We’ve got room.”

(Static. Ringing.)

“Belle?”

End tape.

Here is the last thing:

This world needs un-filtering. It needs a beer and a bump. It needs to be held and choked and loved. It needs a life-vest. It needs to be censored by the goddamn MPAA because it's so perfectly fucking NC-17. This world needs cocaine syringes in the shaft of its dick. This world needs pain and wincing. It needs serendipity. And Jesus Christ it needs some Truth. This world, these silent whisper-ers begging in the dark, these Post-It-Noters reminding themselves of the smell of their sweat and time... This fucking world. Lost in the dust building up in the cracks of our floors. This world - siphoning out of us one tongue-flick at a time.

It gives us love. In our fingers.

It lets her go. Out of our fingers.

I want it to sing. I want a sequence. Fibbonachi. DNA. Perfect pitch.

But this world isn't pentatonic. It isn't a fucking punk-rock, dead-fuck. It isn't a world that breaks your knuckles when you play. This isn't a picked-locked, stolen-out-of-the-case, chrome-cunt-shimmer, black-glean, maple-glide Fender-Tele, swept out of and through your fingertips world.

No.

Quiet.

This world inhales.

This world holds it in.

This world breathes out into a Midwestern expanse. Into that weather-niche, plush prairie. Where the hills bleed drugs and roll octaves over my tongue, *my* tongue - bristled by the gold-wheat glitter. Where I lay backward, touch the grass to my neck and the Whitman-Leaves tickle my shoulders. Where tornado hums wind-pull my hair toward a grey-black funnel. Where God sloshes from my belly to my tonsils while I lay in my own piss. Where it walks into sparkling black and tears through the darkest of matter. And the Mississippi flows into its own soul and sings.

Where the blues was *really* born. Where music *really* makes you want to live.

Chuck Berry. Ike fucking Turner. Bennie Smith.

Where love looks through my ice-blue eyes, down my cracking-copper pipe throat, bubbles around my lungs and heart, and tells me she has been clean for three months now. That she came back to bring me with her.

And this world won't let you live without one or the other.

The central purple-green-brown, mucked heartbeat of America. Or the musical chrysalis, unedited, ever-emerging from an unseen oversoul.

When I wanted her back. I wanted to remind her of the dancing colors behind our black curtain. Her eyes go blank.

She says she can't have the needle. She's too far gone.

I offer her the potion so she can sleep.

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