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MAGICAL REALISM: THE SPACE BETWEEN SPACES

by

Dallin Jay Bundy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ENGLISH

in

English

Approved:

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2010

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## ABSTRACT

## Magical Realism and the Space Between Spaces

by

Dallin Jay Bundy, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2012

Major Professor: Charles Waugh PhD

Department: English

Magical realism comes from Franz Roh, a German art historian and critic, who first used the term to describe the Post-Expressionism movement in visual art. His seminal writings and definitions on Post-Expressionism, then known as magical realism, were translated into Spanish and made available to Latin America in the mid twentieth century. Authors like Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez adopted Roh's writings and re-appropriated magical realism into literary art, and from there the new genre proliferated through the Latin American Boom and magical realism in literary fiction reached global recognition, inspiring authors across the world to take it up and continue the tradition into the present.

*The City Proper*: After a borough fire decimates the city of St. Joan's, local artist Elias Bernaise paints impossibly convincing images over the blackened ruins and draws the denizens back to the site of the fire.

*Eat She Said*: A thin and worrisome Nantucket woman, damaged by her upbringing in a work home with her emaciated mother, struggles to associate with food and eventually eats herself.

*June Eleventh on Vinegar Hill*: A crippled, elderly man searches for answers to remedy his wife's medical condition all across town on the day of an annual Civil War reenactment festival.

*Portable Hole*: A boy struggles to understand his grandfather, a corporate scientist who created a portable hole with his colleague and eventually disappeared inside of it with him.

*Prosthesis*: A young boy, whose mother is away on a dating competition television show, is babysat by his elderly, German neighbor, a formerly contracted designer and engineer of prosthetic arms.

(108 pages)

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Special thanks to my encouraging friends Landon Gray Mitchell and Amanda Utzman; when I grow up, I wish to be as good as you. To Todd Robert Petersen who dared me to write for its own sake. And finally to my wonderful parents, Daniel and Janis Bundy. You made this happen. Thank you.

Dallin Jay Bundy

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

### Magical Realism and the Space Between Spaces

This thesis project culminates my sincerest efforts to engage with magical realism in literary fiction both critically and creatively. I have prepared five original short stories in the tradition of magical realism, which I will define and explore in this critical introduction. Each of the stories is patterned to exemplify a theme of recurring, subjugated metaphors for "vacancy," "deficiency" and "prosthesis" which I use to express the conventions of magical realism, namely mimesis, derealization, defamiliarization and fabulation. Each of these terms will be fully defined in later sections of the critical introduction.

Pinning magical realism down to a neat, condensed definition has been the most difficult process of compiling this work. And, frustratingly, I see the crux and key of it now with such clarity I'm convinced I overlooked the definition a dozen times because it appeared too simple and perhaps too reductive. As will be discussed in later sections, magical realism is essentially constituted of its two parts: the expression of magic, or the impossible, within the conventions of literary realism. Of course, both are terms that require further explanation, especially since they are diametrically opposed to one another. For that explanation I will rely on a few of the most prominent critical theorists of the genre including Angel Flores, author of *El Realismo Magico* as well as several critical essays, many of which are compiled by included authors Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, editors of *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, of magical realism. Other authors whose works appear to define the genre are Matthew C. Strecher, *Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki*; Stephen M. Hart and Wen-Chin Ouyang, *A Companion to Magical Realism*;

Scott Simpkins, "Magical Strategies: The Supplement of Realism," *Literary Semiotics: A Critical Approach*, and editor of *Studies in the the Novel*; and of course Franz Roh, the man who first coined the term magical realism and the author of *In Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerie* (Post-Expressionism, Magical Realism).

Magical realism in literary fiction is slathered with controversy. Literary critics like Angel Flores insist a Latin American exclusivity to the genre, suggesting that it lived and died with a handful of authors of the Latin American Boom. Other like Matthew C. Strecher are less rigid with their treatment of the genre, asserting magical realism as a Post-Modern commodity, recognizing its influence, progression and re-utilization as adopted through translation and practice by contemporary writers, Latin American and non-Latin American alike. In order to address this controversy, I will first establish magical realism as an extension of the realism movement, then trace the term back its source, to 1925 when Franz Roh, a German art historian first used the term to describe the Post-Modern works he saw replacing the Expressionist movement.

In order to discuss the true nature of magical realism, it is necessary to examine the conventions of realism, its mother genre. According to *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism*, realism is a mode of writing that values empiricism and objectivity over former Romantic notions of writing; the point is to create art that is as true to the human experience as possible, effectively establishing the literary equivalent to anthropology, ethnography and linguistics (3-4). Realism doesn't tolerate the conventions of telling yarns or tales that divide the world into heroes and villains, nor does it necessarily create environments where the just are rewarded and the wicked punished. It doesn't seek to artificially glorify bravery or morality; in fact it seeks to



debunk such motives for writing, keeping everything on the page truer to life off the page (4-5). Magical realism, despite its inclusion of the impossible, retains the realist motive at its core. In fact, it includes the impossible in order to further explore the mundane, not in an attempt to destroy it. Franz Roh is perhaps the best voice to include on this subject, as he was the first to comment on magical realism's ability to venerate the quotidian through the examination of the incredible.

Roh remarks that Post-Expressionism, or magical realism as he later named it, embodies the "calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces" (20). It seems that through a quiet observance of the everyday, artists of Roh's time were discovering a hidden excitement that embodied the otherwise prescriptive and banal objectivity that preceded Expressionism. This idea that objects have their own faces suggests also that they have their own identity, history and perhaps even goals or desires, that Roh detected a new energy springing out of contemporary art that centered on a certain curiosity about the identity of the artist within an atmosphere that already had its own identity. It seemed the rising trend in art was no longer to express history, time and environment through the wavy lines of their essence that underlay their definite frames, but to crack open those frames and examine the effect that the underlying essence has had on humanity, to facilitate a space where that essence was free to push back on the artist's easel or mound of clay. In effect, Roh identified the crux of magical realism; it is the treatment of the quotidian as a product of the astonishingly inexplicable.

Roh further states that magical realism:

offers us the miracle of existence in its imperturbable duration: the unending miracle of eternally mobile and vibrating molecules. Out of that flux, that constant appearance and disappearance of material, permanent objects somehow appear: in short, the marvel by which a variable commotion crystallizes into a clear set of constants. (22)

Roh's described world is one where the definite is substantiated by the indefinite, where solid form takes shape out of the chaos or "flux" of "eternally mobile and vibrating molecules" (22). Roh has described an underpinning value that permeates the heart of magical realism: perhaps it is difficult to afford the term any prescriptive definition because it defines itself as that vibrating essence beneath the solid form, that swirling vortex that practitioners of magical realism insist fills up the space between spaces and ejects the material from the immaterial, forming a stable yet still volatile composite of the two. The magical realist's expression through art is one of hybridity, a fusion of confused polarities wherein anything is possible because, to the magical realist, no conceivable fantasy is more miraculous, nor phenomenally impossible, than the empirical, material components of everyday existence. It is an expression that invites the reader to consider the laws of the natural and the chaos of the supernatural as two systems that spring up from the same science, that the real and the magical are not divorced concepts, that they both occupy the same space without discrepancy and without exception.

To repeat a phrase I used earlier, magical realism, in its most crystallized form, is a genre that follows the tenets of realism and treats the quotidian as a product of astonishingly inexplicable. This understanding is the guiding star for any uncertain reader. If other genres or modes of writing bump up against magical realism to create confusion, let this standard be the rule for weeding out the impostors. If the genre does not follow the tenets of realism, in that it does not seek to strip away the romantic from the narrative, and if its inclusion of the incredible, or the magical, or the impossible derives from a motive to replace reality, rather than explore it, it is not magical realism (22).

Stephen M. Hart acknowledges the assertion that magical realism grafts the fantastic onto the realistic, but it is worth considering that, to the magical realist, the opposite is equally true: it is not the sole task of the artist to bombard the material with the mystical, but also to tag the ears of the mystical with material markers and direct the reader's attention to the occasional out-cropping of the impossible from the surface of the mundane (19). To a degree, the genre insists on superstition, and since Latin American culture is steeped in superstition and a folkloric acceptance of the supernatural, Hart proposes a kind of inevitability behind magical realism's migration to its early, Latin American writers (3). It's as if they were meant for each other.

Given a name and a spotlight from Roh's work, magical realism--this new descriptor--spiralled into other forms of art until it was scooped up by writers such as Borges and García Marquez who adopted it as a literary genre, reappropriating the term for good. Whether their response to this new genre sprang from the roots of their culture or from the apex of their intellect is a separate argument entirely, but regardless of what drove Latin American writers to shape their art under the scruples of magical realism, the point remains: the literary genre is a Latin child.

This indisputable truth pushes certain theory purists such as Angel Flores to insist that magical realism in literature is a Latin American product, and that it shouldn't be considered viable outside of Central America after the 1960s. He defines magical realism as a "continuation of the . . . realist tradition of Spanish language literature and its European counterparts" (Zamora 110). But, in reading from his text, *El Realismo Magico*, Flores isn't shy to reveal a native, literary identity with deep-seated contempt for a U.S. point of view and theory, expressing wounded pride at a comment made by Dudley Fitts, an American theorist and prolific translator of foreign texts between the 1930s and 50s.

Fitts expressed how "depressed" he felt for the "ineptitude, insecurity, immaturity, histrionic sentimentalism" and above all "the boring" character that permeates Spanish fiction narratives, particularly those of Hispanic America (Flores 19). Flores relates that Fitts recalls the "amusing despair of John Peale Bishop," an American poet between 1920-44, "who spent months studying Hispanic American novels and short stories" which he "found at once beyond recovery, and noted that the Spanish genius, at least in this hemisphere, only spoke convincingly through verse and with rehearsal" (19). Given this harsh, judgmental brow-beating from an American poet, it isn't difficult to surmise why Flores would seek to guard magical realism so jealously against foreign practitioners, especially since Fitts went on to add that, his distaste for Hispanic American literature aside, "there must be an exception to the Argentinians Jorge Luis Borges and Eduardo Mallea: their narrative fiction is paired with the best" (19).

I can't necessarily fault Flores for shaking his fist against a U.S. reappropriation of his native literary genre, demanding that magical realism remain where it began. Flores himself acknowledges the struggles that Latin American writers have had in the past due to a more difficult and taxing quality of life not typical to U.S. or French citizens (19). Latin America is storied with writers denied the luxury to lie in bed all day and muse about a social meander through the town square. Latin American fiction rose to its elevated status, achieving the crown of magical realism with its jewel, the Boom, on the backs of field-workers and soldiers. It is important to acknowledge Latin America's literary history and respect its achievements, but magical realism is a Post-Modern product, as Roh described, and with Post-Modernism, nothing is sacred or impervious to adaptation. Magical realism, as a literary genre, emerged from Latin America, but it's outgrown the constraint of national borders and entered a globally inclusive space.

Therefore, beyond Flores's call for vindication against John Peale Bishop, I exclude the viability of claims that declare otherwise, that seek to dog-ear 1950s Latin America as the page in history when magical realism happened and then disappeared.

Despite Flores's doggedness to codify magical realism as a Hispanic American property, or perhaps because of it, he has brought to light some of the most indicative and irrefutable definitions of the genre. Through further inclusion, examination and appreciation of Flores's critical work with magical realism, it's possible to deduce just what the literary genre is, what it is not and whether or not it persists today through contemporary writers.

I defer to Flores to examine the mission of the genre's fantastic elements, detailing how certain contemporary fantasy writers seek to sabotage that mission. As will be made clear, the fabrications at play in magical realism operate with different motives and achieve different effects than those at play in the fantasy genre. The desire to lump magical realism into fantasy is not uncommon, particularly among *New York Times* Best-Selling authors like Gene Wolf and Terry Pratchett who respectively have this to say on the subject: "magical realism is fantasy written by people who speak Spanish," and it "is the polite way of saying you write fantasy." These are two writers who seem to declare that differentiating magical realism from fantasy is a matter of splitting hairs, but who also seem eager to glue those split-ends back together, as if the act will imbue one with the properties of the other. But such is not the case. Fantasy differs from magical realism in many ways, but first and foremost in this way: fantasy excludes the tenets of realism. As will later be discussed, fantasy pushes for an acceptance of an alternate world, whereas realist writing seeks fidelity with real life. In the case of fantasy, the fantastic is

included to divide reality from the fantastic, and in the case of magical realism, the fantastic is included to better demonstrate reality through metaphor or contrast.

Magical realism defines itself in an indefinite, nebulous space--that curiosity to explore and question the physical properties of the material world, keeping one ear open for the activity and inclusion of the mystical. So if magical realism is in fact this indefinite thing, how can it be separate from other things, like fantasy? Angel Flores would have us recall the realism in magical realism, saying that realism is so broad and inclusive of other styles that they begin to form flanges stemming out from the root. But that root, that source of magical realism's magical properties, Flores reminds us, has a definite, immutable home: "Despite realism's wide ambition, the continual point of reference is this world" (16). Magical realism is territorial in nature. It stakes its claim on this world and refuses to venture beyond the limits of accomplished human conquest before inserting its magical elements. Stephen M. Hart declares that the fantastic "in magical realism is grafted on reality and in fantasy [it is grafted] on a never-land" (19). This genre's bond to this world suggests an exploratory desire that supersedes fantasy's predominant escapist desire.

To press further on the subject, fantasy seems to typically operate within an archetypal system where plot and character follow the rigid rails of expectation outlined by The Hero's Journey as defined in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a text on comparative mythology and narrative. Predominantly, these stories inevitably pit a noble, learning protagonist against a daunting antagonist, and in the fallout of their contest the protagonist is victorious and assumes the new role of hero. Any supernatural occurrences in such stories largely play supportive roles that ultimately lift the protagonist to a state of capability necessary to accomplish his task. The rules for such

narratives are very neat, and more often than not the end is predictable from the beginning. Flores reminds us of the unpredictable, and often dissatisfying nature of magical realism as compared to narratives in these sister-genres which adopt similar elements. He draws our attention to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, a short story that contains, perhaps, the most famous element of fantasy ever recorded in fiction. Flores wants to impress upon the reader magical realism's acknowledgment of the conventions of mythological story telling, and also its refusal to satisfy those conventions with unyielding tribute:

The transformation of Gregor Samsa into a cockroach or bedbug (Kafka uses the imprecise "monstrous vermin") is not a matter of conjecture or discussion: it happened and it was accepted by the other characters as an almost normal event. Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli* the rest follows with logical progression. The practitioners of magical realism as if to prevent "literature" from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms [construct a] narrative [that] proceeds in well-prepared, increasingly intense steps which ultimately may lead to one great ambiguity or confusion. (Zamora 116)

Here Flores shows us a few key, elemental truths to the genre. First he discusses Samsa's transformation as an actual event that occurs in the narrative, "not a matter of conjecture or discussion" (116). This puts the story in a mystical space, similar to stories from other genres. However, what follows, distinguishes magical realism with certainty, with a broad yet definite brush, from most other, perhaps confusingly similar, forms of writing. Flores notes the genre's affinity for ambiguity and confusion. These are an extension of a method of storytelling that does not follow a system or an archetype--the fundamental framework for most other narratives involving the mystical and/or the impossible. These are also an extension of the genre's loyalty to realism. At its core, magical realism is trying to express as well as question an understanding of the real

world, and in the real world, rarely do acts of nobility amount to a logical balance, and rarer still do corrupt structures of power fall apart due to injustice. In reality, most acts, most interactions, most things in general do not amount to anything of obvious clarity. If I pick up a penny early of the street early in the day, it is not required I find a use for it come nightfall, or even the end of my life. Whereas in most "literature" as Flores puts it, everything included is suggested a role and an expectation to fulfill that role. Often, with magical realism, the role suggested is to create space, maybe to promise something larger and then fail or refuse to fulfill that promise, offering ambiguity or confusion instead. It is a method of storytelling that mirrors our understanding of reality and the consequences of time, but at once questions that understanding, putting the reader in a space where, as Flores puts it, "time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality" (Zamora 116).

Matthew Strecher defines magic realism as "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe" (Strecher 267). How then does one differentiate "something too strange to believe" from something reasonably improbable given the limitations of technology? The answer is perhaps so simple that it becomes a difficult one to assert, especially when discussing the distinction between magical realism and Science Fiction. SF is simple to define, but troublesome to discuss as most have misappropriated the term for years. Many associate the definition of Science Fiction with the proximity of scientific apparatuses to an inciting incident. To such readers, if something impossible happens in a castle it's fantasy, and if something impossible happens in a laboratory or in space it's Science Fiction. This sloppy standard for definition makes it easy to confuse an impossible occurrence for an improbable one due to the mask it might have on at the time of conception.



Believe it or not, Science Fiction, as the name defines, depends on an element of science, meaning the empiricism of research and discovery. Popularly, the genre appears in two forms, Hard and Soft Science Fiction. Hard SF is the form that is closest to reality, operating on scientific theory more than scientific hypothesis. It constructs fictional circumstances wherein the technology and/or theory (not hypothesis) of today play a crucial role and provide key source material for the conflict. Soft SF is further removed from reality, tentatively connecting speculative circumstance to scientific hypotheses; however, what must be remembered here is the need for empiricism. A scientific hypothesis, however improbable and far removed from current, human, technological capability must retain at its center an unmovable scientific truth. Hypotheses are the extension of theories. They are not a license to pretend or invent or disrupt physical laws as we understand them.

Adam Roberts, professor of English and creative writing at Royal Holloway, University of London, and three-time nominee for the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke Award, says that Science Fiction “requires a material, physical realization, rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one. This grounding of SF in the material rather than supernatural becomes one of its key features” (Roberts 5). Even when the inciting, fantastic incident includes a loose proximity to a scientific impetus, the resulting phenomenon, if impossible to explain as anything other than supernatural, removes the text from the Science Fiction genre. If the impossible came from a laboratory, as in the case of *The Incredible Hulk*, or if it flies through space with brightly colored lights emitting from its "engine," like the Millennium Falcon in *Star Wars*, it remains a manifestation of the impossible and is therefore fantasy not Science Fiction, regardless of setting. And ultimately, the above examples showcase narratives that seek to replace

reality with a new setting; their representations of earth and/or humanity are offered in substitute to what the reader already knows and expects. They fail to offer a mimetic representation of reality in the same manner that magical realism does.

As suggested by critic Scott Simpkins, if there is a singular, ultimate, unifying thread throughout magical realism, it is likely mimesis--the literary process that imitates the world, its peoples, and, more often than not, its political and social ideals (140-154). Magical realism utilizes traditional mimesis in order to explore perceptions of the visual and the real; however, it often evolves and complicates the tradition through its trademark examination and inclusion of the impossible. This process often culminates in a totalizing, grandiose view of history and memory as represented by the author's imagery and language. In a sense, a mimetic representation of the world is super-imposed, but not substituted, over the reader's traditional understanding of reality, frequently demanding a re-examination of the empirical world and of the text itself. This principle operates on the same foundation as a parlor magician's act, which, if successful, leaves the reader wondering and questioning what he sees outside the theater. In magical realism, the reader is always based in reality as he understands it, and is never asked to abandon that reality. The author introduces illusions into that reality, and the success of those illusions depends on a type of prestidigitation, a deftness of skill to pull them off and put the audience in a space where the possible and the impossible co-mingle without conflict. With the literary genre, the result is a new, mimetic representation of the familiar world that invites closer examination and discussion on the solidity of the material and physical law.

Simpkins, as well as several authors of the works and essays collected by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, agree that recurring aspects that crop up in

magical realism, perhaps to reveal the bones in an otherwise ghostly form, are derealization, defamiliarization and fabulation (Simpkins 163-190). It's important to acknowledge and define these terms in order to further define magical realism and defend that definition. Derealization is an expression of the author's aforementioned prestidigitation. It is the ability of language to create a sensory experience through mimesis wherein the world is ultimately represented as an altered place, somehow changed from the reality the reader knows before beginning the reading. Just like when a magician pulls a rabbit from a hat, previously expected to be empty. Often this alteration denotes a sentiment that something has been lost or corrupted. To continue with the magician metaphor, what is lost when the rabbit comes out of the hat is the notion, and perhaps the security in knowing that such things are not possible, and what is corrupted is the viewer's understanding of physical properties. Ultimately the goal, in the case of magical realism, is to represent a more deeply-seated truth originally hindered by the superficial appearance of an already perceived reality.

Defamiliarization is the literary, artistic expression of alienation, of making the reader feel somehow apart from the world. Often, in magical realism, this is done by introducing something mystical and revealing the world as something unexpectedly unfamiliar. The magical realist constructs a setting that mirrors a, perhaps, unorthodox world view, and often, before the reader is able to accept that new setting, he must be displaced and broken of habit--like breaking bones in order to reset them.

Fabulation is simply the practice of telling fables, chiefly understood as stories that involve talking animals. However, unlike the familiar, formulaic fables used more often as tools for moral instruction than as art, fabulation through magical realism attempts to express the complexities of the world, of its politics and history, by artificially

condensing them. This seems contrary to the tenets of realism, and perhaps when executed by writers who believe magical realism is essentially fantasy, they do contradict realism, but, as always, the magical realist employs fabulation in order to explore reality, not escape it.

As examples, I bring back Kafka and offer up Italo Calvino as well. By converting Gregor Samsa into a literal bug, Kafka introduces a metaphor for human nature and the world outside that is simply teeming with baggage that the reader can open and examine--a much more effective and affective way to engage the reader than with the treatise of a mission statement. And by attributing names and speaking roles to the forces and materials that existed before the world's creation and continue to exist today, Calvino creates an interpretative space in *Cosmicomics* where the reader views the creation of the cosmos free from the hang-ups of science and religion, a separate, third option that ignores the previous two and focuses exclusively on the already-magical properties of matter.

Given that the use of metaphor is not intrinsically bound to magical realism, the realms in which the genre's metaphors typically operate (derealization, defamiliarization and fabulation) are paramount to help distinguish magical realism from other literary genres. In the case of Gregor Samsa, his transformation into a bug showcases each of the three aspects listed above; fabulation in a quite a literal sense given that Samsa becomes a talking, non-human creature, and also because his new form compresses the issue of his life and behavior before the transformation. Defamiliarization is achieved through the intimate proximity of the reader and the Samsa bug. Instantly the reader is unaware of his surroundings, uncertain who or what might get transformed next. Derealization comes

through with every sentence that convinces the reader Gregor Samsa has in fact become a bug, that he is no longer human.

Understanding now that magical realism draws most of its water through the metaphors implemented through its use of the impossible, it becomes easier to spot and discern the genre from typical, escapist fantasy. Utilizing this understanding I now turn the lens away from magical realism in general to focus it directly on the short stories that comprise the creative element of this thesis. I will discuss my use of metaphor and how collectively these form thematic occurrences and reoccurrences throughout the work, and how these themes resonate with the three previously listed aspects.

There are three thematic linchpins suspending these collected short stories and I've ascribed a term to codify each of them: vacancy, deficiency and prosthesis. I use the term "vacancy" to describe the theme of emptiness that permeates the bulk of my writing, with a predominant presence in this thesis collection. Vacancy typically serves as the pivot around which my stories revolve: some missing piece of information, identity or physical substance that drives the action of the characters and the progression of the plot. Often, in my thesis, the attempt to fill this void serves as an act of futility or even self-destruction. Only rarely do I represent holes that can actually get filled. This habit reflects a certain outlook I have on humanity. In attempt to make sense of our environment, often we impose ourselves and our understanding onto it in hopes to close certain gaps between us and society, whether they are emotional, psychological or even physical gaps. This dissection of humanity serves as key source material for my thesis and is often interpreted through the characters in my stories who seem to create, or hopelessly shovel filler into, bottomless holes.

I often showcase the theme of vacancy by constructing a defamiliarizing physical space in my stories. Sometimes this constructed space is larger than it appears, and other times surprisingly claustrophobic. In the case of my opening story, "The City Proper," the physical setting is purposefully shrouded, with only pieces and city blocks revealed with strategy and used to create a synecdoche of a larger, more global space. What physical space the reader does see is shrouded by a mask of impossible imagery swimming (quite literally) across the surface. This is done in an attempt to make the reader feel excluded from the setting, apart from the lives and circumstance of the citizens of St. Joan's. That feeling of exclusion is meant to combat the wonder that takes place there; one of the goals of this story is to make the reader aware that he stands apart from the setting, and to entice further inspection and desire for inclusion--something that, contextually, dovetails with the plot of the story.

"Deficiency" is the term I use to describe the condition of being insufficient to close the aforementioned vacancy gaps. I find human-beings precious by virtue of their faults, their inability to repeatedly, and reliably, meet the demands set for them by their peers, by their loved ones or by themselves. The stories in my collection focus almost exclusively on people who embody (and perhaps exaggerate) this behavior seeking to expose the human condition as one comprised of deficiency, but also to celebrate the freedom attached to being unreliably sufficient and sufficiently unreliable. In my stories, the characters never seem to be, independently, up to the task ahead of them; this is a deliberate assertion to examine human-beings as something defined and ratified by incapability. I believe that our humanity often is, and ought to be, validated by our propensity to be invalid.

In one of my stories, "Eat She Said," the target character is teeming with deficiency, much of which is relegated to a damaged psyche. The way she thinks and perceives the world is grafted into the narrative in a way that prevents the reader from seeing or experiencing the world outside of the way she does. This type of forced perspective confines the reader to the interpretative space of a character who interprets the world in a way that is highly contrary to that of the reader. This filtering process serves as a method of derealization, of repackaging the world setting in a way that makes it appear altered or free of the temporal and dimensional confines that the reader might typically expect. I forcing the physical topography of the setting through the mental landscape of this character, what comes out the other side for the reader is a character interpretation of time and physical space. I use this new, filtered environment to create a setting that more closely resembles one Roh's might describe. There is space on the page, and solid form, but they seem to shift and wave through time in an unconventional way, in a way that suggests a set of conventions different from those that govern a more natural setting.

The tools, people and philosophical reasoning we employ to remedy our insufficiency as human-beings make up the term "prosthesis" as it pertains to this collection. Prosthesis is a thematic thread that at once compliments and complicates my original assertion that humans ought to be defined by their disabilities. As a species, we actively seek a crutch to remedy incompetence, to counter deficiency so that we, in turn, can fill up the vacancies that surround us and permeate us. This acknowledgment to remedy our shortcomings threatens to change the discussion entirely since, before, I defined humans through disability, but through prosthesis, humans are defined by competence based on dependency. But it is the element of dependency, intrinsic with

prosthesis, that keeps the discussion focused on disability and deficiency. A person who is individually unable to accomplish a task, who is later made competent to do so through support of machinery, family or philosophic application, is ultimately indebted to the subscribed support received. My collected stories seek to explore the consequences of those subscriptions, and the fallout of prosthetic dependency. My introductory story showcases an assertion that sometimes the implementation of prosthesis can develop a new strength in weakened areas, that dependency can build toward independency and the competence to address deficiency. Other stories in my collection show prosthesis as a self-destructive thing or at the very least an unsustainable answer to the terminal disability of the human condition. Often our prosthetic dependency leads to more dependency since, as human-beings, we almost unfailingly remedy deficiency with an inappropriate substitute, equivalent to using a spoon for an asthma inhaler, or in the case of one of my stories: a donut for a satisfying identity of self-worth.

The prosthetic elements of my stories more often than not occupy the role of fabulation, since, above all, they are not meant to solve the problems of the central conflict, but to comment on them and complicate them. In my story "Portable Hole," a literal hole--with uncanny qualities--serves as prosthetic remedy to a more figurative emptiness experienced by each of the characters in the story: for one it is the emptiness of romantic (and Romantic) nonfulfillment, for another it is the emptiness that follows not knowing the truth of his familial circumstance, and for another the emptiness is the lure of new, undiscovered territory. In the case of this story, the complexities of each character are condensed into the visual representation of the Portable Hole, and their interactions with the Hole reflect the grieved mind-set of each. Essentially, the Hole is speaking for them in a way they are incapable of speaking for themselves, and ultimately



they venture through hoping to recover what they seem to be missing on this side of it. In each case of prosthesis as it appears in my stories, its role is to condense the circumstance and complicate the environment through its physical presence, visual description or the metaphoric language surrounding it, and, in this way, open up a discussion or new interpretation of something familiar as it has been invaded by something alien.

Magical realism provides the writer with a certain tool belt exclusive from other genres or modes of writing: the ability to penetrate the real world where we all live with elements both fantastic and mystical and to draw a mimetic representation that can ultimately clarify reality, choose to cloud it, or express a certainty derived from uncertain origins by displaying the impossible and then denying the reader an escape to a substitute world. The genre dares to insert the incredible, at times challenging the reader to prove it wrong, at times inviting a revelation in its acceptance, and still other times frustrating the reader by insisting confusion and ambiguity as material or mimetically material elements of an otherwise clear-packaged existence. Magical realism in literary fiction points to a specific method of interpretation, a kind of dogma that, without promising any certain conclusion, opens up reality into a more inclusive space, and at the same time restricts all mysticism and miracle to an already familiar, material law.

But all of that lives and dies on the page. When the reader looks up from the written work he is immediately met with straight lines and complicating truths of this reality, and it is difficult to propose that what the reader sees outside the page, and what is seen within it, might in fact exist in the same space. Perhaps this is another reason why magical realism is often boxed in with fantasy and seen more as escapist than exploratory, given that reality follows a trend of growing harsher and harsher with age. There's no way around that trend, but still, for those who claim that magical realism is

simply an extension of fantasy, then irony as well as academic controversy heaps around the genre. Fantasy is set to the task of creating a new world, and magical realism is devoted to mining into this one. Were the reader of magical realism attempting to escape, his efforts would land him back in his own world.

Regardless of where the genre originated, magical realism has adopted a new value, like a coin from a former empire whose monetary worth is measured now in the currency of the time even through its appropriate system of commerce has vanished or bankrupted. In a Post-Modern era, perhaps the only thing left that counts is interpretation, and interpretation is quite literally the act of transforming source material from its original confines to bring it under a new regime of contemporary stipulations.

Magical realism, if only an interpreted permutation of its original form, exists today in many literary writers who, some admittedly more often than others, employ the genre's tenets in their novels and collections--writers like Anthony Doerr, Story Prize winning author of *Memory Wall* and the man who dared to remember the happy ending; Dave Eggers, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *How We Are Hungry* and editor of *McSweeney's*, a periodical that challenges the physical standard of magazines and which frequently includes works like "Fox 8" by George Saunders, O Henry Award winning author who reminded us that animals govern with politics and write their memoirs on typewriters. And of course, magical realism persists through the author of *Dangerous Laughter*, Steven Millhauser, Pulitzer Prize winner and master of the impossible.

These, and many other contemporary authors, keep the tradition of magical realism alive and draw their readers into a space where the impossible becomes possible and not for the sake of sensationalism, but as a rite of inquisition. Magical realists recognize the framework of reality: that matrix of facts and ideas including each reader's

thoughts, and the way those thoughts manifest through symbols. More often than not, their writing shakes that framework, and we're left to ask what might come from the shaking? These authors assert with their works that the quotidian is a product of the astonishingly inexplicable, that there exist windows looking into Roh's "flux" which reveal the "variable commotion [that] crystallizes a clear set of constants" (Roh 22). These windows require a reordering of attributes and symbolic ascriptions to understand, and rarely do these authors provide us with the cipher. But it's not the job of magical realism to provide all the answers, just to do the shaking and admire what emerges from beneath the solid form.

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## THE CITY PROPER

Four days after the Augustine tenement fire emptied the St. Joan's northern barrio, Elias Bernaise painted the Laramy tunnel into a three-hundred foot walkthrough aquarium. He began blocking simple swimming shapes onto the concrete bend in the walls, splashing aquas, greens and purples with fluid abandon, like he piped the sea itself through the loose hoses of his sleeves. He affixed a new array of lights, custom fit with rotating cones lined with crumpled aluminum foil that spun to flicker soft, luminous drops across the painted tunnel, shimmering Bernaise's brush-stroke creatures with life and movement. A dragonfish skulked behind a blood-purple coral twist, whipping up the ocean floor with the delicate wake of its passing. Barreleyes clumped together meters from the sun-glimmered surface where light penetrated their cellophane braincaps so those who walked the tunnel could look on the high bend of Laramy's roof and see the thoughts of fishes spilling from the dark outline of a dozen, little, knifing bodies. Below the barreleyes the water stretched back into a blue darkness so infinite and thrilling that many who passed through the tunnel shied away from its walls, walking, as it were, an invisible tightrope stretching down Laramy's center.

And so it was that Elias Bernaise had worked a wonder through the underground passage. In that deepwater tunnel, the man accumulated an impossible collection of fish, crustacean and cephalopod life. He broke the boundaries of their ecosystems and spliced predator with predator, prey with prey until, like the compression of polar energies, this new ocean community condensed with a spark, surging into a hopeless arrangement of fish that seemed to comment on the natural order, as though Bernaise's aquarium expressed a truth larger than truth: that the special impossibility of his painting portended

a new, yet undiscovered reality. Dumbo octopi shared space with giant isopods, lizardfish with anglerfish, medusa eels with goblin sharks. A pink cloud of flower hat jellies lifted to the surface where crystal eyes of sunlight swelled their bellies with brilliance. Children would clap a parent's hand upon entering Laramy. They'd grope the tunnel walls and press their faces to its glass to better see the hulking bozark crabs trundle underfoot. Emerging from the tunnel to the street, the children would release their breath in massive gusts, amazed to have held their air for so long and so deep under water.

The Laramy tunnel connected St. Joan's east and northern boroughs where the burned out Augustine tenement still shifted the weight of its charcoal over failing beams. In the hustle predating the fire, commuters often favored quicker and safer routes than the tunnel. They walked open paths in view of God and vigilant officials. Then Augustine came down to cough smoke and fire through the chimney pipe of Laramy tunnel and necessity reinforced habit as the passage baked into a smoldering cave. Nearly none deduced a reason to return. Inside that black and withered tube there was nothing left to see. And so Bernaise encountered no particular challenge completing his painting. He dressed in orange coveralls and cordoned off the tunnel with police tape. He wheelbarrowed gallons of paint into the tunnel and brushed color over the black char and soot that clung to Laramy in lapping shadows. With rollers he covered the old imprints of fire. With clip-on eyeglass magnifiers he stippled away the smell of charcoal until the people of St. Joan's returned to the Laramy tunnel, pulled there as if under a spell. They walked the tunnel to spite their schedules, to tease their destinations. They strolled Laramy the way some might stroll a park, and when they emerged from one side or the other, the realization of open sky and solid ground often spun and dizzied their inner-compasses.



The Augustine fire had come to stay. Though the flames did pass, they did so like thieves retreating to the shadows; though out of sight, they still fumed under walkways and traded stories behind alleys. Heat buzzed under every St. Joansians' step. The sidewalks seemed to hum with it, as though at any moment the correct combination of concrete and shoe leather would flare up the streets with roaring, resurrected fire. Perhaps, unaware of why, the people of St. Joan's walked Bernaise's aquarium tunnel with a certain dogmatic adherence, an elemental hope its water would cool their feet.

Straight from the mouth of Laramy's north exit stood Iglesia, a city block in the northern borough all but erased by the fire. St. Joansians emerged from their aquarium tunnel to look up at Iglesia's black brick buildings and say, as if programmed, "Oh yes. I remember." Then they would return home, often with slumped shoulders. They did this for days. They'd exit the tunnel, frown at Iglesia and return to their lives, smelling the sea in their clothes and splashing water from their shoes. There remained in them a memory of St. Joan's, of the Augustine tenement, a candle wick of flame that the Laramy tunnel, with all its water, had failed to douse.

Elias Bernaise breathed in the night air as if to draw out the atomized remnants of St. Joan's and its people and the way they used to dream so plentifully they'd stuff the excess in their pockets and trade their visions on-hand with a neighbor. He breathed and breathed to mine the floating tatters of those visions from the precipitated air. Against the street lamps, he saw them spin and dip. He saw them vibrate in the space beneath stars, diffusing starlight into dripping streaks of glowing paint. He thought to write his name in that running light, but soon repented of it. He just continued to breathe and breathe, and from there came the dreams, dozens, hundreds, surging from the bricks where they lay preserved like detritus from a thousand years of rain. They cobbled and amassed before

the artist where he began to plane them out, each one, cutting interlocking grooves into their edges, reverently puzzling the pieces into a single, collective tapestry. Then he looked for a canvas on which to paint it.

In the days to follow, St. Joansians continued out of Bernaise's aquarium where Iglesia loomed to dispel its wonder. "I wish that would just disappear," they said. "Ya know. *Poof!* Gone." They crossed their fingers to make it so, and the crossing served to complete a kind of circuit like the closing of electrical breakers. Bolts of lightning snapped in the spark gap between the locals and Bernaise's latest painting. The artist's work began to drive with locomotion. The people of St. Joan's had wished the northern borough gone, but still they froze in wonder to see it happen. Throughout Iglesia the smoke stained bricks and broken window frames rolled up like old carpet, and the entire neighborhood evaporated into the sky. *Poof.* Gone. They peered from the tunnel to the barrio discovering only heavy clouds streaking, they swore, slowly out to sea. And loping from cloud to cloud were trains of seagulls emerging and vanishing again into their own flock like the birds of M.C. Escher. "But these birds are real!" they would declare. Real and sweeping before their very eyes into a tessellated oblivion, and out again reformed.

Below the birds the barrio opened to a view of the west ocean, bejeweled with rippling light. Ships of every description and every era chugged across the viewscape heading for ports unseen, carting cargo unknown. An ocean steamliner with three brass smoke stacks puffed clean white clouds from its rib-steeled chassis. Its red Plimsoll Line struck through the parabolic waves like the speed trail of a phoenix. A colossal freighter seemed to push the entire sea apart to break a path for its mammoth payload. It swayed and yawed, leaning heavy on its port side. St. Joansians held their breath for the men onboard no doubt presently in the act of correcting the ship before it rolled into the water.

A submarine in the shape of a silver dining knife pierced the surface, returning from some uncounted depth. "A stalwart crew on-board," husbands confirmed with their wives. Children cheered at the ship and pulled their parents back into Laramy tunnel to look for where the submarine had come.

The citizens of St. Joan's ventured into the Iglesia barrio, expecting the painted illusion to fall apart as they rounded the street corners for a disrupting point of view. But the image remained. As the onlookers moved, the Escher birds moved with them, as though the flock's migration depended on that of the viewer. St. Joansians granted right-of-way to bird and cloud and ship, marveling at each taking its own course through the barrio. Ocean waves roiled and quelled with each step. The steamship puffed out clouds like pipe notes and the freighter righted its position over the water. The submarine emerged fully from the sea to display bronze portholes, clean and elaborate as fine china. Scrimshaw ornamented its hull, drawing counterfeit curves of surf foam across the body from point to point. Atop the rig, a periscope pivoted a mirrored glass across St. Joan's, and all throughout the copper housing of its shaft a relay of magnifying crystal balls aligned to scry over the ocean like a diviner's staff.

"Wondrous," exclaimed the clear-eyed. "Unequaled," chimed the lonely. St. Joansians in downtown offices began to take their lunch in the barrio in the light of Bernaise's beach. They'd lie on their backs to count the gulls or ascribe shapes to the drifting clouds. They brought blankets and parasols and beach towels. Many left these behind for the next fellow. Shirtless children and parents with lunch baskets peopled the streets of Iglesia, building sandcastles and leaving them to stand throughout Spring.

In the new season, people still returned to the aquarium tunnel, admiring it as at first. It remained familiar and yet, somehow, it evolved every day. "The fish have

moved," some declared. "No the coral is newly arranged," said others, without ever striking a solid accord. One change, they all agreed, was the whale. Deep in the blue distance, beyond the pink cloud of flower hat jellies, a massive whale hulked in suspension. It drew a long and bladed "S" with its body, as though it had spent a thousand years coiled up in hiding and Bernaise had only begun to pull it out straight. It hung in the deep, far from the tunnel. The distance seemed to promise the whale had much further to stretch, that, unless careful, the great leviathan would unfurl to fill up the entire ocean.

St. Joan's began to hum with new energy, and the city spooled it up like a giant Tesla Coil. Every person walking to work, or for a loaf of bread, could feel it. They were like file shavings being drawn to a magnet. Some would go so far as to swear the hairs on their hands would often slant towards Bernaise's paintings, guiding them back. In St. Joan's everything, everyone, everywhere sank and ascended. The streets passed under the ocean, then close to the clouds, and onto a beach where time and machinery stretched and snapped back into the same mass. St. Joansians whistled and proposed to their sweethearts. They powered off their phones to dip through the aquarium. "Of course there is no signal under the sea!" they would say. Often, in order to speak with another, it became essential to meet in the tunnel, or at the beach, to shake hands and discuss the animated minutia of steam-engines or the surrounding sea life. If they spoke of the fire, it was only in reference and contrast. They were, all of them, changed. They had traversed the sea floor to come out bright and clean before the clouds.

For his next project, Elias Bernaise began to paint himself into the scenery. He first appeared in the aquarium tunnel wearing a spun-copper deep sea diver's suit, leaping from foot to foot like a moon-walker, a trail of pearls and gold coins streaming from his fists. His helmet faced the deepening whale. Children and scholars pressed their ears to

the glass confident to hear the artist conversing with the giant. "You can hear them talking about it," said the men with hats. "It won't be long now," said the women with red shoes.

In Iglesia, a second, painted Bernaise stood alone, ankle-deep in the beach. He wore khaki shorts and a Hawaiian shirt the color of coconut meat. He held sunglasses in one hand and shielded his eyes with the other, staring far into the horizon. "He sees another ship coming," they all agreed. "We don't see it yet, but he does." The submarine's periscope drew a line of vision to a vanishing point on the sea.

Next he appeared on the side of a city bank, painted into the brick and mortar creases like a corrugated ghost. He wore a chalk blue suit with wing-tipped shoes. He kept the sunglasses in one hand with a rolled-up newspaper under his arm. A white felt porkpie hat concealed his eyes as he blindly flipped a silver coin with his thumb. There was a certain temperament captured in his gait that complicated the care-free whimsy of a finely dressed man flipping a newly minted coin. His feet seemed heavy and his shoulders set-to-task. He was bound to something. An invisible harness yoked him to a consignment much larger than himself, and as he dragged it into town, he took precautions to conceal his strain. In his next appearance, the artist omitted any subtext of weight or toil, perhaps ashamed to have confessed to it at all. St. Joansians found him skipping to the corner of Firehouse 62, where the old char marks from the borough fire blackened the sidewalk. Bernaise didn't tarry, but painted as he went. The trail of his passing erased the soot on the ground with clean, concrete colored footprints. "He was here!" they said. "But from here to where?"

The artist continued downtown, to the recent ruin of the northern barrio leaning quiet and empty, its people and pets having fled or vanished now coming on a half a year.

He passed through the burned debris like a soap bubble, cleaning as he went. He painted clear handprints on blackened deli windows through which any who peered would see clerks in paper hats serving coffee and sandwiches to smiling patrons in upholstered booths. His footprints stopped now and again to trace out the one-two-three formations of the Waltz, the Tango, the Cha-Cha. Those who followed Elias Bernaise, dancing to his lead through the hollow borough streets, would swear to the music they heard bouncing back from the void.

Filing lines of St. Joansians followed the artist's footsteps without looking up. Bernaise kept their eyes down on the baseball diamond he'd painted for the after-school games, and on a pair of clean underpants tumbling in the wind across the street. In this way, he hid from them the wreckage of their inner-city, what fire and rain and months of neglect had wrought. He took a brush and made it disappear. Blackened vehicles dotted the curb with their tires melted into the asphalt. Bernaise cleared out their windows to paint a smiling father pulling into traffic, his wife and children engaged in a loud chorus of road hymns, their dachshund wagging its tongue out the rear. Charcoal colored stoops bristled with door-to-door salesmen in gray jackets and polished leather briefcases. Shattered windows spilled out ribbons of drying laundry where women's hands pulled back from cooling pies.

Elias Bernaise led his locals deeper into the heart of the borough, as blackened and wrecked as they shuddered to remember. But every step they drew behind him seemed to summon more of that new energy out of the ground, that spark which leapt from impossible fish to impossible fish and between the Escher birds from cloud to cloud. St. Joansians filled up the fire-broken streets as if to complete a ritual of transcendence; they were sailors and divers, taxonomists and explorers; they counted

waves and carried ocean winds in their hair; they shook hands and clapped shoulders.

They looked through burned windows to picture themselves inside those rooms with their feet up as dinner finished in the oven. "We should really move back here," they said.

"Good for the kids." The burn marks on the street and against the brick served to contrast the painter's palate, no more offensive than the blank white of a canvas.

Striped onto the broken wall of the Augustine tenement housing hung Bernaise's final painting: a bench of ivory and silver scales and an open newspaper with man in a blue suit behind it. The paper dated months prior and its cover showed the northern barrio safe in the belly of a fish while a bright fire burned on the surface of the water. The man crossed his legs at the knees, uncoiled from time. His sunglasses hung by their temples in the crease of the newspaper where Bernaise worked his true intention with exhaustive and meticulous scale. There, painted into the reflection of the lenses, the artist captured the entire city of St. Joan's, with all her people, coming back to the site of the fire. They passed through an aquarium tunnel and along the shores of a beach. They filed out of diners in dancing formations. They came in teams and multitudes and throngs and the glasses revealed them all. They returned to the borough telling stories of birds and whales and Victorian submarines. They recounted meals shared at delis and road trips with family. They boasted home-run swings and swapped recipes for apple pie. They came back to the city proper where their forerunner pressed himself into the scenery, having painted his front the color of fire-blackened brick and sooty concrete.

Elias Bernaise camouflaged himself against the ruined backdrop to his art, where, from hiding, he admired his admirers as they sat on his bench with their arms over his copy's shoulder, thanking it in turn, wiping their eyes to see the old neighborhood restored. And there Elias Bernaise stayed, the unnoticed cog keeping tempo against larger

gears, revolving in secret rhythm until the weather changed to clean his work from the walls and wash it out to sea.



## EAT SHE SAID

Rusha unfurled her five dollar bill. She held it at her waist between clothespin fingers, clamping the bill by the ends. Lincoln's cheekbones protruded off the money like bones were all he'd ever been. This made the third time in four days she would purchase donuts for the homeless men on the corner of Redwork and Cleat Street. Each time, six donuts. Five to the three homeless men who devoured them without thanks, sugar and cherry-filling crusting their beards. She'd stand an arm's stretch away from the men, lifting her chin as they clawed into the donut box. They ate with abandon, like ghoulish wrecks reclaiming their own packaged hearts. She would hum and watch them without blinking.

Lincoln stared off the paper. His bulbous cheekbones reminded her of St. Lucille's workhouse, of herself as a girl and the way her own bones would tent through her skin. Her mother clothed her in long sleeves though Spring, dressed her daughter's hair to hide her cheeks. Her mother's lips were thin. The woman would suck them against her teeth to chew the membrane bloody, then she'd suck on the wound until it puckered dry and pale. *It's because we're hungry, Rusha, she would say. We live here because we're hungry.* Rusha lowered her head.

The sixth donut, always bavarian cream, she'd napkin wrap to keep in her coat. She'd walk home squeezing it in her clothes, verifying it was still there. She'd cut around corners, stab through crosswalks. She'd open the door to her home, just wide enough to sliver through, and lock it behind her. She'd enter the kitchen, unveil the bavarian cream donut and pinch test the tumescence of its filling. Then she'd pull back the knife drawer. The donut went there, lifted into the framework of the counter. She'd shove it into some

inaccessible recess of the fixture and release it, listening for it to slap over the others heaped inside, out of sight.

Rusha imagined Lincoln's tomb. She knew the secret it buried. His weren't bones at all but copper rods, heaped in penny-brown rust. The dimpled stones, the fermenting concrete, these were just a skin for the tomb, the architecture of its hiding place. *You have to hide these*, her mother would say, pulling Rusha's sleeve cuffs over the protruding ulnas in her tiny wrists. *No one wants a skinny girl, Rusha*. She rotated the money until it vanished into a blade's edge of paper, as if to reject the prospect of valuable bones.

Presently, she stood third in line at the Gross Street deli beneath a vaulted ceiling fashioned in the style of Nantucket colonials. Dark maple wood struts ribbed the interior, joining overhead at the hickory sternum like an inverted ship's prow. Inside, puffed clouds of confectioner's sugar eddied through coffee steam. Behind the cash clerk, a bank of ovens exhausted the soupy fumes of rising yeast. Hidden in the back, dough batter crisped in a bubbling grease fryer. Rusha lowered her head and breathed.

Before her, a corpulent man in red flannel dug thumb-thick fingers through his scruff. He had a beard like a beehive clumped on the blade of his chin. He put a hand on the counter and the wooden frame creaked as he leaned. Before him, the pimpled clerk froze in earnest, his eyes trained on the man's mouth for the very instant he might place his order. The man dug into his back pocket. The black hairs on his fingers curled like little beards.

"Two bavarians and two big coffees. Cream and sugar."

"Six dollars twenty-two."

He paid and returned his wallet to his pocket.

"Name?" said the clerk.

"Treb."

The clerk assured Treb his order would be ready shortly, and the big man lumbered to an empty stool beside a barrel-top table shouldering the soft drink dispenser. When he sat, his hips and thighs came off the seat in great rounds. Rusha halved her five dollars with a hamburger fold. The woman before her began to puzzle at the overhead menu. Sandwiches: Country Club, Cold-cut Combo, Homemade Philly Cheese, Reuben. Coffees: Mocha, Latte, Irish Cream, Irish Cream (hold the cream), House-pot. Donuts. Samplers. Specials. 2.99. 4.15. 1.11. Rusha pictured the possibilities swirling in the woman's head like leaves in a lettuce spinner.

Rusha turned the money over in her hands, repeating in her mind the the order she was about to make. One chocolate glazed cruller, two standard glazed rounds, one cherry filled, one maple bar and one bavarian cream. Four dollars, ninety-seven cents. Six donuts, five dollars, three pennies for the change tray. In and gone like she were never there at all. She crimped the money and pulled on the cuffs of her sleeves.

Rusha thought of the bavarian donut, a supple, full cheek of fried dough. She thought of pinching it, watching it return to form. Squeeze and return. Squeeze and return. It was the cream that did it. A full donut. A resilient donut. Stuffed. She pictured a hollow donut succumbing to the pinch of her fingers, deflating to a crushed contentment, just an empty canvas with nothing inside pressing up, a starving, uncertain bit of dough. Rusha never saw her mother eat. She would drink cloudy water from a bent tin cup, and slide her dinner roll onto her daughter's plate when the supervisors weren't looking. Then she'd spoon over her potatoes to Rusha. She'd just drink from that cup. Rusha knew her mother was full of water, that if she touched her skin, she'd put a hole in her mother's ribs

and gallons of water would come trundling out. Rusha knew she must never do that.

*Mommy lives on water, huh, Rusha? Like a fish. Mommy lives on water.*

The clerk called Treb's name and laid the pair of bavarian donuts on the counter in their crackling paper wrappers. Then he turned to Rusha.

"What can I get for you, miss?"

She combed her nails down the hair covering her cheeks. "One chocolate cruller. Two glazed. One cherry filled. One maple bar." Rusha swallowed. "One bavarian cream donut."

"I'm sorry, miss," the clerk said, and he pulled his paper hat higher on his head.

"We're out of cream. We're making more, but it'll be at least half an hour."

"A half--," Rusha started.

"We had a batch ready to go, but the pot tipped over."

"You mean you tipped it over," Treb said, pursing his hidden mouth. His beard and mustache came to a spout under his nose. The clerk blinked several times as the big man leafed a dozen napkins from the dispenser. Rusha folded her five dollars into eighths and hid it in her fist.

"I think. I'd like to take the rest at least," she said.

The clerk nodded and punched her order into the cash register's keypad. Treb drank from one of his steaming cups, draining half his first coffee all at once. When he opened his mouth, steam rolled from inside.

"You ought to comp her the extra donut," he said.

"I'm sorry. I can't do that."

Rusha looked down to her hands.

"It's fine," she said. "I think I've changed my mind."

She turned away from the counter. The deli expanded before her revealing venues she'd never seen before: barrel-tabletops ornamented in clear soda cups, white ceramic dining plates streaked with au jus, melted muenster, gravy. Along the south wall a red-finished counter dedicated entirely to sandwich preparation touted condiments, garnishes, pickles--dill, spicy, bread & butter. She saw a blackboard detailing daily specials hanging between the bathroom and the soda machine: Prawns on a Lawn--4.75; No Fear Gruyere--5.25; Ahab's Catch of the Day--6.25. Six donuts, five dollars, three pennies for the change tray. She clutched the money in her wet fist, and made a wide berth around the deli line for the door.

She stepped to the curb and faced east down the "T" junction where Gross Street decapitated Fullerton Road. She pulled on her coat, on her hair, to hide her body, suddenly huge and tailed by every step she'd ever taken. She was as long as the walk from her home to the deli. She was as wide as all the years between then and St. Lucille's workhouse. And there, on the stump of Fullerton's neck, she became the standing head of the road. She swallowed and the swallow traveled through her and into the earth. The curb lifted with her breath; the tide retreated with her pulse. She reached with her new body, stretching across Nantucket in webs, expanding to fill the frame of the island. Homes and homeless freckled her skin. She felt city pipelines twisting through her like veins. She drank cisterns. She sucked down stalks of barley. She pulled on abattoir smoke stacks and curled the swirling fumes through her organs to cure them.

On the east point of the island, commercial vessels slid out of harbor and into open water. The Fullerton blacktop seemed a dark extension of that water, a congealed canal where ships no longer passed. Still, she thought, oceanic. She pictured roiling ships fashioned lifetimes ago, buckled and braced from native woods, hoisting frozen cargo for

leagues and for generations. Whale meat slabs served as ballast, and men crouched across the corpses in the hold, leaning on blood-darkened harpoons stuck into the deck.

Rusha conjured sailors, harpooners, and set them to lean from their longboats over the chopping sea where whales broke the surface like rolling hills. Her sailors lifted and struck at the sea. Their weapons disappeared as newly ventilated whales exhausted chest-borne effluvia to the Atlantic air. Then came the smells: salt and skin, blood and fat in the jib sheets, grease in the men's clothes, spermaceti in their hair. Their bodies dripped with oil, and they licked their fingers from hunger.

The evening sun chased over Nantucket to brush the bow of a freighter, belly-heavy with steel crates: red, blue, yellow. The ship pushed into the Atlantic against the coming darkness. Rusha pictured its stevedores ashore, turning away from the boat in kind to make their way home. Tomorrow they'd return. They'd unload untold fortunes, rib-picking boats to stack a steel skeleton taller and more valuable than city hall. Rusha counted the crates until their colors bled together, until just a gray mass swam away, whether over the ocean or into it she couldn't tell. She opened her fist. Her five dollars bloomed there like resting bones, she thought, once slid out-of-socket, now returning to a truer form. Her body shrank into its frame. She retracted from the island, from the coastline, and collected again as one thin woman leaning into the chill of the north-coming wind. *It's always cold when you're skinny, Rusha.*

"Buncha assholes," Treb said behind her.

Rusha turned to see the big man holding out a box to her. The cellophane window over the top flap revealed six donuts inside, an extra cherry-filled in place of the missing bavarian cream. He put the box in her hands and placed one of his bavarian donuts over it.

"I've had enough," he said. "Don't worry about eating that extra one. Takes a few thousand before a skinny thing like you gets to looking like me."

Rusha gave no response. Treb looked her up and down and removed a massive bite from his remaining donut. Then he winked and furrowed his beard and followed Fullerton Road away from her, lumbering toward the sea. Rusha swallowed for the bavarian donut before her. Her ears drummed out her heartbeat. She looked for any surface to unload the box, some civil, yet immediate way to free her hands of all but her bavarian donut. She couldn't put it down on the sidewalk. She wouldn't go back into the deli. Home was minutes away. She wanted to pull herself into her coat.

Rusha saw her three patron homeless lifted up on their tip-toes, looking back to her from the curb of Gross Street. The first man stood tall as a ship's captain, the stain of salt and body odor coloring his clothing. She always esteemed him as somehow in charge, deferring to him as the head of the crew. The captain squared his beard and buried his hands in the hips of his peacoat. He motioned and his crew followed him over the street.

"Miss," said the captain, standing the customary distance from her.

Rusha swallowed, aware of her sweaty palms. She painted a cob pipe into his mouth, sliced a Gregory Peck streak of grey through his left eyebrow and into his beard. He held out his hands for the box. She placed it there, snatching the bavarian cream donut off the top.

"We get the whole box, today?" said the captain.

Rusha turned away, both hands on her donut.

"That's--" the captain did the math. "That's three a piece," he exclaimed.

The men fell to their knees over the curb to pry at the box like an unearthed sea chest. They pawed the donuts, silly with the prospect of "three a piece." The captain punched a cherry-filled into his mouth and burst red jelly onto his cheek. His shipmate leaned in and licked it off. Rusha squeezed the bavarian cream donut in her fingers. It gave and rebounded, showcasing that exquisite, inner buoyancy. She lifted her eyes again to the sea, confusing the image of the Atlantic with the smell of the chocolate glaze. And holding her vision there, leagues beyond the east point harbor, she bit the donut and drank bavarian cream like she had room enough for an entire ocean. She drank cream until she became cream, until her body melted from its joints. Her shoulder blades came apart as winged creatures lifting over the island until gone. Her skin dripped into the earth to commune with the big soul she knew lay hidden there. She chewed and the soul spoke of bones and tombs of bones. She swallowed to find them. She swallowed and absorbed their secrets: Lincoln was a penny; her mother was a fish, and in the ocean there is life, both floating and sinking, and every inch of it is full and fat and sliding out to sea. She felt Treb's heavy feet on Fullterton Road, smelled the old sweat in his beard. The man scowled at the donut box among the street sailors.

"Goddammit, lady," he barked, punching the air.

He spat as he cursed and Rusha pinched her donut, warming in the heat of Treb's huge and shaking face. She cleaned cream from her chin and sucked her fingers until they glistened like new infants. Blood swelled on Rusha's thumb from the pointed indentation left there by her canine tooth. She sucked the wound as each sailor poked his fellow in the ribs, laughing at the mess he'd made of himself, dripping with red and maple. She crushed Lincoln in her fist and pulled blood from her thumb until it puckered. She kept sucking. She sucked and pulled the sugars from her bones until her skeleton softened to a



sponge that she slurped right out. Her body whipped in the north wind like a sail. She kept sucking until the bag of her skin compressed out of her coat, and her socks drooped into deflated heaps. Her clothes slipped from her body and flapped down Gross Street until they vanished. She sucked to pull all of her self into her mouth, all of her hair, her fingernails, scraped knees and scars, pounds lost and gained through decades of chewing. She kept herself there, tottering over her throat and the plunge into some deeper hiding spot. Then she looked to the sea and swallowed.

## JUNE ELEVENTH ON VINEGAR HILL

## The Recording

In the coming light, the tape recorder began to draw on its own shadow, reeling its dark copy across the bedroom desk and back into itself. Hollis regarded it as the night backed through his window to claw the western swale on its slow path for home. The old man had risen in the dark to dress for the festival. His stale gray Confederate officer's costume hung threadbare in the armoire, ribboned and sashed and exploding with shirt buttons. He fed these into place across his bony torso, cursing each in turn as they punished his arthritis. He slid from the mattress lip to his wheelchair, hawk-faced and fully clothed, taking care not to wake Wendy. On her last visit to the house, nurse Pawson prepared a standing Nasogastric unit for the old man's wife. Its clear tubing traced the woman's curves, her lips, to penetrate her nostril where fluid drained into Wendy's throat as she lay stiff in bed, pale as a fetus. Hollis breathed the bed-sour balm of the room and crept his chair towards the tape recorder where he tensed its red key until it clicked into place. He swallowed and let the recorder spin a while before beginning in a whisper.

"My name is Hollis Edden and I lost my legs on Vinegar Hill. I'm writing you on behalf of my wife. On behalf of her condition. It ain't that I'm ungrateful for what you done or what you're willing to do. I know about hospitals. I trust your care. When the Barn come down some fifteen years ago there were some lot of us still inside her. As you know. Hospital's changed but sure enough you got staff remembers the day. Lot of us from Redfall were treated up in your county, myself included. So, it aint like I don't trust you to do a good job with Wendy. Rhett Wilkins spent a week up there in traction. That's

the younger Rhett. Couldn't been more than fifteen years old at the time. Has his own business now, family too from what Maddie Wilkins says. Bless her. She had to raise that boy alone. Course we all give the poor woman enough casseroles to feed a family of seven for a decade. Surprised little Rhett didn't plump up round as a steer like his daddy.

"Medical report says it was Rhett senior what saved his boy's life. Earnest Stahl's the man pulled them out. Said he hardly recognized Rhett senior but sure enough there beneath his body was his boy out cold but still breathing. Earnest told me one night we was drinking too much, this was the night his boy married Gladys Oakridge the second time, he says the front of little Rhett's pants was wet, along with one of the legs of his daddy's overalls where the boy had clutched onto his father. Wendy once said to me, Can you imagine being so scared you piss yourself? Told her no I could not.

"Stahl died round three months after that conversation. Something in his lungs he caught going in after people years before, digging through all that dust and rubble. Took a toll on him for plenty long. Finally killed him in his sleep. Not sure how I'm supposed to feel bout a thing like that. Far as I know my lungs is fine.

"Looks like Wendy's caught what did Earnest in. Few weeks back said she felt outta breath. Spent a lot of time sat down looking miserable. Now they say she ain't breathing right. Like her lungs is a boat taking on water. Least that's how they described it. I'm a rancher. Never was too keen on boats, but that's how they say Earnest spent his last days. With the lungs that is. Not on a boat. Say he was too outta breath to tie his boots up. She weren't on the hill when the Barn come down. Wendy. Up in Yarsborough visiting her sister. But it was the infection what took my legs, so, far as I know I walked something down from Vinegar and put it in her lungs, damn my hide anyhow."

The cassette spun in the recorder, swallowing the old bedroom. It recorded a creak under the carpet as Hollis turned his chair away from the oak-tan desk, and the saw grate sound that followed the old man's fingernails through his two-day stubble. He looked to Wendy, his wife of thirty years, sinking into her half of the mattress so deep she took his half with her. The old man let the white noise of the recorder fill him up with its sandpaper scratch until his throat turned with the machine's moving parts.

The bedroom wore its age with dark cobwebs branching from the ceiling in crows' feet. The custard walls slipped away into corners thin and dark where shadows like razors edged back and back. Hollis grimaced. He knew they stretched a path beyond the borders of the room to a place every shadow come and gone lay in wait to return. The sun lifted then through the cottonwood in the yard to warm the rain-cooled gutter lining the eastern eaves of the house. Sunlight hummed through the gutter, shaking the house into new vigor. The house breathed, gave with the breath, her brick walls leaning more than they ought. In the bed behind Hollis, Wendy's mouth cracked to wet her chin with saliva and blood.

"I help Bart Lascow's boy Doug get where he is. When he come to me talking about running for governor, I lent him a hand. Felt wrong not to. When Bart died and I didn't, guess I felt I owed him. What I done for Doug wasn't much at all, but feeling in debt to another, it seems, is a disease easy to catch. Once elected, the boy speeched about reaching out to those affected by the Barn. Used my name. I'm sure you heard about it. Maybe it's good politics. Despite it, I don't want any part. Nuts to nurses like Laurette Pawson coming in to look after Wendy. I'm her husband and I'm right here.

"Nuts to Doug's *service to civil veterans* nonsense. It ain't right. I am no veteran. I buried two sons that were veterans, and I'd be a cheat to accept any convenience what

compares me to those two boys. Far as I'm concerned, Doug Lascow can sit down in Hell trying to take a man's wife out of his charge. I got her sick. I'll fix it."

Hollis sighed.

"Look. We got a shared heritage, our two counties, links back to the festival on Vinegar Hill. Some of you maybe come down for the reenactment. Maybe we shook hands. Some of you maybe, I pulled out the Barn. So I ask you. Don't come round here. Please.

"The day is Tuesday. June the 11th, 1981. Thank you."

The Owl

Hollis scratched the wood grain on his desk in rhythm with Wendy's breath. In the dark behind him, she rasped like a broken harmonica. Hollis punched the eject key and the recorder spat its tape onto the desk. The image of the vaulting cassette triggered something in the old man, stirred his mind and confused his senses. All at once the year was 1924 and Hollis's boyhood legs sprouted off his body like green twigs. He raced the summer through his father's wheat fields chasing an owl out of the daylight and into the dark hold of the oathouse. The bird swept up to perch in the gables where Hollis watched it vomit up a cluster of puny bones. They dripped to the ground at the boy's feet where he watched them reassemble into the skeleton of a field mouse. It leapt away, nose first, into a open oat sack where it dug with flayed limbs until it vanished. Hollis put his pink, boyish hand into the oat sack and pulled back a clutch of withered bones.

A creak fired down the spine of Hollis's house and the old man scowled that sound might wake Wendy. He looked again to his wife, undulating sleepily under the sheets. Beyond her leaned the standing mirror, shoulder-broad and dark on the far wall.

Hollis saw himself there, costumed in Confederate grays, brass decorations gleaming down his breast, his hair still whispering of sleep.

He dropped the tape in his lap and pushed through the bedroom for the hall where shadows exaggerated the shapes their of their hosts like pulled taffy. He traced his wheels through old depressions in the carpet, casting a wake of creaks and moans in the floor. Plastic grocery bags littered the kitchen counter, the discarded shells of Nurse Pawson's many errands for Wendy and the old man. Stapled receipts dangled from their open ends like exhausted tongues, weary from chiding the old cripple, shooing him daily to his corner of the house. Hollis scraped these from the counter with one massive sweep of his arm. He balled and crushed them in his fists until his knuckles turned white. Then he threw them on the floor and pushed out the front door to the sunning porch where the heat tried to push him back in. Behind him the bags expanded over the linoleum floor, crackling like arcing electricity. The sound fooled the old man. Despite the heat, Hollis's bones prophesied thunder. His sinews spoke in tongues about storms.

### The Horse

Hollis fingered the cassette in his shirt pocket. He spat tobacco from his porch for half an hour before Walter Shoar arrived with the gray horse trailer hitched to the back of his sunblasted pickup. Hollis remembered Walter's truck as brown, but as it dug through the graveled drive he took it more for the color of blistered skin. Walter braked the pickup with a jerk, lurching the horse trailer hard against the hitch.

"Jesus, Shoar," spat Hollis.

Walter ground the truck out of gear and killed the engine.

"What's that, Edden?" Walter said with his elbow out.

"You deaf sumbitch, Walt. How you ever convinced me to give up Otis I'll never know."

Walter slid out of the truck and left the door bat-winged behind him. Aft of the trailer, he slid back the bolt and released the catch and the horse backed into the door, flinging him to one side. Otis back-pedaled out before the man regained his feet.

"What's got him all riled?" said Hollis through his chew.

"Must not like the cannon none," said Walter, dusting himself off and holding the gate door open to look on the model 1841 12-pounder, the ceremonial weapon fired to mark the end of the festival.

"Pete took ill this morning," Walter continued. "So Clementine ask me to handle the firing this year. Otis must not like the smell of the powder."

The stallion, tawny with a ribbon of black mane, swung its muzzle about, firing hard from his nostrils stretched wide enough for walnuts. He turned from Walter to draw a circle from the drive to the low boughed cottonwood in the yard. Regarding the tree, he settled and pointed for the house. Walter closed up the trailer and walked Otis to the porch stairs where he stood profile to Hollis. The old man raked his eyes over the animal.

"Least you're feeding him, Walt."

"You'll find me quite capable of many things, Edden," his friend answered.

"All's the same," Hollis said, "I think I'll stand this side of the cannon when you set her off."

Walt swatted his hand.

"I've been out with Pete plenty of times to fire that thing," he said. "Nothing to it. Besides, it's a dry fire on the hill--no ball, no worry."

"Not the way Miss Hilda tells it," said Hollis. "She says you knocked down a whole row of fencing with that thing just this month."

Walter fingered something from one eye and unhatted himself.

"I'da brought Cleet to ride over with you but for the cannon," he said. "Say why don't you just come in the pickup with me? No need running the risk of--"

Hollis scowled.

"Of having me fall without you there to come to the rescue. Walt, you sumbitch anyhow. Get me on my horse."

The old man spat and trumpeted air over his lips. Then he locked his chair in place and lifted his feet from their stirrups in turn. Walter threw Hollis's arm over his shoulder and lifted the thin cripple for the horse. Hollis clutched the saddle at the horn and cantle and pulled. Otis stood cold for the old man toiling over him until his master settled atop. Walter tucked his friend's dangling feet into the withers, then he turned to dig in his nose.

"Say how you sit up like that, Edden, without no legs?" Walter said, leaning into his pickup.

Hollis put the reins in one hand, clutched his thigh with the other.

"What you mean no legs?" he said. "They're here aren't they?"

Dead from the knee down, Hollis hugged Otis with his thighs as Walter nodded blankly and sat into the truck. He dug his key in the ignition and scraped the engine until it chugged. Hollis shook his head and hawked at the phlegm in his throat. He spat a wet lump of quid over his knee to the ground. The old man saw the ball of mucus roll in the dirt and sprout little limbs that clawed toward Otis's hoof. The horse grunted as the old man pulled him away from it.

Walter looked back at his friend.



"Walt," said Hollis. "You think it possible an infection could pass from one man's legs to another's lungs?"

Walter squirmed his finger in his ear and stepped on the accelerator.

"What's that?" he said. "Say I gotta get now and set up before its time. I'll come by later and check on you and Wendy."

"We don't need no checking," Hollis called back.

The old man sat on the horse as his friend drove away, lifting a plume of dust off the road. The old man frowned. He recalled the path back to Wendy, still in bed, turning to the red and splintered front door of his home. It disappeared before him into a vacant frame that yawned for an exposed and cavernous throat stretching down to a quivering thrapple. The house swallowed and Hollis felt the pull of the swallow in his stomach. The old depressions from his wheelchair plumped up in the carpet until they erased completely. His bedroom window opened and a sudden wind ripped his clothes from the dresser, sailing them outside where they whipped and flapped into great black birds and flew away. The old man shivered and frowned on Otis's back. Then he turned from the house, hearing it grind out a medley of creaking boards. He clicked in his mouth for the horse to get on.

### The Omen

It was twenty minutes by horse from Hollis's plot to Vinegar Hill. The old man tarried the long way about, clipping Otis along Bodie Hall's fence line to survey his friend's cattle and tomato garden. From there he led Otis into Betsy Idlesaw's short cherry orchard where he waved to the woman rooted to her rocking bench. He rounded the

Centenary Methodist church at Appleman's Bend, eyeing its graveyard in the back lot, littered with familiar stones and knee-high crosses.

Otis stopped alongside a pair of adjacent stones in a row, both of them cut with the same date. Festival drums spiked through the chaparral around Appleman Stream, staccato and fierce as bursts of thunder. Vinegar Hill swept north, a gunshot's distance from the church where Hollis hung over his horse and turned away from the festival. He lowered his hat to the saddle horn.

"Cleared them of weeds this morning," said Joseph Holliday, coming from the church in a grass stained apron, sleeves rolled up to the elbow. Joe didn't wear his minister's collar when he gardened, a habit that payed in full that day since Hollis often made it his business to tirade Joe with guff for being both an "Indian" and a "Pope".

"How'd I do?" he said.

Hollis didn't look up, but showed a flat and opened hand.

"How, red man."

"Pale face, you're not on the hill. Thought you people loved to play war in dress-up."

"I'm looking for someone what can do me a favor."

Hollis dug the cassette tape from his shirt and passed it down to the minister.

"Laurette Pawson still come to church?"

Joe nodded.

"See she gets that. Tell her to hand it up the Hospital chain of command."

Joe pinched the tape in his dark and leathered hands.

"And Wendy?" he said.

Hollis looked away.

"Last I checked, old-timer, you didn't have a spare nurse to replace Sister Pawson. State's paying her, innit? Not like she's costing you any."

Hollis didn't answer.

"There's plenty on the hill owe you their lives, Hollis Edden. You need Laurette cast off, why come to me about it?"

Hollis shrugged in the heat and turned his eyes to Vinegar Hill peeking over the tree line. The sun burned off the morning clouds and beat on the horizon until it lost its shape in the heat wave. In the sun-distorted light, festival goers moved across the hill amorphous and small as drops of water. They pooled there on the hill into one massive globe that rolled into the grass and never resurfaced.

Joe put the cassette tape in his pocket and pointed to a gnarled beech leaning into the graveyard. Buried in the tree stooped a sleeping owl, dark and slouched on its branch.

"Bad omens to my people," Joe said. "Messengers from the Place of Fright."

Hollis dug into his pants pocket for the tobacco tin.

"Barn's a pretty big deal round here, innit? Used to be you'd all go up and play soldier and hold hands around it or some nonsense. Never was certain what exactly it was yall did up there."

Hollis packed his cheek.

"Then the thing came down and you all turned serious."

The old man looked on the churchyard, hanging his eyes over its many familiar plots. Earnest Stahl and Rhett Wilkins. Roger Idlesaw and Bart Lascow. Elizabeth Shoar. His sons. A waist-high fence of weatherworn pickets slanted on the perimeter. Hollis counted them each before he clapped his eyes on the grave where Joe buried his nephew.

"He was in Nam like your two," Joe said. "Survived two damn tours then goes to the festival the one time and ends up wearing the Barn for it. Figure he followed some white tail up there."

Hollis scraped his stubble. "Gotta mean something," he said.

"Yeah. Means the boy sat on his balls in the jungle so long he forgot what trouble comes from chasing white girls."

Hollis winced and spat. "Ah hell, Joe."

The minister stood, putting the old man's thigh at his chest.

"What do you want it to mean, Hollis? That you failed? That God's got it out for you? That it's your fault Wendy's sick and you're gonna make it right by turning away the only help she's gonna get? The Barn was a hundred years old, Hollis. Things get old. They fall down. That's the way of it. You want to punish yourself for that then you go ahead but dammit if I'll let you bring it down on Wendy."

Joe ripped the cassette tape from his pocket and threw it for Appleman Stream. It ricocheted from the beech tree's trunk where it splintered and dropped into the running water. The owl shook on the branch. Plastic cassette shards glimmered on the water, little mirrors where Hollis pictured his fractured reflection until the stream bore them away.

Hollis frowned in the heat. Roused from sleep, the owl turned its head to stretch its wings, all the way, until the old man figured them primed to snap off. He felt the stretch in his own shoulders. It dove from the tree and winged over the stream, awkward at first, until the dull haze of sleep traded back for instinct and the bird ascended. The old man thought on the summer owl he'd chased as a boy, of the bones in the outhouse, and the day he ran the bird to the end of his father's fence and beyond until it led him through

the valley to a home he didn't know and a girl his age skinning jackrabbits in the front yard.

"Whadda know about infection, Joe?"

"Go home, Hollis."

The old man looked to Vinegar Hill.

"They'll get on without you. The Barn ain't ever gonna look any different than you remember. Go home."

Musket fire rang from Vinegar Hill. Hollis regarded the chalk white plumes rising in vanishing curls until his arthritis flared and he had to turn his neck for relief. Before him the gravestones tilted sunbaked and bright and from each Hollis felt heat directing back to him. He hugged Otis at the ribs with all the intensity of a man about to fall and swallowed and counted every stone. The owl glided idly over the summer fields, bending a lazy swoop to clear Vinegar Hill. From afar, Vinegar and the owl shimmered in the heat like spirits listless and lost. Just a breath, Hollis thought, and they'd drift out of sight for good.

The Barn

The grass over Vinegar sweated in the noon heat to perfume the air with damp soil and heavy pollen. Hollis breathed in the dew of the hill until it softened the drying cracks in his throat. The last shot of the reenactment exploded into silence as the old man slumped into Otis, the horse nosing his way through a labyrinth of parked cars radiating light off their glass. On the summit ahead, Laremy Thorton clutched his breast with martyred bravado, the final soldier to die on Vinegar's mock battlefield. Like every year, he turned his body with the musket ball, displaying himself to the surrounding audience

before pulling the trigger on his rifle in the throes of death. Hollis crested Vinegar Hill with Otis lifting him over the human perimeter surrounding its smoking zenith.

From across the field, Walter raked his hand to signal the old man through the musket fumes. Hollis nodded as his friend took off toward his truck, parked on the rim of the battlefield. Walter pushed two of the Rowley boys aside and opened the horse trailer to climb in. Hollis put his eyes on a shadow that sliced over his shoulder. It scraped across the grass, rolling over dozens of men in blue and gray uniforms feigning death on the field. The shadow raced south-east, connecting with the church owl from Joseph's beech tree as it landed on a pecan limb that overlooked the dead. Their bodies riddled away from the naked, stone foundation of the Barn that cut a bright, gray square on the point of Vinegar Hill. Spotting the old man on his horse, Laurette Pawson knifed her way through the crowd for Hollis.

"You're late," she said.

He shrugged.

Laurette smiled and ran her left hand through the grooved musculature of Otis's neck. The horse turned to her, giving his forehead over to the ministry of her hands. Hollis rubbed the back of his own neck. He pitched his eyes over the hill top. Men in uniform began to stand upright from the grass, the elderly soldiers leaning to their rifles like crutches. Blue and gray shoulders passed one another as men traded positions in silence, each making for his own half of the field, dividing himself from the enemy. Then every man turned at the shout of his commanding officer to face the foundation stones of the Barn in salute.

"I come to talk about Wendy," Hollis said.

"I left her with you."

Hollis spat.

"Who'd you leave her with?" she said.

The Barn stones burned into the grass, lighting up in the sun like the glowing hearts of coals. Walter's horse trailer shook, and something metal dug a track into the trailer wall as the man fidgeted inside. A handful of soldiers broke the reverence of their silence and turned from the Barn to the trailer where, inside, Walter raised a revelry of curses.

"Look," said Laurette. "I know you're none-too-pleased with the situation, Hollis, with Governor Lascow's arrangement. But if you came out here to talk to me you could've saved yourself the trip. You got a phone. I know. I fixed it so you would call."

Hollis chewed.

Walter spilled from the back of the trailer, towing a rope he'd tied to the carriage tail of the twenty-two inch, brass cannon displaying a two inch bore. He heaved the line and the cannon rolled down a short ramp that he'd rigged from a pair of two-by-twelve pine boards. He put the rope over his shoulder and waddled the heavy weapon into place ahead of the saluting soldiers. The cannon shone with a bright finish and squinting festival goers acknowledged its passing, placing their hats to their hearts in rite, beholden to a then uncertain tradition of gratitude.

"So," said Laurette, pushing her hand through the short triangles of her hair.

"Does it look any different than it has?"

The old man rolled his chin to his shoulder, looking down to Laurette's hands around Otis's ears: nurse's hands. He saw them at Wendy's elbow, seeking a pale vein through the diaphanous folds of his wife's skin. They pinched a long needle into her until she bled a dark and steady line onto the mattress. Then he saw Wendy's face, given over

to sleep. At the needle's passing, the gentle woman winced, so faint on the wilting topography of her profile that only Hollis noticed.

"Be more careful," he said.

Laurette smiled, rubbing Otis's ears.

"You afraid I'm gonna hurt him, old-timer?"

Hollis bit down to a clench. Laurette turned up in time to see him shirk away from her. He pulled the brim of his hat hard over his brow, holding his breath. She patted Otis on the neck. The old man looked over the hill. Walter moved to the back of the cannon, holding a thick tether that ran to the cascabel. From behind him, young Rhett Wilkins bent to his daughter, helping her plug her ears with cotton swabs. He looked up to the cannon and called out.

"Not yet, Walt," he said.

Walter Shoar started at Rhett's voice, turning with a sudden twitch. He yanked the firing line in his hand and the cannon went off with a shuddering blast, exploding its payload over the Barn's foundation and into the cluster of pecan trees where branches, thick as arms, snapped into splinters.

Hollis called out as Otis reeled from the shot. The horse kicked off his front legs and threw his rider clean over Nurse Pawson's head. Hollis landed in the grass with a cracking thud. His vision darkened as he sliced his eyes across the sun, dimming down to a candle flame. Through his shrinking tunnel of vision, the old man saw pecan leaves and owl feathers scattering from the shattered trees like streams of confetti. They flittered across the Barn stones, casting their shadows across them as if to sap power away from that sun-brightened ring. The darkness swelled in the old man's head, and as Hollis sank



deeper into it, his last thought was of himself, crooked and broken under the wreckage of the Barn where he lay unaware of its stones bleeding sunlight into his legs.

Wendy

The night expanded through the east valley until it reached Hollis's bedroom window where the old man's tape recorder overflowed with its own shadow, spilling its silhouette across the desk. Hollis opened his eyes. The room stretched in the darkness, finding impossible depth in the dimensions of the house. A hungry pit hung over him, waiting with the quiet anticipation to devour and move on. Laurette Pawson touched him at the elbow, and the old man flinched away.

"Easy there," she said.

Hollis dropped his chin to his right. The moon chilled through the window behind his wife, cutting a faint outline for her that the old man traced with his eyes. He pinched at the space between his brows. There in bed, he shook with the boom of the cannon shot. It percussed through his body like a rap on the chest. Again he saw it tearing the pecan trees to pieces.

"The owl," he said, taking in a spike of air.

Laurette cradled the old man at the neck and shoulder, lowered him back onto his pillow. Hollis clenched his jaw, flexed a network of muscles through his body.

"Walt," said Hollis. "Sumbitch left it loaded it didn't he?"

"You got two busted shins. I got you splinted up. It aint life-threatening, but I'm afraid you'll never walk again."

Hollis opened his mouth to respond, then he stopped and smiled.

Laurette smiled with him. The two stifled a small fit of laughter that ended when Hollis looked over to Wendy. He bit down and drew a long breath through his nose as he lifted his left hand, inching it toward his wife's face. He touched the sticking strands of her hair that clung to her right ear. Then he sank his fingers through to drag them over the blade of her lobe. The nurse rose from her seat and stood uncertain for a while before finally vanishing through the hall. Hollis drew a soft line down Wendy's jaw.

"You hoped for boys" he said. "I said it was a good thing as you was more than enough girl for this house. You laughed. Used to be you'd laugh at everything, whether I was cutting up or not. Said you wanted as many copies of me as you could get, that you hoped for boys. I never said nothing, but I hoped one would come out a girl. One night, while you slept, I crossed a pair of wooden spoons over your belly. Couldn't tell you why. Spoons was the girliest things in the house I suppose. I wished for a copy too."

Hollis swallowed, and his voice deepened.

"She really is something, Boys," he said. "I'm glad you knew her when you did. Before the Barn left your dad like it did. Before she had to spend every day taking care of him."

Hollis outlined the full curve of Wendy's lips with the plane of his thumb, her feeding tube filling up with moonlight. His arthritis ground in his wrist like broken glass. The old man ignored it to lean into his wife and kiss her mouth behind the plastic tube.

"I'm going to wake you up," he said.

Then came a narrow form that fluttered into the cottonwood outside his window. It clawed upright on a branch and remained still and tall in the growing darkness. It drew Hollis's eyes from his wife and fixed them over itself, holding them there until the narrow

form became a part of the old man, an extension of his vision that churned through the space behind his eyes, sinking, sinking.

Hollis did not look away. The world reduced down to intersecting trails of shadow, netting from corner to corner across all creation, tracing countless paths, one for every man to follow back to his own, personal Place of Fright. The walls of the bedroom leaned as something quiet pushed on the frame until the wooden bones of the house creaked in the promise of collapse. The old man swallowed to hold his breath, and, clutching Wendy at the hand, closed his eyes on the owl.

"Don't take me back there," he whispered. "Don't take me back."

## PORTABLE HOLE

Two starving lampreys pass by sides in open water. Each latches onto the other, drawing blood for food, but there is not enough blood for either and they both let go. To their left, a team of sturgeon knives into shallow water where the dark outlines of fishermen's boats loom on the surface. To their right, shoals of humpback whales cut tall parabolas through the sea. The first lamprey latches onto a whale, drinking its fill as its host spirals and disappears into deep water. The second lamprey idles in the ocean, bleeding.

I'm not certain what it means. Grandpa Clarence used to tell it to me. He'd look in my eyes to judge how I was interpreting what he'd said. I think he wanted to warn me about being the idle lamprey. To this day I think he was trying to tell me that he was a fish, or liked to think of himself as a fish. I remember the bald man that would come around the house when I was little—the lawyer. He would call Grandpa "Fish Story," maybe an old name left over from a ways back. They would talk about Grandpa's research a lot. I think he liked that. But I still don't know what the riddle means. Maybe you'll do better with it than I have. I'm leaving this recording for you, Grandma Yola, because I don't know where I'll be when you come up from the anesthesia. I'm not leaving. I would never leave. I just—I feel like I'm about to hook onto a whale, and I have no idea how deep it's going to take me.

I'm going to try, really hard, to not leave anything incriminating on here, so if anyone comes for you looking for me or Spetz's Hole, you won't have anything to tell them. I just want you to know why I did what I did. Then, if I come back, you can tell me. Because I have no idea. I guess I'm like Grandpa in that way.

Grandpa Clarence used to say he didn't know how to talk about the Hole without talking about Sherman Spetz. You knew him, of course, but I think Grandpa was the only one to ever see him work. I've only seen old tapes of them standing outside of IoCorp waving, or on Spetz's Nobel Prize video. He told me that he didn't like it when they called Spetz a visionary. He said it suggested a sort of wild-haired mania that didn't depict him at all. He said the man was clear-eyed. When Grandpa would talk about him I used to picture the church by our house—that painting of God creating the universe hanging in the hall. The way they put him in the center of the cosmos, guiding a path of stars from one side of the painting to the other, gathering them into a glowing center. He had a steady face. His eyelids rested at half-mast, not disinterested but not—it's like you knew he was never going to blink. He's just steady.

When Spetz discovered the Hole—Grandpa had explained all the physical steps he'd taken to create it. He said to me, "You might even understand. Because the thing to understand is this: none of it offers any concrete answer. You'll have to accept it the way I did, that no empirical thing Spetz did caused the Hole to appear. And that's exactly what happened. It appeared. Like it was there the whole time. Like it had been waiting for Spetz to come find it."

He said, "When it first appeared on the dais, at Spetz's elbow, I thought it was his shadow. And after all these years, I don't think I've changed my mind."

Sherman Spetz stood at the chest-high observation dais in suite 12b of the basement laboratories of the IoCorp Chicago building. He hovered a glass dropper over a clear plastic dish with his thumb and middle finger hugged against the rubber plunger, steady. Behind him Clarence Larke leaned in the door frame to the rec room, the

refrigerator door open behind him. It cast a soft glow through the triangles of his bent elbows. He removed a single bite from his ham on rye and held the sandwich unchewed in his mouth as he watched Spetz's rounded shoulders.

"Administering," said Spetz.

As the man squeezed clear drops into the dish, the compound reacted. A thin, dark mass spread over the dais like oil from a ground spring. Spetz came away from the site, controlled, watching the phenomenon expand over his workstation. Sinking through the demarcated measuring panels on the dais top, the Hole began to yawn open, stopping as soon as it matched the circumference of the bowled saucer-light dangling from the ceiling. The light domed toward the dais like a suspended wash basin filled with glowing gasses, and the Portable Hole drank its issuing column of light without discretion.

Spetz kept his eyes on it.

"Mark the time of the event," he said.

Grandpa Clarence didn't ever say much about the quarantine period with Spetz—not to me at least. I don't know if he said anything to you. I wish I did. I'd give my arm to know anything more than I do about what happened down there. I remember spending two weeks alone with you. I think I asked you where he was, or thought about asking you, so whether you told me or not, I guess it's irrelevant. I remember the cigarette smoke. Clouds of it. Just clouds of it. I came out of my room one morning and I thought you had burned a week's worth of breakfast. Then I saw you through the smoke, your outline against the window and I knew he was gone. I guess neither of us knew when he'd be coming back—if he'd be coming back.

Larke hung up the lab's receiver and stepped from the phonebox to the main hatch of the basement facility where he punched the number three-three-six into a gleaming keypad. An on-screen prompt appeared on the monitor, asking him to confirm the entry. It hung on there, blinking. Larke looked over his shoulder to the dais. The Hole rested there in a way that made him think it might actually be at rest, recovering some kind of spent energy.

"What's the quarantine? How long do they want?" said Spetz, cleaning his spectacles in the lavatory doorway. Without them he appeared incomplete, or rather, he appeared inhuman, his face too smooth, his profile too aerodynamic. Larke waited for the man to return his glasses before answering.

"Two weeks," he said. "We run tests on it until the door opens. Then they check us again."

He turned to the monitor and confirmed the entry of 336 hours. A hidden servo slid a fist-sized bolt into a cavity in the bulkhead. The sound of the bolt sliding home was one Larke would recall several times that night.

"Long enough for a start," said Spetz, tucking his night shirt into the drawstring of his pajama bottoms. Then he sat in his rec chair and brought one brown leather loafer to his lap. He retrieved a tin of polish from a shoe box, then a horsehair brush. With a shaving towel over one knee, he began to polish the shoe.

Larke stood with his back to the hatch, watching the man brighten his loafer. The sound of the bristles on the leather reached Larke with an impossible edge, a crisp quality physical sound—when dulled by the trek through physical space—couldn't match. This was a memorized sound, one imprinted from Spetz's repeated ritual: the nightly tin, the

brush on the loafer. From some recess of Larke's brain it played in his ears like a recording. Spetz motioned for Larke to approach him.

"How are you and Yola?" he said.

Deep in the earth the generator to the underground facility thrummed, twisting electricity through a network of wires as thick as arms and multifarious as a vascular system. These spread throughout the buried laboratory, lining the concrete walls and linoleum floor like the pounding veins of some living thing, a great phantom squid that constricted the facility tighter with every violent rush of its heart. Larke could feel it even if Spetz could not: at any second the lab would crack and the great phantom limbs would cave the place in to erase it completely.

I'm almost certain now that Sherman Spetz is my father. I want you to know, Grandma, I don't blame you for anything. I have no idea what it was like for you. The cancer. The long nights. I wanted to hear it from you, from one of you. I lived in a house with two brilliant people who didn't seem to know who my parents were. Whenever I brought it up, your face made me wish I hadn't. I remember kindergarten, when the other kids started talking about their parents—I think it was the first time I realized I didn't have any. Nobody said anything about their grandparents. They had this other thing, this "parents" thing between them and their grandparents. There was nothing there for me, just an empty space between us.

The first time I asked you about where I came from you sent me to Grandpa Clarence. He took me around the arm and before I could say a word he started talking about the Hole again—how it just appeared out of nowhere, how at first there was only Spetz and then there was Spetz and his creation. He called Sherman Spetz "the father of



vacancy.” I remember the word "vacancy" because I didn't understand it. I asked all the kids in kindergarten. The teacher told me I didn't need to know that word yet. Grandpa Clarence said, "Sherman Spetz is the father of vacancy, and I am the father of fish."

I don't know what it was like for you, Grandma Yola. I don't. Were you a mother pretending to be a grandmother? Were you a woman who smoked every second I reminded her she'd had a son? Was there something about Spetz that kept you from telling me that you and he were my parents? Maybe I was wrong. I don't know. Maybe you knew him better than Grandpa Clarence. Maybe you knew everything, and left none of it for me. Or maybe you'd scraped yourself hollow, and sucking on those cigarettes was a way to pipe in some volume and keep the empty space from collapsing. I have no idea. I've always kind of felt out of synch with you and Grandpa. I've been missing something, or a piece of something that would clear it all up. Maybe that comes from not knowing Sherman Spetz at all.

Grandpa Clarence once told me, "A hole is good for nothing. You put things in it." I imagine he and Spetz, and just when it was, exactly, they started to put things in it.

Larke suggested a coin. Toss in a penny and listen for a bottom. Spetz said, "We're not wishing, Clarence." Larke didn't offer any more suggestions. Spetz brought his right hand forward and began to flex his fingers there, observing the machinations of the individual muscles, the tendons, the flow and re-flow of blood. He looked with his actual, physical eyes and also with the augur's crystal of his imagination, penetrating the skin to flay it back and diagram a symphony of tissue—a man at the helm of his machine at once in control and in awe. Spetz was a conductor seeking harmonies; he listened as his right hand hummed its pitch in the octave of the Hole.

"A living tissue test," he said.

From his fingers Larke dangled a puny white rat. He put it in Spetz's hand and the man hefted it up and down. It is uncertain as to where Spetz had cast his mind just then, whether he drilled into the rat's future, to observe with foresight the creature's union with the Hole, or if like an astronomer tracing starlight to its source Spetz peered into the rat to witness the history of the universe unfold before him with present activity—a man evaluating the physics of hereditary ownership, observing the rat's ancestral line stretch through his hand to the Ming Dynasty where it then continued back to branch the bends of every river settlement in Kublai Khan's empire, rats spilling into dried goods of merchants and the salted meats of war parties, rats rousting the courts and larders of Charlemagne—a rogue's gallery of rodent progenitors, of sired genetic coding and repurposed organic tissue distilled from a horde of vermin so vast it out-numbered the diamonds of sunlight winking the waters of Lake Calumet bay, flashing and fleeing out of existence, and yet there, scratching the lines of his palm, Spetz held the fruit of the horde's descent, the coalescence of all that had ever marked it, or any creature, as real. Spetz hefted the rat and Larke watched, unaware that his colleague may have been tabulating the weight of a trillion ghosts.

"Set the clock to zero, Clarence."

Larke removed a steel stopwatch from his smock.

"And begin," said Spetz who dipped the rat by the tail into the Hole over the dais. It dunked into the darkness and utterly disappeared. The seconds on the watch ticked and ticked and Spetz kept his eyes over the blackness that snipped the rat's body off its tail. It was uncertain what he would pull back, if the rat still hung on the other end of that tail or if the tail itself was all that remained.

"Approaching ten seconds," said Larke. "Eight. Nine. Now."

Spetz lifted the specimen and the rat emerged from the Hole, part by part. Larke wrote in the lab notes: *It came from nothing—a birth—is it the same rat or a new creature?* Whatever else Larke would conclude from the test, to Spetz the procedure proved one thing without folly: the Hole had communicated a motive for its darkness, that there was something more at play here than the physics of absent light. Spetz retrieved a penlamp from his smock and shined it into the Hole.

"What do you see, Clarence?" he said.

Larke looked into the Hole.

"I don't see anything," he said. "It's dark."

Spetz returned the penlamp, and cupped the rat into his palm. He hefted it as he spoke, perhaps recalculating its weight for a new lightness, an emptiness.

"It is dark," he said, "because it chooses to be dark."

Grandpa tried once to tell me what the Hole "looked like." That's a strange conversation—what a hole looks like. I thought he'd tell me about where it was and where it went: in the corner of his lab, under the wall to the room next to it; in the back lot, to a neighboring storage garage; at the bottom of the company pool, into another pool in China. But it wasn't like that at all. At first I thought he was describing what the Hole looked like to him. Even at a very young age Grandpa had trained me to think of conversation as evidence to something larger, that even the words a person says hardly encompass the message they're trying to send. So I would sit at his feet and listen like I did when he'd tell me the story of the two lampreys. His words would stack on my brow and weigh my eyes down, until all I could do was look at the carpet as he talked and

talked. Just look at the carpet and try to imagine the Hole there just as he described it, knowing he must be trying to tell me something larger. I never even considered the possibility he'd just been trying to tell me what he saw every day of those two weeks locked in the basement with Spetz.

On the third morning of the two-week quarantine Larke took his coffee over the Hole as Spetz showered in the lavatory. He leaned his hip against the testing dais and, with his head over his left shoulder, sipped the coffee while peering straight down into darkness. There was no depth to what he saw, no cavity, just a flat, dark circle like a round cut-out of black stationary. He leaned close and sniffed. He thought he smelled ozone. He sniffed again. Nothing. He whistled into it but there was no return sound, the Hole swallowed his tune right up. Larke frowned at this, and brought his steaming mug over the dais, tipping it until the coffee dribbled into the Hole and disappeared through its black surface.

Spetz emerged from the lavatory in only a towel, dripping, his spectacles dotted with drops of water. He had his hand up, index finger pointing to the space above his head where a shining light bulb should have hovered, his face alight with the promise of forthcoming brilliance. But when he discovered Larke, hunched over, desecrating the Hole, Spetz's mouth became a stiff line and his hand came down to his side. Larke stepped away from the dais, startled by his colleague. He unwittingly hooked the lip of the Hole with the bottom of his coffee mug and, to Spetz's astonishment, dragged it off the dais where it slapped onto the floor. The dais lay blank, white, ordinary as before it had been days before. The two men looked to each other processing what, exactly, just happened. Larke had moved the Hole.

Larke stooped down at once to examine what he'd done. The Hole lay on the floor, as if looking up at the dais to assess the distance it had traveled. He touched the tiling before the Hole and Spetz waved him away, approaching his creation like it were an injured animal. The man came down to his knees, placing his hands on either side of the Hole and lowering his ear inches from its opening.

"Do you know what this is, Clarence," he said.

Larke had no response. He gripped his coffee mug until his knuckles turned as white as the glazed finish. Spetz acknowledged the man's stupefaction, and kept his eyes on Larke as he wiped shower water from his chin. He lifted his arm as if to show it to his colleague, as if the hundreds of water droplets that clung to his hair were uninterpreted omens: hundreds of tiny, crystal balls each predicting a separate yet equally definitive future. The Hole should not have moved, but it did. Then Spetz put his arm in the Hole without hesitation. He did it with certainty, a mechanic searching for the cause of engine failure. He put his shoulder against the brim, keeping his head and neck over the aperture and pressed his ear to the floor.

Larke watched, perhaps unsure what to think at the moment. He discovered a new kind of stupor kneeling on the laboratory floor, one he carried for the rest of his life. It was sheer amazement. It flung him to a primal, unteachable place in his brain, and it kept him there like a child sent to the corner.

When Spetz plunged his arm into the Hole he revealed a familiarity with his creation Larke didn't understand. The way the man halved his body into it all at once, there was no trepidation, no regard for method or process. Larke would wonder on that moment for years, what it meant, how far and how often Spetz had gone in when he wasn't looking. Before his own end Larke would recall many times with perfect clarity

the moment he watched his colleague scrape his arm into the Hole, churning outer space, he thought, somewhere between Illinois and Jupiter. Larke often determined that as the moment when his own fate was revealed to him, when he knew he would follow Spetz in there, into the Hole, all the way down, as deep as it would take him.

Grandpa talked about it moving. I remember at first I didn't understand. I mean, how could I have? Sometimes, when he talked about the Hole being in one room and then being in the next, I thought he was spinning another riddle. I thought, maybe there was no hole at all, that aybe this whole time he'd been talking about Spetz and I had just been too thick to understand.

In the days that followed, the Hole never stayed in one place for long. Spetz began new tests. Ones to determine how it could move, where it could move—more interested in the “where” than the “how”. He had Larke construct a simple rig, a window pane of glass suspended parallel to the floor between to tripod clamp stands. Spetz laid the Hole over the glass with a set of sterilized tongs, then he dropped a white mouse in. The two searched the floor for the mouse but did not find it.

Larke said, "I think it's time we considered this less as a hole and more as a gateway."

Spetz up-ended a broom from the supply closet and dipped its tip into the Hole on the glass.

"It's a hole, Clarence," he said. "And look what it can do."

Spetz dragged the Hole off the rig with the boom handle, pulling it away from Larke and into the center of the lab. Then he smirked and exhaled in a way that made his

head bob back. His face tightened, beleaguered with a thousand new thoughts at once. The applications, the possibilities that this discovery presented. Questions and answers to questions science and humanity didn't even know they had. Perhaps, in the first time of his life, Spetz was beset by indecision. He had no idea where to begin with this. Had he split the atom, the next logical step would be to weaponize that newly, untapped energy. Simple. Text book. But the Hole offered a different conundrum, one beyond yoking power into new power. It complicated every surface where it lay, splitting—not atoms but--Adam from God. What was in the Hole? Whatever it was, something, it lay beyond the philosophies of this world, outside of its history, its religions and, perhaps, the science of its creation.

Spetz lifted the broom handle and up came the Hole with it, dangling there on the end like an empty trash bag. He saucered it around the broom handle like a hula-hoop and flung it on the bathroom door where it stuck with slap.

"Tell me, Clarence," said Spetz. "Do you honestly believe that, were you to pass through it, you'd find the lavatory on the other side?"

Larke didn't know what to say. He put in his hands in his pockets and walked into the dormitory. Spetz leaned on the broom for many minutes before he pulled his dining chair to its customary, nightly position and began to shine his shoes next to the bathroom. Larke sat onto his bunk and began to rub his hands together, converting energy into heat. He did this until his hands burned, then he placed his palms against himself, spreading brief pockets of warmth across his body. He repeated this for minutes, rubbing his hands and thinking of Yola until the lactic acid in his forearms cramped and stung him. Then he laid down on his side. Every now and then, from the darkened cell of his bunk, Larke would hear Spetz's brush come to a stop on the leather, and, with his head on his pillow,

he compressed his eye lids, able only to imagine what Spetz had seen or heard or touched to distract him his shoes.

I started to think about the Hole all the time. Talked about it with Grandpa—where I would take it. Home mostly. I'd walk around the house conjuring up uses for it. I thought about dropping it on the floor of my room and tying my bedsheets into a rope, then climbing in and out of it like Bugs Bunny. I pictured it under the table, slapped under there like a piece of gum. I could take my broccoli and toss it through the Hole, leaving room for two helpings of ice cream. Then I thought about where the ice cream would go, if I could slap the Hole over my stomach and pull it out to eat it again. I wanted to dress myself with the Hole and walk around school collecting things to place inside. I wanted to take Jenifer Brighten's paper mailbox and dump all of her Valentine's Day cards into my open chest. I wanted to stack a tower of pencils—their sharpened tips stabbing into the soft eraser of another—raise a six foot scaffold of them off my desk and then belly flop over it to absorb them all through the Hole. Somehow I knew that if I wore the Hole I'd become a part of it. I'd be a part of Grandpa's work and a piece of Sherman Spetz.

I remember once you told me to clean my room while I was on the couch thinking about the Hole. I thought about throwing you in there along with all your cigarettes. At the very least I'd put all the smoke down there. If that didn't work, I thought about carrying it around so I could duck my head in there to catch a breath every now and then. Sometimes there was so much smoke in the hall I would bear crawl into my room like the fireman who came to our school showed us. I thought it would be fine to keep “up here” full of smoke so long as I could use the Hole to breathe “down there”, wherever it went.



Maybe that's when I started thinking about it like that—in terms of "where it went." I must have asked Grandpa a thousand times.

I think about the day Grandpa learned about you and Spetz—if he found out. I like to think he did. I'd love to think you told him, but that might be optimistic. I had no reason to think he knew I wasn't his blood—he never treated me like anything less, but looking back, I like to think Grandpa knew I didn't come from him. To him, water was thicker than blood; it was better to swim with the fish is better than to spawn from one. I want to give him the credit of having known the truth. Beyond that, I don't know. I don't know how I want to imagine him around you, whether he looked on you the same way he looked on me, or if all he saw on you were Spetz's footprints.

Grandpa told me he had been following Spetz's career since he was a grad student at the "U." Said Spetz was the kind of guy that you don't hear about unless you're in the right circles, and then he's all you hear about. I think Grandpa only ever dreamed of working with Sherman Spetz. I pity him it actually happened. Grandpa told me about how he was recruited to the IoCorp R&D department. It was a story he tried to tell you a hundred times. I know because he would bring it up at dinner parties, as if to tell the table his grand adventure that led him to work with his living hero, but he always kept his eyes on you. And you always found a way to keep him from telling it. It took me years to finally get that story. I cobbled it together from public-release corporate notes and research journals. I had to learn about Grandpa's accomplishments and accolades from thesis candidates, strangers who knew him better than I did, and I'm trying really hard not to blame you for that. But I am going to make you sit there and listen to Grandpa's story for once.

He got recognized for his synthetic designs for—well—they're essentially fake fish. All fish have these swim bladders; they establish buoyancy—regulate at what depth the fish can swim. This bladder dictates how deep a fish can go. Too deep and the pressure would compress the glandular gas in the bladder and poison the fish, or crush it. Environs Operations hired Grandpa's team to culture a swim bladder that could withstand pressure distension, and that would simultaneously process compressed gas into a higher-density, nontoxic mixture that would allow a fish to swim, essentially, as deep as it desired without any adverse affects.

Because of Grandpa, the project never went through. He laid out exactly what they needed to make it work. He gave Environs everything, except the chemical composition of a necessary enzyme that would line the bladder and detoxify the compressed gas. He withheld that information. He sent them a message, Grandma. I read that he went to their department head and told him the entire project was infantile, that it didn't consider the ramifications it would have on oceanic ecosystems. He tapped the man on the face, right between his eyes, and went to jail for breach of contract and assault. Can you imagine, Grandma? Grandpa in jail? On principle?

Two days later IoCorp posted his bail and recruited him for his work on the bladder, for what he had done and what he'd refused to do. Sherman Spetz requested him by name. That's a day Grandpa would have loved to share with you, and I wish you would have let him. Sometimes I think I'm very much like he was, but then I'm reminded that I don't know him at all. I know him better than, probably, anyone—maybe better than you. I think I can say that confidently now. But there are so many pieces missing from him. Still, sometimes, I believe I think like him—that I can understand why he refused to follow through on his contract with Environs. Think about a fish that can swim

at any level it desires. Not a whale. Nothing so large and commanding. Just a short, sea perch. Down in the blackest water, where everything it knows is light-years away. No access to food. No mates. It can't even see down there, and it's subject to everything that can. Grandpa was never any kind of activist, but he knew something the other, more eager science jockeys seemed to unanimously overlook: there's no penetrating the deeper system. Only the native fish survive down there.

After counting Spetz's brush strokes on his leather loafers for many minutes, Larke at end fell to sleep and dreamed. Before him, Jules Verne's creation, Professor Von Hardwigg, hunched with soot on his face. He carried a lantern through a great tubular corridor marbled with volcanic glass. The tube cracked a thin hollow through the mantle, narrow as a vein of the Earth given the correct perspective. Larke clutched Hardwigg's coattails and followed as the man led on.

"It goes straight down," Hardwigg exclaimed. "All the way through."

Lantern light glittered on the black glass stones like winking stars. Larke tried to count these, but whenever he started the sound of a horse hair brush scraping over a pair of shoes made him turn away to look behind.

"There's a hole in the Earth," Larke said. "You think we would have noticed."

Professor Von Hardwigg did not turn back to acknowledge his companion. Larke continued to speak aloud, picturing the volcanic glass to split his voice and reassemble it into a new formation before sending it back.

"There's something about shooting stars that Yola loves," he said. "She stands on the balcony all the time. Just looking up. Waiting. I don't think she watches the news, or

has any idea when or if any showers will be forecasted. But she'll watch for them anyway. Like every star is just waiting for her to watch before it will fire off.

"She looks up and thinks, Clancy, why can't you be more like that," he wiped his face and continued. "Goddamn ridiculous really. Shiny. Not shiny. Such an immature scale. I try to explain it to her: it's just contrast. It's only contrast you're admiring, dear. The stars possess no special property that makes them superior to the darkness around them—in fact, we owe more to the unseen energies sweeping through the blackness of space than to any star. With the exception of the sun I suppose. But she doesn't listen."

Professor Von Hardwigg stopped to remove a chart from his pack. He hung his lantern from a stalactite and opened his map before him.

"It's like with fish," Larke went on. "A fish sees a shiny lure in the water and strikes it. All for contrast. Underwater, almost nothing shines or glimmers. It's dark and it's murky, adrift with sand, with algae, so when a fish sees something shiny, it simply cannot help itself. It goes for it. And it gets hooked. And it pretty much always dies. For contrast.

"It trades back thousands—hell, millions of years of hereditary instinct that tells it where to go to spawn, how to avoid predators, how to swim for Chrissakes—it trades all of that for the chance to consume something shiny. And then it dies. And you know what? I'll bet that, not even when the hook sets does the fish regret it. I'll bet it swims against the reeling line taking as much thought for its shiny mouthful as for its own life. It's just contrast. You only appreciate the stars for all the empty black around them, behind them, Yola—all the stuff that doesn't shine."

Hardwigg nodded and licked his fingers and doused his lantern to leave everything silent and black.

Grandpa told me about the morning when Sherman Spetz had vanished into the Hole. He said the night before it happened, he had a dream about *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*. He bought me a copy of that book every year for my birthday since then, and I always read it—each copy. I accepted the books the same way I accepted his riddles, like there was something in there I was supposed to figure out, but I honestly don't know what it was. Or if there was any.

Lately, I've been thinking about those books as though they weren't meant for me. Maybe the point of them wasn't as gifts but as some kind of therapy for Grandpa, some knee-jerk coping mechanism. You know, none of us ever asked him how it made him feel when Sherman Spetz disappeared into the Hole.

Spetz left his loafers at the base of the Hole, clean and together. The Hole remained on the lavatory doorway with Spetz's chair pulled beside it facing toward the test dais. The shoe box sat at the front chair leg like a loyal hound, closed and clean but for the occasional thumbprint marked in the color of shoe polish. The shoes pointed their toes to the lavatory door; they hugged at the sole as though they were one item. Larke knelt for them, took them up and pinned them to his chest. They stepped across his torso from collar to navel, and from the cavity where his colleague's foot belonged he heard Spetz's brush scraping across leather. The sound lapped from the shoes the way a conch shell recalls the sea. He returned them to his bunk, to an old shoebox containing stationary where he tried to place the loafers—only they were too large too fit.

He slid to the floor beside his bed and stared at the Hole clinging to the lavatory door.

Grandpa never said which day of the two weeks Spetz had disappeared. What I mean is, we don't know how long he was down there alone, with nothing to do but stare into the Hole until the time lock released him from quarantine. He came home different, and when IoCorp approached us and offered to pay his reparation penalties, you should have taken the money. I never told Grandpa about that, that I saw you turn them down. He spent so much time in the basement after he came home that he never would have known they'd come in the first place. I kept your secret from him and I have no idea why. I kept one of his from you too. But not anymore. Here it is.

I would sit against the basement door and listen to Grandpa on the other side. He'd sit down in the middle of the room, sometimes for hours, sometimes completely prone. Under the door I could see him place his hands on the floor and pull his chin up to them like he were looking down a cliff. He would just lay like that and look down. "Spetz," he'd say. "Spetz." He said it a lot, but mostly in a whisper. "I can hear you," he would say. "I hear you, Spetz."

He talked like he and Spetz were having a conversation. Grandpa would tell him all sorts of things. Things about you and me, but mostly about school and how as a student Grandpa had hung the cover of TIME with Spetz's Nobel photo on it over his desk. He talked about the number of hours he'd log each night studying things and words I can't remember, too complex for me understand back then. But more and more he started talking about the Hole and what he wished he could put in it.

"I think I'd just hide in it," he said once. He said he'd carry it with him—it was portable after all. If you don't carry it around then it's just a hole. He went on like that, listing all the things he'd hide in it—lots of things. Then he listed pieces of himself. He started with his arms and legs and began talking about when he was a kid, and how he got beat up at school a lot. He said there was this other kid, that he didn't remember what he looked like, just the shadow he cast. This was a big kid who always seemed to be standing in the sun. He said he remembers that dark outline.

Grandpa was afraid of this kid. He told Spetz that he would pitch him in the Hole, but then he said, "Not just him, not really the kid at all, but rather, that whole time. That feeling. Seeing the shadow creep up on me." He said he'd put all that into the Hole.

In the days that followed Larke's return home from the IoCorp basement laboratory, Yola's lung cancer began to crawl through her body with recruited hunger, affording new and irreparable purchase in her lymphatic system. In the years pursuing her prognosis she made it her business to sit in her shoe closet every morning to smoke until she heard her grandson Phillip coughing in the next room. Then she smoked two more cigarettes before coming out for the day. This continued until the morning Larke returned to work for IoCorp and disappeared in his lab.

Alone in his testing area, he opened a copy of *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* and laid it on the dais. The Hole had been pressed between two panes of glass clasped together in each corner with steel shims that had been rifled to sport hand-fastened wing-nuts. IoCorp stowed it this way in a freezer unit where it remained untouched until Larke's return. He pulled the cold chamber open and withdrew the glass casing from the refrigerated mist. He brought the entire assemblage to the dais where he

unpacked it. Larke kept one foot on the tile and stepped the other into the Hole, fitting it up to his waist like a pair of trousers. He did the same with the other leg and found he'd become a floating torso, legless, suspended in the test area. Then, like a hood, he drew the Hole over his head and darkness flooded into every space around him. This was the moment Larke examined the world through Hole and not the other way around. The observing lamps in the test area bounced their glow through the Hole, creating a white disk of light that Larke held in a space of infinite darkness. He turned the disk over in his hands and found light shining through the reverse side as well. This was not the same light coming through two ways; these were two separate light sources, mirrored perhaps, but separate. There were two worlds waiting through that disk, one behind each side of it. He spent his final moments wondering where the two sides went, how separate one's reality would be from the other's, and if at some distant point, even if too far to see with any instrumentation, the two ever met.

He folded the disk in half, then into fourths and then eighths. Through the opening, he saw his book laying open on the dais before him. He placed the disk over it. Then he reached through the Hole and pinched the corner binding of the book to pull it closed and cover him completely.

The doctor said your surgery went according to plan, Grandma—that they successfully removed the cancer. What little remains in your lymph nodes is likely to go into recession. They say, for all intents and purposes, you'll make a full recovery. They say you should play the lottery when you get out of here. Maybe they're right.

I'm leaving this for you. It's the last copy of *Journey to the Center of the Earth* that Grandpa left for me. I'm leaving it in the same spirit that Grandpa left me with so



many riddles, and pieces to work through. I won't be here when you get up, and I don't think I'll be coming back from where I'm going. But, if you see Grandpa before I do, tell him hello, and I'll do the same.

When Phillip Larke left Yola's bedside the moon had already begun to dip into the Lake Calumet bay. A sliver of light rounded its belly, rimming the black thumbprint of night pressing the orb flat in the sky. Starlight rippled on the bay. Soft swells of water chased the light with dark rings, expanding until they broke on the shore. Freshwater fish whipped below, snapping, coming to surface and sinking.

Phillip unbuttoned his sleeved shirt and let it flap open at his ribs. He lifted the apron of the T-shirt underneath, brought the fabric up his torso and pulled it over his head. He revealed his bare chest to the lake with the Portable Hole clinging to his abdomen, wide and delicate as a spider's web. He stepped into the frigid waters of the bay, until waist deep in the silver lined waves. Then he drew in his breath and went lower until the water met the Hole and began to pour into him, emptying into Phillip's body as if to escape there. The Hole began to drink, slurping the bay into its host. Phillip stood with open arms, overlooking the water as it rushed and rushed to fill him.

A huge catfish whipped in the shallowing bay, seven feet long in three feet of water. A massive specimen, broad as a pantry door. It displaced Lake Calumet in gallons with the powerful swipes of its tail. Phillip dropped to his knees, lowering the Hole to erase even more of the bay. The water came down to reveal the fish. With the moon behind the creature, Phillip had to look through its own shadow to see its wet scales glittering in the mud as it thrashed great scars into the bay floor. He imagined its swim bladder, long and broad as a tank of compressed air. Looking on the solitary fish, Phillip

wondered of its ilk—where were its spawn and how deep did they swim? The Hole drank the lake water until nearly none remained, until it came to rest in the weeds near the fish's belly. Phillip Larke stepped into the mud already scored and pitted by the lashing barbels of the catfish.

The fish swapped the ground, its tail fin sticking where it struck. It opened its mouth for something, closed it. Without water, its gills seemed gruesome, like cruel incisions. Phillip scraped his finger through a coat of mucus that clothed the fish. From inside the Hole he heard the sound of a horse hair brush sweeping over leather shoes. The fish tried again to breathe, blinking, as Philip dressed the Portable Hole over the creature's belly, over the area he thought to cover its swim bladder. There in the mud, he looked into the Hole and saw a pathway through the entire earth: a deep and promising tunnel where the glass of precious stones glimmered to light his way. He wrote his name on the catfish, in the mucus on its belly. Then he drew an arrow connecting his name to the Hole and crawled through.

## PROSTHESIS

Kenny Fink watched the Groundskeeper dig the same hole into the yards of each of the six houses that lined his street. The holes started on the north end of the block when, days earlier, the Groundskeeper appeared with the morning, tied his black hair into a thick knot behind his skull and stabbed his shovel in the sod of the first house, clearing a pit next a serviceberry bush. The neighbors didn't understand. Kenny had seen them yell from their living room windows, shaking tea cups on china coasters and placing telephone calls from their kitchen nooks. The Groundskeeper spoke no English in return. He simply pointed to the Fork Springs Community logo emblazoned on the back of his coveralls and cut into their lawns with his red-pommeled, round-nose shovel.

Presently, Kenny sat with his forehead pressing against one of the front windows of his home. The boy slurped Froot Loops from his spoon that he lifted and dropped into his bowl like a toy Drinking Bird. Across his street, in the yard of a house sharing a fence with Mr. Diehard's, he saw a woman in lingerie tip-toe out the front door. She carried sneakers under one arm and let the fly to her jeans hang open as she hastily buttoned her top over a dark, satin brassiere with one hand, trying to close the door behind her with the other. She whipped her flattened red curls about, looking all around her before hustling to a short, black sedan parked on the opposite side of the street. As she sat into the car, Kenny decided he'd never seen the woman before, that he knew she didn't live in that house. As she drove away on bare feet, Kenny knew he'd never see her again.

From the yard of the same house, a red-pommeled, round-nose shovel volleyed out of the lawn, and behind it, the Groundskeeper in his green coveralls, hoisting himself out of a hole. He emerged with sinewy vigor, as if recalled from his own grave. The

Groundskeeper put his hands on his knees before coming up tall. He buried his fists in his back, locking his skeleton upright; then he laid the shovel on his shoulders and hung his wrists from the pommel, twisting around the axle of his spine, left to right to left. Kenny drowned his spoon in his bowl, enraptured to witness the elaborate process of coming out of a hole: the Groundskeeper was a diver fighting off the Bends. Kenny breathed on the window and drew the man's silhouette in the mist he left there, connecting the Groundskeeper to the universe by tracing the form of his collected matter in a pattern the stars would recognize, one that would signal their assembly into a new constellation that followed this outline. The boy breathed and nodded, and then he called to his sitter without looking away.

"Mr. Diehard," he said. "He's out of the ground."

Rorick Deinhardt emerged from Shelley Fink's master bathroom with the toilet flushing behind him. The sound of the swirling water pleased him as it spilled from the closed acoustics of the lavatory into the drapery of the master bedroom. He had no clue how many days or weeks to expect before Mrs. Fink returned from Hollywood to claim her son, so he left the sheets on the queen bed in shambles, going to the night desk to retrieve his clothing from the day before off the back of the paisley, upholstered chair.

The old man assembled dark suspenders over a pigeon-blue bowling shirt tucked into worsted slacks. The time-mottled trousers sported coffee and machine oil stains that faded into the material like old bruises. He affixed a pair of rectangular glasses on his nose, holding argyle socks in one hand, as he came out to answer little Ken's call.

"What then, my boy," he said, and he lowered onto the window seat next to Ken, worming his foot into a sock.

"He's coming over," the boy said, and he slid his cereal bowl to one side, removing a single Froot Loop from the milk to press it onto his chest like a badge. "We need to be brave."

Rorick looked to the boy, recalling him the way he'd been years earlier, when Anja would watch over him in their home during his parents' divorce. The boy was smaller then, and rounder. Rorick imagined him swelling from a singular ball of pale skin, plumping to sprout an arm here, a leg there, a head complete with hair and lined with flat teeth. Ken was a distillation, a drop of something that hit the ground and began to grow with such speed the old man thought himself to be shrinking.

"Who now?" he said. "Who comes, Ken?"

The boy reached for a glass of water on the window sill next to his bowl. He brought it up to his eye and looked through it before pointing out the window to the Groundskeeper digging a hole in the side yard of the house.

Through his water glass, Kenny saw the living room in swells and bends. The sofa raked up the side of the glass, a long and velvet scythe edging away just enough for a crescent window to beam white and fiery behind it. The tasselled rug spread over the white-oak floor as if spilled there. Mr. Diehard's round frame leaned across the aperture of the unlit hall behind him, the dark fish-mouth stretching wide to swallow him. The old German put his finger into Kenny's water.

"Is the birthday shark," he said.

Kenny clutched the glass with both hands, sealing away an entire cosmos of microbic life with his fingers. He tried to picture a complete shark in there.

"No way that's a real thing," he said.

Mr. Diehard adjusted his cornered glasses.

"Oh no?" he said. "And how many birthdays you have had? Five? Well that is not enough at all to know is it?"

Mr. Diehard smiled. Kenny drank from the glass.

"Now I know everything."

Kenny scooped up the television remote from the kitchen counter and stretched his arm out so he could fire the "on" button around Mr. Diehard's body. On the TV a boy walked hand-in-hand with his father down a suburb sidewalk as the sun set ahead of them. Kenny typed a sequence of buttons on the remote, summoning and dismissing a kaleidoscope of menus flashing over the screen. The highlighted selector skipped over a list of previously recorded programs and those set to record in the future. It came to stop over a show called *The Fiancée*.

"Mommy's show starts at 7:30," said Kenny.

The old German pulled on his suspenders.

"You think she'll sing me Happy Birthday, Mr. Diehard?"

"I'll sing to you, my boy."

Kenny pressed the "info" button on the remote. The compact pane that read *The Fiancée* exploded across the entire screen. *Week 7: The Ladies Learn to Please a Man*.

"Ken. Does your father know about this show?"

"Oh yeah! Dad's coming," Kenny said and he sucked in a sharp breath that pushed on his cheeks and bugged his eyes. He turned off the set, hopped off the kitchen stool and bounded for the sofa with his arms ahead of him. He came to one side of the couch, bent his knees and shot over the armrest to bellyflop on the pillowed seats. His lips popped to release all the air inside him, and he panted on his stomach. Kenny straightened his arms

and legs until he was a solid rod of a boy, an arrow slicing through countless, imagined enemy creatures, coming out the other end to explode into brilliant lights and rolling drums. He filled the living room with the fire of his tapestry and at last coalesced all the incandescent shards of himself back into one boy, too small and ribbed to get noticed by big people. Kenny saw himself hiding deep in the earth, pulling jewels the size of toy trucks from the cave walls, keeping them to himself and telling no one.

"I can hold my breath for real long," he said.

Rorick smiled and put his hands in his pockets. He met the flimsy tab of his matchbook there. On his lower lip he felt the heavy, phantom gap of his dark maple pipe.

He patted himself to find it.

"I'm going to be a diver," Ken said.

"Oh yeah," said Rorick scanning the room. "Whatever for?"

"All the best things are deep-deep under ground where no one can find them."

"No one but you?"

"Uh-huh. Or they're in space."

Rorick saw the Groundskeeper out the window, head down and shoveling. The man's arms seemed to do all the work, as if they operated on gears separate from the rest of him. His back hung stiff, locked into position.

"Well you better make cracking, my boy, or the gardener beat you to it."

"He's not looking for what I'm looking for. You can tell because he stopped looking when the red haired lady came out the front door. She wouldn't stop me from looking. I'm not afraid of her."

Rorick didn't understand—he'd spent a lifetime failing to understand Americans.

"Well I looking for my pipe," he said. "I think I have left it in my house. Want to come over with me?"

Rorick took Ken's hand and hefted the boy from the sofa. He felt a resounding pop in his hip as he guided the boy several inches off the ground, swinging him with control around the armrest of the couch and into the foyer. Ken landed on his feet cheering, and held Rorick's hand even after the old man had let go. Ken followed him through the door and across the black street, waving in the sun. In the side yard behind them, Rorick heard the Groundskeeper and recalled the image of the man bent to his shovel, knee-deep in the earth, rowing in motion again and again as he cleared a dark and ongoing path into the ground.

Mr. Diehard's house exhaled over a short lawn that slouched to the curb. The sidewalk met with baked brick hexagons pitting a path through the grass to a screen-door bolted over a warped wooden stoop. Every molecule of the house seemed to lean on the other, suggesting a co-dependence, a systematic functionality exclusive to living organisms. Kenny held his breath until his eyes reflected what he knew to be true, until the house devolved into swirling sparks of color that revealed every atom of wood and brick and glass. Among these atoms, some fired off to disappear, some drew figure eights and others revolved slowly around each other as if to betoken an entire universe of freckled light, spinning without guidance through empty space. Kenny gripped Mr. Diehard's leathery palm and hopped from one brick hex to the next. The he stopped and bowed to the house respectfully, the way one explorer greets another.

Mr. Diehard opened the front door and Kenny held his breath as he entered. He affixed a pair of swim goggles dangling from his neck, and pressed across the carpet with



exhilarating trepidation, bounding from foot to foot with slow, wide steps. The living room telescoped back through rings of shadows of increasing intensity, scaling from the patch-row carpeting to the box angles in the ceiling. It gave Kenny tunnel vision. He focused on the slender door frame across the room, behind the wine-dark, conjoined armchairs and the beige piano that pressed against the south wall thin as a card table. The door frame shone bright with back-lighting across the unlit foyer. It beamed as a single tongue of flame boxed and flattened into the wainscoting. The broad and yellow-curtained windows beyond it gave the frame its burning color, but to Kenny the door was made of light, a strange and new light that replaced his understanding of darkness. The unexplored corners of the world didn't all hide in shadow, not to Kenny, not then. He wanted to press through that bright square of fire and come out the other side as a glass replica of himself.

"You've been in this room, Ken," said Rorick. "Remember when my Anja, Mrs. Deinhardt, had you over for sandwiches?"

Kenny, fixed on the door frame, recalled the name Oma Diehard, a bright figure that spread brown mustard through cut-open buttered rolls. He saw fingernails, long and glistening as dragon scales, carefully handling dark cheeses with pepper crusted slices of turkey meat and crisp lettuce leaves that cracked in half like thin sheets of ice. Kenny remembered breaking open the soft mustard seeds in his teeth and the musty smell of their spice as Oma Diehard's long fingernails danced through his hair. Rorick saw the boy roll back into that smaller, rounder form—his hands too weak and fat to grip much of anything. He remembered those hands on Anja's apron, pulling for the chocolate stains that smeared its front. When the boy was small, the days nearly always smelled of sugar,

and the air vents piped the heat from the kitchen throughout the house, thawing the rigid angles of the framework until, at times, the rooms seemed to droop or expand to new dimensions.

"Well. You were quite little then. Come. I show you around."

Kenny released his breath through his nose, slow and loud like a pneumatic piston coming to rest. Mr. Deinhardt took the boy's hand and crossed the living room heading for the door of fire. Kenny closed his eyes, handing himself over to Mr. Deinhardt. He waited for fire. He waited for pressure. He felt his body preemptively compress onto his bones, amplifying the sound of his blood as it boiled through him, hissing. Kenny saw snakes in his veins with bright rubies for eyes. Rorick felt the boy's hand tighten. He looked to see him wrenching his eyes shut. Uncertain why, he did the same, and in that moment the two traversed the house hand-in-hand and blind. Oncoming light painted Rorick's eyelids red with translucence. He saw the tiny veins that branched through the skin shielding his eyes; they stood alone against the invading red light like the limbs of a single, blackened tree before a backdrop of encroaching fire. Kenny knew the fire was coming. He squeezed Rorick's hand, and the old German squeezed his back. Then together, they opened their eyes, blinking to swat away a haze of uncleared vision. When their eyes refocused, they did so on a display of a dozen human arms, outstretched, resting in cupboards of glass.

Kenny froze under the towering, dark-stained cases. They had shelves of wood and glass and mirrors, and each boasted a long and severed arm ending in a hand with unpredictably crooked fingers. Kenny compared his own arm to the many on display,

contorting his fingers in every combination he saw available, knowing that if he matched the signs they each formed some hidden truth would reveal itself.

"I designed these when I lived in Dinkelsbühl," said Mr. Diehard. "It is a place. I grew there. I was little like you there."

Kenny let his right arm hang, lifting it up with his left hand, turning it over and releasing it. There had to be a way to take it off his body. He just had to keep looking.

"You took these from people in Dinklesquirrel?" he said.

The old German laughed. "No child. They are not from people. I designed them. They are made like television sets."

Kenny pulled back his goggles. The perspired rings around his eyes cooled with a new freshness on his face like larger, pupal formations blinking into life. He had it all wrong. These weren't people arms. They came from television. Mr. Diehard had reached through the screen and picked these from gameshow hosts and news anchors like fruit off a tree.

"They're prothetisch," said Rorick, lifting his pipe from the lampstand next to a tall armchair. He took it to his mouth, opened his lambskin tobacco wallet and began to tamp the musty leaf into the bowl.

"Proxketic?" said Kenny, drinking in the arms through his new, huge eyes.

Rorick struck a match in the tabs of its book and buried the flame in the pipe bowl. Immediately the room filled with apple and wine berry and the smell of new leather.

"Hmm," he said. "How to describe."

Kenny looked up to the old German drawing on his pipe. Mr. Diehard appeared clouded and ethereal, more like a spirit than the neighbor he knew. The smoke was familiar, but he couldn't remember in what way.

"Prothese is when you loose something, Ken. And you replace it with another something."

Suddenly the boy recalled Oma Diehard's hands and the way her clammy skin wrapped her veins and knuckles like a toad's throat pouch stretched over them. He recalled sandwiches and short cups of hot cocoa sending out long plumes of steam. Oma Diehard would capture the steam on the end of her needlepoint to knit an aviator's cap for Kenny, placing it on the boy's head just seconds before his flight from the bathtub to Skull Island. He remembered her apron and the way it seemed to climb forever to reach her curly hair, the way it retained oven heat to slowly bake the woman all day long.

"You lost Mrs. Diehard, Mr. Diehard."

Rorick squinted into his smile.

"Where's the proxketic Mrs. Diehard?"

The old man removed his pipe from his mouth and held it fuming before him. Kenny blinked back at him through the smoke, picturing Mr. Diehard through the mist that circles and weaves the inner fabric of crystal balls, asserting the inter-connectivity of the matter of life and time. He saw Oma Diehard emerging from that mist, knitting a trail of smoke behind her.

"Some things, my boy," he said. "They don't replace easily like others. Or at all. You could spend a life looking for them again."

"Like the Groundskeeper," Kenny said. "That's how I'd dig if I were looking for something under there. He must have lost his Oma too."

Rorick winced. "I'll be right back, Ken."

The old man touched Kenny's shoulder and disappeared into the bathroom. He closed the door and left the boy in the den alone. Kenny turned through the smoke in the room, making arms like an F-17. He barrel-rolled over the carpet, sky-blue in his eyes, firing at close-sweeping bogies until they shattered into fire. The boy winged the north display case coming out of a nose dive and bruised the thumb joint on his left hand. The case shook and lumped a plastic-cast arm to the carpet.

Kenny rubbed his hand red and bent to the arm at his feet. He lifted it and rubbed it on its thumb joint. He held it against him in a rifleman's grip, clearing the room with the armchair chair for his cover. He swept through the den, emerging into the kitchen where he fired the arm at the oven. He bounded across the foyer with his wide, deep sea diver's steps, approaching the north-facing floor-to-ceiling windows where he drew back a single curtain panel with the extended index finger of the prosthetic arm. He saw his house and the sea-foam green coveralls of the Groundskeeper bent into side yard where the red handle of his shovel arced now and again to displace a heap of soil. With the plastic finger on the tip of the plastic arm, Kenny drew the outline of Oma Diehard's skeleton, floating in the earth a thousand leagues beneath the digging man.

"Do you see that button on the wrist, Ken?" Rorick said, drying his hands on his trousers.

Little Ken turned the arm over to discover a plastic protrusion bulging a centimeter off the wrist. Without further instruction, he pressed it, and the hand fired off the arm to the coffee table, knocking magazines and pressed-cork drink coasters onto the carpet. The hand lay there limp, a tether tracing its trajectory back to the arm where a

winch whirred inside the wrist, ready to retrieve it. Ken went to push the button again, but Rorick lifted a hand to stop him.

"It's behaving slow today," he said. "It has been a while. But give it time."

Ken blinked several times as he looked to the hand lying still on the floor.

Without warning, it sprang up onto the tips of its fingers and began to claw around the carpet from magazine to coaster to magazine. It scratched the cover of one of Anja's gardening periodicals and then returned to a coaster where it sat on its heel and rolled onto its little finger. The hand scooped up a cork coaster with its thumb and forefinger and flung it onto the coffee table like an American frisbee—Rorick recalled the many hours he struggled to understand the word "frisbee." The hand did the same for the magazines, gripping and whipping them to the table. Then it crawled up to the surface and straightened their arrangement before falling limp again. Rorick clapped in the den and laughed heartily, loud booming laughs he fired from his gut like cannonballs.

He wiped his eye and pointed to Kenny. "Press it now, Ken."

The boy pressed the button again and hidden servos operated the wrist winch, retracting the tether until the hand locked securely on the end of the arm, whole again. Ken lifted the arm up to his nose, raking it back and forth to inspect it. Rorick laughed and clapped and hooted until, again, he excused himself to the bathroom.

In Kenny's living room, Rorick stacked a heap of birthday presents, instructing the boy to wait on his bed until called. When the boy emerged again into the living room, he lifted fists over his head and flexed. He began to prod the stack with one stiff arm. He sat on his heels as Rorick telephoned the boy's invited guests a second time, each of whom had a mother's excuse promising rain checks and gifts in the mail. Ronald Park's

mother refused to bother with excuses. She took the phone from her son and said to Rorick, "We have a TV. We've seen the show. Ronny won't be attending the party, or any party at Shelley Fink's home." And she hung up. Rorick turned to Kenny, twisting on his own arm.

"No one's coming, huh?" he said.

"Good news, Ken," Rorick said. "I call all your guests and tell them piss off. We have too much fun planned for them to interfere."

Rorick came over to Kenny, lowering himself to the floor like a massive ship slowly taking on water. Kenny drew symbols in the carpet, perhaps nonsense he thought, perhaps an unwitting copy of ancient script reserved for dead holy men on forgotten temple steps. He let the carpet chase his finger. Rorick nudged him with his elbow and whipped his finger repeatedly at the gift stack. Kenny looked to the raised tower of red boxes ribboned green and blue, two-dimensional balloons exploding over them like strange berries on cubist shrubbery. He crawled out for a present, scooped one up and crawled back. Rorick rubbed his hands as the boy opened it. The red paper shed to reveal an old shoe box covered in German, familiar letters arranged and accentuated into something alien. He traced the belly shape of the "ß" character for many seconds until Rorick nudged him to open the box. Kenny lifted its lid. Inside, a prosthetic arm draped over crumpled newspaper. This arm was darker than the one in Rorick's den, a skin of leather dressed over its plastic casting. It looked more like a fine shoe than an arm.

Rorick clapped. "Try this one, my boy."

Kenny held it out in both hands like a piece of lumber, turning it and turning it, looking for a switch, a button, anything. Discovering nothing he returned to the shoe box, finding a small harp inside, about the size of a slice of bread. The arm wriggled in

Kenny's hand, inching toward the harp. It clutched the puny instrument between its thumb and pinky, using its index, middle and ring fingers to play Tchaikovsky's harp cadenza from *The Waltz of Flowers*. The fingers swept over the harp with an impossible adroitness, creating notes between the strings, issuing sounds and music as if cheating to do so.

Rorick bellowed with laughter. "You know how long it took to make it do that? Another, Ken. Another!"

Kenny ripped open another present. This was an arm of clear plastic and glass, what the boy imagined telescopes kept on their insides.

"Quick," said Rorick. "Take it to the window before the sun goes."

Kenny raced it to the window and held it up to the last sheet of sunlight scraping over the neighbor's garage. On the carpet, the clear arm's shadow transfigured into a watery outline that began to shift and transform. It cast the image of a quetzal flying over a heavy forest canopy, its long and illustrious tail gently touching the tree leaves behind it to disintegrate them. The bird rolled into a ball and sprung out into the shape of a diamond that winked into a star and shrank back into a wide illustration of the universe turning through interstellar miasma swept by colored gasses. And then the sun fell behind the garage and the arm's apparitions vanished.

"More, more," Rorick bellowed.

Kenny opened arms that thumb-wrestled, arms that made tea, arms that zipped and unzipped his coats and tied his shoes. He opened arms that did ventriloquist acts and arms that fired their hands into the sky like helicopters. Soon his living room crawled with arms that slapped five and gave thumbs up and dialed local take-out restaurants. And each, after performing its task, propped itself up on its ball socket to shake Kenny's



hand and fall limp onto the carpet. Kenny and Rorick rolled on their backs at the sight, each trying to laugh louder and at greater cost than the other until finally the old German had to rush to the toilet.

An unnoticed arm cut Kenny a piece of birthday cake and snaked it over to him on its elbow, balancing the slice over a broad, silver cake knife. Kenny took the knife from the arm and shook its open hand, dismissing it from duty. The arm slumped to the carpet with the others, and Kenny sat up, holding his cake out before him like a flashlight. He looked out the window to the Groundskeeper bent over and digging in the dying light. The boy shook his head and went into the side yard. He approached the Groundskeeper and held out the cake on the knife.

The Groundskeeper stopped his shovel and Kenny took notice of his fatigue. When placed to his task, the man's weariness went unnoticed, but then as he stopped and turned just enough to see Kenny's ankles, the boy beheld a man rolling with every breath, shining with perspiration. The Groundskeeper shot his eyes to Kenny's and then down again. He patted the grass at his chin. Kenny nodded and placed the cake there. He watched the man breathe, picturing his lungs to mirror the work of his shovel. Kenny saw the Groundskeeper chipping away at a mountain of air, arching his back to the darkening sky to draw his breath all across the Milky Way, pulling at the southern universe with a trembling anxiety that it might come rushing into him all at once and fill him until he burst, then withdraw with every piece of him in tow. The Groundskeeper inhaled like a machine, Kenny thought, like an animal twice his size. Watching the man crowded in his hole, the boy half expected starlight to escape through his nose.

"Keep going," Kenny said. "It's down there somewhere."

The Groundskeeper stabbed his shovel into the ground.

"Ken," Rorick said from inside. "That show is to start."

Kenny turned away from the hole and carried the image of sinking green coveralls with him as he returned to the front door.

Rorick and Kenny sat into the soft tongue of the velvet sofa in the living room. Rorick lifted the television remote like a plane in flight and crash landed it on Kenny's knee. The boy scooped it up and clicked the power button. The television fizzed into life. Portraits of Shelley Fink adorned the wall on either side of the set. On the left, a pencil sketch of her several years before Kenny was born. Her hair clawed over the peanut bend in her brow. Her lips pouted, heavy with cosmetic paint over the needle-tip of her chin. On the right, a more recent photograph of her, hair laid over her left shoulder as she seduced the camera. Her lips curved into her cheeks, two sliced beets floating on a blank face.

The program began. Invisible fountain pens scrawled the words *The Fiancée* across the screen over a backdrop of waterfalls and ocean waves colliding onto pearlescent beaches in slow motion. A catalog of women's busts flashed on the screen displaying names and ages in the bottom right corner. Jenipher 29. Aimee 24. Kalissa 31. Shelley 27.

"I had no idea your mother was so young, Ken," said Rorick.

A man in a cocktail suit walked towards the camera steeping his fingers at his sternum. He gestured to his right and to his left with out-spread arms and, from off-camera, stage lights flooded over nine women surrounding him.

"There's your mother, my boy. Maybe she sing birthdays to you."

Rorick elbowed Kenny's ribs.

"Is there any more cake?" the boy said.

The old German smiled and left the sofa for the kitchen, pulling ceramic plates out of the cupboard. On the television, a re-cap of the previous episode flashed in montage. A shirtless man with well-groomed hair and definite shadows cutting across his abdomen ran down an empty beach. Ten women encircled him in bathing suits and he took them in armfuls. The man appeared in a candle-lit room wearing a tuxedo, nodding his head attentively to one of the women speaking at him, laughing over her champagne glass. Then they gathered in a ballroom that striped red with elegant carpets. Lilacs and petunias ran in vines through a pine-plank lattice behind the women who stood in gowns over ascending platforms. One by one the man with the abs knelt before them and asked if each would be his Fiancée before sliding a ring over their trembling fingers. He did this for nine women, and the tenth left in tears before the man raised a cocktail glass to toast the remaining candidates.

"Would you like ice cream too, Ken?"

A set of keys scraped in the lock of the front door of the house. Kenny shot up and turned toward the foyer. A man in jeans and a dark collared jacket came through, closing the door with a boom behind him. He had hair like black meringue and smiled like it was a birth defect. He patted himself on the chest over the inside pocket of his nylon running jacket. Then he spread his arms.

"Happy birthday, little man. Oh thank God there's cake. Hey cut me off some of that will ya, pal?"

Kenny straightened over the back-rest of the couch to see the man.

"Hi, Dad," he said.

The man went to Kenny, "Is that all I get after two months? Get up and give the old man a hug."

Mr. Fink scooped his son off the couch and swung the boy around in one arm, knocking Kenny's knees into the wall. Then with a "whoops" he lowered Kenny to the floor.

"Is nice to meet you, Mr. Fink," Rorick said. "I'm Mr. Deinhardt. I live across the street."

"No kidding," Mr. Fink said. "Say how's that cake coming along, Mr. Diehard?"

He turned to Kenny. "What we watching, pal?"

Mr. Fink sat on the couch and dropped his son next to him. Kenny rubbed his knees. Shelley laughed at something the abs man had said, and Mr. Fink turned to the television, to the sound of his ex-wife's laughter.

"What the hell?" he said. "Is that Shelley?"

On the TV, Shelley took the hand of the abs man as he led her across a wind-beaten field to a white helicopter chopping at the air. The helicopter lifted off the field and dipped towards a sunny cityscape ahead. In the canopy, Shelley smiled, revealing the immaculate porcelain of her veneers. Mr. Fink stood up in the living room and pointed at the television.

"Mr. Fink," Rorick said. "You didn't know about this?"

"Kenny," Mr. Fink shouted. "What is she doing? What the hell is this?"

Kenny saw the carpet like he pictured an ant might see the sands of its den. The curled fibers expanded until they covered him in complete, high-sweeping loops. They ushered him through their arched corridors, leaning away into ubiquitous tunnels tracing

honeycombed pathways that exploded with dizzying quantity. All of them anchored to somewhere out of sight, somewhere beneath—a hidden Under that tugged at Kenny like gravity, pledging itself to him with fealty. No matter which honeycombed way Kenny chose to travel, the secret Under would find him on the other side. He wanted to fall to the carpet and keep falling, down into the microscopic dimensions of atomic emptiness, to become a part of the space between electrons and planets and heartbeats.

Mr. Fink dug into his jacket. He tore away at the contents of his pockets and threw them down: a half-smoked pack of cigarettes, a napkin with a phone number written in green ink, a slender box in red balloon wrapping paper. Finally he hooked onto his cellular phone and ripped it free. He dialed wildly and threw the phone across the room before finishing a complete number. He ripped the pillows from the couch until there were none. He turned to Kenny and lifted him off the couch by his arms, clutching until he met bone. He shook the boy as his face turned pink and pronounced with veins. His body wracked as though in seizure, and he clutched on to Kenny as if to keep himself from falling over.

"Mr. Fink," called Rorick. "You're hurting him."

Mr. Fink flung his son to the couch. He turned to Rorick with a trembling finger. The old German had seen this reaction before in himself; it emerged sporadically in the weeks that followed Anja's passing. He spent the days of her absence assembling stools and rocking chairs in his shed, and would at times, without provocation, lift them over his head to smash them against each other.

"Who are you?" Mr. Fink began to shout. He shouted it again and again, coming closer to Rorick. The old man gripped a plastic knife in his hand and spread his feet on

the tile, feeling behind him for something on the counter, anything. Outside, he saw the Groundskeeper who began to dig with a new zeal, fueled by the commotion in the house. He frantically cleared out his hole, as if digging were somehow the answer.

"Why are you in my house?" Mr. Fink shouted. "Why are you with my son? Get out."

Rorick felt his bladder constrict. He began to urinate in his trousers.

"Dad," Kenny called.

Mr. Fink turned to see his son holding a prosthetic arm lumped with artificial muscle. Kenny compressed a button on the wrist and the arm fired its fist across the living room, thudding soundly onto the square of Mr. Fink's jaw. The man fell and connected to the kitchen tile with the back of his head.

Shelley laughed. Kenny flinched, stepping onto the remote control, pausing the program, freezing his mother in that laugh. Her hand clutched the bare knee of the abs man. Her shirt billowed open from the helicopter prop wash, exposing her lime-green bra. Kenny turned and saw the small bow on his mother's brassiere, wrapped over her sternum between her breasts. His father's present lay canted on the glass coffee table, bowless and poorly taped.

"Come now, Ken," said Rorick, hurriedly waving the boy over to him.

Kenny breathed fast through an open mouth, uncertain. He bounded to the front door where Mr. Diehard took his hand. The two raced across the street and into the home of Oma Diehard.

Rorick and the boy spent several minutes huddled in the den, the lights off, the old German's hand over the telephone, trying not to make a sound. Kenny examined Rorick's wet pants. He studied the display cases for the second time that day. In darkness they issued a new sensation. They retained their promise for the possibility of things otherwise impossible, but this sentiment rested sleepily behind heavy layers of shadow. They appeared somehow encased by those shadows, buried in them. Kenny knew unlocking them again the way he had before would require more process than opening a present. It would be more like breaking up stone and cutting through tree roots to get at them a second time. He'd spent all their promises in one fleeting moment, and now he didn't know if he'd ever get them back.

"Mr. Diehard," he said.

Rorick swallowed. Kenny rose off the den carpet and walked over to the farthest display case.

"It's all right," Rorick said. "I think it will be all right."

The man put his palms on his knees, feeling his pipe pressing into his thigh. The curvature of the bowl reminded him of his wife, of how she'd follow him through house forcing out choking coughs in his wake until, smiling, he agreed to put it out. He removed the pipe from his trousers and held it before him with soft, curled fingers, as if the slightest misapplication of force would crumble the pipe into sand.

"My Anja gave this to me," he said. "I don't know what I do if I lost it."

"Maybe you'd quit smoking," Kenny said, and he held his breath to walk down the hall to the room Oma Diehard had once told him was his.

Rorick smiled and put the empty pipe in his mouth.

In his room, Kenny held his breath and tightened his stomach, pushing blood into his head until his eyes clouded with delirium, with stars that weren't stars draping a mimetic Milky Way across the domestic darkness of his closed eyelids. He pictured the origin of those stars stemming from somewhere deep inside himself, and began to dig for that spot. Somewhere behind the wet and fastened seal of his throat and under the pliable layers of his insides, Kenny pictured a thundercloud of cosmic light at once confined to his belly and breaching it, borderless, stretching through him and beyond him to some power source, some system of relays that put everything in his body into motion exactly how and when he commanded it. He told his body to hold its breath and so it did, operating through that galactic microcosm contained in his belly where all wealth of discovery lay, waiting to be found. Kenny saw himself as piece of all that outer space, divided and earth bound, leaning on his little universe as a vicarious act of self-interdependence, at once the arm and the prosthetic apparatus that imitated it.

Kenny fell to his knees and gasped for air. The stars in his eyes receded back to their hiding place to churn again in his belly, out of sight. He remembered Mr. Diehard and the smoke from his pipe—how the two together seemed to confirm a union between solid form and the smoky, immaterial, of how time and space could never be measured with mechanical increments or gears or plastic arms. He felt the stars sink into his belly where he knew they would remain until he had grown to forget them, to ignore that cosmic drop inside him, until without prescient thought he would begin a long and eclectic hunt to replace it.

Rorick took his pipe to the window where, with the aid of his glasses, he saw the Fink's side yard in the dark. The Groundskeeper was gone. In his place: a hole crowned



with a hill of earth. The television set in Kenny's living room maintained the frozen projection of Shelley Fink laughing with her exposed breasts. Rorick turned back into the darkness of his home and, for the instant his eyes hung over the shadows, the image of the woman with her dripping red lips remained. He went about the house, puffing his pipe in every room if only to somehow replace the swelling emptiness with tobacco smoke. He visited the bathroom and brushed the musk from his teeth. He lay his head down and rolled into the blankets, binding himself tight, hoping the pressure would compress his body into a new space where Anja sat and drank tea and worked her needlepoint. He tried and failed many times to sink into his mattress and into sleep. He sat up in bed lighting matches, watching the flames burst and wither as he counted a new set of rhythmic stabs pounding gently into his own yard, where the Groundskeeper, perhaps already with his head under the soil, continued digging through the earth.