

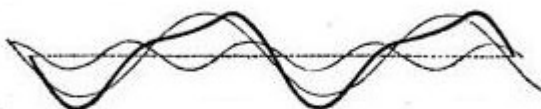
BETA DECAY



NUMBER SEVEN

BETA DECAY
#7

by ANDREW JACKSON KING



D W E L L B E L O W .

Ill Thrift

Agata stood on the shore, the winter wind blowing across her face as grains of sand skittered across the surface of the beach. Wiping her nose, she unfurled the map. The heavy saffron paper, its corners curling against the surging gale, showed the ragged coastline and the choppy ocean in front of her, the dying cities behind her.

She studied it, looking for some kind of explanation to illuminate the data, to make sense of the red dots and concentric rings that marked the disparate levels of noise pollution throughout the region. She knew the higher levels and thicker circles represented the major cities of the megalopolis, tapering off into the suburbs, the exurbs, the waning fringe, the rural surrounding areas. The deuterium rigs speckled the far ocean. This all made sense.

In the freezing air, she stared into the distance, out from the shore to the far horizon, a view without ships, without life, devoid of all meaning except what she could conjure out of the data. Out there, she knew there was something causing a great deal of noise. It was marked on her map, only a pinprick, but the spot was innately different than the surrounding sea. In her mind, she overlaid the noise map with the others she had created back home, networks of widespread ganglionic dissolution, rapid dopamine fluctuation, neurolinguistic decline. The deterioration had been creeping up for months, maybe years. Now it was almost over and she knew she wouldn't glean the answer. There wasn't time.

As the sun began to sink behind her, she struggled to find a solution as a fire of red and purple rippled through the sky. Her nose began to bleed. Wiping it with her sleeve, she thought how clearly her mind still worked and wondered why she was spared. Most everybody in the town was gone. Most everybody

everywhere was gone.

The fish, too.

As the tide carried in their dead bodies, shimmering muscles scaled in green and orange and every other color, Agata felt an overwhelming hopelessness. Weeks had passed as thousands of them washed upon the shore, mirroring the people in the cities in their flight to leave their home. Yet the ocean and the skyscrapers remained.

Rolling up her map, she realized that the artificial beach, towed in by trucks generations ago for the state fairs and summer tourism and now simply polluted with broken bottles and macerated plastic, would certainly outlive them all.

The washing machine rumbled in the kitchen. The phone rang. Agata turned, the golden worklight reflecting off of her cherry drafting table. She rubbed her eyes and slid across the floor to the phone.

“Hello?”

“Aggie, it’s Andon. How are you doing?”

She ached to see somebody in person, a body she could see and hold and lay beside during the cold, late autumn nights. “Still going,” she answered. “You?”

“I can’t get out of the city yet. They’ve got us in a few blocks. The rest is triage, but I think they’re going to let it go soon.”

She paused, realizing the gravity of the move. “I’m sorry about your mother, An.”

He clicked his mouth in disgust at the government’s failure to stop the deterioration.

“How long do you think the power will hold out?” Agata asked.

“Not long. The radio says they’ve still got crews, but it will be a free-for-all soon.”

“Come out through the ekkejo tunnel, An. The jetties aren’t working anymore, right? So there’s no third rail. Take a flashlight and walk the ten miles. It comes out above ground after that. I’ll meet you.”

“That sounds terrible.”

She cut him off before he could disparage her idea any more. “An, I mapped that sound data like we talked about. It shows a sharp spike out in the sea, off the coast. I don’t know what’s out there. Looks like nothing, but...I just wish this all hadn’t happened so fast.”

There was a long pause as the information tumbled over in Andon’s head. “Is the input data only audible sound or all waves?” he asked. Agata froze. She hadn’t thought of that, hadn’t thought of splitting the data into various frequencies. It was simple.

“I’ll call you back, An. Please come through, I’m begging you. Everywhere’s emptying out and it’ll be winter soon. Be big.” She hung up before he could respond. She wondered why she hadn’t thought of differing wave levels beforehand and couldn’t decide if her mind seemed any cloudier than it had been before.

Reworking the data, she realized that the noise far out in the ocean was composed of very high frequencies, higher than humans could hear. She grabbed another map she had made, showing local temperature fluctuations. This chart showed a massive heat well overtop of the ultraharmonic area. She wondered what was out there, how the two interacted and pondered the existence of other variables.

In Agata’s mind, invisible lines of information criss-crossed all around her, delineating secret boundaries and hidden frontiers, conveying information that lay just beyond her reach. Hard, real-world fences demarcated the solid, measurable earth into plots of ownership and non-ownership. Concrete curbs showed where traffic flowed. Unseen survey lines created property. Municipal zoning crafted uses for land.

But she knew there was a deeper world of beautiful air currents, fractal pollen drift patterns, pocket gravity wells, entropic radiation networks. Below that she pondered how to create visual expressions of spatial luck systems, radiating spheres of inclination and disinclination over non-fixed options, local deviations in probability distributions, repetitive déjà vu by region. One must simply map the data and find the relationship.

There just wasn't time.

The power in the house flickered. The lightbulbs in the chandelier above Agata's head crackled. It was past midnight as she checked her watch, the small gears and jewels unaffected by the disturbed flow of amperes from the power plant. It was time for bed.

The man at the pier shook his head as he leaned his body against the ax he'd been using to split logs. In the distance, his small house stood battered and beaten by the wind, the wood turned blue from the elements, the edges of the metal roof tiles curled a bit. A thin line of grey smoke rose out of the brick chimney. Agata had been lucky to find him.

"This money, it's not worth anything. Look around, who's going to take it?" His hot breath streamed out of his nose in wisps of white.

"You can have whatever's in my car, then. Flashlights, food, blankets."

The man walked over to the small yellow sedan, peered inside. "Okay, I'll do it for the whole lot. The car, too."

Agata cringed. She had hoped he wouldn't take everything. "Let's go then. Now," she said, determined to find out something to offset such a great loss.

The sun was high as they walked quickly out onto the pier. "Don't get seasick," the man said as she stepped in. He pushed the craft off from the dock. The sleek sloop sailed cleanly out into the water.

"I haven't been out here since it really started going down," he said, turning the wheel slowly, assuredly. He slid his knit cap farther back on his head to clear his vision. "It's nice to have control over something again, but...it feels like a different planet almost."

Agata knew what he meant and kept silent as the boat swayed gently in the cold wind. If she stared away from the coast, into the sea and the awe of the expanse, she could almost forget what had become of the world. Suddenly, she felt lighter and a wave of elation passed over her body, as if the built world had

been the crushing weight on her chest and its removal was the key to freedom. In the distance she could see Hog Island, a small scratch of land that had become a nature reserve, and thought of its inherent beauty in being so unspoiled save for a few cabins on the southern shore.

With a snap, one of the sails puffed out in the wind and the small craft began to move. Agata looked at the map, showing the man where she wanted to go. He nodded. Moving back towards the tiny cabin, she could see a copy of the Swell Line on a fold-out table, the leather cover chipped and worn.

“The Wild God?” she asked, tipping her head towards the text. The wind blew her hair across her face.

“Got into it before everything happened. I swear. He’s watched over me so far.”

“You think it protected you from the deterioration?”

“Something did. I couldn’t be bothered to follow that stuff for the longest time. But there’s no order out here on the water. All chaos and fractured skulls even when the world was doing fine. I’m a salted earth fisherman and I was spared all this rage.”

Agata’s nose had grown red in the cold. “You swap belief so easily?”

“Have you seen what happened? The old way wasn’t doing anybody any favors.” He waved her over. “Show me the map again.”

As Agata stood near the gunwale, the man steered the boat with the wind from the southwest. The hair on her arms began to stand up. She could feel the charge in the air.

“We’re near. Very near,” he said. The man’s demeanor changed quickly as the water churned. He looked alarmed. Pulling in the sail, the man scanned the horizon as Agata stared into the water.

“There,” she said, pointing into the sea. “Look at that. There’s something under the water, like the wall of a giant cylinder.” She angled her body out over the surface as far as she could reach. The bulk showed weakly through the shadows of the depths. “I can only see a small arc of it, a few degrees at most. It must be massive.”

“I don’t feel good,” the man said, grabbing the railing. Agata felt it, too. The dizziness, the tingling in her fingertips, the satiated feeling far past the point of euphoria. Castles dotted the horizon in her vision. She had shed her sadness of the world for the wonder of the sea only to be overcome with an unexplainable revulsion.

“Turn around, let’s go,” she said. The mariner had already begun to spin the boat. Helping the man with the sails, they were soon back on the coast. There had been a rage of chemicals inside her as they had moved towards and away from the spot, alternately lifting and dropping her.

Pulling up to the pier, the man spoke for the first time since the turn around. “Don’t come to me no more for anything. That is a blasted place.”

Agata’s heart was racing and she understood what the man meant. Back on solid ground, she still felt strange and left without giving thanks to him. Their silence spoke of the magnitude of the place.

Walking the near-empty streets in search of a car to drive home, she felt that her body had been through a profound change, even as the aberrant high ebbed during her fruitless search. She saw a small child run away through the trees and contemplated chasing, but felt like her body wouldn’t be able to handle the exertion. She wondered if there was anybody watching from the endless gallery of darkened windows overlooking the boulevard, judging her for letting him go alone into the wilderness, damning her for the choice.

The sun was on its long decline. Agata felt helpless and adrift. Alone. There were no open vehicles around, no way to find the keys. Most people had slowly run down, not hurriedly leaving their cars and homes open for the world, just wasting away in their bedrooms or on the couch, never getting up, living in a far fantasy world of distant memories. She longed for the safety of her own home, her own bed. To be able to die in a familiar setting was comforting.

As the orange and brown autumnal leaves crunched under her feet, she found a bicycle leaning against a detached brick

garage. Strong gusts of icy wind blew against her face as she started pedaling towards home, the front tire nearly flat, causing the valvestem to make the wheel jump on every rotation. The onset of dusk was only an hour away and the shock of each revolution kept Agata awake as she thought about the watery depths and the key to it all.

Darkness had come for hours before she reached her house, the little red saltbox with the great big porch. The night blew hard and cold and the windows on the home shook noisily in their frames as she lay in bed. She would miss the house. She didn't know what was going to happen, but her time on the fringe was winding down. The effects of the trip had mostly worn off, although she hadn't been able to write legibly when she had sat down at the table to scratch out a few notes. She feared sitting down to the task again and finding that nothing had improved. Or to find that it had grown worse.

She thought about the convoy that had passed through town the week before. Agata had walked down the street to watch, the sound being so loud now without cars and heat pumps, but it hadn't stopped, hadn't even bothered to slow down to show the residents that there might be a glimmer of hope.

From the curb, she had studied the unit, the glow from the lightwires reflecting off their faceshields, but could intimate nothing about their purpose. She noticed a few other residents, glassy-eyed and dazed, emerging from their homes, hoping for a reprieve. She had approached them to talk, but they shuffled away, resigned to the world. She, too, had returned home, unsure of what to do.

It was all a wash.

The next morning, standing in front of her pantry, she looked over the measly amount of food that was left as the light in her back room kept flickering on and off. It could be the storm, she thought. Then she realized that the end of all electricity would probably come soon, ushering in a new era of lean times.

The telephone's ring shuddered through the house.

She picked up the phone, the black handset rattling against her rings as her hand shook. Her fingers clenched and unclenched

randomly. “An?”

“I’m coming out. Through the tunnels. You need to meet me at Jägala Square tomorrow morning, right where the station exits the underground. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there. Just you?”

“Yes, I’m one of the last regular people left in my block. Listen to me, they said you need to start wearing-”

“An. An?” The phone died. The lights in the room flickered and sputtered and were gone.

Agata pulled her china cabinet over in front of the door for a measure of protection. She was hungry, but decided to go to bed, crawling under a mountain of blankets, saving the food for the two of them.

The summer sun hung heavy and full in the sky. Agata unfurled the gingham quilt, the blue checks sparkling against the bright green grass as Andon opened the old picnic basket, placing the bottles and food on the soft coverlet. A group of children ran by them with a kite, yelling and tugging at the taut line as the fabric manifold fiercely climbed away from the earth.

There was a yawning void between the two. Agata had traveled to the outer darkness, had seen things that needed harder explanations than she had accepted earlier in life. It had been difficult to readjust to the soft and easy world around her at home.

Andon had stayed behind all that time, waited, longed. He knew she had changed. Resentment had been building, but there would be no yelling, no clattering of dishes. They were adults.

From the hill, the pair could see across to the bay, its far reaches flowing out into the ocean as dozens of ships crossed and recrossed the surface in a labyrinth of arcane naval rules. In the outer darkness, far from the motherly replenishment of the earth’s seas, Agata had experienced the desperate need of water and had come to realize how weak their bodies were. It had become difficult for her to share with people that had stayed behind, people that never truly understood the far junction floating outside the sun’s reach.

A kestrel flew past her, riding a smooth, calm breeze.

There would be another day for the end. They sat and ate, smiling as the sun's rays fell on their skin.

The morning was just breaking as the car sprinted across the landscape, barreling around roadblocks and past the carefully abandoned rescue vehicles. Agata thought of Irene, her neighbor, who had always kept the house key under the milk box on the porch. The car keys had been on the fridge, frozen in place after their usual morning removal was disrupted. Agata hadn't ventured up the stairs.

In her rearview mirror she could see the deciduous bands of saffron and auburn on the mountain behind her, its bulk crowned by rings of fir trees. The final peak was stuck in the clouds, overlooking the impotent milemarkers and fenceposts that had once meant something important. It was a mighty range, pristine and perfect. She was glad they had never had a chance to ruin it.

Racing past the measured fields and uniform neighborhoods, the empty houses stood sentry over the vacant roads, their own deaths some ten or twenty years in the future as pressure-treated wood and vinyl siding gave way to nature. The terminal loomed large before Agata, a giant block of brutal vanilla concrete more placed on the earth than an actual place on the earth. Seeing the tunnel mouth open like a hellish void from the ground, she ran the car into the chain-link fence, sending the barrier careening across the waist-high grass.

A few hours passed before she saw Andon's face emerge from the endless black of the tunnel. They hugged as he told her about the city emptying out. She told him of the map, of the sickening feeling near the spot.

A few flakes of snow landed in Agata's hair. Andon took her hand. He told her about his headaches, the palpitations, the old memories that had become so intense. "I have to go," he said. "I have to see it."

Agata wondered if there was a point in arguing. "We'll both go."

As they approached the dock, Agata could see smoke from the sailor's chimney. They had cleared her pantry to trade the man and looked at each other, hoping they would be able to barter his assistance. Andon stared out into the water. It had been so long since he'd been free of the haphazard walls created by the urban form.

Agata pushed the door open a sliver. "Washington?" She stepped in. Andon followed her, saw the man on the ground, huddled in front of the fireplace. He weakly turned his head, saw the woman and turned back. The pair saw the blood trickling out of his ears.

"Leave. I told you not to come back," he scratched out.

"We need you to take us back there. The world's dead. I thought we were immune, but I don't know now."

"*Corruption is a fact of form.* You drew me out there, you saw the wall."

"I don't know how to sail." She pleaded with him, motioning toward Andon. "We don't."

"Just figure it out. People have sailed forever. Let me lay here and die."

Andon grabbed the door. Agata threw another blanket on top of the man as they left. She knew the fire would soon be a collection of embers.

"I guess that's what we have to look forward to," Andon said, walking towards the pier. He grabbed the frayed white rope, unlooping it from the cleat.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Andon steered the boat toward the spot. It had taken hours for the two novices to get the craft going, but once they had, the sea opened up to welcome them. They had sailed for some time – Andon steering, Agata navigating – but the sun began to set behind them to the east. The black night and a great hunger moon rose up from the eastern waters.

"We have to head towards Hog Island. There's no time to find it tonight," Agata said. She could see a thin rivulet of blood streaming down from Andon's nose.

“No wait. There. Is that what you saw?” he asked, pointing into the depths.

Agata stared to the southeast. She could see the wall, translucent white and rising up out of the sea at a slant, the far edge a few inches above the surface. Where it had been facing away from her earlier, now it curved towards the boat. She realized that they were probably inside the structure, the other edge dipped below the water. They could get trapped inside.

“Andon, turn the boat towards the island now! You can still see the tops of the trees there,” she said, pointing in the dim sky towards the speck of land.

She watched as Andon vomited over the side. “I feel amazing!” he yelled. “Can you feel that?” He grabbed his head with one hand and put the other on his knee as he bent over. A small wave hit the boat and Andon slipped, hitting his head on the gunwale railing.

Agata stepped forward and grabbed the wheel, steering the boat gently towards the island. The water beneath the boat was stronger than she had expected, the rudder struggling to keep a course, but they swiftly cut through it in the twilight. She could just make out the moonlight reflecting off the sand as the boat crashed into the beach. Ran aground, they climbed off as the wind whipped at the sails, battling with the mast until the spire of oak cracked near the deck.

Dragging Andon up to one of the island park’s cabins, Agata pulled out her flashlight. She laid his limp body on the ground as she searched for the door knob.

“It’s getting louder, can’t you hear it?” he said, the joints in his spine cracking as he twisted his body on the ground.

Exhausted, she dragged him by the armpits onto the wood floor of the cabin. He stood up. “How much longer until summer?” he asked as he stood at the room’s rear window. She saw the flux of blood streaking down his neck from his ear lobes. Agata knew he wouldn’t have long.

“Let’s get you something to eat,” she said, opening the bag of provisions she’d brought to trade for the boat ride. “Here, An, don’t try to stand.” She helped him into an old chestnut rocking

chair, worn smooth by past voyagers.

“Do you remember when they photographed the ocean floor?” Andon asked. “It was shipwreck after shipwreck, all perfectly lined up, just a graveyard of nautical ambition. And they found that cube? That giant cube?”

Agata opened a can of baked beans. She turned the flashlight onto the fireplace. Andon needed to be warm. A stack of wood sat nearby, left by the previous occupant. She sat and made a small fire as he continued.

“And then the cube disappeared? What was that? They said we remembered it all wrong. But I can still clearly see it. Maybe twelve, fifteen feet tall? The edges were perfect, just hard and classical and eternal. Great swooping designs on the sides, like it was etched.”

As the fire grew, Agata began to feel the charge she had felt earlier. She barely noticed Andon speaking.

“It’s a cylinder of some kind,” she said to herself, trying to put the pieces together. “And it’s moving. The heat. The electricity. I just don’t know.” She found a pot in the cabinet and moved back towards him. Her thoughts seemed fuzzier.

Andon tucked his legs beneath him on the chair as the flames in the hearth grew. Flakes of snow drifted by the small windows, backlit by the moonlight.

“Ear plugs.”

“What?”

“The phone died before I could tell you. They were telling us to wear ear plugs.”

Agata let this sit in her mind. Putting down the pot, she moved back to the door, opening it and staring out to the beach, the water, the great space beyond. She thought she could see the cylinder wall rising out of the water, looming over the island and the sea, blocking out the abiding universe. The moon hung silently in the night sky, the radiant white orb untouched by the problems below, its ridges and craters standing for eternity, the vacuum preserving a small conurbation of steel as the only memento of human progress.

Shutting the door, she looked over to the fire as Andon

weakly opened the pack he had brought and slipped out the dying mariner's leather copy of the Swell Line.

"You took that?" she asked, momentarily forgetting his condition.

He didn't hear her. Opening the book at random, he seemed comforted by the words. "*Those of the land should not be afraid of their first death on water,*" he quoted. "*Do not be ashamed to look away.*"

Agata realized that Andon had been safer in the city, far from the ruinous surf. They shouldn't have come here, shouldn't have probed the expanse. Now he deteriorated with the rest. She wondered if it was the pressure, if the ultraharmonics were finishing the destruction it hadn't been able to work on those still standing on land.

It was too late now, Agata realized. It didn't matter. She tried to plug her ears, but she heard it now. Or felt it. Or knew it. It was happening. The winter moon was the last real thing she'd see. The last piece that would connect her to whoever survived.

Staggering across the room, she grabbed two blankets off of the cots along the far wall of the cabin. Andon had slipped out of the chair. Hugging the floor, his left cheek pressed hard against the floorboards of silver maple, he whispered. To himself, to Agata, to the void. "*The final woe will come quickly for those close to the ground.*"

Deep magenta blood, blackened on the edges, covered his lips and chin, spilling sideways onto the wood floor as she tried to cover him. He was too tall and she smiled to herself. She remembered always having to special order his clothes. There would never be a moment in history like that again. How silly it had all been, she thought.

The room grew hotter by the minute. She wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead and tossed the holy book into the fire.

"It's going to get better, I promise," she said. "We both made it this far. We'll be fine." The chorus inside of her grew louder. She lay next to his calm body, waves of euphoria and disgust passing over her, mimicking the ocean outside. There was no impeding her own change. She tried desperately to stop her

hands from shaking as she held his head.

The blood that began to fall on her lips was warm and metallic. Her vision fluttered and the clinking sound of the rings on her hands reverberated off the sturdy cabin walls. She could see faces from her halcyon youth, but understood they weren't there. She missed them.

The fire took great leaps up the stone chimney as she stroked Andon's hair. The room itself was warm, comfortable, timeless. Agata stared into the depths of the maternal hearth and spoke softly, mostly to herself. "Be big."

The Greengrocers

Travers always sang. Folk songs, new songs, hymns. Whatever came to him. I met him when I first moved into the neighborhood. It was a cold winter day, biting and chill, the kind that made me tug the collar of my jacket up to my ears and tuck my gloves under the sleeves. An impending storm had forced me to the store even before I'd thought of unpacking and, in my hurried state, I'd pushed the glass door of the small store without even noticing the ringing of the bell that would come to define my life for so many years in the future.

It was inconsequential that first time. I believe I bought milk, some bread, cheese, salami, just enough to last me through the heavy, snowy weekend as I propped up old photographs of the vanished restaurants and stores of the city and practised my sign painting. It was tough going and I barely learned much those first years of trying out on discarded cardboard boxes and broken tabletops, yet the corner store saw me through it all.

So it was that I got better at it and, from my countless trips, soon came to know not only Travers – his only name that was ever revealed to me, simply Travers, indomitable and forever – but his wife Marguerite, a humble and hard-bitten woman, the better for having grown up with a strong older sister that protected her and showed her the world when others had tried to shield her. Marguerite was the real thrust behind the whole operation, the one that not only kept the regularity of the balance books, but also followed trends to know what orders would help boost their profile in local newspapers and attract young blood, whether it was procuring Ibisha pears or Montetrejo chocolate or the inner seeds of the watery Yunox lily.

It was for my temperament of trying all of Marguerite's bizarre and toothesome acquisitions that she invited me behind the counter on a crisp autumn day two years after I'd first arrived. I'd

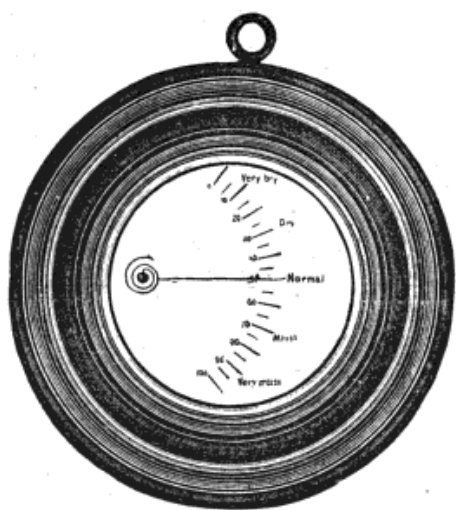
noticed a dozen of the store's regulars had begun to mill around out front, faces and clothes-patterns that had become etched in my mind for how often I happened to bump into them, but as I was pulled backwards into the hidden postchamber, they all appeared before me, smiling softly, knowing of secrets that I couldn't possibly be a party to.

Travers emerged from the side kitchen – singing, of course – with a tray nearly above his head and gestured us all to sit at the long wooden table that ran perpendicular to the length of the overall building. A woman to my right who I'd always called Hips in my head for her preternaturally high pants passed a carafe of water to me. I filled the glass in front of myself, sipping deep and noting the crisp earthiness of the liquid, the herbal and mineral notes carrying the water, it being more than a palate cleanser, but rather a palate energizer.

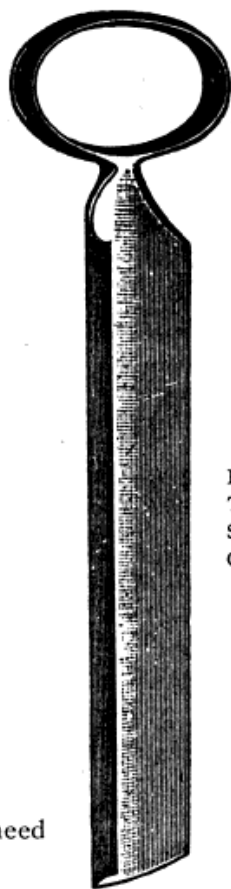
Marguerite took to her husband's side and read a quick poem. I'd no way to jot it down or remember it, but, looking back, I often feel it was a Dunn, a fast piece on living far away, a world that I believed Marguerite had come from and often pined for as she drank her wine and stared out the window on slow days before she rang up my groceries. She could taste the words and feel the sunshine again, not the kind that bounces off the hard skyscrapers reaching out above us, but the real sun of the squat cities and towns of the old world, a life of picking your own fruits and carrying your own ice.

But it was short and over and, with that, Travers placed the tray on the table. I stared at the polished silver, trying to make sense of the blocks and squares and semicircles that lay before me, the milky whites and soft yellows of the various cheeses, each veined and ringed with the blues and greys and greens of mold. The smells hit my nose, the acidity stinging, the threads mingling, but each yet being able to disentangle itself from the rest if need be.

Black Glasses to my left gave me a rundown of what was spread before me, excited as he spread each on the thin buttery wafers that Travers followed up the tray with. There was a sliver of Canton, aged in the deep caves beneath the city, a heavy



All the world
and all you need



Flavor.....
Texture.....
Salt
Color.....

crescent moon from the barrier islands of Uzhon that had been pinpricked by hand with mold, a Tomenbrey crosshatched by maggots, a Sinsinn covered in the wild mold of soft ryes, each and all of them pulled together with the beautiful fungi that reached deep into the centers of the wheels to find their true purpose.

Black Glasses waxed philosophical on the benefits of those unpasteurized, bacteria-laden, raw-milk cheeses with such a reverent awe that I could overlook the stinging ammonia of the harshest offenders. It was all very heady and I reached for the water over and over, new vistas of experience rapidly overtaking me as each bite moved from salty to sweet, fatty to smoky. There were the flavors of old boot leather, rancid meat, the sweetest of all butters, mushrooms from ancient redwood forests, fields of mountain herbs swaying in the autumn wind, halfway-finished caramel.

The whole affair lasted perhaps forty-five minutes before the cheeses were gone and the hands all shaken. I stood up, hugged Marguerite and Travers, and left my first meeting.

My relationship with Travers and Marguerite changed after that, growing denser, more substantial. Marguerite hugged me like a brother returning from war and with Travers himself I often sat on the rooftop sipping mystical peated whiskies and trying to remember the world below.

He was a fantastic story teller, focused on the hazy period of adolescence when you just begin to find the world and long for embrace and all your friendships seem like they'll last forever, yet you can't quite understand what your parents are speaking of in their hushed whispers behind closed doors. There were the stories of car trips to forgotten relatives, legendary baseball games, pets that seem near irreplaceable as you grow older. First loves hung heavy in his stories, there always being an endless stream of firsts that all blended together into a period of life where everything seems so damn important.

Marguerite would often come and sit on his lap after closing, her skirt billowing over his legs – the sun just a memory but radiating out from her skin always – as he told of epic footraces for ice cream money or afterschool fistfights that

changed lives. I wondered of their absence of children, but never asked. They were past all that, but their faces were so young, so impregnable from any notions of linear time. We drifted in those weightless moments for what seemed an eternity.

The tastings would come randomly every few months, Travers or Marguerite telling me a few days beforehand as I left the store. I'd return at the prearranged time, excited, open to trying new things, always the four new cheeses arranged on the platter. I swear that Hips and Black Glasses and Bicycle Lady and College Guy told me their names at some point, but I could never remember. Yet the cheeses have forever stuck with me. The bracing arc of Retron, the sublime silkiness of Thelony, the harsh astringent chemicals emanating from the Cyliaro. There was the coastal sweetness of the Yurke, the smoked salt of the Bryzene, the stone fruit earthiness of Wella. All magical.

This carried on for a couple of years, the group unchanging, my admittance being the last bit of new blood for some time. And yet Harrigan came silently to one of the meetings a few years into my tenure in the tasting club. He hardly spoke, but always made sure you knew his name. He wasn't Eyebrows, although his were wiry and long and, I often believed, waxed; he wasn't Homburg, despite always wearing a black felt version of the aged hat; nor was he Teeth for his enlarged and overpoweringly white mouth that shouted his presence. He was simply Harrigan. He would nod achingly slowly when a bite pleased him, but often emit a guttural growl deep from his chest when a certain aged block offended him.

One night on the roof, I asked Travers of the man, his background, what brought him to the group despite me having never seen him at the shop. He dismissed the questions, refusing to answer, but somehow I gained the impression the new interloper was a member of Marguerite's past, some long-lost individual from her old life that had hidden in steerage for a chance at a new life.

I often wondered how the two grocers procured their cheeses, there being a crackdown on all kinds of potentially-sickening food products in the years after the war. There must

have been an old world connection and I wondered then and now if Herrigan had been it. Perhaps Travers had welcomed the trade when separated by an ocean, but he was clearly disturbed by the man's showing on new soil, his brusqueness and proclivity to intrusion.

Yet, he was allowed, and on his second tasting, he even brought his own offering, pulling a waxed paper block from inside his coat, declaring it a smoked Itreoan from the western islands, the infectious strains completely different from the eastern world we had known. I welcomed it, the exoticness, the palatability that was missing from some of the other cheeses we'd had previously.

Travers was obviously put off by this, the incursion in his ritual, the usurping of his role as gatekeeper. Marguerite pulled Herrigan aside as the table was cleared and I, following Lady Pompadour, could not hear more than a few muffled curse words. The husband and wife grew distant on the roof and I wondered at the back story, but knew I could not overstep my bounds. There was a heavy past to it all, more than I could match in weight if proffered to tell my own weighty tale of familial disruption. So, I waited.

Herrigan missed the next two tastings and I felt the marital bond strengthen in the time away from the troublesome man. Yet, as Travers told me of the next meeting, one scheduled for the dead of winter, I could see something was wrong. I asked, feeling stronger in my friendship with him, and he told me that Herrigan was returning. It felt like a blow, a return to the unsettling haze that permeated the previous tastings, but I knew that Marguerite must have had her reasons.

As I came up through the alley the night of the tasting, I heard the husband and wife arguing, the muted shouting, the pounding of fists on doorframes and the stamping of leather shoes on weather-beaten brick. The wooden fence behind the store rose above me, blocking my own view and, perhaps, an appearance of myself that may have stopped the argument. I reached the front of the building just as Travers and Marguerite entered from the rear and were attending to the last few customers in the store.

We nodded and I headed into the back, saying hello to

Grey Professor, Hips, Bicycle Lady, Brown Eyes, and the rest. Before he even entered the room, I felt the overpowering weight of Herrigan's presence. I turned to see him and I could feel his green eyes inspecting and judging each of us at the table, looking through us beyond our noses and foreheads into the people we wished we could be. I poured myself a glass of the glorious water and waited, the rest of the group trying to hide their nervousness.

Sitting at the table, Herrigan pulled a block from his jacket as he often had before, yet in the past he'd waited until Travers had arrived with the tray. This time, however, he also pulled his own knife from some hidden interior pocket and cut the twine holding the package closed.

I stared at the block as the four corners of waxed paper fell away, revealing the strangely white round of cheese that lay and existed before him. Just softly, hardly there, I could see the striking blue veins hiding underneath the rind, a world rippling just at the edge of perception. Herrigan looked at each of us and I could see a faint smile gently pulling at the corners of his mouth. He slid the knife in at a slight angle, deep into the body of the cheese and, as he pulled back, I could see the soft crumbling of the edges and a bit of softness oozing out from inside, reticent, like the blood at the beginning of a cut.

He motioned towards each of us to stick our hands out and, with the same knife that he'd just sliced with, he excavated the interior, passing warm globs of it onto our palms. It is hard to say why we went in so whole-heartedly, but there seemed to be a sense of no return, a belief that we'd be able to placate Herrigan, smooth over the group's unease at the tension between him and the married couple.

There was no going back. As I swallowed my portion, I saw Travers and Marguerite enter from the front of the store. Travers grabbed Herrigan as the man swung his knife at him. Marguerite yelled.

My eyes closed and I lost control of my body even as I tried to stand and stop the melee. My mind swam and I lost sight of the room, Travers, Marguerite, the other members of the group. There was a moment of blackness, a pause that let me dwell for

just a minute, before my mind opened and I saw other lives that could have been, other worlds without me, other existences where I became more than a forgettable face or even less than I currently was. Worlds where I stood alongside Marguerite, lives where my children and grandchildren swarmed around me in a lakeside cabin, bits and pieces of my last days or my own birth, windows forward and backward, mountains of iterations, all seeming more real, more substantial than my own life, as if I'd always been in the haze of a dream, forever adrift, yet they began to slowly slip away.

The high passed and I opened my eyes, the other tasters around me coming down themselves, with Travers, Marguerite, and Herrigan nowhere to be found. We sat in silence, unsure how to proceed, but eventually choosing to leave when none of the trio happened to appear.

I took the key from the pins on the back wall, turning off the lights and locking the door behind myself as I left. Days passed, then weeks, without their return. The landlord emptied the store, leased it to new tenants, yet I kept the key in the top drawer of my desk, the only physical memento I had of the pair.

I passed Black Glasses on Ellwood Street one summer night a year later. We nodded, but there was nothing to say, those moments in the back of Travers and Marguerite's lost forever like the visions I had of the thousands of different lives that could have been mine had a different choice been made here or there over the years.

The pair never returned. I've tried to follow their example of spirit, tried to learn from the visions I had, but I've never found water that tasted so life-affirming, food that tasted so absolutely vital, and still, years later, I long to hear my friends' stories of screaming youth, the soft singing of endless summer nights, the radiance of everlong skin. I miss their embraces and hate that the finality of their exit sends shockwaves forever into my future, the phantoms of my companions always on the edges of my remembrances, my kitchen table never again weighed down by the transformative gifts of close friends.

Kid's Got Teeth

A taxi honked out on the street as the crowds shuffled by, their folded newspapers held over their heads as they moved from one overhang to the next, searching for a refuge from the morning storm. The drops of rain were heavy and luminous and as Nicholas stared out the window he had the sense that a greater storm was building off the coast, yet there, in the confines of the diner, it was just another drab day for the beginning of the long spring.

Sitting at one of the booths in the old streetcar, he sipped on a depth charge – a cup of black coffee with a shot of espresso – which had come to be his usual on weekday mornings. Over his shoulder, he heard a woman ordering a long black, and thought for a moment of the somewhat rare drink, seeing in his mind a map of all the various locales where it was served and wondering where the woman might have hailed from.

A clap of thunder echoed out on the street. Nicholas blinked and forgot the coffee as he stared out through the windows of the small streetcar onto the thoroughfare, eyeing the city as it slowly, repentantly, chugged along, waiting for the closing of a business day that had only just begun. Before his mind had wandered, he'd been thinking of how to design a three-legged chair that had come to him in a dream. It had been beautiful and perfect and in the vision an anciently old man had been sitting on it, dapper and poised in a grey worsted wool suit over a thick merino sweater, staring straight ahead with a gnarled walking stick across his lap. Nicholas kept getting caught on how to balance the chair if he wanted to keep its shape exactly as it had in his dream.

Frustrated with his inability to progress, he stood up and buckled his yellow jacket, hoping a walk would clear his mind. He had placed his hand on the slim aluminum pushbar of the door

when he heard a voice.

“Hey!” a patron called out to him. The man turned. “You forgot your camera.”

Nicholas turned and saw the woman sitting at the counter. She was smiling, pointing to the table he’d just left. He saw the two dollars underneath the saucer on the edge of the table, but past that, closer to the window, he saw the small black box he’d left behind. He turned to thank the woman, but his eyes fell to her shoes, slowly taking them in, their rough black leather, scraped and marked and pitted, and their two laces, both black, but slightly different in construction.

He reached for the battered picture box. The slim camera he’d forgotten was a Coratex S53, one of the cheap snapshotters that had been manufactured when he was a kid and quickly forgotten as nicer devices came down in price. It had been a flop on the market. The three-lens design – each piece of glass set slightly off from the other, bevelled at different angles – created ethereal, dreamy photographs that the consumer market had found subpar. Still, there was a depth to the images that couldn’t be denied, a warmth and complexity that gave it a cult following among the youth who competed with him constantly for the dwindling market of parts.

Dipping his head to the woman, he smiled and picked up the device. Turning to leave, she caught his ear. “My father invented it, back in the ‘50s,” she said. “He worked at Telnolta.”

Nicholas was taken aback. The company had been so long forgotten by the general public that, outside of niche stores and quarterly photography club newsletters, he had rarely even heard the camera mentioned. And now, here was the daughter of the inventor right before him. She leaned forward to examine it and noticed the film door was held closed with a hairpin bent to wrap around the lip of the lid. She extended her hand. “I’m Cora,” she said. “I bet that I can help you with this.”

The man reached out and took her hand. It had been a lazy week and his words came out sluggish. “Nicholas. I’m Nick,” he said, shaking her hand. “That would be great. I’ve been scouring junk shops for years buying what I could find, trying to make it

work. Should I leave my number with you? If you find anything?” he asked. He pulled out his business card, the slip of paper emblazoned with the image of a black cat, its tail curling upward into a spiral near its head.

“What are you doing today?” she asked. “To be honest, I’m free to work on it now and I love meeting people that enjoy my father’s work. We can go look through some of the boxes at his old house.”

“Are you sure?” Nick asked. She nodded. With the rain and clouds souring the sky, he realized he would have wasted the day, anyway, lost in a daydreaming session of the three-legged chair. He stared at his watch, at the crippled camera, at the woman. “It’s in the city?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I’ll have to get my car.”

The small coupe hummed along as Nick followed beneath the J Line, the great elevated track that curved and twisted out from the downtown to the forgotten inner suburb of Cane Hook. Cora rattled off her father’s patents and inventions as Nick chafed in his seat, wanting to see and hold and examine the devices, not hear of their creation.

As the pair pulled up to the brick rowhouse, the man noticed that the neighborhood was devoid of children, bereft of the bright pastel chunks of chalk on the corners of stoops, the groups of kids hopscotching or double-dutching in a brief respite from the storm, the forgotten bicycles laying over on the ground. He saw a few older women walking on the sidewalks as weathered faces looked on from the upper windows.

Stepping out of the car, Nick stretched his arms, glad to be free from the confinement of the small vehicle. He thought of Cora’s descriptions of her father’s work, of the the strobe pulsers, the mnemosonic image capturers, the ciphers for a rudimentary form of negative temporal cryptography. He could only imagine what else lay in the building before him.

The sun had come out and turned the sidewalk into a swirling mass of thin mist as the rain evaporated off the concrete.

Cora made her way up the marble stoop in front of the building, checking her watch and turning the stem to keep it sharp. She turned back and looked down. “Come on, Nicholas,” she said, pulling a keyring from her pocket and flipping through the set for the right one. A small screen porch was built on the front right side of the house and even though the netting was tattered and torn, Cora insisted on using the lock.

“When did he die?” Nick asked, placing his right hand on the burnished copper railing.

“He’s not dead,” she said, matter-of-factly. “He lives upstate.”

Embarrassed, he took to inspecting the building from the front steps. He felt the solid Guilford brick of the rowhouse’s walls, the carmine color a clear indication of the origin of the clay. Peering through the windows of the enclosed front porch to the left of the screened area, he noticed that everything inside seem so old, so uncared for. He wondered what had preoccupied the man in recent years, but hesitated to ask. Perhaps he was sick, perhaps Cora’s mother was ill, maybe there were other family issues to attend to. Nick thought it would have been rude to press the issue as Cora had been nice enough to bring him in the first place.

“A-ha!” she exclaimed, jiggling the handle and kicking the bottom of the door to push inside. Together, the pair entered the small room. Cora used the same key to unlock the door to the enclosed porch and, as she pried open the oak slab into the vestibule, the man was instantly hit by the heaviness of the air, the smell of stasis that lingers on a forgotten horde. It was clear that the house had simply become a catch-all for her father, a building left solely to hold objects and past achievements.

As they removed their coats and Cora opened the original front door of the building, Nick examined the waist-high stacks of newspapers that packed the room, bundles of clippings set aside by the inventor for some long-forgotten reasons. He paused and picked one up. “Balloon tracks cirrus cloud across ocean,” the headline read. He placed it back on top of the stack.

Cora stepped into the house and fumbled in the low light for a switch, but found only the knob of a small lamp. An arc of

fuzzy yellow light cut into the cavernous space, a completely open first floor that reached all the way to the kitchen in the back.

“Don’t touch this wire,” Cora said, pointing to a tangled piece of bare copper haphazardly crossing the framing of the door. “It could be hot, or...” and she trailed off. Nick thought about what she could mean by that, what sinister intimations could lie behind that open-ended caution as he took in the cluttered space, trying to give some kind of organization to the mountains of boxes, the great cliffs of books and manuals, the seas of scattered electronic components.

He imagined hypothetical children of his own crushed by mountains of his own detritus, a mysterious horde, fragments of a life that could never be pieced together to form the whole that had been him. His mind shifted to a world of water, where possessions and ideologies were continually washed away and scoured clean, but the idea slipped away from him.

As Cora turned on another lamp, Nick noticed the walls were completely bare. “Did he ever even paint in here?” he asked. Cora shook her head. He wondered if she’d grown up in the house and imagined what it must have been like to never invite her friends over, never bring a boy home after a date, never be proud of where she lived. He wondered if she ever thought how different her life could have been if only a gene or two in her father had gone the other way.

“This cabinet has the camera things,” she called over across the darkness of the building. “He got into some strange photographic stuff as he got older. Weird modifications, but we should be able to find some parts for you.”

As Cora pulled a drawer out of the cabinet, a stack of papers tipped off of the top shelf. Nick pushed a box aside and reached for the leaves as the papers spun out of his hand, clattering onto the floor.

“Here, why don’t you go into the kitchen? I’ll get these. They’re just junk,” she said, hurriedly pushing Nick aside as he tried to help. “Father became obsessed with capturing pathochromatics a few years back. Said photographs never accurately exhibited the beauty of the world. He wanted to capture

people's thoughts and passions and fears, thought that they were visible at some level. But enough, get to the kitchen."

Despite her pressing against the man with her elbow, Nick had already begun to bend over. He clutched the fallen stack and saw a strange set of photographs sandwiched between wax paper. Great whorls and swoops of greens and blues tore across the paper, erratic travels and shapes caught in the emulsion. He'd never seen anything like them.

"What are these?" he asked as she crouched beside him.

She looked at the small images. "A 'dead-end,' he told me. Father said he was searching for something, but never found it. Kind of gave up on his own photography after these last sets. A bit of a shame." Cora stared out through the stained glass transom window above the entryway. Nick could see she was remembering her childhood, thinking of times when her father probably wasn't there, too caught up in his own world.

She stood up and pushed Nick towards the back of the house, picking up a wooden box as they made their way to the kitchen. In the dim afternoon light that could make its way through the rain and the small windows, she sorted through the box's various rings of plastic and metal, each inscribed with strings of esoteric model numbers, the kind of precision and exactness and variation that inevitably lead to a shuttered company.

Nick sat down with another box, trying to feign interest in the spare lenses and threading mechanisms, but couldn't shake the beauty and mystery of the discarded photographs, images that showed a world that was just barely there, just beyond regular senses. As Cora examined sets of aperture rings at the kitchen table, he slid one of the images into his pocket, unsure of how far he'd get with her if he bothered to ask for a keepsake, but compelled to keep a bit of the shrouded world.

Cora turned to him. "Did you find anything you could use?" she asked.

Nick's mind was racing. He could no longer focus on the camera parts. "What does he work on now?" he asked. "Does he do any kind of photography anymore?"

She paused, staring down into the box. “He has a ... museum, a gallery, now.”

“Of his work?”

“Mostly.” She let out an exasperated sigh and handed him a box that had been on the table. In it were stacks of photographs that painted the patriarch in an artistic light. There were black-and-white abstract images, prints of bright and explosive arcs of color, dozens of sepia-washed facial glimpses. Outside, the rain continued to pour, rivulets of water running out of the overflowed copper gutters. The holiday was tomorrow and Nick knew there wouldn’t be much traffic going upstate. He couldn’t shake the draw.

“Can we go there?” he asked.

The purification bonfires for Anchor Day had already begun in the valley, their bright flames dancing and swarming along the far ridges that ran parallel to the roadway. The small car threaded its way upstate as the smell of black cohosh and blue flag flowers lingered in the air and thick embers slowly drifted onto the windshield. The setting sun cut a thin orange line on the horizon.

The blazes would be extinguished with sea water as the sun rose, yet Nicholas welcomed them in the coming darkness, lighting a path to his destination. As the radio played the *Slavonic Dances*, his mind pondered how Cora’s father would have captured the flickering flames. Infrared, plasma, black-body radiation.

“Up ahead here is Left Acre, the old factory town. Have you ever been?”

The man shook his head.

“This whole area used to be one town, Acre. An old allanite mining camp. There were two major shafts – east and west – both bringing the mineral up for the war effort. The interstate cut the place in half, so they began calling themselves Left Acre and Right Acre. There was an accident one day in Right Acre and the shaft collapsed, killed hundreds of workers. They abandoned the mine and moved operations fully to Left Acre, but

the shaft had been so large that a pond formed on the surface due to the collapse. After a year of hard rains, the lake and the underground tunnels came to breed a huge mosquito population.

“They put Left Acre on daily quinine tablets as an antimalarial to prevent an illness from slowing down mine production. The doses became so high that many of the residents began having induced nightmares. The government brought my father in to try and photograph their dreams. He never spoke about what he found, but I stumbled on a box a few years ago of the images. Folder after folder of different people, different ages, men, women, children, elderly. All had the same dream. It was a bear, standing on two legs, staring directly ahead, almost smiling, but just not quite. To the bear’s left was a small person, about three feet tall, wearing a large cardboard box on their head. That’s it. Everyone one had the same dream, the same strange vision.

“But then the war ended and the mining wasn’t as important anymore. They pretty much shut the whole town down. This overpass goes atop the main street of the old place.” Cora looked out to the left of the car, craning her head to take in any details of the abandoned hamlet as the car sped by. Nick felt cold and a wave of goosebumps shot up on his arm. He sped the car forward.

As the two strangers raced farther from the city, the ridges bounding the valley shrank, the fires slowly petering out as the population dwindled. The sun had set and the roads had become empty, total darkness surrounding them on three sides as the car’s wipers brushed the final layer of ash off of the windshield.

At the edges of his vision, Nick thought he saw movement, shapes darting between the shoulder of the road and the line of trees a few feet past it. As a teen, he’d hit a deer coming home from a friend’s house and the anxiety of night driving never let go. He gripped the wheel tighter, the tips of his fingers beginning to feel numb. The branches of great cottonwoods hung out over the roadway, reaching down, obscuring the sky from his sight. Nicholas felt like the road was getting narrower, the body of the woods threatening to overtake him.

He blinked and a certain calmness and clarity returned.

As the radio became mostly static outside the city boundaries, Cora picked up the slack of the conversation, offering up whatever was on her mind at the moment, a stream of consciousness comprised of equal mixtures of anxiety and compulsions.

She casually mentioned voyeurism. Watching her neighbors, her friends, keeping track of her coworkers and past lovers. There was no reason to it, no logic, no endgame for her. There was no blackmail or gossiping. She just described what they did, got a rush out of watching people carry on their regular lives.

Nick was repelled by the normalcy she attached to it and began to tense as she carried on, his anxiety swelling at the idea of spending more time with her, falling into her bizarre orbit, but it was so late and they were so far from the city that there was no point in turning around.

“It’s just up ahead here, Nicholas, not too much farther,” Cora said, unaware of his unease. “Almost midnight,” she said, looking up at the moon as it hugged the edge of the sky.

“Open the glovebox,” Nick told her, and she reached in, pulling out the simple paper-thin ceramic masks for the holiday. It was a regional tradition and although Nick wasn’t sure how it originated, he’d always followed the custom. She handed him one and he slipped it on, letting the car guide itself over the lazy roads. The mask was a dull mint with criss-crossing orange lines overtop. Cora’s was a fiery red, the edges dipped in yellow streaking patterns. There were others in the glovebox, yet she’d chosen those and they’d wear them all day.

Cora paused before putting her mask on, staring out onto the edge of the woods running alongside the car. Nick watched, tried to intuit what she was feeling as they approached the compound. A few minutes passed in silence, both occupants quietly taking in the new day, the holiday, in their masks, before the car descended down a range and into view of a solemnly-lit building on the fork of the river below. Two tributaries rushed together into a single stream ahead of them and, in the pale light, Nick could see the arched granite bridges that connected the

curved piece of land to the east and west shores.

“There it is,” Cora said as Nick pulled around to the side lane. There were small globes of light that hung a foot above the edge of the roadway, guiding the car into the small parking lot. Nick struggled to see what he could in the moonlight. The building itself was long and low, with thin vertical slits opening out into the night and catching bits of light. The sides were a dull stucco with raw wooden beams hanging horizontally across the façade. Pulling the car along the driveway, Nick could see that the building cantilevered out over the water, the lower level constructed of glass and built into the side of the hill to watch the rushing torrent below.

The moonlight glinted off the perfectly trim lawn. “Dad was always a perfectionist with his grass,” she said, staring out the window as Nick brought the car to a stop. “You know, when we were kids – me and you, I mean – they use to put clover in with grass seed, to fix free nitrogen from the air. Nobody remembers that. Everybody wants that perfect, three-inch fescue. But all those majestic post-war images of suburban lawns, they all had twenty-five percent clover. Kind of messes with your perception, right?”

Before the parking brake had even popped into place, Cora had hopped out of the car, the small, soft gravel of the semi-circle driveway crunching under her feet. As the pair walked to the entrance, the lightwires built into the ground began to illuminate, casting a soft glow over the immaculate landscaping of the museum grounds. Nick noticed the pathway leading to the building was a complex design of cut gneiss and sandstone.

Cora approached the front of the building and the doorway opened up, as if expecting her. Nick watched as she paused and moved her hands and arms through the air, hidden sensors picking up the strange code. Warm light rose up out of the hallways and he could see the art lining the great white walls of the interior.

She turned back towards him. “Come on.”

He followed her through the portal. “Enjoy yourself, Nicholas,” she said. “I have to check on a few things.”

He began to turn to ask her the proper method for navigating the museum, but she was nowhere to be found. With a

calm resignation, he started nearest the door, taking in the stunning pictures that were presented before him. There were images of bodies that looked like they were disintegrating into their constituent parts, stars exploding in showers of gamma rays, waves emitted from eyes and ears and mouths, X-rays from the tiniest of decaying particles.

He leaned into the images, looking for pencilled information at the bottom. There were no names, no titles for each work, yet below the photographs, between their ends and the mattes surrounding them were unique sets of seven shapes, runes Nick had never seen before. Beside the shapes were the dates of the works, ranging from several decades ago for the simpler, more conventional images to only a few years before for the most complex and byzantine.

The ambiguous and haunting works pulled him deeper into the museum. Every few steps, a light ahead of him would slowly rise in luminosity as the ones behind him dimmed off. The gradual rising and falling caused a wave of sleep to sweep across his head and land in his jaw.

Checking his watch, he saw that it was only a few hours before the sun would rise. He wondered where Cora had gone off to. Pulling back his mask and rubbing his eyes, he found a leather couch surrounding a great central pillar in the gallery and sat down. He rested for a minute, realizing he could sleep there if need be, but stood up to continue on. The images drew him forward on a path to see where the focus of the man's work had ended.

He paused and thought of his own father, dead for years. He'd collected branding irons, lining the walls with dozens of them, each one imprinted with the mark of their owner's ranch. Their rusted symbology had bewildered and enthralled Nick in his young age, gave him a window into the obsessions of the earlier generations. And so he took these rows of images in, watching the way they flowed, trying to intimate the deeper meanings in the old man's works.

Rounding a corner and blinded by the darkness and his mask, he stumbled on a low step, the block marking the threshold

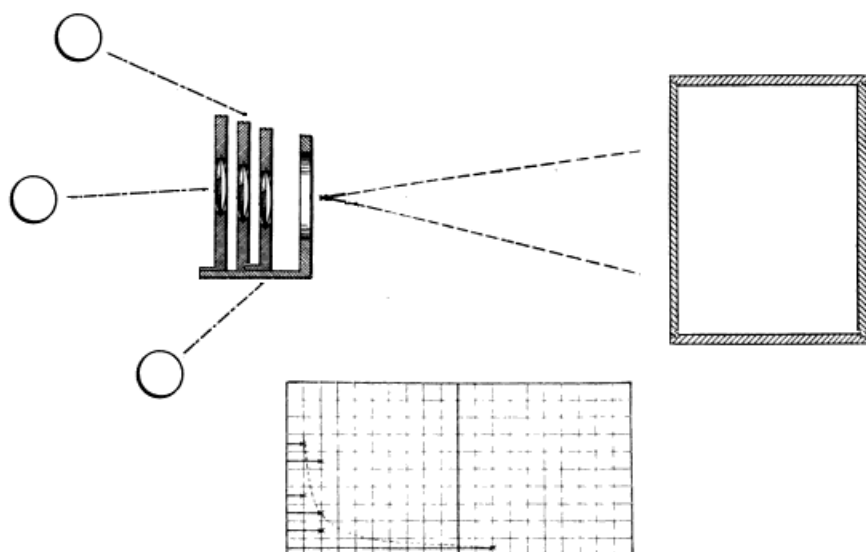


Fig. 33.
Distortions

into a new room. He caught himself, steadying his body on the white granite-cladded wall of the small connecting hallway. Slowly, the lights ahead of him rose and a new room broke before him, cleaner, more majestic than the one he'd previously been in. The walls were a polished stainless steel, the graining a pattern of swirls and whorls capturing the moonlight that streamed through the plate glass windows.

The new room was one grand circle and in the dim light he could faintly make out images lining the inside walls, staring in upon him. He stepped forward to the first and a small light illuminated the image from above. Nick remembered it, the face. It was familiar. It was an image of a child from a baseball game. He stood behind a thick green railing, a worn mitt in his hand. Nick looked closer, bringing his face nearly to the print to make out the finer details. The cracked orange seats, the smiling faces behind him, the baseball hurtling in through the left side of the image. The boy was oblivious. Nick remembered the crying parents on the news.

He felt sick, wondering if this new room was for news photographs. He turned to the next frame. It was black-and-white, the center of the image a bright explosion of a flash obviously from a newspaperman. Far to the right of the photograph, a woman was running towards the foreground, her left arm extended outward, clutching something, it wasn't clear. To the left was the blurred front end of a large truck, taller than the entire image, but the tread on the tire and the chrome emblem on its hood clearly visible.

He didn't recognize her, but realized she must have been killed, as well. The next photographs were of a family standing on the edge of a great amber-colored canyon, smiling, unknowing, a young couple crossing the street, deep in conversation, a young girl on a corner, waving to the picture taker as a crack formed in the wall behind her. He felt nauseous.

Between each mounted photograph was a thin, oblong window and he could see that it was beginning to rain again, big soft drops that clattered on the glass and the metal rooftop above. Beside the window, Nick could see a small glass orb embedded

into the wall, the size of a small coin. He turned left and saw others along the wall. Turning right, he saw more.

There was a creak from across the room. Nick turned and saw the man wheel himself into the room, his holiday mask a splattering of hunter green atop a deep, unending black and overlaid with geometric blue lines. Order and chaos. His grey hair emerged from behind the edges of the ceramic. Nick watched his weathered hands grip the wheels, propelling himself across the slate floor. The chair stopped.

From behind the mask came a voice, hoarse, but angled, enunciated. "I'd prefer them all to be random, but it gets harder."

Nick was frozen in place, his arms unable to rise from his sides. His legs felt cemented to the floor. He tried to speak, tell him how disgusted he was at the work, but only a hoarse crackle came from his throat.

The man spoke for him. "I didn't take these, no. Purchased them all from disgusted photographers, some driven almost to the point of insanity. Bought the negatives, the rights, the moral weight of each. It's thrilling, no? The slight moments when the universe tilts on itself, spilling some unfortunate soul's life across the great expanse, never to be recovered."

Nick thought of the glass orbs, like eyes. Like lenses. He stepped backwards toward the wall, trying slowly to make his way to the door that lead to the main body of the museum, back to the entrance, his car, safety.

"I met a man in a bar once. We drank Myers's rum for hours after the sun set." The man rolled his wheelchair to the arc of glass overlooking the river. "He became increasingly unhinged as the bottle emptied." The man paused, turned towards Nick. "Surely, you remember the Key Tarro killings, at the resort?"

Nick nodded slowly, stalling, begging for time. He remembered back at how the massacre had dominated the news for months. He'd only been a child, but it was all so clear. He thought back to the maps showing how the killer had moved from the resort up the highway with all the little red dots showing the victims along the way.

"This stranger, completely glazed over at that point, tells

me that he was the one that did the killings at the beach. I told him to get off it, that they tracked the murderer that night to a beach house. That's what happened, remember? The building caught fire from the flash grenades and he died in the house. But he goes on and tells me that, just by sheer coincidence, it was a completely different guy that did the killings on the roadway. Two madmen in the same general area that looked kind of the same and all before surveillance cameras. Everything seemed to fit. So this guy at the bar tells me he had actually passed the other killer on the roadway, stared him in the eyes and tossed the gun he'd used into the back of this guy's car. When the police finally caught up with the roadway killer, they followed him to the house, had the standoff, and then the house caught fire. The gun was still in the back seat the next morning."

Nick tried to nod, tried to move his body towards the exit.

"I'm not sure if I believe him, but that confluence of events. It's remarkable."

An owl screeched outside the windows, startling Nick. His body released itself from the grip of terror. He inched ever closer to the exit, wondering where Cora was. No words came to him, no repudiation for her father. He felt the lenses in the wall boring into him, silently watching, waiting for whatever was to befall him. He couldn't bear to look up at the ceiling, at the endless void that held any number of terrors waiting to extinguish him.

The old man began to remove his mask and Nick ran, slipping on the marble floors, steadying himself on the stainless steel walls. There was a crash behind him, but no time to turn back and see the implement of destruction. The lights ahead of him flicked on, the ones behind him dimming in a trail. The kaleidoscopic photographs he'd examined only a minute ago swirled around him in a fever dream of neon swirls. As he neared the entrance, the thin doors slid open and he ran out, his feet digging into the soft gravel of the driveway. He threw his mask onto the ground and took in deep breaths.

Fumbling for the keys in his pocket, he grabbed the car door and threw himself in. The engine turned over and as he reversed out of the lot, he looked back towards the museum,

wondering if Cora would come running out. The thin horizontal windows showed through into the gallery and, in them, Nick could see the maskless faces of Cora and her father, seemingly disembodied, floating there, watching him flee in terror.

Nick knew this was how mistakes happened. As he swung the car around, he saw lenses everywhere, in the trees, on the telephone poles, in the curbs dividing the highway. He took a deep breath, tried to steel his hands. He told himself he wasn't going to die tonight.

Looking up at the rearview mirror, he saw that the thin bit of glass and aluminum was askew from his rush inside the car. As he reached up to align it, he could see, reflected in a sharp sliver of moonlight, the battered camera that he'd come so far to fix had settled in the backseat. Rounding a bend in the road, he reached back and grabbed the camera, throwing it out the window in one smooth motion.

Nick sped away, a bright flash exploding from the black box as it hit the ground, illuminating the night and capturing, in one brief moment, in its own unique way, all that existed before it.

The Baying Gap

I found the tunnel by accident. I'd walked by its general vicinity for years, never knowing that a secret lay beneath the forest floor, and yet, as I walked on the pathway a few miles from my home some years ago, all changed.

It was springtime then and I noticed a small grey cat watching me from the edge of the path, peering out from the wild lilac, its great big eyes hesitantly hoping for some bit of charity, and I was, alas, drawn in and away from my normal routine. Always an animal lover, I regularly began to bring scraps of food for the poor stray.

This continued throughout the summer and early autumn until one day I found a small insulated pet carrier set out on the curb by a neighbor for trash day. Quickly thinking this could be used as shelter for the feline, I lugged it home, greatly increasing the insulation and layering the bottom with blankets. I installed a piece of soft vinyl for a door and it was complete. Winter would be coming soon and this would make the perfect home for the cat.

As I lugged the small house into the woods, I trekked farther in than I normally would had I simply been feeding the cat, mainly to hide the structure from any passersby that would remove it as trash or kids that would damage it for fun. The cat, which I had taken to calling Otto after a great uncle of mine, although I didn't actually know the gender, had become quite friendly with me, yet he stopped short of letting me pet him. Often, he would simply watch from a few feet away until I left, eyeing each of my movements, never giving me an inclination of his thoughts, but on that day, whether understanding my compassion for it or not, I can't say, it stayed no more than a few inches from my feet as I walked back into the woods.

It was at this far point, some fifty yards from the asphalt and gravel of the path, that I saw the thin architrave of a rock

ledge above the small opening of the tunnel. Even then, just that small bit of a window into another world was enough to entice me. Walking over, I could feel cold air emanating from the small black opening and I, thinking it was perhaps of the network of limestone caverns that crisscross beneath the western portions of our great state, felt some measure of vitality when examining the connection to a possible underground labyrinth.

Placing the cat house on the ground, I knelt closer to the opening and could distinctly hear a low hum, a subterranean throbbing that reverberated through the soft stone of the hidden breach. I felt compelled to investigate further, to see what mysterious domain might possibly be connected to the tunnel, but lacking any proper equipment, I simply opened the can of tuna I'd brought to entice Otto into his new home and placed it inside the house. Standing a few yards away, I watched as he entered for the first time, listening as he hungrily ate from the tin. He failed to emerge and I imagined him laying down to sleep, comfortable for the first time in his life.

With autumn slipping away, I returned to the spot the next weekend with a flashlight and pocketknife, hoping to uncover at least some hidden bit of the howling void. Otto watched as I laid on my stomach and pulled myself partway into the tunnel. I shone the light in and was able to see the smoothed walls of a well-worn space. It seemed safe, the routineness of it, the ritual of use that it plainly showed.

My mind returned to the stories I'd heard in my youth while visiting the limestone caverns west of my home. It was always a rogue explorer that slid down into the cracks and crevices and discovered the milk-white wondrous world of stalactites and stalagmites. Their shapes, so eternal, so unique, had fascinated me then and began to renew their pull. This allure drove any thoughts of danger – be they snakes, raccoons, opossums, or other subterranean creatures – from my mind.

So I pressed on, head first, my flashlight in one hand and knife in the other. Terrifyingly, the tunnel quickly became narrower as I pulled myself farther in. Glimpses flashed across my mind of being wedged into the crevasse without the ability to

move, yet I was able to shirk them and continue on. Still, the passage grew smaller.

With my head facing deep into the earth, and realizing then what a poor and unsafe choice I'd made, I wondered if a passerby would even hear my cries for help. I cursed myself for being so enthralled by the possibilities, yet so short-sighted in my attack. At that moment, I felt on my leg the fur of Otto, his cold nose brushing against my ankle as my pant leg pulled up against the wall of the narrow confines. His purr counterbalanced the one that still emanated from the origin of the tunnel. I knew if I was to continue taking care of the poor feline, I'd have to get myself out, whether by going forward or backward, it was no matter.

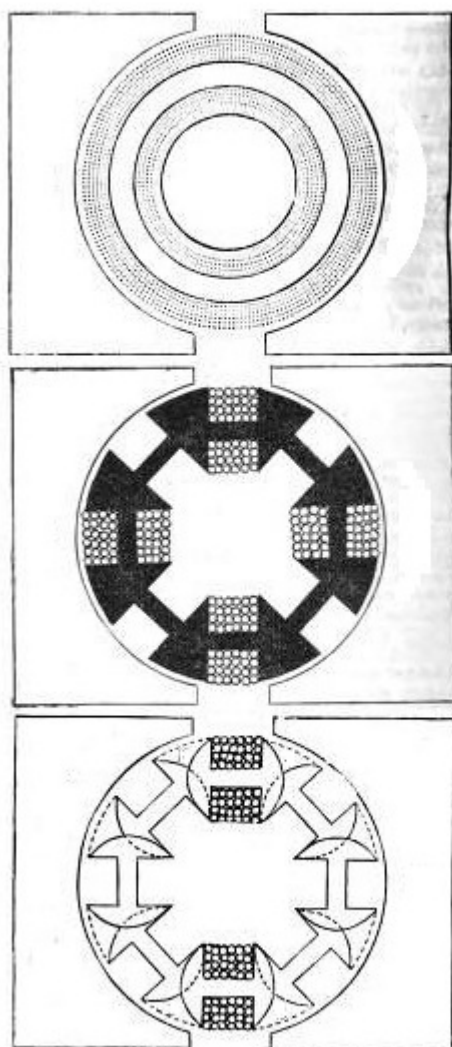
As I waited there for a moment catching my breath in the tight space, I twirled the flashlight, trying to find any respite from the claustrophobia that was beginning to overtake me. In the darkness I saw a small blue glow in the space ahead. The small dot was soft around the edges and I could see that it slowly danced in the distance, shifting its shape as it pulsed rhythmically. I watched it, my mind lost in the way it rippled, mesmerized by the patterns the shadows made on the walls. To say the color and movement of the light was enchanting is to cut short and demystify that which pulled me deeper into the subterranean opening. I had to go farther, I knew it.

Despite the diminishing space of the tunnel, I was able to pull myself deeper in, the blue glow growing, until, at one point, my grasping hands reached only air. I realized that there was a cavern at the end, just as in my childhood dreams. I peered down with my flashlight and saw the floor was not far. Tumbling out of the opening, I took in the size of the chamber. The room was roughly ten feet wide, with the ceiling only a few feet above my head, and from where I stood at the front wall, there were roughly twelve feet to the back wall.

Twelve simple feet to the blue glow in all its glory.

Against that far end, the shimmering spot began a few feet off the ground and was about a yard in diameter, casting a weak light into the room and throwing shadows back to the wall where I'd entered. It looked as if the surface of a beautiful lake, dappled

COOLING AND
CONTAINMENT CHAMBER



KEYNOLDS

by the summer sun, had been peeled off and hung from the wall. I moved around to the side of the glow, realizing that it wasn't actually set into the stone backing, but floated a few inches off of the rockwall behind it.

Again, I got lost in spectral beauty of the glow, analyzing it from every direction, trying to see into it, through it, find any deeper meaning. All the while, the soft rumbling continued unabated, seemingly rising up out of the ground, a chorus from the earth. I felt a certain compulsion to touch the glow's deep blue, but had never seen such a natural phenomenon and decided to explore the rest of the chamber with my flashlight beforehand.

While no great underground labyrinth like the western hollows, I found several interesting details indicating previous exploration of the chamber. Firstly, several sets of cast iron metal hooks were embedded at regular intervals along two horizontal lines running down the sides of the room leading up to the glow. I ran my finger along their curves, the tips pointing back towards the tunnel, and figured they'd must have been driven into the wall with long masonry screws, for they held remarkably well despite my attempts to dislodge them.

Secondly, carved into the left wall was "M. Reynolds, 1903." I ran my fingers over the etching, noting the smoothness and weathering that had occurred over the past hundred years. I memorized the name, intent on looking up further information on the brazen explorer.

Third, and finally, at the far end of the room, in a great circle of steel around the plane of the blue glow, was a track that ran in a complete loop. It resembled an inverted train track, in that it was concave instead of convex, perhaps allowing for a barrier to be placed into the void and seal up the end of the tunnel, dividing the room into two sections.

As I ran my hand along the smooth iron, the sound of the chamber stopped. I paused, trying to slow my heart and remove its beating from ears, but no sound returned. I felt uneasy without the dull roar, the void of it making the hair on my arms stand.

So, foregoing any further searching, I turned my flashlight back up to the opening where'd I'd entered and saw Otto there

watching me, his swollen black eyes shrinking as the beam of light hit them. I'd forgotten all about him in my explorations. With a particularly cold late autumn night setting in, I knew he would have to get into his new house soon and so I climbed back up to the tunnel opening, pulling myself as fast as possible out to the woods and back to the real world. Winter was close and when I finally felt the cool air of the surface, it had already turned dark. I shone the flashlight in a path for Otto to walk along back to his house and, satisfied, I returned to the path to make my way home.

Eager to reach home and catalog the fruits of my search, I checked my watch for the time. It seemed to have jumped forward. Always a forgetful person, I'd purchased myself a self-winding watch that gets its time through radio signals from an atomic clock. It was a perfect timepiece without the ability of user error and so I stared in shock at it as I realized that three hours had passed since I first crossed the threshold of the tunnel opening. I'd accounted for, at the most, one hour in my initial exploration and investigation, but could not figure where the other two had gone.

I quickly walked back home, pondering the discrepancy. I ruled out losing track of time, for I'd been lucid the entire journey. Yet, it had happened. The watch was infallible. If the loss was due to some inherent power within the design of the cavern, I would have to wait for a large window of time for further exploration. Getting stuck in the dark could prove disastrous.

I began to take on a heavier load of work at the shop, so that, combined with the days growing shorter up until the equinox, barred me from being able to make any visits to the site except for the food that I brought for Otto. However, a few weekends later, I visited the local library to find what information I could on the solitary figure linked to the cavern, this 'M. Reynolds' of the inscribed walls. I left my name and address with the kindly librarian and, returning two days later, she presented me with a stack of copied articles from the local paper on the enigmatic figure.

The first was a piece on the A.P. Freeman & Sons Company, a general goods business that had been based in town a century before. Included with the article was an accompanying

photograph that showed one Marcel Reynolds posing along with the rest of the company, a group of fifteen men outside the great doors of their warehouse. The image was only a few inches wide and quite grainy, although I could make out Reynolds' thick beard and broad shoulders as he stared sideways, seemingly eyeing the patriarch of the business, A.P. Freeman. The owner himself was seated to the side of the group in a gleaming wheelchair, emotionless, but for the strong hands gripping the armrails. I cursed that there was not a better photograph of the explorer, but tried to divine what clues of his personality and mood that I could from the antique profile.

The second article was more of a personal interest piece, covering Reynolds' attempts to integrate an ammonia-cycle refrigeration system onto the back of an early delivery truck. Reynolds had attracted considerable attention, due not only to the cost and complexity of the early coolant system, but also by having one of the first automobiles in the town. Notably, the article described his intense eyes and focused passion.

The final article was a crime report, stating that Reynolds had been arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct two years after the refrigeration article. The article described him with no fixed address, a seemingly far fall for the once company man and struggling inventor.

The librarian searched a week longer, but the mysterious man disappeared from the record after that, so I took to the town's cemeteries to find him, walking all throughout the winter, checking the carved marble and limestone for a name, but found nothing. Wherever the man had ended up, nobody could know.

I traveled to Otto's house many times that winter, but was unable to muster the energy to investigate the cavern further. The newspaper mentions of Reynolds had unsettled me to some degree and, quite honestly, the cold and dreariness gripped me tighter than usual as I waited for the spring thaw. But as the days grew longer and new growth emerged from the earth, I again felt the inquisitive spark that had driven me – and certainly Reynolds a century before – to exploration.

So, come April, I returned. Otto followed me as usual and

as I slipped into the subterranean chamber I found nothing had changed, save a bit of water on the ground. Stooping and dabbing my fingers in a small puddle, I brought the liquid up to my nose and inhaled. It smelled faintly of apples, perhaps York Imperials or Taliaferros. I looked to Otto and saw nervousness in his face as his ears perked and his whiskers pulled back. What I had failed to notice on my entry was the absence of the usual humming sound, although now it returned, rising quickly in intensity and cycle.

Shocked by the change not only in sound, but in overall oppression of the room, I turned to leave back through the tunnel, but dropped my flashlight in my rush. I knelt to pick it up as a sheet of water spilled across the floor of the room, exiting from the shimmering source in a thin sheet. The water came faster than I would have expected, waves of it spilling over each other, and in the small, confined space of the chamber, it soon rose to my ankles and then up to my calves.

I wondered how such a large amount of liquid was exiting from the portal. I thought that perhaps, in the dark, my eyes were simply seeing the scene incorrectly and the water was spilling from some crack in the wall, a connection to an underground river suddenly being breached. But the quickness with which the water rose forced me to contemplate my situation at the moment. I had to find the exit and get out.

As the water continued unabated, the flashlight began to float, spinning its yellow arc across the room as I tried vainly to reach it. A forceful blow of the liquid knocked me to my knees and by the time I had pulled myself up from the wet ground, my nose and eyes had been splashed with the sweet-smelling water. I coughed, bringing up some of it that had entered my mouth, and realized that the water was still spilling from the source, the surface reaching up to my waist.

At that point, I conceded the flashlight as lost despite it still spinning, throwing chaos around the room, casting shadows in the tumult. Being lifted off the ground as the water reached my chest, I pushed down against the floor and leapt for the tunnel. Otto was long gone. Reaching the lip, I pulled myself forward out into the spring day. Otto stood watching me from beneath a

blossoming pawpaw tree, his small eyes sizing me up, in all certainty finding me the dumber of the two of us.

I wrung the water from my clothes and checked my watch. The three hours were gone, lost to some entity I had no way of knowing. As the day was winding down, there was a chill on the air, so I hurried home to shower and change.

Although I know illnesses only arise from viruses and bacteria, I couldn't help but think later that night that the intense sickness I came down with was a result of the chilly subterranean water I'd been in. A week passed before I felt better, before I left the night sweats, fever dreams, vomiting, and head-splitting headaches behind. Lying in bed those hurried nights, I often thought of Reynolds, how his mind must have raced upon first entering the cavern, what he thought of the blue glow, the connection between the hooks, the track, and the refrigeration truck, and what drove him to shambles. The thread of it all escaped me.

As my health returned, I left to check upon Otto, who'd had to fend for himself during my absence. Feeling strangely compelled to enter the cavern as I neared the mouth – though I'd had no intention to do so upon that visit – I quickly fed my friend and returned home to get another flashlight. I figured that the water would still be in there, so a quick check proving the chamber was still flooded would sate any lingering curiosity.

I climbed in, drawn by some unknown force deep within my body, and found the tunnel and room both bone dry. My heart raced as I saw the blue glow, yet I felt dizzy and fell to my knees. Coughing terribly, I put my hands on the ground and watched in disbelief as a stream of water poured from my nose and mouth, pooling together on the floor into one mass and slowly inching its way back towards the portal, animated by some power within itself. Reaching a point directly below the quivering mass, the thin stream rose up and rejoined the body it had originally come from.

I realized then, in that awful moment, what Reynolds had been attempting, what all the devices and contraptions were for. The portal wasn't some kind of bridge between two worlds, an idea which I had originally contemplated, but been reluctant to

give any credence to for its harrowing possibilities. No, as I stood there watching the small puddle of water that had been inside me reform with its greater entity, the dread realization came upon me – the blue intensity was no doorway, but rather a creature unto itself, the water pouring out simply an extension of its form, a stretching, a malleable growth. The whole terrible monster was confined in those rippling borders, able to enlarge and reduce itself at will, and now the small bit that had been taken from it through my ingestion had been returned to its parent.

That was why I'd been so sick, for a foreign creature was inside me, doing exactly what, I could never say. It lived for that week within my body, a parasite waiting for its opportunity to join back with the brood. That gaping maw was the home of a monster, more insidious than those on the bottom of the sea or the kind kept in laboratory freezers. This was an organism that could grow exponentially and separate itself into bits and pieces, each keeping part of the hivemind, able to control the lifeforms it lived inside. That was why I felt such a strong compulsion to enter the cavern even as my logical mind resisted it.

I knew then that Reynolds had meant to capture it through his refrigeration experiments. He'd attempted to imprison the terrible beast, as one would a lion or elephant for a carnival, but as to whether he had, I could never know. Yet it was clear that the exercise had driven him mad.

I clambered out of the chamber, Otto nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he'd understood the evil that had transpired and made his way back to the safety his house. Rushing home, I took various emetics and purgatives in fear of what might have still been inside me. My health returned and although I felt few lingering effects from the foreign liquid, I refused to enter the cavern over the summer and autumn. What to do about the droning cavern and the creature within weighed heavy on me throughout those long days.

It became clear to me, though, that I had to save Otto for I feared that the liquid would spill out of the chamber and he'd possibly try to drink it. I stepped up my feeding regimen for him, sometimes returning two or three times a day to gain his trust. I swapped the house that I had originally made him for a cat carrier

and, as summer wound down, he had begun to let me pet him. One day in October, I quickly shut the door of the carrier after he'd entered and brought him home to my house. Despite his piercing moans, he eventually calmed down and adjusted to living with me.

As winter set in, my life with Otto fell into a routine until one day I received a letter in the mail from the local library. The librarian had kept my address and when a patron brought a letter found in one of the books to her attention, she forwarded it along to me. It had been written to the local newspaper, but apparently never sent. My eyes fell to the signature at the bottom, Marcel Reynolds.

Reynolds opened the letter begging for an audience, to be taken seriously. But as it began to ramble on, Reynolds devolved into describing various visions he'd had, worlds of green and red, scorching dreamscapes of marble and limestone, humanless vistas where other organisms had risen to the apex. Devoid of religious overtones, Reynolds likened the glow to a visitor from another plane of existence. I believe he must have been taken over by the creature more than I had been or, perhaps, his simpler times called for a more outlandish interpretation of events. The final part of his letter discussed the hooks, which had been used to form some kind of a net to capture the creature, the rail, which was a failed attempt to stop the water spilling out from the glow, and the truck, a final experiment to keep a bit of the liquid in stasis after it had separated off.

The letter was dated after the arrest article. These surely must have been his end days. I imagined madness, sanatorium stays, even suicide. It had destroyed him. I had to avenge him.

In the depth of that terrible winter, I knew what I had to do. Leaving Otto in the house, I began going to the cave every day after work, hours lost not only in the waiting, but in the two hour time discrepancy that bled hours from my life. I waited, staring into the depths of the blue glow for some kind of answer to it all, the dull roar always lulling me into a half sleep as the hours passed.

When, finally, the sound stopped.

I prepared myself, pulling out a bottle I'd brought and backing towards the tunnel, ready to jump. As the water spilled out in the same thin sheet as it had been before, I dipped the bottle into the face of the wave. Spinning the lid tightly onto the top, I leapt for the tunnel opening. For a moment, I saw a vision of Otto standing there watching me as he once had done. Reaching the above-ground world as a snowstorm began to cover the town, I slipped my shoes off and tossed them into the hole. I retrieved a pair of shoes I'd left in a container in the woods and raced home to put the bottle in the freezer.

It was a signal to the creature. I knew not the extent of its powers, but felt forced to bluff that I could do more, that humans could do more. The bottle sits now in the chest freezer of my basement, the sole occupant of the padlocked tomb. Otto avoids the basement entirely, his natural instincts protecting him from the unreal and the risky.

I bricked up the entrance to the chamber and covered it with dirt, hoping to give the impression that no subterranean wonders ever existed at the spot. Every few weeks I check up on the depression to assure myself that no more evil has spilled forth from that yawning chasm, that the creature hasn't made any more attempts to exit into our world through that wailing sanctum, but I simply can't bring myself to listen for the roar. To place my ear to the earth would be too much.

I often think about what drove Reynolds insane. Was it his obsession with the cavern, with the glow? Could it really have overtaken his life? Did he ever succeed in obtaining a piece of the monster? Had it somehow escaped and corrupted him? Or did it simply get into his body one day long before as he quietly and curiously explored the chamber, invading him as it did me? I'll never know.

Still, on quiet summer nights, when there's no sound in the house but Otto's soft purr, I try to decide if I've been changed, faintly wondering how different I am than that poor company man that went mad.

Muscle Scars

The intercom pinged to let Mauricia know there was an office meeting in fifteen minutes. She rubbed her eyes. There were still five hours left in the day and she already felt burnt out. The grey walls of her cubicle stood silent over the climate-controlled office. She looked at the folders overstuffed with memos and manilla envelopes that needed to be sealed and stamped, but couldn't bring herself to care. The day felt like it would never end.

Slipping out the side door into the hallway, she ducked into the bathroom and into the farthest stall. Everything was white – white walls, white floor, white ceilings. The water was so clear against the white toilet that, it too, seemed white. She sat on the edge of the seat. Unclasping her purse, she sighed softly, not of boredom but of resignation, and pulled out a small, teal vial. Breaking the cap, she turned her head sideways and let a drop of the liquid trickle into her ear. Her left hand began to shake and she leaned her head forward onto the metal handrail before her eyes began to close.

Hugging the gas tank of her motorcycle, Mauricia leaned her body inward to take the banked turns. Great fluted concrete walls rose up to her left, protecting the endless loops of cantilevered road from the wilds beyond the absolute edge of the city walls. The overflow turnarounds of the city's roadways spilled out of the massive inverted cone of the metropolis, there being no more space inside the dense structure to connect the roads in any logical way. As the city climbed higher into the sky, the roadways followed along in succession, forming new connections that hadn't been planned, looping around the outsides of the growing fountain of urban mass.

She tried to control her breathing. The horizon usually

calmed her. If it had been during the day, she'd have been able to see for miles through the interstices between the panels, but it was night and dark, and only small slivers of the purple sunset were able to make their way through. Mauricia tried to push from her mind the fact that a thin band of concrete and asphalt separated her from the deep void below and to the side of her. She usually never rode this fast.

The road ahead was empty, but as it detected her motorcycle, instant explosions of light cascaded up the concrete to illuminate her way. The road banked hard back to the left and Mauricia turned her head to see her pursuers. Three bikes followed in her wake. It had been stupid to show up at the den alone. They'd gotten the better of her before she could subdue them, but she was able to slip out through the elevator while they argued, making it to her bike, hoping to lose them. The engines roared behind her.

In her helmet, she cycled through voice recordings she'd catalogued from the banks of discarded data. The static domesticity of the messages always calmed her, brought her back to a place she'd probably never experience again. The husky voice of an older man asking his wife to buy a certain brand of crackers from the store. A young woman telling her mother of her newborn's first word. A teenager begging to stay out late. She pushed the fear from her mind.

An air current whipped up to her right, sliding between the city walls and the roadway. Her left leg slid on the foot peg, bringing her calf closer to the exhaust pipe. She could feel the heat even through the thick leather of her clothing. The smell of it burning seeped up through the suit.

Looking back, she could see one of the group gaining on her. The leather of her gloves creaked as she accelerated on the straight-away. The gloves were a deep rust color and she could see the lines and wear from years of use as the lights to her side illuminated the way. There was no route of escape out on the loops except speed. She accelerated. The exhaust pipe began to melt through her boots and pants, but there was no time to reposition herself. Even a small change could slow her down.

A great section of the city rose above her to the right, cantilevering out and arching above the roadway. A quarter mile ahead of her, she could see a portion of an apartment that hung down nearly to the concrete walls bridging the road and the outer world. Certainly illegal to inspectors, but not much of a priority.

Mauricia bit her lip as the exhaust pipe scalded her skin. Fighting back the pain, she ran through the safest scenarios in her mind of how she could get to the wall, but none seemed feasible with her speed and pursuers. There was no other option. Bracing herself, she twisted the handlebars, causing the bike to spin out from beneath her. The front wheel swerved wildly and she was thrown into the air. As the bike skidded to a stop, she could see the riders behind her swerve to miss the wreckage, spinning out of control. Before she hit the ground, she queued up a message of a father talking to his son.

The impact nearly knocked her out as she slid across the roadway, the brass rivets of her breastplate sparking in the night. She blacked out for a moment, but came to as the damaged recording looped over itself. *I love you, I love you, I love you*, it rattled on. Still sliding, she was able to turn herself over and focused on the apartments above her. She could see that the part hanging close to the wall was an illegal air conditioner, the bolts barely attaching it to the apartment above it. As she came to a stop, she saw that one of the pursuers was still approaching her.

The leather of her outfit had protected her during her crash, but the exposed skin of her burnt leg had rubbed all along the asphalt of the road. The pain was nearly blinding, but she was able to grab onto the textured concrete of the wall. Reaching the top, she balanced herself on the foot-wide cap. *I love you, I love you, the recording continued.*

She forced herself to not look back onto the world below, the realm outside the city walls. Even in the dark, she knew there were clouds just off the city edge. The wind pulled at her feet as she saw one of the pursuers bringing his bike to a halt and hopping off of it. Adrenaline subdued the pain as she leapt to the hanging air conditioning unit, only just making it, and pulled herself to the vent opening above it. With a forceful kick, she

separated the unit from the structure and heard it crash into the concrete wall and onto the asphalt below. The new gap would be too large for anyone to make the jump.

The vent tunnel was hot and damp, but Mauricia had no energy to crawl farther through the passageway. She slumped down against the wall, letting the voice from the recording wash over her. *I love you, I love you.* Sleep came hard and fast.

The roadways intersected in bridges and overpasses, cut-unders and interchanges. Mauricia tried to zone out as the traffic inched along the interstate. Her commute had originally been no more than twenty minutes, but had inched up to almost an hour in the past year as change took hold of the landscape. Cars ducked in and out, never signalling. Clutch, gas, brake. Clutch, gas, clutch, brake. Her mind wandered.

The sun was setting and she looked up to the exit sign, the reflective green exploding in the sky. She still had four exits to go. Twisting the wheel hard, she swerved onto the ramp, flew through the toll booth, and onto the main road. A car cut her off as she made a turn. The rage bubbled up for a minute and she thought of chasing it down, running it off the road. Or slowly tailing it until the driver got home and then puncturing the tires. But the anger subsided. It was hard for it to stay at the top anymore as days bled into each other. She looked right and saw endless tracts of cream and tan and copper houses stretched out in all directions, climbing up the hills, and let it go.

Pulling over at a gas station, she reached into the glove box, scraping her hand against the top side for the small glassine envelope taped to the surface. Grabbing it, she pulled a small paper square out and slide the textured piece under her tongue. Almost instantly, she felt the pressure inside her head change as her eyes rolled backwards. She caught herself for a second and looked back up the hills to the houses and tried to see through them to the land that was before – box elders, cottonwoods, bristlecone pines.

The concrete crumbled away. Getting out of her car, she walked to the back of the parking lot behind the station, to a spot

that a creek once ran through. Dipping her hand in, Mauricia could feel the cool water flowing between her fingers, the purity of the spring that had bubbled to the surface all those years ago. Even the sun felt different.

She walked back to the car. The cold seat enveloped her as she closed her eyes, tried to forget the steel and glass world, ever reaching for that far off place of lost beauty.

The whirr of an exhaust fan woke Mauricia in the service shaft. A slim ray of sunlight arced upward through the opening at the edge of the city and in the dim glow she inspected her injuries. The exhaust pipe had burned through her pants, leaving a bloody black wound on the inside of her left calf. The fall had scraped the right side of her body all of the way from her neck down to her protruding hip bone. The leather had protected most of her body, but had worn through in some places leaving exposed, ragged skin.

She pulled herself back to the opening, wanting to see the world raw and natural. Most people relied on the artificial light of the city, the new circadian set-up imposed by the planners, so windows were rare. As she peered over the edge, she could barely see through the clouds. The small patches of green or brown or blue were too far away to discern the details, too distant to mine their secrets, but it comforted her to know it was all still there, in some form.

Satisfied, she stood, slowly at first, gathering herself against the metal wall, before heading down the steel corridor. Apartments were to her sides and above her, but she wouldn't have been able to fit through the grates. She walked a quarter of a mile before an access hatch connected the tunnel to the street surface. Pulling herself out, Mauricia quickly crossed the interior borough of the level – Tarkhun Arms – before traveling diagonally across several other jurisdictions she was barely familiar with. Hours passed before she made it to her own apartment.

Stepping in, the small bed folded down from the wall. She sat on it, peeling the armor off of her body. She drank cold slugs from a bottle of rosemary liquor as she separated her underclothes from the wounds that had already begun to heal. Dressing them,

she lay back in bed, her head on an expensive down pillow.

She played from the bank of recordings. A son asking his mother for haircut money. A woman talking to her father about raising children. A grandmother reaching out to her grandchildren for any conversation at all.

From the small slit window above the door, Mauricia could see the interior sun setting. She could feel in her bones that it wasn't aligned with the sun she had woken up to, but there was no other choice. It would be easier to sleep now. She stopped the recordings and thought about the crew. It seemed as if they'd been ready for her. She wondered if Keir had said anything.

She sighed. It wasn't the old world she missed, but rather the old people. Everybody was out for a quick win. With her bike, the crew would be able to find her, tracing the ownership through a few shell corporations back to her address. It would take time, but they'd get to her soon. She had to hit them first. In her mind, she could see their dumb faces and their open mouths. There was no way out; the criminals were more than a simple capture to her, they were a revenge to be paid back, a hand that was forced to violence in order to prevent them from coming for her.

On the wall beside her were the cardboard wrappers from hundreds of bars of toffee. The candy company changed the design every few weeks, incorporating themes of the holidays or seasons, historical figures and nature. Mauricia ran her fingers along the ragged, perforated edges. She'd had so much wealth in her old life at such a young age, yet accumulated so little. Now, the new world had taken nearly everything and she felt compelled to hoard. The space that belonged only to herself was so small that she'd taken to managing her collection obsessively. Only the best pieces made it into the grid, but she'd been unable to get rid of the older ones, bundling them with rubber bands and running them into the air vents of the building, lengths of yarn holding them in their endless hovering.

She stared at one in particular. It was a crane standing on the water's edge. She thought that it had probably been at least a decade since that scene had played out on earth, on the ground far below her perch in the city. She remembered going to the beach as

a child, staring out the back window of her parent's station wagon, proud farm houses and signs for farmers' markets standing sentry along the roadway. The ocean had seemed so endless then, so indomitable to her young mind. But it had been conquered, destroyed. The crane wrapper deserved its eternal spot on the grid.

The last bit of fake twilight disappeared from the window and Mauricia pulled the heavy wool blanket over top of herself. Playing a recording of a university student calling home and checking up on his sisters, she dozed off to sleep. She dreamt of riding in a boat with a one-armed man through limestone canyons cut into the earth, their ragged rainbow walls surrounding the craft, comforting her. The sun shone so pure, saturating her skin and the water all around. Other, simpler dreams followed.

She woke as a great grinding sound came from the hall outside the apartment. By the time she had dressed in her tattered leather clothing and grabbed the things she'd needed, whatever had made the sound was gone, replaced by the hurried crush of people making their way to work and market, the walls lined with beggars and orphans, the air filled with the sweet smell and sputtering grease of fried bread. Mauricia left and locked the door knowing that it would probably be for the last time unless she was able to find the crew.

Crossing the concrete plaza, she looked up at the levels surrounding the opening, the walkways and windows that looked up to the sun. She knew it was an illusion, that there was another block above them and another sun and another above that level and how far on she wasn't sure, but it was a pleasant illusion, a vision of the world that once was. She crossed and caught a cart ride to another district. Stepping off, the air was cool and heavy with artificial humidity.

Keir had worked out of the back of a trepang restaurant since she'd first met him. Mauricia stared at the neon sign, the red and green flashing in the morning air, the 'G' having burnt out, and thought of drilling a hole in her head to let off some steam. She smiled, knowing that might be just what she needed.

A siren rang out. She jumped. "Move!" a man on a pedal cart yelled at her. She stepped through into the restaurant, slipped

back along the side wall to the door behind the kitchen. The door led to a small courtyard and, pausing for a moment, she stopped and took in the great bunches of gumamela flowers, pink and gold, orange and purple. A metal spiral staircase in the far corner led to the small room that her informant kept. She pushed the door open without knocking.

“Do you remember the fishing cat, Keir?”

The thin man looked up from his ledgers. The room was lined in hammered copper, walls and floor both. He adjusted his glasses as he looked up, but said nothing.

“They lived in the wetlands, hunted in the rivers, but they were all solitary. Each fishing cat its own island in a sea of other animals. There were predators, sure, that would kill a few here and there, but the species lived on. The fishing cat somehow knew intrinsically that others of its kind would survive it and so could be as careless or as cautionary as it wanted. But we built everything up so fast and there was nowhere for them to go. Recklessness did them in. The last one probably didn’t even know it was the end of its breed.”

The man closed the ledger.

“You’re the fishing cat, Keir. I’ve seen a lot of people go missing in your line of work. Hell, I don’t even know anyone else left except you. Yet you don’t realize it’s the last time your foot will grace the river’s edge.”

The man pointed across the small room to a spot behind Mauricia. “Look at that door, Reece. It’s solid chestnut, probably the only piece left on the planet. How many people could get that? You think I’m some short-sighted boxpusher that would get the upstanding portion of my clientele killed? I would never rat on you. But, please, let me surmise what happened, since I have a reasonably good idea. You rushed in there, were overwhelmed, and somehow managed to escape before trashing your bike?”

He lifted the ledger and slid the serial number plate from her motorcycle across the stainless steel surface. “You can have that, but you can’t blame me for your recklessness.”

She grabbed the cold bronze plaque, slid it into the front pocket of her jacket.

“They’ve been here since, though, I’ll give you that. I gave them some leads to get lost on, but I can’t stall forever. You’re as likely to screw up as them and then I’ll lose both sides. I’m a businessman, Reece. But, we can, however, reach a new understanding if you’re still so inclined.”

Leaning against the door, she felt the solidness of the ancient wood, the eternity of something from the earth and felt sad for a moment. She’d had to bluff, to find out if Keir had said anything to the crew he had been fencing for. He was an opportunist, but truthful in the end. He was the closest she had to a real friend anymore and that saddened her.

She switched tactics, unzipping her interior pocket, pulling out a waxed canvas bag. Tossing it to him, she helped herself to a pitcher of water on a small bookshelf against the wall. Keir opened the bag, slid out the carved piece of scrimshaw. He turned it over in the light, inspecting the ornately etched lines depicting a whaling party.

“I’m hoping this can ameliorate any complications that may have arisen between us.”

The man nodded, never taking his eyes off of the carving. He placed it on his desk, a miniature obelisk to a once-vibrant marine world. Opening the ledger, he tore out a slip of paper, quickly jotted an address onto it. Mauricia glanced at it quickly. It wasn’t near the original spot, somewhere deeper, safer. The paper was slick between her fingers, some kind of strange amalgam, not the dense, pulpy fiber she remembered from her childhood books.

She turned to leave. “I’ll either be back for more marks,” she said over her shoulder. “Or back for that.” She pointed at the scrimshaw that Keir had picked back up. He was staring at it intently, reverently, as she left.

The path to the address was long, circuitous. She had to cross multiple districts, each level and bracket its own world, with its own culture, food, speech. She bathed in it, let the differences that had become magnified since the city grew wash over her. Only thin layers of steel and concrete separated them all, but it may as well have been across a continent in the old world.

On the roads that looped around the great structure, she

could have made it in a fraction of the time, but her bike was gone and the money was thin. She grew tired. Passing what appeared to be some kind of factory, she found an alcove in a secluded alleyway. Climbing above the detritus piled up at the end, she found a small passageway that led to the edge of the city. Pulling herself in, she lay her head next to a small panel used to access the outer walls. A thin bit of the rubber seal had worn away and, if she closed one eye, she could just see through to the outside world beyond. The sky rippled with clouds, the golden, all-encompassing light of the true sun bursting from seemingly all directions.

She remembered her grandmother's attic and the diamond of stained glass that had looked out over the deep black forest beyond. She would move her head, looking at the world through red or blue or green or yellow, each color creating a new shade of the world, unique possibilities that filled her day-dreaming mind. She'd been imaginative once and yet it seemed so painfully long ago.

A giant turbine somewhere near her hummed on. Mauricia lay her head down on the cold steel and closed her eyes.

The electronic lock beeped, snapping the door open. Mauricia walked into the penthouse apartment, the windows looking out across the city to the water. She trudged to the kitchen and dug through the refrigerator, looking for dinner, anything to fill her. She found a pork roast from her mother and cut the meat into slices before microwaving them. She glanced at the telephone on the wall and thought of calling home, but decided she wanted to eat in peace.

With a tumbler of rye, she ate and looked out at the cars below, the small dots that signaled business and autonomy and something more than locking yourself inside an apartment all night, but from her apartment's height, all she could think was that they looked like a dozen fireflies in the summer night, a scene she'd seen a hundred times at her family's cabin during those far-off summers. All of them jostling in the darkness for the best position, bumping and turning, the points of light searching for

meaning.

The weekend loomed large atop her and Mauricia hated it, fearing the expectation of the parties, the drudgery of discussing her work with people she barely knew and may never see again. She felt her twenties were a vacuum devoid of any real meaning. She'd wanted to be an artist once, like her father, but after his death, the drive had faded.

She placed the plate on the table and reached into the inside pocket of her jacket, fumbling for the small plastic bag that finally made its way into her fingers. As she dimmed the overhead bulbs, the moonlight reflecting off the balcony exploded inside the pink crystals in the bag.

She crossed back to the low-slung, heather wool couch and lay back on it. Reaching into the bag, she pulled out a pinch of the crystals. With her other hand, she pulled back the lower eyelid of her right eye and dropped them in. Her vision fogged for a second before returning with wild streaks of oranges and blues.

The high set in and she stared out the window, watching as a plane came in for a landing at the airport on the water. It turned, gracefully. Her mind swam. She had a vision of walking through a library. As she slowly passed each aisle, turning to look down the book-lined passageways, an elephant-headed businessman stood in each, talking to a small librarian crushed under a stack of books. Each aisle the same, the crisp, blue, double-breasted suit of the elephant man, its long trunk hanging down to the waist of a normal-sized body. She studied the rich tobacco leather of its shoes. The librarian always faced away from her, his plaid pants nearly blending into the floor as he was crumpled under the tomes. The elephant was directing the man to do something, but she couldn't slow her pace to decipher the words. All she could hear was a fragment, "forgotten in the Arctic," and she was on to the next aisle as the scene repeated, over and over.

The vision passed as she came down. She tried to sit up for a sip of water, but couldn't control her body. As she gave up, the roar of another jet overtook the building, mingling with the floor fan in the far corner. The drone put Mauricia to sleep as the moon rose in the distance, full and golden and forgotten by all those on

the ground.

Blood and bone covered the walls of the small apartment. Three bodies, what was left of them, lay sprawled across the couch and floor, holes bored into the backs of their skulls. Mauricia looked at what remained of their faces and couldn't find the anger she once had. Somebody had beaten her there, taken the glory and removed the criminal material.

She'd desperately needed the bounty. It would have given her some worth in a world that had taken away so many of her previous markers of achievement – cars, housing, clothes. The aimlessness of the new world was draining on her, but she found some consolation in sidestepping another battle. Deep down she really hadn't wanted to fight again. She wondered who had gotten to the crew. Keir? A client of his? One of their own going rogue for the bounty? It would be worth narrowing down in the future.

She leaned against the cleanest wall in the room and collected her thoughts. It was a beautiful apartment, wide and clean, far from the bustle of the next nearest district. Mauricia had noticed how depopulated it had become as she slid through the forgotten passageways, the unsavory elements having driven the old citizens to other areas. The criminals had their run of the superblock and had chosen wisely.

Though the space was without windows, she ran her hand along the far wall of the room, knew instinctively that the outside world was only a foot beyond. She could feel her position on the edge of a concave curve of the soaring city, the rare point just below a blossoming horizontal spread that was home to the wealthy and elite of each sun level.

She stepped out of the apartment, wandering down the hallway as the lightwires struggled to illuminate the row. The door of another apartment hung open. She stepped in, noticed the window. With a rag, she cleaned the soot from the pane. There was a movement outside in the sky beyond. Mauricia thought it may have been a nighthawk, the image coming to her quickly from the recesses of her memory, but it was gone in the endless black and she didn't know if they were even around anymore.

A fleeting memory came of her mother and father helping her out of a pool, faded with the hazy edges of youth. She tried to remember the hard earth of her childhood, the fields of clover, the rushing rivers, all the limits of nature surrounding her, yet seeming to reach on forever. But they hadn't gone eternal. She and everyone else had failed. She sighed. If there was anything left to see, she was too high up in the city to even see it.

Mauricia turned. There was a sound in the hallway behind her. Pulling her visor down, she slid along the wall of the apartment towards the door. The corridor had been deserted when she'd found the crew, but now it presented only danger. She wondered if her usurper had come back for more specimens. Crouching, she stuck an empty glove around the frame, hoping to draw fire from the stranger.

The sound of soft footfalls echoed off the walls, growing fainter as the form ran from the apartment. Mauricia leapt from the floor, slid on her glove, and rushed out into the hallway. It was dark, yet she felt compelled to follow, eschewing safety in the attempt at recovering some of the biological material removed from the crew. The bounty could still be hers.

She ran, the leather of her jacket creaking, the metal heels of her boots clicking in the empty hallway. Turning a corner, she saw, huddled in a corner, a small brown dog. She hadn't seen one in a decade, at least. A wave of adolescent memories rushed over her as it whimpered in the gloom.

She marvelled at the criminals' ability to traffic even in the most mundane of animals. Exotics, she'd assumed, but dogs she hadn't expected until she realized how valuable they were to the regular person, the volume that could be moved compared to rare specimens. She knelt down. The creature's fur was wet and matted, its skeleton plainly showing through a thin layer of skin. It had been loyal no matter how they had treated it.

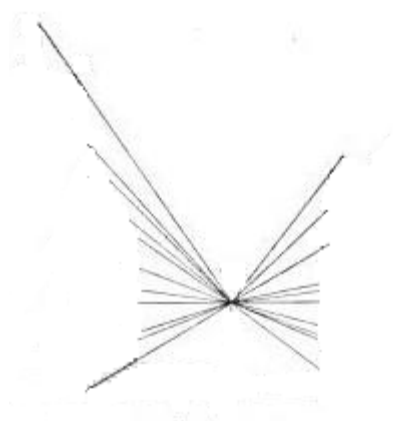
"Come here, come on," she said, sticking out her hand. He stared at her, through her to some memory of a nice life he maybe once had. She took off her glove and tried again. The dog slowly leaned forward, trying to smell her, intimate her caring. He licked her palm and Mauricia slid forward and rubbed his head, taking

him in under her arm. She could feel the warmth of his body through the gap in the leather clothing under her armpit.

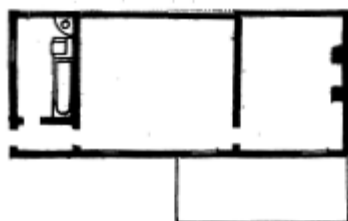
With the crew gone, she realized she could go back to her apartment now, but it would be difficult to get the dog there without anybody reporting her. A vision took hold of her, the possibility of clearing out the garbage of the abandoned block all around her, turning it into a refuge for those that couldn't fit into the larger district. Those that longed for the old world. If there were more criminals in the den, perhaps they'd get the message when they saw what had happened to their cohorts.

The dog was worth the chance, she knew it. Even the brief minute with it brought her into a completely different mindset. She thought back to what had brought her into the chases. Justice. Science. How hollow it all seemed compared to what they were capable of. But the dog was against the law, nominally, and yet it was meaning, purpose, a spark to keep her going as the rest of the citizens slowly dissipated, like the rain from the summer storms she remembered as a teenager.

It would put her outside the law for a moment, at least until the place became legitimate, and she paused to wonder if somebody would be coming for a bounty on her someday. She was ready, perhaps had been for some time, and knew it deep inside. As the dog began to calm, she slid the crane wrapper from her jacket and was strengthened, thinking of all the possibilities that spread before her.



Spontaneous Memory

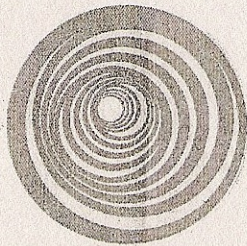


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