

OUT THERE IN THE DARK THERE'S A BECKONING CANDLE:

STORIES

By © Benjamin C. Dugdale, a creative writing thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment for the degree of

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Abstract (200 words)

OUT THERE IN THE DARK THERE'S A BECKONING CANDLE is a collection of interrelated short stories drawing from various generic influences, chiefly 'weird,' 'gothic,' 'queer' and 'rural' fiction. The collection showcases a variety of recurring characters and settings, though from one tale to the next, discrepancies, inversions, and a overwhelming barrage of transforming motifs force an unhomely displacement between each story, troubling reader assumptions about the various protagonists to envision a lush plurality of possible selves and futures (a gesture towards *queer spectrality*, which Carla Freccero defines as the "no longer" and the "not yet").

Utilizing genres known for their unsettling and fantastical potency, the thesis constellates the complex questions of identity politics, toxic interpersonal-relationships, the brutality of capitalism, compulsory urban migration, rituals of grief, intergenerational transmission of trauma, &c., all through a corrupted mal-refracting queer prism; for example, the simple question of what discomfort recurring character Harlanne Welch, non-binary filmmaker, sees when they look into the mirror is demonstrative, when *the thing in the mirror* takes on its own life with far-reaching consequences.

OUT THERE IN THE DARK...is an oneiric, ludic dowsing rod in pursuit of the queer prairie gothic mode just past line of sight on the horizon.

General Summary. (143 words)

OUT THERE IN THE DARK THERE'S A BECKONING CANDLE is a collection of related short stories about rural queers struggling to find a place in a world where they are offered visibility, but at a cost, in migrating to urban centers. A catastrophic future looms over multiple generations of prairie farm-folk, from which fantasy and play seem the only refuge. Non-binary filmmaker, Harlanne Welch, and co. struggle to survive nightmarish film shoots (a la *Apocalypse Now*), Dungeons & Dragons games that take on overtones of fate, shitty underpaid jobs, and life-threatening romantic relationships. As the various hyper-sensitive and neurotic observers obsess over things from mundane to the fantastic, they struggle with unknowable forces just outside their line of sight. In turns dreamy, fantastic, and horrifying, *OUT THERE IN THE DARK*...is a dowsing rod in search of a new queer prairie gothic Canadiana spectacle.

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Table of Contents.

Abstract	ii
General Summary	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	v
Prologue	1
Starecase	3
Hail (Howie)	20
Summerfall	56
Depth of Field (Striking Distance)	87
Golgotha	108
Fables of the T.P.K. (The Necropolitics of Melancholy Story with Gary Gygas) <i>or</i> GEAS	128
Nothing Ever Bothers Juular	209
Out There In The Dark There's A Beckoning Candle	249
POWER CREEP	261

PROLOGUE

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A boy bored during harvest, too slight & young & asthmatic & interested in books to be of any use during said harvest, finds buried in the rows of peas in the mother's backyard garden a small, corrupted square prism, its many faces refracting light in many directions but none as straightforward as they should be given its comforting rational shape, and light not functioning in the same manner from faces opposite, nor from those adjacent to one another. Curious.

Suspended in its direct center by any axes' measurement is a pebble, no, no a pearl made of pure oil. The boy holds the prism up to the midday light and admires the ways the willow's tops sort and file the light and shape it. Those treetop-chaperoned rhythms of light that come through to him come through to him through the prism intermediary too. Catching a glint of a daydream here and there, but strangely, inside the prism, like a television, the boy looks at girls that look like boys, middle part haircuts and quoting Devon Sawa's lines from *Casper* from heart, the Backstreet Boys with just the same haircuts, friar monks and Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves' particular fryer, and Christian Slater, a distant brother to Costner's Hood, that same recurring haircut, darker on him, but apropos nonetheless; no, wait, only sometimes the same, but usually combed back, not apart. Little John is huge in that movie, but they call him little as a specific kind of humour. Was that what was going on with his sister's friends, girls who all looked like famous actors and boy bands? A joke about what you called a person who looked different than the way language permitted them to? And what's the deal with the boy-girls in Hanson?

The boy rotates the prism, wondering if there's a way to retrieve that perfect black marble from the prism without compromising it. He wonders the wily afternoon away, dozes off, and when he wakes he's lost the dang thing. In a frenzy to retrieve his new marvel he tears through his mother's garden, ripping out sundry veggies prematurely, and at last he grasps it again. He kisses it, like people do in movies after they find something they thought they lost, can't live without, and something about kissing it splits his lip. The lip blood runs into the prism through an invisible succession of faults, illuminating some hitherto unseen pulmonary diagnostic, a road map to an inhuman, arterial lung, a red ghost of a lung.

Older now, the no-longer-boy, alone, visits the dead farm in the dried-up province, and retrieves the prism from a shoebox beneath its childhood bed. They gaze into it. They gaze into the long-since browned blood and the fattened black pearl that almost expands to fill the complete cube. The grown-up that used to be a boy looks into the prism's shallow corners, seeks out those arterial threads which the gluttoned marble didn't manage to swallow up in its growing up, follows those frayed threads along their conspicuous trajectories into the dark, obfuscating centerpiece, follows the stubs along to their blood-stained exits, their detours, all those other redline routes they'd long since careered away from.

STARECASE

1996

Mom is doing that quiet laugh that only my uncles ever seem to get from her. The twin cigarettes' chimneys of Du Maurier haze coil into one, single, foggy thing and then that joined thing floats out of the dining room and toward me through the kitchen's pass-through. Mom's tin cigarette case clasps shut with the satisfying click as it always does. I can't find what I'm looking for in the junk-drawer, but maybe a steak knife will do.

Middle-Uncle's come from the Quonset across the road to tell my Mom about some prank him and Baby-Uncle are pulling on my father. They've hidden something inside Dad's combine cab. Middle-Uncle's coffee is snow-white and his cigarette smoke is hazy and hovering now, like a stormcloud over the coffee's perfect egg-white mirror. He bangs his spoon three times on the cup then sets it down right on the varnish of the table, just like he always does. My Mom is trying hard to suppress some emotion, covering her mouth with her hand, her eyebrows arched the way only my Mom could arch them, like a stretched elastic band waiting to snap. I think it's laughter, but she always looks worried when she laughs, and she laughs when she's worried sometimes too.

"I don't think he's going to take this well, Dave. I think you should go stop him from getting out into the field before he finds out." Middle-Uncle relates that Dad left the shop about an hour ago, as soon as they got the thresher running again, so there was no point in rushing out to rescue him now; "Damage is done. And maybe it naps all day. Maybe it died in the night. *Hoo* knows?" He holds his gut like the time Dad beat him up

at the 4H cattle-sale that one time, when he said something about the heffers, or my sisters.

Mom frowns, smothers her cigarette, and drops her hand into her apron's pocket. She's surprised to see me in the kitchen, eyes me queerly, takes the steak knife away and sets it back into the cutlery tray, but doesn't say anything rude to me, and she checks on the chili supper she's cooking for everyone who's out in the field today; sounds like it's only ever Dad out there, given his brothers always coming over here, always telling Mom jokes. Maybe that guy from New Zealand who works for us who I can't understand very well, that hides stuff in Middle-Sister's roof, where the ceiling tiles slide aside; I'm not allowed to talk about that, sworn to secrecy, and by the only sacred act in this whole damn house, no-less—the pinky-swear. Mom's strange gaze at me bothers me, but I think I know where it's coming from.

These days after school I go around the house in usually one of three shirts I like: two are identical long long long white Zellers T-shirts, with the mascot, Zeddy, languishing like a benzo'd trophy wife across a space-rocket; the heavy print is always kind of sticky after it comes out of the dryer. The third shirt I wear these days, of which I wish I had another, but my parents refuse to buy a second of, is my Batman tee, black with the yellow puck with the black bat silhouette in it, which Dad had bought in an XL, but found was a touch too tight, and been mad about for whatever reason. Those are my tees, my three tees, and that's all I 'need,' though I'd kill for another Batman one. Sometimes the basement is so cold that I will put on underwear to go down there, but other days I'm braver, stick to the tee, to its simplicity.

It doesn't bother me that I'm the only person who walks around the house nearly naked, though my dad seems angry about it, well angry at my Mom about it when he doesn't realize I can hear him—something about looking into the eyes of a six-year-old boy in nothing but an over-large Batman t-shirt that he himself used to own seems to neutralize dad-mad opinions on boho fashion choices. I like how the shirt can be twirly when I choose to play girly to both sisters' applause, before or after I lip-sync to Seal's *Kiss From A Rose*, on loud-speaker only in my mind.

Dad's belly doesn't let him show off his nice belts or buckles that he sometimes wears on weekends, and he usually leaves his dress shirts un-tucked, sticking out far enough from his pants that it casts a shadow; when he wears his pants high up and his shirt tucked in he looks just like Doctor Robotnik, Sonic's nemesis, which is like a best friend but the other way; Kintobor was his name before he was evil, when he *was* Sonic's best friend; Dad doesn't like me calling him Robotnik, or Eggman either; I don't think he gets that Robotnik and Eggman (and, when you think about it, Kintobor too) are the same guy. I like that my twirly long shirt can cover everything and that I only sometimes don't shake enough after peeing and only sometimes leave a lugubrious piss droplet on its bottommost trim. Only once have I caught my dad staring at the dark spot, but he didn't say anything about it within earshot.

Middle-Uncle finishes his smoke, and is gone before its butt stops smoldering, his coffee mostly full and not poured out in the sink even. In short order Mom's out the door, taking her smoke with her because "wasteful" isn't in her dictionary, and yelling to my sisters to make sure I eat something, and she'll be back soon enough. None of us say

anything in response, each involved in our much more interesting world of boys or books or logs or a light hitting gloom on the gray.

*

At six-years old, my logic is as follows: my wingspan lets me palm the walls bracketing either side of the steps going from the landing to the second floor, and since I can master this passage this way, I claim dominion over this whole staircase. No one may come or go without my permission. Laundry embargo, everyone can go away and leave me alone, because only I am guaranteed safe passage up these stairs. This site will do just fine for my purposes.

I am the smallest member of my family, though I suspect this is merely because I am the youngest, and I know I will eventually surpass my Middle-Sister, and possibly even Oldest-Sister; it is hard to fathom ever approaching a size where I might mimic my Dad's scuba-tank forearms, and my Mom is so-often hugging me that I can't visualize how wide her arms would go if they weren't always wrapped so tightly around someone, or mending something, or dicing something, and, and you know what, if her arms came undone from a hug I think they might go wide as the whole horizon! A terrifying thought. That's entirely too long.

I start slotting together the foundations for this Lincoln Log cabin, and the space shrinks, so small the same way you sometimes have to shrug your shoulders in to squeeze past someone in the busy aisles at CO-OP. I don't feel big when I look at small things, I feel like I scale to them instead of the other way around. The aisle at CO-OP I hate the most is the one with all that laundry stuff, because it gives me a headache, and it makes me feel small and spotty eyed, but not small in a cool way, like the little Lincoln Logs do.

The steps are so plush, too soft for this Lincoln cabin to stand the test of time, so why is the rug on these steps so harsh when you slide down it on your bare bum; these steps are so so silent that I can't tell if Mom and Dad are ever gonna come up to tuck me in some nights, 'til suddenly they burst through my door in tandem and spook me; I hate this part of my day, every day, but last time I cried about it I got in trouble for it, or my Mom did, and I heard it through the doorway.

I've been working all day on a troubling problem: how do you get a diagonal into this cabin? How do you cut the corner off? Don't get me wrong, I don't have a problem with squares. I'm sure there's a way to do this though, but my Dad didn't understand me when I asked him how to do it. I told him I want it to be like half a grilled cheese, and that I want it to go really high, like on T.V.

“That's a skyscraper. That's not what those'r for.”

Why would I make a stupid cabin? Who lives in a cabin? We don't live in a cabin. Our house has a round part where the living room bulges out, like press carefully on one part of a balloon and it sticks out somewhere else. It's not round, though, I guess it's kind of like a stop sign, but the one window that broke in a storm last year just has a piece of plywood up there, because it's so expensive to make bent glass or something.

I haven't figured it out yet, but why would they make them so you can't do that? The logs, that is. Why do they have to come together at odds with each other, notched planes clasping together firm as the handshakes Dad's been trying to workshop with me.

“If it's soft I'm gonna squeeze you until it hurts, until you firm it up.”

He steals points I miss when we play crib too, but we don't play that much while it's harvest, because as Baby-Uncle says, "That fat bastard's too tired to pull off his own socks the end the day, in't he, Wendy?"

*

Oldest-Sister kicks down my skyscraper when she blows by me crying, like a real idiot. I throw a few logs up the stairs after her but too slow, and I hear Middle-Sister's door mirror *clink*. I run up to survey the damage and the door's mirror is cracked with a shaky C-shape, or like when my Oldest-Sister gets a tummyache and hogs the hot waterbottle, bent over. Yeah, like the mirror is bent over with "cramps." Oldest-Sister looks out with just one eye from her dark room, and seeing me see her, slams it shut. I'll blame Middle-Sister's mirror on Oldest-Sister, because she basically did it, and she does everything wrong these days, though it's kind of magic now, how the things in it all of a sudden bound when they cross the crack. I touch it, and it nips me, and I suck my finger, and I look at where it hurts. I blow on the cut, like I blow on the Sonic2 cartridge when it's not working, and a little see-thru flap waves as I blow, but the interruption in the fingerprint gushes out new blood. Oldest-Sister comes out to use the bathroom, and catches me before I can faint and fall.

"No Peroxide."

"Yes Peroxide."

"Leave me alone you bitch."

But it's too late, and the fizz consumes my finger, and even when I throw the bottle at the tub, Oldest-Sister is keeping her cool. "Your eyes are red and stupid."

"What else is new?"

She has me there. She's almost as deft as me, when it comes to these battles of wit, but not quite. If I hadn't just almost lost my whole finger, which she too-snugly bandages, and begins immediately to itch, I wouldn't have let her win this argument.

Taking my silence as admitted defeat, accurately, she pivots, tries to help calm me down. She re-caps the Peroxide, and starts the shower to rinse away the stench. Her voice big and frightening like Dad's from the smallness of the bathroom, she asked, "So, you know what it is they put in the combine cab?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you do. You were standing there, holding a knife like a weirdo, listening in on them."

"You must have me confused with someone else."

"I bet it's a bomb. He pushed them all too far this time. They're gonna get him back."

"Like the Penguin did to Batman. He got rid of that one."

"The Penguin took control of the Batmobile, he didn't plant a bomb."

"Then why did those police cars blow up when he threw it away?"

"I don't think you're remembering that right."

*

Earlier this week Middle-Sister and I called a truce for about ten minutes to spy on Oldest-Sister helping Dad in the yard. Dad's trying to get the backhoe going so that he can go fix the ditch at the neighbors, because something's stuck in there, interrupting their water somewhere along its ditch artery before it gets to their dugout too. "I bet it's a dead

body” Middle-Sister speculates without emotion, her huge glasses making her look like twice the idiot I know she is.

“No, because bodies always wash up in *our* dugout, idiot. Read a book or something.”

She laughs like I was telling a joke, which I wasn’t, but I maintain the truce, as I am not a creature without dignity, without honor. We can tell Dad is swearing because Oldest-Sister is covering her ears, wearing dad’s baggy track jacket, floppy swooshy cuffs sprouting from her ears; “or maybe it’s just too cold,” Middle-Sister mind-reads in reply to me. Dad has a can of ether he’s spraying straight into the engine, and Oldest-Sister is using her one hand now to point the flashlight at it, and her other one to try the key. It fires up, and an explosion comes straight from the engine and makes Dad nothing but a silhouette for a second, and then the bucket plummets straight down into the driveway, a wound gouged into yard grass and lane gravel alike. We duck from the window as soon as Dad’s silhouette rears in anger toward the house, but we can hear him take it out on Oldest-Sister, well, well even if we can’t *hear* it.

*

The stairs to the basement from the ground floor are unfinished, and are, in this way of lesser quality than those that lead to our bedrooms on the second floor. A navy-blue cartoon tongue of frayed rug rolls over the tippity toppest step, a tongue tonguing around the curve and then down under and then along the flat plane a lickle, stapled flush about an inch above where it cowlicks up, where its fraying white whiskers cameo. If you want to take smelly markers to make something secret, you can always draw on the part where the rug quits, make a treasure map or try to do that one where you draw a cat

without lifting up the marker even once in the middle of it; Oldest-Sister's guy friends do this, but they always show the cat's butt, which is pretty gross, even if it's funny. Other than that top step, the stairs are arid all the way down. Each step is alarm-loud, so when you come and go, everyone in the house can echolocate your exact position, like bats.

The whole basement is unfinished. I like to come down here because the cold of the concrete is so cold it makes my feet ache, ache deep like a stomach cramp, and what a wild feeling that is! It makes me feel alive, and sometimes I test myself to see just how long I can stand still before I have to run back up and have Mom rub my toes warm one by one, though I kicked her in the face last time she tried to gobble them up because it tickled, and she cried about it, but lied about crying even though I could see her crying right there in front of me.

When you get to the bottom of the basement steps and turn to the right there's the cold room, with the gooey heavy-metal deepfreeze buzz; in the cold room's back corner, the door to the furnace room doesn't close over properly, and it terrifies me that we have a door we cannot close in our midst, that we don't talk about it. The main berth of the basement is for the sofa, and formerly, for the T.V. too. Since the Christmas arrival of a Sega Genesis last year, the T.V. lives upstairs in the dining room, and you can see it from the kitchen pass-through, like a window you don't need glass for; Mom seems to really like this pass-through that Dad took down a wall for last year, but he's never once said "you're welcome" to Mom despite her diligent daily thanks, smiling and crying, dicing onions and watching Buck Shot and Benny through this architectural marvel, singing whispersoft along to *Sixteen Chicken and a Tambourine*.

In this new Sega-era, when you sit on the basement sofa all there is to stare at is the plain back wall's load-bearing beams, beams partitioning itchy insulation; it seems the couch is just down there now for chilly meditation. My two sisters—seven and ten years older than me respectively—often kick me out of the basement when they have company, and once, Oldest-Sister has the balls to say I can only keep hanging out with her and the many drooling dudes around her if I put on “some friggin underwear already,” but I won't be bullied by some mere girl, and I storm upstairs to play Sonic2 on the Sega T.V. set-up we've insinuated into the corner of the dining room. I haven't deduced what it is about the basement's Pink Panther palette that makes for the ultimate hangout spot to sisters and their moody lingering boyfriends, but I am sure my detective skills will prove fruitful soon.

Sonic nyooms east forever and ever collecting golden rings, until he crashes into spikes or monsters, and then his whole existence flashes invisible-visible, invisible-visible, coins scattered east too. I play until they ask me not to anymore, and when I close my eyes I still see him going, until the fright of the gooey reverberation downstairs creeps in, and I start to speculate on whatever horrible thing those ungrateful uncles have hidden in Dad's combine.

*

The door on Middle-Sister's bedroom is straight ahead when you come to the second-floor landing. On its outside is a body-length mirror, and sometimes I spook myself as I crest the top step, catch my own reflection bobbing closer and higher and bigger. I moved my Mickey Mouse pillow into Middle-Sister's room last week and was baffled to find her still using her room after I'd clearly claimed it with my Mickey pillow.

You see, I know I'm intelligent because Oldest-Sister really applauded when I explained that balloons shrink over time because the air inside them “disintegrates,” clearly a combination of the words ‘disappear’ and ‘integrates,’ the latter of which I don't have a total handle on yet, but enough to have figured out the portmanteau’s etymology from. I know I'm intelligent because this balloon science is just one example of several things I've gotten raised eyebrows and “oh wow, I didn't know that”-s for lately. She’s been kind of terrible to me all the time this year, probably jealous I’m so much smarter than she is.

But my Mickey Mouse pillow didn't lay claim to Middle’s bedroom, and I want the room now, and I am “the baby,” and “the Middle” has a room with a window with a view to the dugout I overheard a weird story about, from my Grandma to my Dad about drowning some black cat, or some drowning black cat is what she said, maybe. Or did I dream that? Mom said I must have dreamt that up, but of course, Dad said she’s not the expert on nothin’, and “especially not harvest,” which sounds like a huge headache, and like something they should consider avoiding in the future, if it’s really so much work for so little.

I’m not allowed to play out there by the dugout ever since our last dog drowned in it too, but that was different than the cat somehow.

“That was a good damn dog,” Mom had said when I asked about it, her eyes somewhere else, but last month Oldest-Sister's ‘boy’ ‘friend’ took my Hush Puppy stuffy and hockey-boy threw it toward the dugout.

Dad’d been mad at Mom about the snow and the frost on the ground this early in the year, because they haven’t finished taking off the crop, but I’m not sure what Mom’s

got to do with that, and I went out in my shirt and some of my Mom's slippers which were all crunch crunch crunch, and when I got to the dugout's slope I saw my Hush Puppy sitting upright on the ice forming along the mouth's inner-lip. The moon was so bright that you could see it even before the sky was dark, even in the misty blue, and the moon's light was steady on the ice scabbed around the dugout's mouth, but shimmering in the center where it hadn't all frozen over. By the time I got back to the door I hadn't realized I'd lost Mom's left slipper somewhere on the way back, and my hands were so shaky I couldn't turn the handle, or maybe it was locked, Oldest-Sister trying to get some of that "privacy" she claims no one in the house gives her. I went back to the dugout to get the slipper, looking at the dent the puppy left on its icy lip, flaking like my nose when I have to blow it too much, all white and sore, and I wondered if the dog we had when I was little, so little I don't remember, I wonder if she's down there still, and I wonder how I know it's a girl too, *was* a girl, I guess, because when you're dead you're not anything. And the door's locked when I get back still, if that's what it is, and I bang the door and scream until I get my way, and I keep it up until Mom comes home an hour later and executes a wrath beyond my wildest hopes, so potent I almost start to feel bad for the doomed Middle-Sister.

*

Middle thinks the thing the uncles left in Dad's combine this afternoon is bad. "It's a gun. You know? He doesn't let me see it either, but Kirk was telling me about it." Middle looks like a clown today, all that makeup, and her chest is all pushed together like there's a crease down her middle, and with her skeletal frame it looks less like cleavage

and more like a manufacturing defect, or a car run head on into and perfectly centered with the telephone pole, wrapped around like.

“What’s with the makeup? Kirk said makeup’s a trap, designed to waste your time and dupe unsuspecting boys.”

“If only it worked that well!” Some weird bad shape sponge thing—obtuse maybe?—too big an angle, making her all ghostly now, corpse-paint for her cheekbones that stick out too far. She does that mind-read thing again, holds the sponge and a brush just like it up, and lectures: “It’s a reflex angle. See?” Draws her finger across the handle, then around how the brush goes. “It supersedes 180 degrees.”

“It’s like that snake in that stupid scary movie you made me watch.”

“Which?”

“It’s named after a snake. That’s all I got for you.”

“I remember now. We weren’t going to watch *Mortal Kombat* again, okay?”

“*Mortal Kombat: Annihilation*. And I voted for Liar Liar.”

“Well you lost the vote.”

“Voting’s stupid.”

“That’s what Kirk thinks.”

“So the makeup. You going out with someone? Better not be hockey nazi.”

A many-toothed thing gums up and blackens her blonde eyelashes. does the same thing to them as her bra does to her chest. Too conspicuous. She pivots again.

“Yeah, it’s probably one of Dad’s guns. Maybe they put a pink bow on it, like as a prank. Or maybe he had it in there, and then they replaced it with a SuperSoaker.”

“How many guns does he have?”

“Hard to say. Kirk said it’s at least a few. She’s even held the one, she says.”

“Liar.”

“Liar liar, could be. So this is reflex, yes.” She holds the sponge up again, suspiciously like Ms. Pacman, like in cousin’s arcade cabinet, upstairs in the quonset with the pool-table. “She retrieves a brush from the filthy, loud pouch she keeps all her brushes and expensive pencil crayons in. “And this?”

“Straight angle. No degree”

“Zero degrees, right. And this?” Tugs up the sink-plug toggle, parallel to the tap.

“Right.” I turn the tap on. Water starts to rise.

“Right indeed.” She turns the taps off, and the water stays where it is. She travels to her room and I trail her.

“You really think a gun?”

“Yeah. Maybe it’ll go off and shoot him in the foot when he least suspects it.”

“I don’t want him to get shot.”

The unforgiving quick thwip of zipped shut pouch, “okay, out. I’ve got to finish getting ready for J.D..”

“I hate that hockey nazi.”

“He didn’t even make the team this year.”

She slams her door shut, a little puff of space as her door-mirror parts from the door a second from the force. I look at the mirror a minute longer. I’ve thought lately, how mirrors mess up everything. When I think of the world inside the mirror, outside our world, I wonder if the me on that side always breathes when I exhale. If they also get so worked up about breathing that they have to focus on it, that it won’t happen

automatically? Or if the opposite held true? And were they a boy or a girl on the outside? If I walked through that mirror would I find brothers, or just kinder sisters? So strange, how ‘opposite’ seems to pivot so many ways at once when you really look at it, that ‘difference’ never clarifies things the way the world promises it oughta.

*

Why didn't my Mickey pillow get rid of Middle? I chew my shirt collar, my teeth meeting each other in the thin center of the threadbare cotton. Does she not fathom that this is my most-prized possession? That I had to suffer the too-social Disneycation with the rest of them (plus many prissy cousins) to get this pillow, and that if it's in her room, then it must not be her room at all? I climb the steps to give her a piece of my mind, remind her what the Middle kid deserves—an invisibility in the family hierarchy; a polite designation as forgotten versus an acute uncomfortable attention as too middling, not enough of any one or the other, and it is her choice which status she wants, but there'll be heck to pay if she doesn't surrender that bedroom and its window, or at least return my Mickey Pillow—and as I realize the precipice, halfway out of breath, I'm already imagining our argument in my head, just how to make her shut up and listen to me already.

I don't catch myself in the mirror this time though, because the door is open inward, and in the mirror, Middle is naked, looking at herself, hands on her collarbone like she's miming “me Jane” to some intelligent animal, and she's naked in a private way, but really she's somehow not naked at all, some invisible and permanent change about her posture and body and everything, tight as an onion skin, her skeletal angles mending

the mirror's fault, bringing two unlike things back together, smoothing the crease that forms her wicked features.

The screen-door clatters downstairs, and I bound down to see Mom first, tell her who broke the mirror while she was out, and I am adroitly dodging scattered logs, moving with purpose and now with a vague understanding that I'm probably not supposed to see my sister naked, and unsure if she saw me see her when the screen-door sounded below us, not that it mattered because we still have baths together sometimes, but that it maybe mattered now, like she was different now than before, abandoning me in the world I live in to go and join Oldest-Sister and the rest of them, leaving me with no one but the hush and the Hush Puppy.

Dad's forearms log-drive through the foyer and then the rest of him too with a small red toolbox tucked football tight to his belly, and he rushes to the dining room table without taking off his muddy boots. He's screaming "Mom, come help." There's something wrong with Dad's eyes, they're wet and red, like when he gets his recurring sty, but shinier. He flips the lock-latch up on the toolbox, and Middle-Sister suddenly behind me puts her housecoat arms on my shoulders, and Dad opens up the blood-red toolbox top, and Older-Sister sounds each of the basement steps like a dinner triangle as she rushes to come help too. My Dad, so scared of the dark, turning off the kitchen light so as not to blind the owl suffering the broken wing, doing its best to retreat into the clatter of loose screwdrivers and many half-spent electrical tape rolls, something my uncles'd found stranded in some dead wood in the middle of the slough, its suffering golden eyes yellowing up the whole kitchen like a fresh-bulb floor-lamp, its one wing broken but only in some way I can't see in this low light, some faulty geometry, its cry

bad enough that I know it might never be mended, grounded forever and ever and its golden rings cast across the floor like a stunned Sonic, passing out from the shock of it all. The open toolbox lid looms, lifted, menacing like a backhoe bucket ready to bury something already.

HAIL

“The days became languid and sonorous with the drone of bees over tawny meadows; white and yellow butterflies danced as thoughtlessly as ever over the pink remnants of the last wild rose; the bush was a flurry of wings and song, and every day the children brought to school deserted nests to make drawings of with charcoal or colored crayon.”

—Martha Ostenso, *Wild Geese*.

1963

Big P., the Fell Pony, is looking to the bunny-trail and shifting his weight from hoof to hoof, venting hot air from his nostrils. I adjust his saddle-cinch and glide my palm across his tricky shoulder. Dad’s left a message with Mum that I should take P. today, though I’m not sure why I’d need the actual work horse instead of the withered old useless pony, Bug, who can get me wherever I need, but doesn’t like to pull a plow, or much weight in the saddlebags (if he let you put a saddle on at all); Dad’s soft on Bug, even though that damn horse don’t work, don’t appreciate gettin’ rode. Bug’s already hitched to the wagon for Mum and the littles to head to church, so Dad must’ve caught a ride in to the elevator with someone else, that or he walked, which would mean he hardly slept. Myrtle and Marion are getting their church clothes out of order tending to the chickens, and Mable’s watching the triplets in the house.

“Thursday today, isn’t it Mum?”

“Going to town to run a few errands for your father.”

“Need me to stay home, manage the Littles for you?”

“No no. We’ll be just fine.”

Dad must hope P.'ll help me catch up, which means he knows I'm anxious for my mail, and might dawdle on the porch a little later than I ought to. Not many folks have got their crop off yet, but work's been steady at the elevator anyhow. Dad brought in some of the Hutterites to help replace the man-lift that crashed through the headhouse last week, which should help us keep a reasonable pace once everything really gets going; those men know work, and Dad and I both admire them in that way.

P.'s a sharp horse, and I think he knows we should be gone by now. Dad must know P.'ll guilt me into going sooner than later, smart damn horse; the way Dad always has a plan in place, for any improbable disaster, ain't nothing caught him unaware since his first wife passed. He's got more energy than me, more brains too and ain't never taught me a thing, just expects me to figure it out the way he had to, and P.'s looking down at me, nostrils flaring wide like wide, staring eyes. Mum's doing her best to get everything they need loaded into the buggy, but takes a break to help me up and onto P., blows me a kiss and then goes to start corralling the six Littles.

The mail hasn't come in yet. If I wait any longer I'll be late for my shift at the elevator, but Fritz's reply should've been here a few days ago, and if he's made the move I think I forced him into, I'll be able to send my reply tomorrow before work, before the post-office is closed for the weekend. Dad doesn't appreciate me spending so much of my earnings on correspondence for "some dumb paper game"—"two dollars *per turn*!?" but I told him I'd find work somewhere else if that was how he was gonna be, that I heard Busslinger's even paid fair wages and didn't care if you combed your hair before the shift.

I couldn't hear out my left ear for a week after that beating, but he brought home some good paper and postage "for the missus" once Mum threatened to leave and never come back should he ever lay hands on me like that again; Mum's like a millstone, steady, and Dad and I are two idiots trying to turn her opposite directions at the same time, and she seems to like being in the middle of it, defusing things when we come in too hot, and we try to take care of her as best we can in turn, and she hasn't complained to any of us yet, and even if she wanted to, well, she's not the type.

I give up on Fritz for now. It takes about an hour to the elevator with P's crisp trot, though I think he's going to start slowing down any day now. Then we'll be stuck with two useless ponies. Lotta cars go by as we make our way, and P. sneezes so hard from the gravel dust I almost get unhorsed.

Ned Coney comes to hitch P. quick to the post, and helps me down, knowing my back's been tight since I got thrown from the lift last week. Real tender, he eases his cherished CNR pocket-watch from his coverall pouch, inspects its face. "That's something like on time, Howard."

Dad peeks his head out the bay window when he hears his name, but sees Ned's talking to me, and goes back to work; no wastin' time, and certainly no wasting time where someone else might see you wasting it.

Ned and I pick up a simple game each morning, debatin' who has less, or rather, who has it worse. I don't like this game, and Dad really hates hearing it (and I'll get it bad if he hears me 'winning'), but I don't mind indulging harmless Ned. Ned's folks got a T.V. last year, and they upgraded to colour a few months later, no less, for some cowboy

show called Bonanza. I still pump water from the well and we hardly use electric, but I ain't got no Owenses for neighbours, and that one's hard not to assay at high value.

Ned doubles down on his 'victory,' "well's shot back home, too, not sure I mentioned that."

"You did, Ned. Your cousin's coming in this weekend with rods?" My pitchfork's shaft is dried so bad it's coming apart in two, ton of tape keeping it together. I've grown accustomed to the sticky grip, but Dad thinks it looks unprofessional, wants me to 'replace the handle already, and no, it ain't hard to do, so just do it.'

Ned nods. "Got in last night, with her brand new au-to-mo-bile. Gave your Dad and I a lift in this morning too."

"Ah." Dad's been saving to buy old Brand down the road's IH pickup, but Dad worked for the man for a long time, thinks he's due a fairer price than Brand's bent to yet.

Ned finishes admiring himself in the soft gold watch cap, tucks it back in. "She's the same one who found the last well, so, hopefully she brought a better magic stick this go."

I turn the pitchfork around in my hands, the dried lines unwieldy, kinked and wandering. They look like Mum's book she left out on the porch and got soaked, *Wild Geese*, its pages a weird uneven wave now, and its cotton cover smells like mildew, but she won't let us get rid of it, she "ain't finished with it."

"I reckon it's vibrations and paying attention, patterns. Trusting your gut. Some people just have the ear for it. Gram did. She taught me how to steer clear of fairy rings too."

“Oh, *those* I believe. My one cousin went through one along the Bow, and he came back different, and face gone soft one side and can’t talk right.

“How many cousins you have?”

“You know what they say about Rabbits, Kid.”

He likes to call me kid, even though I’ll be eighteen come february. I think of my twelve siblings, all the oldest off and into the city, from Dad’s last wife, couldn’t get on with dad and left me to spearhead the lot of his unhappiness.

Dad up top in the elevator: “Dicksons coming in the yard, hop to.”

Hot, dry day. Goes quick. Between the dust and the heat, no one can say anything as they sweep out the pit, which given everyone’s exhaustion, might be a blessing. Dad, Ned and I work quick, almost giddy to get going. Not often we head home before dark. The hot chinook air coming down through the comb-teeth of the Rockies, carrying some manic high-altitude energy with it. ‘Pink panties at night, sailor’s delight, &c..’ We wave to Ned, picked up a bit early by his cousin in her T-Bird, cherry puckered taillights and a handsome teal paint job, a woman of strength and beauty (and apparently wealth) comparable to her vehicle.

“Real handsome woman,” Dad croaks, and looks to me for confirmation. He can’t see very well these days, but thinks glasses are a bad investment.

“And then some, sure.”

The two of us finish up, and Dad helps me into the saddle, hops on behind me without any trouble at all. We get home just past dark, scrape our boots, and wash up. Mum’s got hot mashed potatoes, lots of green beans, and Dad and I break the one last stalk of heavy buttered corn in two to share. The littles are already in bed, and Mum

doesn't wanna risk ruining our good mood by saying much. Problem is she smiles so much at the two of us getting along that Dad snaps and slams the table, walks into the field without finishing supper. Mum gives me my mail, and goes and lets the littles know not to worry. I quickly survey Fritz's move, just what I thought, pencil in my own rebuttal and write a little note to let him know I've won, though my already poor writing comes out beyond messy rushed in this dim light. Mum and I each bed down to avoid whatever rant Dad'll have prepared once he gets back, and I sleep the night through without even a glimmer of a dream.

*

Ned doesn't think his cousin Martha'd be good for me, on account of her being loose with men. "12 this year. A rrround dozen!" He's fuckin' the dog today, mind somewhere else. I don't chastise him for the unkind things he says about Martha mostly because I don't care for her that way. In fact, I'm beginning to think Ned is a little more than protective of her, maybe even jealous.

"I think she'd fit fine, Howie." Dad's slouched into and conformed to the slope of the barn-knee joint we salvaged when we helped tear down Homem's spot after the fire. He's like a snake, some days. I can hardly sit at the picnic-table, and it hurts anytime I'm not standing or lying down. Dad doesn't look at anyone when he talks, though he used to. He always looks to the horizon, like he's figuring out just how far a section stretches. "Just be careful you don't get stuck home with the littles, though. A woman like that might outwork the lot of us twice over."

"I don't think that's true, Howard."

"You're right, Neddy. She'd outwork you three times over." Dad loves razzing

others. He hates to get razzed himself, can't stand it, blows up and makes you wish you hadn't. But he loves to give it.

“We have to work to rule, Howard. I work as hard as I can and we'll be done by noon, get paid half-days and none of us will make the mortgage.”

Dad doesn't pick up the conversation again. He picks a bit of flax from between his few teeth that neighbour others, his dirty palm prints embossed deep and lingering in the bread of the sandwich Mum made for him. I don't have an appetite, with the pain. Ned pulls out a cloth and wipes at his teeth. He's not a brusher. Never had a toothache in his life. Twice a day Ned takes a nice piece of cloth, and wipes his pearly whites down after a feed and never has any trouble. Dad and me are both missing an embarrassing amount of 'em, between brawling with the Wall's when their boy killed a few of the cows we tended back then (back before Dad ran the elevator), routine accidents (get kicked in the head by a horse once and you'll learn the lesson well, if you live), and them plain old rotting and needing to get yanked out by a doctor who made you hurt more than he ever helped. This tooth business is the one thing about Ned I can't stand (of all the many little ones that don't add up), but it's so innocuous, and I know better than to chastise a good worker for something personal.

Mable asked Dad if she could come work with us on the weekends, but he told her no. She's too little, and I agree, but I'm bitter 'cause he's easy on the girls, and all the littles. He softened when he met Mum, or so she claims, but soft is relative when you're talking about an old piece of worn leather. She almost died carrying me, so they took a long break afterwards, and back then my half -brothers and -sisters were plentiful, all six of them able and willing to pitch in. Ripley got killed with a tractor working on one of the

Brand's second cousin's spots, out in Saskatchewan, and Dad took all that grief out on the rest of them. Now we barely kept anything we grew for ourselves, too much land to manage for two men, or rather, my Dad and me, a man and an overgrown child.

I told Mable I'd show her a bit of sewing and quilting, and other stuff Mum'd promised to do but hadn't had a minute to yet, and that bargain got Mable to give up the idea of working for the time being. She'll be nine next spring, but she's so small, and there might even be something wrong with her she's so small, yano. Myrtle's taller now, and Mable's almost there. Next time she asks I'll offer to teach a bit of math if she'll take it. Dad and I both fear the day she just follows us to the elevator and can't be driven off.

Train's late today, so we're kicking gravel 'til we can start emptying some of the bins. Nice to have a minute to eat, and breathe.

"Funny thing about your fancy watch is it doesn't make the train show up any quicker." Dad chuckles at his own jab.

"Busslingers' aren't patient," Ned nods to the horse team sitting patiently in front on the scale, waiting their turn to dump.

Dad speaks quietly, "well they trained their horses to step back just a touch to add a phantom bushel to the scale, and I've never shorted them on grade or volume for it, so they're welcome to wait and be grateful all the same." So that's what Bobby always there up front, chatting the horses' ears off at weigh-in, asking them to lean back a touch. Incredible. Can't believe Dad both knows of it, *and* lets it slide. Hard to predict how and when his anger will manifest, and it only gets more difficult as he ages. We can hear the train now, wind cool and cutting in a great relief, the Busslingers' overfilled cart a little

shorter now, a bit of rapeseed traveling in the wind across the yard, the pile simmering down just a little, just a little, like a boiling pot yanked from the stove.

*

Mum relayed one night, quiet-like, that Fritz had wanted to send me something by post but it was too big and expensive, and so I had to come into town to pick it up at Tandy and it was paid for in full. Fritz and I had played through six full play-by-mail campaigns these past two years. He'd written to the local Wild Rose Eccentric-War-Games Newsletter (WREN), in an effort to contest my last posted victory for allied forces in the battle against the fabled "Fourth Reich" that many vanity clubs like Fritz and his friends played under.

"Well, what is it? If it's that big Dad won't be happy."

"Worst case he'll take it from you, and sell it. We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. Doesn't do it any good to sit in shop. I'll try and warm him to it anyhow."

"I gotta get to work, but I—"

"—No, I told him you had to run errands for me today," passes me her list, "which I will need done, too. I arranged a ride for you, too."

"Dad took P.?"

"Yeah, and Bug needs a few days off. We're skipping church, according to your father."

"You sound like you don't think that'll be the case come Sunday."

"It won't. He just doesn't know it yet."

"But then how—"

The familiar T-Bird glug forces its way up the driveway. “She’s a nice young woman, you know, and she doesn’t mind you at all. You got too much of your Dad in you to be so picky, Howard.”

I got the same lecture at 4H after they made me and the poor Hill girl stand on the podium with blue ribbons, proof of “the virtues of good breeding,” and pressure to pair with her, perhaps even right on stage [cue a metric-ton of laughter]. Steph had gasped when they proposed that, and I got scared, and shouted out “yeah, maybe not her.” The next few weeks the boys in group with me kept going on about how we ought to “Learn to do by Doing,” and pointing across the hall to Steph Hill, and she stopped coming back after that. The counselors reminded me: “waiting around to find a prettier gal isn’t gonna get you little workers for the farm, nor a wife who’s strong enough to toss bales, cook, and bear those kids for you. Maybe just take our advice, Howard.”

*

Wendy and me kiss a while in the parking lot, her coming a bit across the seats onto the console to reach me. The car’s still running, and a few drips of rain give me a break while she gets the roof up. The door slams shut behind her loud like a gun as she hops back in. “Isn’t it nice how quiet it is? For a car, I mean?”

“Is it?” The rain is steady like a marching drum, our breath thick like spilt cream across the windows.

“You argue a lot less when you’re kissing.”

“Oh.”

“Com’ere.”

It seemed to be getting old fast, and she never asked me to do more than kiss, but I felt like she was waiting for something. I like to look at her forearms when they flex, hands choking the wheel while she drives. When she looks strongest she looks handsomest. I ask if I can touch her breasts, and she laughs at me, grabs my left hand, and guides it inside her denim blouse, no bra. They're small, and tense, more muscle than anything else, but the nipples are so soft against my dry palm and I wince with worry I'm hurting her; her eyes are closed, and she seems to be enjoying it all. I feel poor being clinical about all this, but I'm curious about how it all works, what parts go where, just what it is folks want out of this whole, dark, stifling act.

Eyes still closed, "So, what's this radio for, then? From your German friend?" She lets go of my wrist, works shakily at her blouse buttons, all the way down to her Chuck-Championship buckle.

"We play games sometimes. Like, we take war that happened, or other folks with math take all this, right, and they make a system of rules, and all sorts of us do this, actually, and we re-imagine all those conflicts after the fact, and try to out-manuever one another. Fritz mentioned last post that his club had gotten a transmitter for shortwave radio together, and—"

"What's that?"

"Oh, umm, like a way to send out their own radio, like broadcast their own thing."

"Mm, good. Keep talking. Keep going." Her buckle falls limp to her left, gentle against the leather, and her hands come to my face, stroking my chin, rubbing my earlobe.

"Yeah, and there's a club in town here, somewhere too, actually. I haven't been, but I write for their newsletter sometimes, and basically he and I go and replay all these

huge battles that shaped the world and see if we can't outsmart each other. It's kinda silly, I guess."

Her eyes ease open, and she looks to her unbuttoned jeans, then to me. I move my hand down, over her panties, and she pulls me back, and I'm scared I've done something wrong, but once I'm back far enough, she guides my fingers under the elastic, shows me the parts I need to find, how to tinker with them; it's all just like a fussy tractor, when you think of it. "I don't think it's silly at all, hun. How are you gonna radio a guy all the way in Germany, though?"

"Oh, he just pretends to be a Nazi! He's down in Montana, well within broadcast distance."

"He pretends to what?"

"His whole club has this shtick, yano?" I pull my hand out to articulate my point, but her sudden stare chastises me and I hop back in. "They don't mean it. They just wanna agg us on."

"All of them?"

"Well, I imagine so."

"Oop. Yeah no for sure. Just like that, that same motion. Yeah."

Fritz, my friend without a face, who I know more as a pretend Nazi than anything else, he's all I can think about as my back starts to ache all the way down my hip, through my ass and thigh. My wrist is burning a bit from her wriggling, where the elastic rubs back and forth, and the shuddering and the bouncing quits and the windows are an inch thick with humidity. She guides my hand to my mouth, my fingers in. A bit acidic, and a dense scent I can't place, but one in which my nostrils revel. I suck hard on them, tongue

along each knuckle from the palm and up, and she melts into me, hands on my thigh and knee, fingers tapping my in-seam.

My own belt-buckle defaulting now. “Tell me more about him. This Fritz.” So warm in her mouth, the whole car cold and my belly shivering but her mouth so warm and kind to me.

I look to the passenger window, shear some this sticky residue from the window with my black, busted thumbnail. “Well, it’s kinda funny. He sends me all these clippings from different papers, and I think he travels lots, but he never misses a beat with correspondence. And,” her one split nail swirling small maelstrom in my thigh hair, her other hand cupping me underneath her mouth, like I might fall apart if she didn’t keep me held together. “That’s really nice, Wendy. You’re really nice. I like this.”

“Ahmmhm.” The pop of a broken seal. “And how’d you two meet?”

“Did you ever meet Ripley?”

A negative grunt.

“Well, Ripley had all these military enthusiast writings, like, for people who wanted to think about the war, and, lord it’s hard to think,” her free hand joining my right hand pressed against the passenger window, then our fingers interlocking. I look down at her, finally, and she’s all eye-contact. It really is nice. “Well in the back they have these ads for scale models, like tanks and planes and stuff, and sometimes there’s one for a war-game, and this one says “Allies, you feckless cowards, you fought without honour, and the Fourth Reich will have your heads. For land and glory, write to us at, wherever it was, Montana, and we’ll meet you head-on to prove we’re better. I wrote them to tell them that

ain't right, not realizing it was a game thing. And Fritz was the one to reply, to clarify. And we've been writing ever since."

"Mmhm, and how long's that been."

"Oh, coming on, mmm, mm three years now."

All together, our fingers flexing and easing, flexing and easing, the abandoned nail-wound swirl unwinding in my thigh hair to go back to its usual garbled thicket, her warm, kind mouth, still there, but slow as I shiver and grow ticklish all over—the nail-scraped port fogging back over as well—Fritz trying to bottleneck my driven forces, my forced-march horses skitterish but holding fast, and me breaking through, breaking him, winning.

We kiss. I taste myself in her, and her in me. What a nice girl. The rain thumps down still, but we grab her cardigan and wipe the windows down, giggling a little.

"He sounds like a keeper, Howie."

"Who?" I feign ignorance while she fixes her hair in the rearview.

She reaches out and holds my left hand, checks over her shoulder, and backs out the parking spot.

*

The L6X38T radio is a thing of chrome beauty. Fritz had included instructions on when to tune in to listen to the live casts from the club down there. Further, Fritz had made arrangements with WREN to book time with the local shortwave broadcasters, and somehow got reduced rates. This offered a weekly block for the gamers to play all at once, together, and to put rumors of "cheating" and problems with "contested wins" to bed, once and for all.

I only know Hagel at the local club, who I mail my written thoughts on the various systems and rule additions and errata and all that, when I get a minute to at least, not too often during harvest. They're open on Sunday afternoons every week, and Saturday nights too; I heard some of them stay up all night playing games, sleep on the floors, and start over in the mornings. Club might be an exaggeration, as they met in Roger Nevis' Mom's unfinished basement, but the station and its broadcast hall, that sounded nice. I start penning my reply to Fritz, that I'm flattered, but no way I'm getting weekends off from work. Mom leans over my shoulder, "Why are you using the nice paper, Howard?"

"I have to send the radio back. Or give it to the club in town. Something. These things cost upwards of \$15. Can't leave Fritz hanging like that."

"If Wendy drives you in, you can skip church."

"Mum."

"It's fine. As long as you keep spending time with her, that's fine. I'll handle your father."

And she did, somehow.

*

No one was in a good mood this morning. Mable has a nasty rash in her armpit that hasn't gone away in a few weeks, and she can't stop rubbing it. P.J. has a cough but I have a feeling it's just allergies, eyes a red wet smear when the rest of us come home filthy from haying. But even with all those small, stacked worries, the day can't help but feel good, pregnant with possibility. Wendy is taking coffee with Nevis' Mom upstairs, because every kind of parent and serious person loves Wendy, loves to gab a while with

Wendy. I can't make what out they're saying, but I can hear the two of them laughing, even all the way down here in the unfinished basement.

Roger's permanent post-nasal drip plagues his every speech, and he is very fond of delivering speeches before the gaming starts, or as he would put it, before the games "COMMENCE!" His orange IBM pocket protector proud as a bonfire in his over-large short-sleeve dress shirt. Strange, how these frail men so ill-fit for war are the ones to obsess over simulating it. I thumb the torn center-belly button-hole in my flannel, spot a dot of grease on the sleeve's cuff. Roger's sand-sotted gaming-table is so big we all have to orbit it, raise our voices to call out to one another. "It's like the banquet table for Jesus at the last supper," Roger had sniveled when he debuted it last month, taking credit for the thing his older brother, a carpenter, had made for him. "We can simulate just about any meaningful combat in the world's history here, figure out what was luck and brawn and what was plain old inevitable."

It's stupid, but I'm nervous around all these fey and scrawny boys. I rub together four six-sided dice in my cupped hands, a known and comfy clatter. Cavalry roll this much when they charge at least a hundred yards before assault. Pretty well guarantees two inflicted casualties. High point cost, and too often having to run morale checks, get cut down, but, well, I like riding Big P. I can picture myself charging into battle on him, well, maybe my memory of him when I wasn't yet a teenager, barely big enough to get up on him without a boost; he was heartier then.

The majority of the dozen others here in this stuffy basement are obsessed with infantry, with sufficient bodies to chew through artillery and archers without compromising their special units. No one wants to risk high point cost on the field itself.

Everyone likes to stand at a distance and chip away at the enemy. Maybe that was how you won a fake war. Roger absent-mindedly scratches at a rash in the ditch of his elbow, dry skin flaking off and joining the anonymous ranks of the gaming-table's sand-dunes. Maybe that's how I've been fighting Dad, Mom the thing chewed up in the middle of us bickering at a distance. Doesn't quite fit. Life isn't a game, I guess. Roger's younger brother Dan, more bottlecap glass than actual head, pushes a few marked pucks around the sand with a crop from the war. They look like they're just thin sliced dowel pieces with a bit of paint, but the markings denote unit, rarity, and muster conditions.

We're starting a new game today, and Dan has read over the rules that the "Fourth Reich" sent along in advance. "YOU CAN'T BEAT THE RAT: A 4R Game for Tabletop & P.B.M.. Thorvald & Levi Publishing Co.." It's a land-grab game that Fritz and the rest wrote, assuming the war hadn't ended the way it did, which was kinda their club's whole schtick anyhow. But the gag is that the last bastion, Alberta, we've got some space-age tech that keeps the Krauts out. So they're training super smart psychic rats to infiltrate the barrier, and, the more territory they stake, the weaker the barrier grows. A bit goofy, kinda like a poorer Bradbury paperback, but you can't claim it's not unique.

Dan has plenty of ideas for opening moves we might make, but Roger and the rest of them veto him without listening. Dan folds up his quarter-inch laminate grid and cinches the mouth of his velvet dice bag tight, a puckered mouth poised to say something but never getting around to it.

"So, yer chicky Wendy's still okay to drive a few to the station? Mom has room for a few in the LeSabre, and Bucky's gotta his Mom's station-wagon too, right?"

"Mm. Yeah, sure, Wendy can fit a few."

The boys all mutter in excitement, and a few polish their glasses with cleaning clothes in eerie synchronicity. They plan to fortify the capitals, scour the dumps, and lay poison literally along the entire province's border.

I shuffle around the table to Dan, chat quiet. "What are you thinking, Dan? What about the water supplies?"

Dan is hesitant to speak to me, but I smile as sincere as my shyness 'bout my crooked teeth allows, and he relents. "Well, it's Adan."

"Ay-den."

"Okay, so, yeah. Water-supply. They're not wrong about the dumps being a hot-spot, but the thing is, they'll always get in there, and they'll be very hard to get rid of from there. They have advantage on stealth checks in urban waste. Roger and the rest didn't even read the glossary's game terms. These guys, they used words that we're used to, but mean a little bit different things here. They're setting us up to fail."

"Yeah, Fritz is pretty darn smart like that. But you caught that, 'cause you're sharp."

Adan beams like a brand-new lightbulb.

"Do you guys have a second set of the rules lying around? Fritz told me they sent two."

"Roger's got them in his room, but, he's not giving them up. I asked. Twice! Power-trip. My oldest brother left a spirit-duplicator in the garage when he moved out, I could make you something 'unofficial' if I sneak a few more notes from the communal copy."

"You and me, we're gonna get along just fine."

“I like you. You’re like my oldest brother. He’s got a foxy chick too.”

“Ah, she’s ‘got me’ more than the other way around.”

Adan is gobsmacked. “Is it true she drives that brand-new T-bird out front?”

*

Roger wouldn’t listen to the radio-station employee about how to actually dial in on the signal, so we lost the first half hour of our two hour block we’d booked. It was a really strange building, so earthy and concrete and ugly, and all this weird fabric hanging all over the high walls. The board the radio guy has to process all the sounds is a gigantic panel with many sliders, a couple dials, and it’s honestly overwhelming; these kinds of things don’t make sense, electrical, you can’t just take them apart and deduce how they work, and I don’t like that one bit.

The game’s first session went as poorly as Adan had expected. A single rat cavalry mustered first turn and swept through Medicine hat, hitting an underground power-station to briefly down the barrier long enough for an actual infantry troop to breach Northeast of McMurray, and the un-mustered locals hadn’t been able to cut down that unit before they burned their way into Fort Chipewyan. Chipewyan was worth six of the twenty total points the Fourth Reich needed for victory conditions. If the ‘Krauts’ had wanted to sweep us completely I suspect they could’ve.

The highlight was Fritz’ perfect radio voice. He’d been chuckling along in the back the whole time, but at the end he came on to ask for me by name. He said “Howie, zwölf men on your end and you can’t get one to read ze rules? There’s just zwei of us! Maybe you need to vote for a new team captain.” Roger stormed out at that, but found his

Mom had gone to pick up groceries; he was still fuming outside the station by the time the rest of us had finished packing up.

Roof down and roaring, Wendy just begging for a ticket as we peel past The Eaton Center and out of downtown. Boys in the back can't hear any of us in the front. Adan's nestled between Wendy and me in the front seat, excitedly relaying all the turns to her, how I'd been the one to roll high enough to muster calvary in Cold Lake, quick enough to intercept the marauders in F.C.. "And like, we lost them, but, Roger hadn't even wanted us to invest in actual military units. He wanted us to just invest in infrastructure and a rat-patrol, like this isn't a war-game, but it is! It just doesn't look like that the way they write it. It's honestly kinda brilliant."

"Indeed," Wendy humours him. "You're very keen. At your age I was reading Archies and chasing boys."

Adan gulps, and shuts up completely. I don't need to look at Wendy to know the smirk she's got on her face right now. Growing on me, that lady. We catch Sarcee south toward Glenmore, Adan drooling over Wendy the same as half the other drivers on the road gawking at her whip; we're a conspicuous lot, and that attention is a balm to the hearty tactical losses we suffered today. I nudge Adan's elbow to break Wendy's thrall over him. "Okay Adan, so we traded some really high-points to stop them from staking out the whole north, which is too diffuse to really manage once we've already lost it."

"Exactly."

"Do we have any means to reach out to the other provinces? We need time to recoup, right? We call on the neighbours to pull their own weight on the border patrol, we get that time we need."

“Yes, there’s a broadcasting center, which is kind of funny, because we go to a radio-station to play live with them and in the game we’ll probably have to do that same thing. Hard on the brain, the layers.”

“Okay. So, what’s the catch?”

“Catch?”

“Yeah, what’s the cost of running the broadcast in the game.”

“Oh, yeah. I don’t remember. Something like, like it might attract the attention of, mm, ‘grey-men,’ or, something ‘old.’”

“Old like me?”

“Old like before history.”

“Just from a radio broadcast?”

“Yeah, totally. For all we know there were complete strangers who listened in to us playing today. Just takes a receiver. Man, maybe we have fans out there? Cheering for us?”

“Or for the rats.”

Adan laughs really hard at that, like I bet he used to laugh at his older brother’s jokes. I used to laugh like that at Ripley too. Poor kid, stuck with older brother Roger and his pocket-protector collection.

“Okay, so, next session I think we start developing assets. Like, you saw how Roger was surprised about the power station under Medicine Hat?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, if I were in charge, we’d be fully investing in shock troopers, cavalry, and R&D. The higher our research score, the more we get to know about our randomly generated secret assets.”

“And the rats know about those?”

“Yes. The post-office is holding a letter they sent to us until the end of the game. In it there’ll be the rolled-values and the corresponding tables that tell us what secret government facilities we have, to prove they didn’t cheat. But the mailman’s gotta hold on to it until we’re done, so we don’t cheat.”

“And Fritz, well, the club, they know those? Which we have?”

“Aren’t you listening? They roll them for us.”

“Makes sense. Sounds like they’re set up to win.”

“Yeah, but if we start putting points into research, we’ll figure out what we have, and we’ll be able to demolish ones that are too vulnerable, and to make super soldiers and stuff in the ones that are valuable for us.”

“Super soldiers?”

“Yeah, they grow these extra strong men in big test tubes.”

“This is all in that tiny booklet?”

“Yeah. Partly they reference a lot of other books as “further reading,” but I like to read. So they say ‘for example, Invasion of the Body-snatchers,’ and then you get a general sense of what they’re talking about.”

I didn’t know Fritz was into all this whackadoo sci-fi junk. I thought we were on the same page, about war, about it being solemn. Well maybe not so solemn we couldn’t play games based on it. But men in tubes? Aliens out for a drive listening to the radio

while psychic rats run amok? This wasn't the Fritz who mailed me his copy of "In Parenthesis," his pencil strokes in the margins the only thing I really understood.

"Hey, Howie?"

"Yeah, Adan?"

"Did you see the clause at the end?"

"I didn't get to read any of it yet, unfortunately."

"Oh. Okay, well they said that any territory we lose in the game, they get for real.

Can they enforce that?"

"No, no I wouldn't worry about that. It's part of their schtick. It's all vanity."

Sunlight glances off of Wendy's aviators, the four boys in the back squeeze as small as they can to keep from touching one another, and Glenmore opens up as we spill from one artery to the next. A good day. A good day indeed.

*

I fiddle with the L6X38T's dials a while. Dad's not home yet. The top panel flips up to show an inner world-map, cold grays blues and blacks. Nothing but static. No wonder Roger had such trouble, though he'd had someone there to show him, was just too proud to listen. Maybe I haven't set it up right. Maybe one of the littles broke it while I've been out at work.

Later tonight, Dad comes home covered in blood up to his chin. Some of the Busslinger boys were out for a drive, got into it with their dad and mad and not paying close attention. They run down Big P. and Bug. Ned and Dad got thrown, but neither got hurt too bad. Dad wordlessly drops a potato-bag of cash on the kitchen table, then marches out to the water-trough to start washing off. Too much blood for the shower stall.

Guess Busslinger doesn't want anyone knowing his boys were out driving drunk, something the RCMP had given him grief for a few years back, bullied him about when they felt like it. Mom counts out the bills. More than enough buy Brand's old International.

But P.? And even Bug? Dad doesn't mourn them for a minute. Whatever he had done to try and help had bloodied every bit of him but his face, but he doesn't seem to care they're gone. Or it's like he doesn't notice it yet.

The littles go to bed frightened, and Mom sleeps in their loft with them. I wait for Dad to come back in, but he wanders off into the flax with a fresh lantern and doesn't come back. I turn in eventually, knowing I'll have to be up that much earlier to ask to borrow some neighbour's horses to get us to the elevator tomorrow, or, strange how it comes to the mind second, but call Wendy for a ride; such a sweet girl, so good to me, but for what reason? And why always behind someone else?

*

Howie Senior isn't talking anymore and is of such a permanent gloom that no one in the house can communicate with one another while he's in line of sight; we can't complain, nonetheless protest the ridiculous work regimen we all seem to have adopted in the wake of the dead horses. Silent isn't quite right, but something on some other plane, like an unheard roaring fury on a wavelength we can't tune into, the felt but not heard roar as encompassing as radio static, it guides us all through the days without speech. I'm still given my Sundays off to visit Wendy, but lots of days she drives me to work, Dad having left hours earlier than necessary in the IH, and not waking me to join.

I suspect he's mad that I wasn't there when the Busslinger boys killed the horses. The boys ended up rolling their truck so hard into one ditch they rolled across and into the other. They got hurt worse than Ned or Dad. Work and chores are alike greased by the palpable silence, and the ghostly mechanism that is the farm itself hovers above us all and scares us all into perpetuating it.

Work doesn't stop to ask politely, marches on whether you're shorthanded, exhausted, crippled or the victim of completely shot nerves. Mom's garden wilted and abandoned until Mable leads the rest the Littles to take it on themselves to tend it, and it's coming back just a tiny bit to life, Littles too little to worry about the looming end of the growing season, still sad about the horses, asking when we'll get some more; a luxury, all those tears.

*

"Roll two dee-six," Fritz instructs WREN. I look to the others, but everyone seems to defer to me whenever Fritz is the one communicating with us. Roger pouts and schemes from the corner, everyone's faith in him faulty as far back as the first session. Snake-eyes.

"That's a two."

"You discover a way to cross-breed mustard seed and a diluted cousin of DDT to poison certain rodents and breed out undesirable taste characteristics. Requires a roll of 11 or higher to detect."

"We ignore that, well," I turn to the group, Adan flipping through his copy of the book, all of us with one now.

He mouths to me, "Pat-ent."

“We patent it, but we don’t develop it. We’d like to re-roll our research directives to try and hone in on subterranean mineral rights.”

“Wait, what? Really?” Fritz’ put-on accent slips, and he sounds just like Ripley for a second. “Oh, um. Yeah. Roll two d6. I mean, um, just one.”

“We also spend this week of the convoy’s downtime teaching basic chemistry to those uneducated in our employ.”

“Sure, that’s a free action.”

“Good, then we train in long-bows too.”

“Bow and arrows? This isn’t Cowboys and Indians, Howie. There’s guns in this world we share.”

I don’t like guns. We keep the .22 locked up unloaded under the seat in the International, and the Littles don’t even know we own it. It’s one of the only things Dad and I have ever agreed on.

“We know. But is a week long enough to gain proficiency?”

“Yes. You can have ‘improvised munitions, in fact. So it’s not a complete waste.”

“Good.” I look to the rest, see if they’re ready to pull the trigger. Adan is a sure little dude, our anchor, and the rest look from him to me. Wendy’s reading in the corner but looks up long enough to wink at me.

“Then Slave-Lake Cavalry drive east into Saskatchewan.”

There’s absolutely no reply for ten minutes. The station’s technician double-checks our bands, and reports we’re still transmitting *and* receiving. Fritz finally comes back on, his accent flagging, and sad.

“Well, Howard. Well, we’ll have to take a few weeks to generate some written materials. If we don’t want to lose too many weeks, I’ll broadcast on this frequency Friday night. Can you tune in at home? And take notes? We’ll generate some apropos mechanics for inter-provincial siege, and you can make copies for your comrades?”

“Yes, yes of course Fritz.” I let go of the mic’s toggle just before all of WREN breaks out in hollers with the din of mal-tuned cellos. Even Roger seems pleased. We’ve changed the material conditions upon which we play. We won’t just be under siege. We’ll strike back, drive all the way into Quebec if we need to. Wendy is bewildered, but supportive. She brings me back to her apartment tonight and we make love, and when I come back in the room with our two glasses of water, our little domestic ritual, she tells me she was pregnant, had been, “but I ain’t no more. But what do you think about a life like that? With me?” And then she proposes.

*

Friday comes sooner than I thought it would. Wendy picks me up and the car smells of hot onion rings. “I was chatting with your mum on the phone. Told her I’d treat everyone.”

“Peter’s Drive-In?”

“Yeah, hold the tray of shakes.”

“Knowing how you drive I better.”

I never thought my life would be good. That I’d visit the city, that a city-girl would love me. She knows I’m distant, but she respects it. She knows I don’t like a lot of her college friends, that I can’t fathom how she gets on with folks who never worked a day in their lives. Dad doesn’t come home until he feels like it most nights, and doesn’t

answer when I ask when that might be. Ned and Wendy get me home in time for supper most nights, but Ned's dampened by Dad's bad mood too, doesn't play "who's poorer" with me anymore in the mornings. This morning, Ned was mad I was in "too good a mood," asked me to "shut up and work," and I must've been day-dreaming, sure, 'cause the whole world of our rat chase game has completely changed, and with me at the helm no less, but Ned and Dad spent half the morning playing crib anyhow, so fuck him. Slow this time of year. Seems like not many families are holding out for better prices this winter.

Wendy lines up the shakes on the kitchen counter as we all finish our burgers, marking them "Mable, Banana. Myrtle, Bubblegum. Marion, Vanilla. Hank, Chocolate. Lucy, Chocolate. P.J., Chocolate." Wendy hitches her thumbs in her belt-loops, leans against the counter and asks Mum "You sure, Mags? There's an extra chocolate and vanilla each I brought for you and Howard."

"I'm sure, Wendy. You don't need to be spending money like that on us anyhow."

"It's nothing."

"Not to us."

Wendy knows better than to push this with Mum, proud of her poverty, of kids in threadbare church clothes who all loved and feared God proper. Mum's getting to be as hard to deal with as Dad some days.

I warm up the L6X38T's tubes, then help Mable wrangle the Littles to get everyone washed up and ready for bed. Fritz's voice coalesces in the center of the interstices, then the fuzz falls away and it's him speaking just to me. I start taking notes in the little book Adan gave me after we won The Battle for Lethbridge Bilge weeks back.

Wendy sneaks in beside me in the recliner she gave us from when she moved house last, burrows in beside me and ignores Mum's overt leer at our unchaste closeness.

Fritz is soothing. All the clang and clatter of too-many-kids and fretting Mum and baleful coyotes giving Brand's chickens hell boils away until there's just Fritz teaching, Wendy warm and contoured to my body, and the chicken-scratch of my writing the only intrusive sound going on. Who'd've think that bringing a girl home would fix all the things in life? It was too simple. It was like one of the traps the Fourth Reich laid out for us in the game, like when they literally plunged Airdrie and a quarter of our cavalry into a giant sinkhole hell-mouth. My nerves so shot from this world I live in that I don't actually know how to relax. Wendy says her and her parents never argue like this, that it's not normal. We'd fought about that, separated a few days, but we couldn't actually stay apart that long.

"So the same combat rules apply, but troop movements will be measured in two-week units instead. We have a Reich contact in Saskatchewan that's mailing us a B.A. Oil roadmap, so, please acquire the same A S A P so we can generate the same playing field." The more clever WREN plays, the more justly Fritz and the gang seem to revise the rules to balance things, like these fake Nazis really thrive on real collaboration.

The International rolls up the driveway, its headlights shattering the dark and blinding Wendy and me. She hides behind the book she's reading, "The Second Sex." Then the IH turns and closes distance with the porch, rolls against it with a groan as it sits down into P. The brilliant rumble dies, and a few minutes later, like he was out there thinking awhile, he finally comes in.

He nods to Wendy, ignores the rest of us. Mum brings out his Peter's burger from the oven. "Wendy treated."

"Mm." He snorts like a bull, then gets to eating. I realize I already turned down the radio, by instinct even, but now it's too quiet to hear what Fritz has to say. I tweak the top-left dial a little to the right, and Fritz's baritone simmers back in. Dad's coffee-cup shatters against the wall before I realize he's thrown it. We beat one another half-to-death in the parking lot while a sprayer flies overhead, a bit late in the year to be spraying, late in the evening too, to be ducking under power lines no less, strange the way things slow down when we come to blows like this. He finally drops when I bat my clenched fist against his ear. Wendy rubs Mum's back, whispers something to her, and seats me in the car. "I'm so sorry, Wendy."

"What for, hun?" She watches the rearview like she's worried something's gonna follow us.

"I seem to have gotten blood all over the seats."

She cries, first time I've ever seen that. "I can drive, if you want."

"Nah, nah I'm fine."

"Are you sure? Can you even open your hands?"

Left, sure. Right, not quite. "Point taken."

"It doesn't upset you?"

I can't tell what I'm feeling. Nothing, really. Like I kicked his fucking ass and he somehow still ending up winning, now that I can't feel a thing. "I suppose not."

*

The group is confused about why I didn't get all the rules written down.

“I think he’s choking” Roger offers from the corner, cross-armed and mad. My bandaged hands hide the beating I gave my father two days ago.

“I think we’ll be okay. I think we just ask for a break. I need to get re-settled, and, I guess find work.”

Fritz and co. refuse our request. We lose half our push, and are forced to retreat. It takes them less than an hour to route us and for all parties to agree to a break, us like cornered rats instead of the other way around. Fritz spends the last hour re-dictating the expanded ruleset, Adan jotting things down with a speed and almost fury in his tidy cursive, a marvel. I wish I had his brain, his thoughts. “It’s not very fun to play when you’re playing against amateurs.”

Roger calls a vote in the parking lot. Short Adan, the vote to strip me from command is unanimous.

*

Wendy chats with Mum on the phone every Wednesday. She always holds it out to me at the end of the call, but I can’t think of anything to say. Can’t apologize to Dad, not that I would, but he’s not even grunting in reply to her now. Hardly home to terrorize the littles these days. I’m on with a few of Winters’ second-cousins, helping clear snow. Easy work, if you’re dressed for it, and folks in town don’t seem to know how to do it, so there’s as many hours as you’d like. By the time spring comes Wendy has an interview lined up for me, and then I’m working at Tandy, selling radios, T.V.s too.

Wendy never over-steers, and listens when I ask her to slow down, to let me just, I’m not sure. Just sit in silence a little while. Wendy keeps me social, though, knows I need it. Introduced me to a lot of college commie types, like one guy Rod Sykes, but he’s

sharp, and I think he knows how to work despite being a monied type. I like him, and his older friend, a real pretty man, Stu Hart, who wrestles. What a show. Asked if I wouldn't get into all that, but my hands still hurt from putting Howie in his place last fall. He says it's all staged, but just seems like a little too much attention for me.

I bus to the radio-station these days so Wendy doesn't have to drive me all the time. She doesn't mind, but I like watching the incalculable mass of the city at a more reasonable speed than her driving might otherwise permit. Her apartment is really nice. I like the way she organizes the confusing mess that is the world. Like she can see the way it works. Like it's just a game to her. I only go to the "YOU CAN'T BEAT THE RAT" games every other week now, and Fritz doesn't come even as often as that, and he's stopped writing me. We're on a second play-thru now, and hemorrhaging money, oil and blood all over the place even quicker this time. Adan, thirteen now, is 'dating' and crazy about it, which is a shame, because I always thought he'd be a good match for Mable when she got older, a way out for her; any sense that group had had is gone. Roger and the rest are all fighting these phantom Nazis but literally on the Nazi's terms. The system is a little over-engineered by this point, honestly, but if you complain about the terms, well, you don't get to complain. Just like life.

Wendy sits under me at the foot of the couch, pulls off my socks, and starts to paint my toenails, purple, not unlike a bruise. Her hands are cold today, but *sure*, they're always doing something they oughta be doing. "Your mum says Mable's having a party this Sunday."

"Ten already."

“Indeed. She said your dad’s out helping Ned with a bit of early-plowing, and that he understands not to come home ‘fore supper. I think you oughta go.”

“You come with?”

“I’m helping Busslinger’s put in a new well, actually. They’re gonna pick me up in the morning.”

“Well how am I gonna get there then?” But I know what she means, that I’ll take the T-bird. It’s just worth asking to let her know I don’t wanna go alone.

*

Mable is crying because she thinks Dad’s gonna be mad at the Pillbox hat Wendy and I gifted her. “No no, he’s never mad at you.”

“Well how am I supposed to know? He doesn’t talk!”

“He’s just sick, Mable.”

“Then get him some medicine.”

“It’s not that easy.”

Hank is in the den, fiddling with the L6X38T. Fine model. A bit overpriced, given its capabilities, but pretty, how I like ‘em. “What you listening to today, Hank Snow?”

“That’s not my name.”

“He’s a country singer.”

“It’s your rat show.”

“My what?”

The radio seems to adjust itself of its own accord, hone in so close there’s not a lick of static. Fritz’ cruel croon cuts through the entire birthday party. “We run Die Rätten battering ram into the secret sandstone treasury.”

Roger, meek, rebuttals “What’d you roll to do that?”

“It’s a passive ability. No roll necessary.”

Roger doesn’t let go of the toggle to consult with the others as they furiously flip through loose sheets of errata and additions. “Well dammit. Okay, Fritz. Well we deploy the gas we developed last week in the science skill tree.”

“Okay. Well we plant bombs in the treasury and walk out.”

“Wait. It says here you need to roll to save.”

“No, it says it works on *mice*. These are rats. Read the rules, Roger.”

“Hank and the rest of the littles listen every Sunday.” Mum’s voice is shocking to hear, as though she were the one that stopped talking half a year ago. “You’re not there much lately.”

“Yeah, no, I got demoted.” I finally will myself to look away from the chrome voice to my Mother, knowing the treasury is end-game. They’re going to blow it sky-high. Gold will rain down and all the rats will revel in it. “Back, back when I went to live with Wendy.”

“She’s a good woman. She’s good for you. You need a woman like that.” It’s hard to hear Mum over Fritz’s furious ramble, on and on about claiming Alberta for the Reich, and that it’s for real, which of course it can’t be, but the clause in the rules of every edition insist upon, that stupid little Nazi-vanity bullshit. The subterranean treasury bulges up then bursts as the nu-cue-lar device goes off. I can see it. Gold blotting out the whole damn sun, then clattering to the ground as the mushroom cloud roars up and kills us all in an even longer winter than I just lived through. As though the game bled from the radio into our world, the roof is getting pelted. “You never were cut out for this life.”

“Pardon?”

Fuzz fills every radio-band; the storm snuck up on us all a sudden. Out the window the sky’s unkind and withering, and now it busts open and the roof’s gotta shoulder the thump thud-da-ding as best it can, and Mum’s got to restrain Mable to keep her from running across the yard to check the coop and its own surely failing roof, pillbox hat tumbling off her writhing head. The hail pools all along the alley through the foothill valley, and yonder, a few shafts of god-like light come through and privilege nothing in particular. And now it’s really coming down, and I can hear the chicken’s suffering, and Mable’s gone and drawn blood on Mum, bit her, so I give chase, and catch her before she can get out the door, throw her back in to Mum. “I’ll tarp it down, you take care Mum and the littles,” and I grab a spare wagon canvas looks like they’ve been working on mending as Mable screams bloody fucking murder at me, and I trundle across the yard as fast as I can without a lick of visibility, knot this half-mended tarp’s corner to free-standing post, tug the rest as far over as it’ll stretch, have to hold on to keep the hail from battering it off, the succeeding thwaps across my knuckles and my neck and my scalp and all the blood in the way, until I can pry a joint of chicken wire apart with my buck knife, and barb the tarp to that split wire bit, twist it back together as tight I can and it’s holding, it’s holding for now. I can’t see the house, but I see the deathly silhouette of the IH, and I run full tilt into the door, came up too fast, and I’m seeing stars. Inside, Ned’s big ol’ tool-bag is tilted over and spilled its guts across the passenger floor, the broken pocks of windshield glass digging into my ass. The hens are shrieking widowed bloody murder, sound the same as Mable had (I can’t hear her now, though), and when I wipe the blood out of my eyes, grown gummy already in the corners, and I somehow see the elevator

through the storm clear as day, what resolve from shooting stars to gold bars, blasting holes right through its broad broad belly, aerating the whole damn thing. The gold bars start to replace all the hail, and with a gulp and two quick, short breaths, I grab Ned's empty, wanting tool-bag in hand, and run out to catch my own share of the bloody, glimmering beating.

SUMMERFALL

2009

“I watched them jack it up, cut it out, and drive it down the road a half-hour or so.”

“There’s no way they drove away an entire grain elevator.”

“There is so.” Harlanne shrugs off their fuel-sotted gas-jockey jacket, takes their misspelled ‘Harlan’ nametag to politely press into the corkboard, and then hangs the jacket on the office-door’s hook.

“Well I’ll be damned.” Harlanne’s manager, Laird, he’s always saying things like that, phrases on autopilot, how goes the battle, and this weather, eh’s, but there’s no way he’s old enough to be doing that; he’s striving to be an old crotchety prairie man, just a trucker cap and some suspenders away from retiring and living in the coffee shop bitching about hail and crops all his remaining days. An awkward lasting beat lingers between the two.

“Hey, could you go do pump four ‘fore you head home? I wanna nab a smoke before I’m on alone.” Zipping up his down jacket, Laird waggles his eyebrows, smoke already between his chapped and peeling lips.

Harlanne nods once at Laird, but keeps their eyes down in case they’re angry; these days, with the buffet of SSRIs, Spiro and a spot cod-liver oil (a holdover catchphrase from their mother, all they had left of her), sometimes Harlanne can’t tell how they’re actually feeling. They head out to the pump, look back to the building as the door’s jangle jangle sounds.

Laird, 23, a whole year younger than Harlanne, but had been there since he was 16, a lifer, not a hard worker, but willing to stick around, and handsome given the small pool of bachelor boys that never left.

The Toyota pickup is rusted around its gas cap like thrush, and a child in the front on the middle console is kicking at another child in the back. The Mom's neck is stained by her bag's strap, or maybe bruised by it, and she only slithers around the child on the console long enough to crank down the passenger window. "Fill it with superior, thanks guy."

Harlanne flinches visibly, but the mother misses it, too busy rifling through her glove box for an old aspirin canister of mixed pills.

"Umm, excuse me, miss, do you mean supreme?"

The mother dry-swallows something. "Miss? Oh you're real smart, aren'tcha, being polite while you call me an idiot? Think I can't afford superior?"

Adroit in avoiding conflict, "Of course, ma'am. My mistake. It was a fill?"

"That's better. Yano you shouldn't bring that attitude to the pump. Keeps decent folks like myself from tipping you."

"We can't actually accept tips." The mother actually looks up to Harlanne now, scrutinizing. Harlanne pivots away Toyota's rusted gas cap, then to the pump to retrieve the nozzle, all the while easing the black cap off, one fluid motion in two disparate directions, and the gas fumes quit the tank in a sigh.

"Is a gas pump phallic or yonic?" Harlanne thinks, and surprisingly quick in reply, their brain ushers a response, ask Elizabeth Bishop. Harlanne chuckles at this, another memory of their Mum, who'd been the only reader in a den of disinterested T.V. loving

men. Harlanne has been in such a fog lately, and this private moment of recall feels important, but the squeak of the Toyota's window struggling to close flush behind them punctures the revelry.

Turning to the sound, Harlanne smiles at the sweet quiet children, both asleep now, and ahead of them, the mother puckering an unlit joint between her lips, pressing a zit just below her eyebrow, bleeding bad enough to make Harlanne wish the Mom'd consider seeing a doctor, like that can't just be 'a zit,' can it? The Mom staring manic into the sun-visor's mirror all caked in something, maybe juice or cracker debris or other kid gunk, but maybe her cheap makeup. Glass between Harlanne and Miss Superior. Laird in the station, behind glass too, pulling his loose pants up, adjusting his bulge too, though he's behind the counter and no one would know that, no one but Harlanne, who recognizes that particular shimmy of his.

Colder today, no snow, but that personalized bullying wind. Harlanne squeezes the tense nozzle toggle through the shooting pains to keep the toggle tucked up tight, keep everything flowing full steam, the gasoline welling up stubborn slow in the pickup's thirsty tank.

*

Laird is pumping gas rest of the day, 'cause Harlanne can't get their hands to warm up again, circulation bad as their Mum had always had. A bunch of teenagers from in town, well, probably in town, as Harlanne doesn't recognize them, they're goofing off in the chip aisle, near the end where the wiper-blades and lock de-icer and WD-40 all is.

The dullest of the lot struggles to read the air-freshener aromas out loud to the rest, and they all think it's hilarious, probably high. "BUH-LACK ICCCCCCCCE, oooh." Doesn't land. "VANILLAROMA, aha, well Banarama to you, Shelby." Must-be-Shelby's laugh a squeak like a sneaker scuff, making Harlanne weak in the knees, a bit of envy and a bit of want, want to be her / want to be with her all bundled up together with a pretty bow on top. "NEW CAR, what about OLD CAR?" Okay, maybe they're not worth envying, but they're harmless all said and done.

Door and the jangle jangle, Laird flush as a beet, or maybe still drunk from the night before, doused his usual Du Maurier Menthol musk.

"You took long enough, master Laird."

"I'd be quicker if I was vaping. I wouldn't even need to go outside." Laird can't get out of the jockey-jacket quick enough, the heat radiating off him even just a few feet away.

In just their mind: "How you get a metabolism like that? What lottery you enter for that?" The heat from Laird is nice. Harlanne cross-legged in the office chair, spinning until they're motion sick. "Well, you'd still have to go outside."

Laird slaps his cheeks a few times, in kinda a hot way, Harlanne reckons. "You gonna rat me out to the manager, Harley? 'Are you in the right headspace to receive information that could possibly hurt you,' bub?"

"I just mean, like, legally, you still have to go outside."

"Who cares? Laws aren't always just. You're always on about that."

"I mean—"

“—tut tut tut! And it’s not hurting anyone, like, secondhand, yaknow?”

“Laird, we’ve talked about this! It’s so gross. It’s such a skid thing. At least smoking is sort of cool, like it has an aesthetic going on and—”

Death-rattle clatter-clang from the toppled chip rack, the stoned teens in their snowboard coats that cover their butts and the deep pockets surely full of stolen chips out the door and cackling before Laird can fully process what has happened.

“Maybe they’re the ones who keep stealing the air fresheners.” Harlanne’s smile hurt their face, but they hid it from Laird.

“Corporate is gonna have my fucking head for this.” As if on cue, his fear, his temper, but Harlanne was sure they could stop it if they moved quickly, sweetly.

“Laird, let’s not freak out.”

“You’re not the one who gets yelled at over the phone for this shit.”

Harlanne can’t help but giggle but stifles it as Laird turns on them with fear and hurt in his eyes. “Okay. Well, go make sure the cameras save that clip. I’ll clean up the chips.”

“But you got off ten minutes ago, and—”

“Yeah, I wish I got off ten minutes ago. Haven’t got off proper since I started t—”

“Harley, just—”

Harlanne rights the rack, then points to the backroom, all its wide, distorted camera images on the tired old monitor rows. “—Just go. Honestly it’s really embarrassing that you’re making this big a deal about this? I’ve got the chips. My god.”

Laird gingerly steps around the chips heading to the back room, but turns to step back and stomp a bag of baked Lays, *thwap* like a lemon’s backfire.

Harlanne chuckles. They hardly ever tease Laird these days given how easy a target he makes. Easy to press someone's buttons when their whole personality is one big button. Harlanne's skinny jeans are almost too tight to drop to a knee to begin restoring the chips, but they manage the maneuver with a wriggle, no crotch rip, no nothing. They were proud of themselves, because bodies were tricky on the best of days, and ever worse when you wore them in a way you 'weren't allowed to.'

Shouting from the back room: "I'm mad at them, Harley. Mad! Do you recognize any of 'em?"

"Why are you mad? What's a few air fresheners and bags of chips?"

"It's the principle."

"Nahhh. They're not worth it. Property is theft."

"That's not a real thing."

"We have to get you this thing called the internet. There's so much you're gonna learn from it." Harlanne rolls through cow pose, rocks side to side to stretch their hips out, then tucks a few bags back into the bottom-most row.

Laird sounds almost distracted now but persists. "Well, do you or don't you know them?"

"Probably town kids." They didn't want to be a rat, but nothing would come of this, and maybe it'd help Laird calm down. "The cute one was called Shelby."

"Which was that?"

"You know."

"I'm a bad metric for that."

"Well, she was cute."

“Okay, I’ll trust you on that. You seem to understand cute.”

The backroom’s door squees shut.

“And I mean, Laird, I’ve been robbing this place blind for months! Didn’t I tell you?” Harlanne doesn’t hear a reply, so they crawl to the smashed baked chips, take up the bag, and march to the back room, letting themselves in before anyone has a chance to protest.

The wrinkle of the 30-second CCTV delay is the first thing Harlanne sees, but they know that Laird is groping himself over his pants just a fraction of a second after they process the image of themselves, hiked over like they a cat in heat, rolling their shoulders and their neck and then swaying their hips, and then finally, the figure in the small monitor crawls clumsily to the smashed bag, plucks it up and almost leaps to the backroom door, and, well here we are, all caught up, the mess in the aisles still in need of tending to, and so Harley lobs the bag of what used to just be chips to Laird, “I mean, baked chips, they fucked with a good thing, right?”

Harlanne closes the door before Laird can reply and hides behind the register a minute, hides in the jockey-jacket to hide their gooseflesh. Laird doesn’t leave the room. Harlanne can’t tell what they’re feeling. Obviously there’s a problem being watched by your boss from a security camera while you show basically your entire ass to the camera, and obviously your boss shouldn’t touch himself while he’s watching that. But then there’s the other problem, where you feel like no one looks at you like that and you’re worthless and anyone who does must be good on some fundamental, negotiable level. And then there was the other voice in their head, the quietest, but most insistent one, that someone wanting you, that bad, that they did a bad thing, eluded the quagmire of ethics.

Harlanne makes up their mind on how to proceed, shouts real loud, “I’m stealing something else, you fucking pervert.” They root through the deep-freeze, grab a Bomb Pop, strip off its wrapper and whirl to stare straight into the camera, deep-throat it until it dribbles red white and blue dribble down their chin, down their work polo—unbuttoned all the way, *like a punk*, Laird always says, and then bites down, the cold too cold for their teeth, and the brain freeze dropping them to their knees. Laird still won’t come out. Harlanne looks straight up, right eye low and unwilling, like a stroke, victim, and looks right back into the lens again. They draw an anaglyph highlight on their collarbones with the bloody blue stump of rocket left, then down their sternum, unsexily caught where the collar won’t give anymore. No Laird.

They give up, push up to standing on one knee like a little kid learning how to get up skating, then toss the last of the pop into the staff waste bin behind the counter. No paper towel back here, and a car pulling in to, no, it’s fine, self-serve lane. Harlanne knocks on the door. “I’ve made a bit of a mess out here, Laird. Help me clean up?”

The door breaches the width of a gasp, and then the rest of the way.

*

“And utilities in, all for under a grand. My tenants love me.” The landlord is tiny, Greek, and generally unhelpful. “I mean, help me out here? Mr. Welch didn’t even tell me he was sick, and I *need* this place empty by the 25th.”

“So early?” The apartment is already plenty empty, sun coming in its high, slim windows never coming close to alighting on any furniture anywhere, just packing bins, and a few rolled up wool carpets leaning against an understairs storage cubby’s door.

“I like to paint the walls every new tenant. I used to be a painter, if you can believe it.”

“Sure can, Mister Panayotis.”

“So I need time to do it. Do it all myself. I like to do the personal touch.”

“Yeah. Well, I can borrow a truck sometime next week, but I need to ask for time off work. Can you leave the keys with me?”

“Oh a pretty young girl like you, you’ll get time off no problem.”

Bad attention, which is too bad, given how dire the need for any kind has been lately.

“Well that’s sweet. But having the key will help a lot.”

“Well okay, I can trust you.”

“I appreciate it.”

“So, one of Howie’s sons come help you lift? A few of these bins are heavy.”

“You been going through his things?” Harlanne has to tug up on the handle of the cubby door so it doesn’t scratch the floor

“No no, Ms. Welch. Just sliding them around when I inspected things.”

“Sons are all in Ontario.”

“Oh, I swore he said he had one out here.”

Harlanne slides the empty hangers all to the deeper wall of the space, that strange, sad wind-chime of them feeling definite as they snug up against the wall together, like a thing that can’t be undone. They proceed further into the dark, and retrieve their phone from their butt pocket, 13%, but enough to run the flashlight a few minutes. “Yeah, no,

not out here. One is in Montreal, I think? We don't chat much. And I think Howie was pretty out of it t'ward the end, there."

Dull, distant, from outside the closet, "Well I'm just glad to have someone help clean up the last of it. You wouldn't believe the mess the rats had made in here before I came by to check on Howie."

"There's no rats in the prairies." Harlanne makes a pile of garbage-bag protected suit jackets, sets each gently on the previous.

"Sure, Ms. Welch. I'm sure the nice places a pretty girl like you would live, there's no rats."

"No, you're thinking racoons." There's a big old zipped up toolbag in the back corner, where the stairs shrink the space to nothing, encircled by pellets of some sort.

No clear reply from him, but some re-assertion under his breath. Harlanne was used to this byproduct of reading full-femme, that all a sudden all the wordly knowledge they had was moot because they were just a *girl*, and that their thoughts were dumb, half-baked, like all girls' thoughts always were and always would be; Harlanne knew that sticking up for herself about this pedantic tone from the landlord was off the table, because if you wanted to be a *real lady*, even for an afternoon, you had to listen to the *real men*. To question that less-than-meritocratic everyday conversation power structure invited criticism to your gender presentation, just begged someone to know you weren't the thing the way they knew that thing, to notice it, and then to reject you. Harlanne tugs the bag out through the perfect little mouse poop ring encircling it, almost a shame to scatter this ring, and they draw it close, fumble until a big long unzip defeats the fussy zipper of the oversized duffle.

Nothing but bills, bills on bills on bills. A bill is a bill is a bill, Mum might've said. The bag so full of twenty-dollar bills it takes on the twenty-dollar green hue in the little light the cubby lets in through the steps, small succeeding shafts of light like rungs on a ladder.

"The downstairs neighbours hadn't realized he was gone. They swore they heard him doing dishes, cussing about something drove under his thumbnail, just a few nights ago."

"And you're sure you didn't go through none of this?"

"Not a lick of it. There's still dishes in the sink! Look for yourself."

Harlanne struggles with the tool bag like it were recalcitrant luggage, kneeling to knead bills as flat as they can be squished, coax the zipper shut in that moment of complete exhalation. It works. The bag is heavy and dragging it out into the light, Harlanne notices the bag is that very imagined twenty dollar green, the reality of this bag full of unmarked bills, every brick of them bound by the fat rubber bands you usually find binding vegetables.

"Bag looks heavy. Need a hand, missy?"

"No, no I've got it."

"So, you gonna do these dishes now or will you do them when you come back with a couple strong young bucks to do the heavy lifting? You know, I have a son who's about your age, and..."

*

"Someone's gonna come looking for two-hundred thousand dollars."

"I think it was his."

“Where would Howard Welch get that kind of money?”

“I don’t know. The little Greek creep said Howie paid the entire year’s rent in advance, which explains why I didn’t get a call from him until a week before he needed it empty, letting a ghost pay rent.”

“When’d he even leave the farm? You never run into him in town?”

“Dunno. Didn’t talk to him much after I left.”

“Did he really die in the movie theater?”

“Think of what we could do with this money. I mean, just think.”

“You’re not gonna share it with your brothers?”

“They got the acreage, the land, and whatever was in the bank. I wasn’t in there at all. Hadn’t updated it since before I was born, sounded like.”

“Ah, I’m sorry Harley.”

“But, think of what we can do with this.”

“You’re not upset your crippled old dad left a bag full of cash in his closet, that he moved to town and never got in touch with you, or apparently with anyone else neither, and—”

“Crippled is a generous appraisal. Tired, entitled, lazy. Those come to mind.”

“I know he w—”

“Yeah, you know me and the brothers came in to clean up when the flood washed your aunt’s place away. But Howie sat in the truck, watched us work. That was always the way.”

“Okay, you win. So what do you wanna do with those bills?” Laird spins around in the office chair, draws on the slurpee, a manic energy to him that assured Harlanne he

was dropping it, and that they should be silly a while, that he would play along. Harlanne waits a minute to pout, to play it up, and consults the math on the sticky note again, $20 \times 100 \times 100 = 200,000$. Laird puckers up in pain "...oh cocksucker."

"Brain-freeze?"

"Mm"

"Looks like radioactive turtle shit, dunnit?"

"Tastes so sweet, so cold so sweet." Another spin of the office chair, must be getting dizzy now. "Okay, but, just to play devil's avocado, he had all those suitcases upstairs too?"

"Almost a dozen."

"Did he travel?"

"I'm thinking we head out past your rez and visit the casino?"

"Just so you can brag about all that white-lady charity you did, dropping sandbags down during a flood?"

"I mean, a wad of bills, a wad's-worth, we could get pretty far with a wad. Wad'd it hurt?"

"I fucking hate you so much." Laird's slush-chilled lips press quick once against Harlanne's cheek, and shocks them into silence.

*

Laird's local bookie licks his lips, turns down his radio that's more interstice static than the meek AM sports-cast caught somewhere in its center. "Wanna place your own bets, Ms.? You couldn't do any worse than your pal here."

"I'm alright."

“Well, you wouldn’t wanna settle up for him from last week, would you?”

“Goddammit, Laird.”

*

The casino is too loud, too sad. The VLTs in Summerfall at “The TwennyTwo” are always busy too, but they’re hidden away, past the pool tables, by the end of the bar where they keep can keep an eye on folks and ensure they don’t lose their whole paycheque. Here in the casino? Its blinbling sonic artillery and too-many carpet and all the strange, affected wood paneling in the red hallways, too yellow light, but not that beautiful canola yellow, a sick, buttermilk bruise yellow, this melting yellow drone is built to melt you down in it, to let you congeal again only after you leave penniless.

Harlanne feels like spitting, like when you’ve been in all winter, and the fresh spring makes you feel like you just gotta. They spend fifteen minutes in the bathroom propping up their coiff, admiring their eyeliner.

The wad doubles, Laird’s un-luck broken, or according to him, Harlanne’s luck sufficient for the both of them. A little drunk now, Laird asks Harlanne to kiss the dice over and over, until it’s embarrassing. Harlanne hides in the bathroom a little while again, texts Laird: “Hey, Billiards?”

“Sure, [shark emoji].”

*

The nuisance of Candy Crush pops and blings and bings and bongs wears on Harlanne’s attention, the sun going drooling lower and lower as they head back toward Summerfall.

“Right there on that corner! You can still see the foundation.”

Laird isn't sure what Harlanne's referencing.

"It used to be down the street from the elementary school, the end with the portables there, at that end of the tracks!"

"Oh. Yeah I know. It's not there now? I can't see so good in the dark."

"Do you even listen to me?"

"Your birthday's September 14th, and you don't like mayo, which your mum never ever seemed to figure out." They laugh together, but dip into a long slab of silence, Laird even closing his phone games to stare out at that boundless prairie horizon, that last gasp of fuschia smear racing them home.

"I think he must have sold something we never knew was valuable. A painting or a teapot, something innocuous but it turns out priceless, like that show."

"Who-zat?"

"Howie."

"Oh, yer dad. Huh. Maybe. Or maybe he was a secret agent. Or had one of those *R E S P E C T s*."

"I don't think that's what you meant."

Laird, in a lisp and silly. "Innit? Oh sure, sure. That's what I meant."

"I can't believe your bookie wanted my number. I don't know why you hang out with those creeps. They just rob you blind."

"I don't gotta worry about that no more with you around. You must have a horseshoe stuffed up," he looks to Harlanne, knowing he can offend them here, but choosing not to, "up yer nose."

The road's rumble-strips draw Harlanne back to full attention.

“Can’t be picky about your pals in a town this small, Harley. Eh! Eyes on the road.”

The Oldsmobile glides back from the shoulder like a ghost, like it’s not touching the ground at all.

“And Miss? Can’t believe he ‘miss’d’ me.”

“Oh fuck off.” Laird plunges the lighter into the plugin, pylon orange ring coming and then going, plucked and pressed to cigarette. “See, you’re being picky again. I thought you wanted that? She and her? Huh?”

“Not when I’m done up like this.” Laird cranks the passenger window down, and the broken seal hurts Harlanne’s ears, the buffeting wubwooshwubwoosh too much, but they know Laird needs this, that this’ll keep him ‘regular.’

“Yeah, but you prefer she and her, right?”

“Well, yeah, but, well no. I like the neutral ones. I lean that way, sure, but I don’t want to be a miss. No Miss Ms Mrs. bullshit. I want to be who I am and not trapped by that language.”

Harlanne flicks the high-beams on once the last car they can see oncoming roars past them, and the highway beams white and zoomy.

“Sounds right-fuckin’ picky.”

“It’s such a small ask.”

“Turn up Homem’s, it’ll cut off twenty minutes.”

The Oldsmobile slows, turns onto gravel. Harlanne side-eyes Laird, and catching on, he cranks the window back up.

“I just, I don’t want anyone to trap me again. I feel, I feel like a pitcher full of, fuck. No, okay I just feel like something inward, like I want to be fucked instead of fuck someone else, except for when I want to fuck, and,” Harlanne doesn’t steal a glance at Laird directly, but catches his want plainly visible in the big rearview mirror that joins them, “and I know that’s not every woman, but I feel so normal too, like I feel like lipstick and skirts, but I don’t feel like, I don’t feel like I have to lose everything I was. I don’t wanna think past tense about my whole life. I’m a big bundle, and when I’m wearing my triple denim look and slick back my hair with pomade and put on my mean black Docs I don’t want that Miss bullshit.” Harlanne sniffs once, reaches to the glovebox to grab a napkin to blow into. Laird doesn’t sit back out of the way, nor help retrieve one, but he flips the glove box shut once Harlanne’s gotten what they need.

“Triple denim?”

“Shirt, vest, jacket, and pants.”

“Innit quadruple then?”

“Well, shit. Yeah, I guess aha.”

“So much for trying to not get trapped.”

“Howso?”

“That’s a backroads hick look if I’ve ever seen one.”

“Fuck no! It’s Canadian couture.”

“It’s blue-collar-er than the big blue prairie sky.”

“Clothes don’t define people. That’s classist.”

“You’re not allowed to use a word like ‘classist’ when you dress like that on purpose.” Laird plunges the lighter again.

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

“It ain’t me. It’s just, that’s what the whole world is gonna tell you.”

“The world will learn. You did.”

Laird cranks down the passenger window, flicks his butt, cranks it back up, retrieves the primed lighter, and pulls a second cigarette to life with his deep, quintessential Laird loud breathing.

“Laird, comeon.”

“What? I thought you said I got special privileges car-wise? If you drove faster I wouldn’t need a second smoke.”

“I’m not talking about smoking in the car.”

“What then?”

“You can start a fire doing shit like that. You’re an adult, act like one.”

“It’s all wet slough, I reckon it’ll be A O K.”

The Oldsmobile slows again, the gravel canticles left behind as they come in sight of ‘city’-lights. Harlanne doesn’t bother arguing it further, Laird’s too damn drunk to be reasonable, to *lose*.

A few more minutes silence.

Laird grabs a Tim’s cup from the back-seat floor, plunks his butt in there.

“Okay, Harlanne. Let’s do this again. What do you want me to call you? It? Cousin-It had more hair. Get cracking.”

Harlanne resents the ultimatum, but speaks their truth. “They / Them, that’s what I want.

“It wasn’t that two months ago.”

“Well I was a different person two months ago.”

“Things don’t change that quick ‘round here, if they change at all.”

“Maybe that’s our fault, being stubborn.”

“And when I’m on the phone with ma, or Auntie K., what do I call you then?”

“Why do they need to know my gender?”

“When I tell them about my, what you call us, partners?”

Harlanne’s cheek reverse-blanch ruby-red, and they sit up straight in their seat, rock hard, like a teen all over again, holding hands on the school-bus sharing a Discman listening to Outkast, comfy and showing. Breathless.

“Like they ask me I’m coming to Sunday supper, and I say you’re coming too, what do I say? Jus’ so I know what you want them to know.”

*

“Two iced-capps, that’ll be \$5.85 at the window.”

*

The two hold hands in the “Perfect Pocket Billiards” parking lot. They both get brain-freeze. They squeeze hands tight to get through the freeze. Laird doesn’t light a hat-trick cigarette.

“You know Mr. Baine brought us here on a field-trip once, for gym class. They had a really cool racing game, like, you could put a card in it and upload your custom car and stuff? None of us had one, but some kids from the city did, and none of us ended up playing pool because we all watched the city kids, and man, man we got in trouble. We had two weeks of suicide running drills at the start of each gym class after that.”

“I never heard that story.” Harlanne likes when Laird softens like this. Usually after a little booze, a little arguing.

“Yeah, well, you were a cool jock senior. I guess you were too busy being better than the rest of us to check in on our lives,” Harlanne lets go of Laird’s hand,

The two wads of bills in the right-hand pocket of Harlanne’s vest feel damp, probably because they keep patting them to ensure they’re still there, still real, clammy palms wetting them down. The Oldsmobile’s shocks oomph out a squeak as Laird struggles to unbuckle, the car rocking left then right. Harlanne realizes they haven’t let go of the brake since they parked, and finally eases off, the Oldsmobile rolling just a touch ahead to boop the turtarrier, but the idiot in the middle of wriggling out of his hoodie, he slaps his nose against the dashboard, not hard enough to break it, but the blood comes quick and steady as a sink-tap.

Harlanne pushes Laird back, retrieves every assorted napkin left in the chaotic glovebox, but Laird’s belly against Harlanne’s back quivers, and Laird’s hands come to rest in both the small of Harlanne’s back and the ditch of elbow respectively.

Tugging one another, biting lips and sucking face strong enough to pull a muscle, and Harlanne begs “pull my hair some” and Laird, still angry but playful about it now asks, “You’d like that you little cum-slut, wouldn’t ya?”

*

Harlanne peels away a little more of Laird’s blood away from their neck, the harsh pulp of those last napkins hidden in the mouth of the glove box behind the registration and the air-gauge irritating their tender skin.

“No more of that for the night,” Harlanne looks in the windshield at the reflection of their cellphone pinched between windshield and dashboard. “I mean, not in public. In fact, no more fucking work friends,” Harlanne teases. Harlanne feels a strange sadness now their glovebox is empty of napkins, but is glad Laird has finally stopped gushing.

Laird pulls on Harlanne’s sunny KODAK hoodie they’d had lying in the backseat, a little baggy on him, but better than a FOX RACING getup with gnawed cuffs all covered in blood. “I wouldn’t call us friends. I’m your boss.” Laird leans over the center console to the back seat and rummages through the tatterdemalion closet that is the entire rear of the car.

Harlanne hurts, the idea, however much a bit, that they weren’t friends at all, together or not, triggering. They deflect with humour, like always. “Looking for a handbag to accessorize with?” They spank Laird’s ass hard as many times as they can in the short window before Laird squirms back into his proper seat.

“Ready to triple my wad, stud?”

Laird’s eyes squint, “This isn’t the carnival. No trading up plushies for a bigger better bear.” He seems so serious all a sudden, but then his scrunched brow dissolves and he reveals what he got from the backseat of the car: a mesh trucker cap with a duct-tape brim, a slopstitched Playboy bunny pulling everything together in the front panel. “But yeah. I’mma drain these dudes dry ‘fore they can say, umm, umm—”

“Hope your pool game is better than your catchphrases.”

A chuckle rings tocsin outside the window. Laird and Harlanne catch two Hells Angels leaning on their bikes eating footlong subs, the one with tiny sausage fingers in fingerless gloves dabbing sauce off the other’s beard lovingly.

“What softies” Harlanne muses.

“My grandpa’s old house, outside the city, in Shephard, right, he lived next door to their club house.”

“Club house? Like a tree house?”

“Like a party place, basically. Lucion’s old acreage that got swallowed up some when the city came that far out.”

“Right right.”

“So they always had him over for barbecues. They loved his junkyard. They would pick from it and pay him more than what the stuff was worth. Maybe they were building pipe-bombs or something.”

“These folks don’t seem like they’d be the type to.”

“Maybe that’s why they’re so dangerous. They live like children, laughing and smiling, but next thing y’know they’re kicking the back of your seat and tugging on the yard-dog’s ears.” Laird shoulders the stiff passenger door open. “Then again, they were very respectful at his funeral. And they all wore black.” Laird sticks his tongue out at Harlanne, then labours into the parking lot, the stubborn slush starting to stiffen up and get icy by this time of night.

Harlanne has a realization like a pin-prick that Laird has never said anything about his Dad to them before. Why was that? But they have no time to worry about what this means about ‘them’ in the plural sense, for the remark about being the boss, for every complication that two of three total employees might suffer under at the only place in town they didn’t need ambition to thrive in. Harlanne feels riled up, a tick manic, like

causing trouble, and so they nab their matte mauve lip-stain from their boot, apply it quick, pucker, and pleased, they lean across the manually lock Laird's door.

Laird's through the black glass doors, into the pool bar already, and Harlanne finally eases out of the car, slipping some but catching their door with their strong chin and then their hands, a chin they likened to Elvis', whether or not it's true Elvis had a notorious chin.

"What's your name little lady," one of the tender bikers inquires, Thousand Islands dressing bingo-blotting his belly-long beard.

"Harlanne."

Bikers, like they're rehearsed, turn to their Indian and their Victory, look back at Harlanne. "Oh I've never rode a Harley before." Roar like one mean, loud mouth.

Bad attention, but they could walk home tonight if they needed too, and they were gonna get drunk and they were gonna get fucked again and ain't nothing's gonna get in the way of this night being as good as they'll will it to be.

They really feel like a man when they shoot pool, not exactly a man, but something about gambling feels rebellious to them in the way only men are allowed to be, the luxury of stupidity. These bikers revel in that specific, mean male leisure. The black doors of "The Perfect Pocket" offer no reflection as Harlanne bears down on them.

*

Harlanne wraps herself around Laird's left shoulder, a little drunk now, and thrusts their phone forward to take a selfie, maybe to stake some claim on Laird, or maybe to just indulge their own vanity. Laird shrugs away some, but Harlanne grabs his ass and between his buzz and easily aroused nature he cheers up, pulls the little cue chalk

in to contextualize the photo, kinda like dice when you thought about it. The phone's photo application opens, but doesn't default to front-facing camera, so instead of selfie in the frame in wanders a Dolly Parton-type, frizzed big blonde hair and boobs out to here.

Harlanne is rattled, taps the swap button quick, and then tries to pull together their smile for the photo. Their lips are so much thinner than they want, but there's nothing to do about that. They tap the capture button a few times, but keep looking past the phone at the Parton-type, the Mom from the pumps a few weeks ago, letting someone coach her on how to properly handle a pool-cue. But it can't be her, can it? She seems so powerful here in that loud pink top and with that foul dude-gratifying cackle. And whether or not it is the Mom, Harlanne feels too middling now, and so turns and bites Laird's earlobe to grasp any kind of leverage they can. "Thanks, babe." They turn to the Mom, to see if she is competing too, but seemingly no one in the whole bar noticed Harlanne's performance but Laird. Laird mumbles along to the music, but screws up the words, "Wel-come to the mo-tel fort mick-murr-ay." Sometimes he screws up words by accident, but other times, Harlanne knows it's an accident. Tonight, he's being clever. Harlanne wonders if their Mother would've loved Laird, and all his punning, his word-play, his parodies; would they have sat around the bonfire in the backyard, wine-drunk doing Mad Libs. Laird brushes Harley's knuckles with his own a second, smiles right at them, and goes back to sharking the table.

*

A very large hand on Harlanne's shoulder indicates things got bad much more quickly than either they or Laird could have anticipated.

"Miss, we're gonna have to ask you and your beau to step outside for a talk."

Laird sets the tray of cheesy nachos down right on the table's felt. "We ain't like that."

"Outside, now," another in leathers demands.

Harlanne pockets Laird's winnings in their vest pocket, starts buttoning the jacket up over it, but notices halfway that the jacket is one row of buttons askew, a little droop at the bottom that feels as drunk as they themselves do.

"That's uncouth" one biker tells Laird. "Mind the felt."

"What's your problem, faggot? Don't be sore losers."

Harlanne cringes at this, and the biker hand clutching them lets go, and now there's a swarm following Laird in Harley's sunny KODAK hoodie out the black doors into the even blacker night, and Harlanne's right there behind, but Laird cries out in a way they've never heard before, like a dog choked by its short lead, and the glister of blood on a switchblade nips Harlanne's breath short.

"You have an attitude problem," chirps one of the gang, and then another hawks a loogie on Laird's face, speckled and sprawling like a wet bloody spider web.

Laird sputters, trying to keep the phlegm from getting in his mouth. "Stop it. I'll leave."

Harlanne pushes through the bodies, most of them moving like buoys, feet planted but bobbing out of the way when someone wants to get by, much of the crowd just tired working folks come to blow off steam, as surprised by the altercation as much as Laird and Harley.

Harlanne can't look right at Laird, all bloody in his gut, in their hoodie in his gut, looking not so much like a stab but more a slice, but even looking at their own unlaced Docs is gruesome because the slush and blood are soupy together.

Harlanne is still and does not know what to do, and things are quiet now, but only until a biker speaks up again: "Don't embarrass yourself in front of your lady, man, just pay us back what you didn't really deserve."

Laird puts his head back, trying to slow his breath, the trucker cap coming off and floating in the muck. "He ain't my girl. Tranny's got your money. Take it up with him."

Before the hurt can properly register Harlanne is running to the Oldsmobile, but someone shoves them from behind and they hit the glass of the passenger door hard with their face, get pinned right against the car, looking in through the glass at the spent Tim's cup with chewing gum draped over its mouth like a coat on the dining room table at the end of a long day, cigarette butt in its bottom, plenty of smoke left on it, but apparently Laird liked to throw things away before they were completely used up.

"Give it up."

"No. We won it fair and square."

"Well, that's not how we see it."

Harlanne is spun around and then back against the car. The Thousand Islands biker gropes Harley's thighs, their cock but only briefly, like a static discharge scares him off, then fishing through back pockets and squeezing Harlanne's ass, too hard, fat fingers sure to leave a bruise. Jacket pockets, hand slapped on window in anger. "Where is it?"

This was the moment, the time to embrace that male-machismo, make their mark: "Left a fat tip for the waitress, I'm a gentleman that way."

The biker is unfazed, like Harlanne couldn't present a threat to him even if they tried, and the biker finally finds the great throbbing sore in the right side of the misbuttoned jacket, but his short fat fingers aren't adroit enough to get the buttons undone. *Thwip* marks the switchblade's salutation and in it goes, sawing through the weave, and the wad's gone and Harlanne's belly isn't even cut their shirt isn't cut just the jacket's damn pocket is gone and the wad is gone, their shirt uncut their gut uncut and the reds and blues and wow-and-flutter oowoo-oowoo as Laird's drawn away in the ambo and Harlanne can see a ghostly print of their cheap makeup smeared against the passenger window where they'd been pinned as they try and slow their breathing and sober up some sitting in the front seat and absentmindedly nabbing the gum from the cup and starting to chew it again but only now realizing it was Laird's old chewing gum so they spit it out and they're gonna have to look for a new job now because they promised themselves they wouldn't put up with that bullshit language and hate from anyone anymore, but snagged on a deeper worry too now, that maybe it wasn't just their resolve, maybe it was personal too, that Laird was a friend, and that Laird turned on them like nothing had ever happened between them, like they hadn't shared space and spit and cum and money and time, time they wouldn't ever get back.

No no, it must just be Harlanne's resolve, they must have known better than to take a lifer like Laird seriously anyhow.

*

Harlanne turns on the stove's light when they get back home, illuminating what must be Laird's spurt blood in a butcher's paisley across their neck. *Oh, Laird.* But they

breathe in, smarten up. It's from when they hooked up in the lot beforehand, not from him getting what he had coming in afterwards.

Harlanne was too far away to get *that* blood on their body. The cops said it wasn't an uncommon thing to happen out there, not to *take it personal* as the H.A. start trouble out there all the time. Harlanne hadn't asked about getting their lost wad back; there was plenty left untouched in the duffle, and they hadn't checked their voicemail yet but it turns out Howie has a lawyer and the lawyers knows something about the will the brothers might've tried to bury; more to come, always more to come, but whod've think it'd come from *him*, so convenient and smug, but Harlanne admitted, at least he couldn't lecture them about it, not now he's dead.

The stove light, it's wan, throws so little light but such hard light. It's flattering, the way this light casts such crude shadows, the way it deepens Harlanne's features, unfamiliar valleys that must always be there but only noticing them now, and the subtle stubble nudging in along the chin.

They pull their slight heels out of their half-permanent-knotted Docs without unlacing, stumble across the soft swells of the linoleum to their octagonal bedroom with the red hardwood floors, a sort of halfhearted spire added on to the Georgian house in the '70s, tall and smooth like a grain-silo. They throw on their platform pumps to get just enough height to change the burnt out bulb; it's been a weekend to a Wednesday since light's come in the bedroom from any source, with the war-era blackout curtains they inherited from their phantom godmother—one of Mum's many strange life-threads Harlanne never got to unravel—saturating the window frame and then some.

They peek out at the street just a second, the sun coming out now. They'd been out all night. This is the worst part of fall, the early part, where things freeze over again, where it's sunny slippery and snowy, but wet too, and all the birds sing but sound hoarse like front-yard gates with squeaky hinges.

Harlanne marches back to the kitchen, fires up the oven and then thumbs their way through to a cookbook bookmark: cuisine—comfort—cookie—mint chocolate. They worry about the big things a few minutes, try to will *feeling* into their mind, think on the binary, on fucking someone in power above you, on having never gone to school but talking smart like you did (*thanks, Mum*), and the melancholy allure of the oven and its fumes like Plath found.

Harlanne can't quite melt into that narrative; Plath was capable of being a mother, she was a 'one or the other.' Harlanne bends, and their knees crack like the last of the dugout hockey-rinks fall apart in the spring. Back to pond. Inevitable.

They think about writing a brother about Howie's toolbag of plenty. They wonder about what they'd say. If they'd sign *your loving sister*, or would they concede to *brother* with their brothers, or just sign their name after *best*. Wondering how'd their siblings would address them back. Mum had taught them that Percy Shelley used to sign off *I am not Your obedient servant*; that would be a less controversial signoff than confronting their brothers about these things. Did they even know about Howie's 'secret second will'? They must have. But even if they did know, did they care? Harlanne was the only one dumb enough to stay, they thought, to skip school because it was a scam and a trap. They thought there must be something pure left in the world, but only out here in the middle of nowhere. They thumb the aubergine welt on their side, tender, a tease of what they had,

what they let slip through their fingers, but no cut, a pressure-bruise from where the bills had been crushed, where money had blunted violence. Their denim feeling less like a *lqqk* in this moment and more like a uniform, and mad Laird was right about that, or that him saying it had somehow made it come true. Harlanne muses on writing, looking into that mysterious godmother, or the books their Mom had supposedly ghost-written (but they couldn't find any of), or that distant, Toronto-duped artist-Aunt might've reviewed, but they are never sure of their own voice, and their chicken-scratch cursive almost indecipherable but something they liked tucked in the middle of their ramble:

Maybe the prairies hold hope? I do not know. I do know that sometimes I want to burn in the teeth of the harrows, a piece of deadwood caught in their 50m yawn, its 14km/hr trot, its nails rankling the soil and the seedbeds born-again so that they might bear as well in the coming spring. I need a fucking vacation.

They didn't like it. It wasn't writerly, but it wasn't Tumblr-bait either. Wasn't 'one or the other.'

*

Harlanne will dream of the grain elevator tonight, of that monolith gliding down those gravel roads, an immovable thing ghosting over the arcadian trails most folks don't even know exist. Harlanne will dream they get lost on their way back home, not the place they live, but the acreage they grew up on, 'cause they don't catch the WHEATPOOL eyesore in their periphery before the last range-road. They will dream of the way you can miss something you've never done more than loathe. They will dream of that beautiful groaning basilica defying everything everyone in the town'd known, and then the wind'll pick up and whip you like the truth, nothing more than phantasmata, ghosts good and

gone, the gravel razed and lingering. Harlanne choking on motes the size of old railway lanterns in the midst of the densest dustbowl, drove – driving further into the dream to find the vacuous nugget in its center, sour, and dry.

DEPTH OF FIELD (STRIKING DISTANCE)

2018

“No, no. I’m only interested in the particular intersection where a man was beheaded sometime between 1994 and 1995. Winkler off of, mm, twenty-two X told me about it.”

“Which Winkler?”

“Maybe it was Wagner.”

“Whereabouts on twennytwo?”

“Winters? Does that sound right?”

“I know a Wagner, and a Winkler, and I’m related to most all the Winters, all across the plains.”

“So do you know if someone was decapitated around here?”

“Lots of people died around here o’er the years, what of it?”

“I’m looking for the intersection where the man was beheaded somewhere between 1994 and 1995. For my boss, for the film we’re set to shoot early next fall. Winkler said it was sometime between 1994 and 1995, because, mm, oh, because ‘that cop who doesn’t mow his lawn moved in on the corner by the tracks that year.’”

“Gary is a nice man, and I don’t appreciate you talking about him like that.”

“I’m not talking about him like anything, that’s just how Winkler described it.”

“Well Winkler can shut his gob, and you can go ghost-hunting somewhere else. Good day.”

“Okay, okay, just tell me why they don’t make the canary lower? At these blind intersections? Why leave them blind? Answer that and I’ll leave.”

“Canola is a beautiful crop, no need to idiot-proof it. You just pay attention and you’ll be safe. Have a nice day.”

The ribs of the cattle guard rattled the Denali, last thing Hertz’d had left when I’d landed. I’d been promised a jeep, something without doors or a roof I could really sink into these prairie badlands with, but seeing the gravel dust kicked up out here as oncoming traffic slowly eased into the shoulder from the center, seeing the fuss the road made about these slow-dance lane-changes—if you could call them that at all, no lanes in the first place—I was glad to have the vacuum seal between me and the outside world.

I wish I’d taken better notes at the first place. I didn’t even get this guy’s name right when I knocked on the door, Larry Forde-Lorne, not Forlorn. My viewfinder, a several-thousand dollar spyglass to simulate camera lens conditions, a sad rolling pin in the bounds of the backseat floor-mat. My luggage is still missing from the flight in, but I brought underwear, a camera, and that trusty spyglass in my backpack. Everything here looks the same, but Yannick won’t agree with that, so I’ve gotta draft a list of forty or fifty random places with pithy descriptions to dupe him with; I love the man to death, and his reputation as a leader in artsy-cinema, ‘the shadow that killed Dogme,’

I have yet to nab a toothbrush from town. I’m staying in this great big house by myself, and it’s the first time in my life I’ve been able to play music loud, walk naked around the house, and do whatever the hell I want. I eat at the local curling rink canteen everyday, mozza sticks and burgers, eight bucks with a bottled pop. Ton of canned goods in the pantry, but it’s startlingly unappetizing to eat food that you might get stuck with in an apocalypse; maybe rink food is the same kind of stuff, but at least I’m not the one preparing it. Harlanne back home usually does all the cooking, which is good, because I

think they learned pretty late into their 20s, and I want to keep encouraging them; I don't want to get a hunch in my back, opening my pores over a pot of homemade gourmand spaghetti sauce every day, that's just not the kind of woman I wanna be, or that my mother would want me to be either—even if that is the kind of woman she herself grew into, curled up into herself like an ingrown hair, perpetually on a waiting list for one knee replacement or another.

The dash-display claims I've got a cool 183km left on the tank, so I'm free to keep tooling around these gravel roads, finding folks to pry some secrets from.

*

I wish Harlanne and Artemis were here for this, but, it's nice to have freedom here too, to go and meet horsemen for drinks, who care about things without ironically deflecting, and talk about things in response to things you talk about, who you didn't need a truth serum to seduce even the most innocuous of opinions from. I guess I wish just Artemis were here, and I do miss Harlanne, but I'm not sure if H'd just bitch the whole time they were here, about how they left the farm for good reason, but never happy with the city either. I'm happy not to be the one to wake up early, and walk Artemis, but I worry now that Harlanne is just making her wait to go out, still sleeping in, still blaming depression for everything—never doing anything about the melancholy they feel, never taking a step one way or the other, even when I book them an appointment, when I offer to go down on them when they're stressed (showered or not), when I pushed us into polyamory to get a rise out of them. Frankly, I think H is faking it, at least half the time.

*

Lane Frieze finally told me the good stuff. All this questing, all these stupid coffees, this humouring old women whose husbands were forced to seek refuge in fields 18 hours a day, all this pulling over at the last second because there's no real lanes, all for this! "I mean you should be asking Larry about this, he's the first one who come upon the accident," Frieze throws back his LaZboy lever, the top of his recliner mooshing into the wall like a hungry, *missed-you*, kiss. I sit side-saddle on the coffee table, both hands around the spyglass of my well-water, so mineral-saturated, so opaque as whatever seltzersome effect the under-sink filtration system put it through takes its time to resolve. "Well, I suppose he didn't know right away that that had happened. He pulled up alongside the tipped schoolbus, the rear-exit of it thirteen, fourteen feet above the ground, the whole damn thing tilted into the ditch driver-first, sticking up, like, well." He harrumphs, brushing some spilt beads of his Bud-heavy down his Western shirt, the fleeing little things crossing from the breastplate's barn-red across the border onto the bone-bleached belly below. He looks at me like he's trying to translate something from a language that didn't have a correlate in English. "You know what I mean," he holds his arm on a 45-degree angle. His tongue sticks out a little, as if from the exertion of holding up his arm.

"Yeah, sure, I know it." I smile to suppress more laughter, burning my cheeks with the strain.

"Yeah, well, so the bus has this accident and the driver, geeze, what was her name? It'll come back to me. The bus goes down, and deep down, so the back of the bus is looming way up above the road, above the crop-line, even." He looks down at his belly, producing his sagged turkey-neck, thinking.

“And the driver, who you don’t remember the name of, she,” I rake my thumb along my throat, “you know? When it hit the ditch?”

“Oh no, Lois lived a long time after that. Got in a car accident with her daughter years later, like, her and her daughter driving separate rigs, they ran into each other at the tracks over Langdon-way, terrible ice. Lois. That’s it.”

“Oh, really? Could I get that address from you too?”

“Eager! I like eager,” in tune with his body, he coughs hard just twice, rocketing a bloody cork of phlegm into his pocket kerchief. He dabs the corner of his mouth, wiping away some of the white thrush that seems to live there full-time. “Reminds me of Joan Blondell. You’re a movie-person, you must know Joan Blondell.”

“Grease? Older in it?”

“I suppose that might be her too. I’m thinking when she was all,” he gestures with his bloody kerchief to nothing, “when she was all, well, young, and *leggy*.” He laughs through another cough, this one dryer, hoarser, and then he licks his lips to wet everything down. “What were you asking about, again?”

My back is aching in its center from sitting without support, from my asscrack to my neck, and so I stand, ask if he wants any water or anything from the kitchen. He insists on getting mine, but the LaZboy release-lever is just out of his reach, and I gesture for him to sit back down. I survey the plugged sink full of drinking glasses, too full to stack another on, and the counter colonized by stacked bowls with yellowed cereal milk in their bottoms, and what looks like squares of used saran-wrap he’s saving for later, little oat-y crumbs between the sheets clung to one another. I raise my voice loud, empty-house-I-live-in-these-days loud, to mind his hearing aid. “You were saying the bus was

down in the ditch, and the tail end was so high off the ground, and Larry came across it.” I reach under the sink for the filter’s spray-nozzle I saw him use earlier. The cupboard drawer swings shut with such vocal pain in its squeak, catching a magnet when it gets close and coming to a firm rest.

The first thing I see as I turn around to resume the discussion is an array of inverted *Days of Our Lives* images caught in the glass of many grandkid graduate portraits above Frieze’s head, kids all cursed with braces, and a few younger ones in camo hats and bad teeth, the same kids probably, younger then.

“I’ve gotta get back to work now, though” he says, reaching out his left hand to shake mine, bloody kerchief still clutched in his right. He doesn’t even look up to me as he smothers the television remote with his kerchief, thumbing the volume louder than was fair to the cat asleep on the sofa-back; the cat doesn’t react, so perhaps it’s already been badgered into deafness.

I step between Frieze and the TV, and come down onto my knees to his height, to look at him without dominating. “So, can I come back and hear the rest of the story sometime?”

He leans over. “Yes, of course. I’ve got to go to work now, though.”

I make sure I pull the stiff old door shut the whole way closed, and then gently set the screen-door down, catching yet another magnet; they were so simple, kept things from swinging open of their own accord, and cheap too. Maybe I’ll have to swing by The City to grab some magnets, and pick up something other than canned food too. I’ve never been one for crafts, but I’m starting to go a little crazy all by myself in this house, and those pantry doors could all benefit from these elegant little solutions.

I walk along the gravel, wasting my energy as it slides away from my every step in a way the pavement of the city doesn't, which, well maybe that's obvious. It just *feels* like more work here, at least. I open the back door of the Denali, and grab my viewfinder, stick it in the cup-holder the same way the bus went down. Must have been one of the kids that lost their head; poor thing. I can see why Frieze froze up on something like that, but I wonder what exactly prompted him to turn on the TV when I was in the kitchen, and why he called it work. If I'm going crazy here after a few weeks, I can only imagine what's up with an old fart like him after twenty years.

I check my gourds in the rear-view, still buckled in, and then turn around in the driveway, realizing too late that I backed into the disused tire-swing hanging from the yard's large lone willow, pushing the tire swing back enough to start it swinging as I pulled forward again and ceded its original space back to it.

I'd been by the corn-maze off the main highway earlier, and talked with the fellow there, Lantz, about the accident, but he thought it was made up. We talked a while in general, but he couldn't convince me to give the maze a go.

"Too many horror movies in the front of my brain. I know better." He was agreeable to that, though he'd never had any trouble, and the local news always sent its weather-copter over that way to show off the ambitious field designs he did surrounding the maze, dinosaurs one year, Mickey Mouse another. He donated all the profits to Children's Hospital every year. He'd just retired from farming. He didn't want his kids to take over, but they'd got into pumpkin five or six years ago, got contracts and guarantees from dog-food companies, safety that growing cereals never offered them, and so with that new comfort, he handed over the keys.

“It’d be a few million to buy your way in to farming these days, can’t imagine my kids taking on that kind of debt for fickle grain that gets hailed out more years than not.”

“There must be some sort of farm insurance?”

“There is. But selling a good, healthy, crop, a real bumper crop, that’s good for the wallet *and* the soul. Pumpkin’s hearty, somehow. And Pedigree and the rest of that lot never seem to try and rip us off. Wheat-board dissolved a few years ago, but it’ll take time to get back from that, that and Notley’s reign of terror too.”

I bit my tongue at that, not exactly a fan of all these rural bumpkins sending her death threats, nor could I comprehend why they were upset about her forcing them to give their kids worker’s rights, safety-pay and stuff like that; I hadn’t read a ton of it in fine-print, but, seriously, basic labour rights aren’t a bad thing, and all these farmers mad at her for it seem to miss that point. By the time we were done sharing a coffee he wouldn’t let me go home without a few prize gourds. He referred me, as Winters, Wagners, or Winklers before me had, to Mr. Lorne for community gossip, but recommended Frieze as a less-popular, but more affable alternative.

My precious orange nothings, buckled in in the back seat. I text Harlanne:

Hey!

Busy day today.

Met some real whackjobs.

Just a reminder there’s more puréed pumpkin in the fridge, behind the beer.

Just put some wax paper down on a plate and you can make Arty more cold pumpkin

pucks!

Love you.

Miss u!

I check my texts as I head down the road, replying to tinder-boy's request we meet up in Langdon, a little commute-community, for drinks that night, in a bar with carpet everywhere but the kitchen, apparently. He seems to have a good sense of humour. Did I pack condoms in my carry-on? I think so. I guess I'll have to—I skid hard and long in the gravel, the tail of the truck kicking out to the left, the whole body tilted away into the soft-shoulder of the road, overlooking the hungry black ditch, its tallest grass tickling the passenger window. A dustbowl stands in for the rig I narrowly missed as it shrinks down the road. The dirty nimbus is kinda beautiful.

Hesitant, I let my foot off the brake, and steer back onto the road, parking once I find a spot with a bigger berth. I only process the *hornnnnn* sound now that it's all happened. I get out and look at the stop sign I hadn't seen, its face chin-deep in waving canola. My hands shake a few minutes, but I alternate making fists until the tingle and the quake settle. I doff my silk black bomber jacket, loft it onto the passenger seat, and then retrieve my viewfinder from the passenger floor-mat—thank god—unharmful. I retrieve it, set it to zoom, and watch the formless thing keep shrinking, compensate with zoom, shrink, compensate, shrink, the further in I zoom the wilder the frame movement, the whole image flatter and flatter until the rig turns off somewhere else, a water-truck I feel like I've seen before, an old yellow fire-engine converted to a big ugly Franken-water-truck.

I adjust my door-mirrors, raise my seat, and set the lumbar to ease the ache sitting on the coffee-table gave me. Last, I fix my rear-view, and I see one of the smaller gourds popped out of its belt, spilt its guts in the canyons of the rear-seat floormat, still oozing

out the hole in its head. *Like a hole in the head*, I thought, *what does that mean when it's your first?* I check my mirrors, and pull back into the road, taking the middle with full confidence for the first time since I came out here. GoogleMaps booms that I have to return to the route, the radio-dial apparently subjected to a turn of the screw or two in my mad braking efforts. My heart still pounds, but I leave my phone behind the brake pedal where it landed, just for now, because farm-boy can wait a minute, he can wait a minute.

*

“THE WILDFIRE SALOON” is too damn loud, too damn dark. But he wasn't fibbing about the carpet. Wi-fi isn't even password-protected, very small-town of them.

I follow a small tip from my forthcoming Tinder-boy, that some ‘Austrian Royals’ own a lot of the land out here, but I feel like someone I interview last week mentioned that in passing too, but in a bit more of racist way. Tinder-boy says some families had lots of their own farmland, but everyone farmed at least a little for the V.M.s, Von-somethin'-or-other. They weren't ever in the country though, and a couple quick emails to secure shooting rights on some of their fallow fields, an interest in associate-producing, and a few CC'd nieces and nephews who model, and who all would be “great for the project,” well, that'd go a very long way to getting this production off the ground for Yannick indeed. I only find one reference to “Austrian Royals, ALBERTA,” but it's definitely them. The family owns literal castles over there, and apparently built one out here too, hidden somewhere in the foothills; could be great for the shoot. Own the land beneath the sprawling City's second new hospital in just two years. I don't get any further in my research before Tinder-boy sits down across from me.

I open Tinder before I even look up at him, scrutinize his pictures a second, then look up to him. He's thinner now than whenever it was he recruited a buddy to take those two nearly identical pictures of him in front of some Mega-loader up north, looking comically little by comparison.

"Nice spot."

"Best in town, for what it's worth."

I go back to the main feed, start swiping right on other guys, set the pace. He just smirks, smiles a familiar, friendly smile at the waitress as she passes by and lets us know "I'll be right back to grab yer order." He studies at the laminated menu that I'm sure he doesn't even need to consult given that the Wildfire is the only damn place to eat or drink in town, and the chalkboard says "SPECIALS: NO."

"What's your name again? Donny?"

"Lonny," with a little laugh.

Polite, stares enough but without expectation, laughs at himself and isn't easily threatened. Yeah he'll do just fine.

*

I meet Lonny's uncle at the Langdon dog park a few days later. I feel like some sort of creep being here without a dog, but I guess Peter doesn't go out other than to walk his dog; when he was a little less house-bound he used to work at the provincial archives, which seem to have otherwise misplaced all records local to the hamlet and the county. He wears a facemask like all the people from the bird-flu countries do, a newsboy cap, cheap gas station aviators, and a rotten Dickey's flannel coat over some pristine Carrhart overalls. His little Shephard something or other mix has yet to grow into its ears and

paws, but it sits sweet and silent at his feet while the others, lotta retrievers and other big dumb breeds, yap on and on. “That’s close enough, lady.”

“Peter?”

“I have the information Lonny asked for me to get for you.”

I sit on the second bench, indulge his ‘secret rendezvous’ daydream, and stare forward. I hate movies like this, a bunch of low speeches and pea-coats and no real action no real horror. Not for me, but for work? Sure.

“So?”

“There’s been two decapitations in Dalemead county since 1900, but only one after 1950, and it matches your inquiry very closely. The dumpster behind the Tim’s on Main Street, in a blue recycling bag, you’ll find the dossier.”

“What do I do if I need to contact you?”

“You won’t. I’ll find you.”

He stands up to leave, his dog heeled close and obedient, not playing at all in the park built for its pleasure.

“Before you go,” I put on my own sunglasses, looking straight to him, “what do you know about a secret castle in the foothills?”

“Only fools go seeking it, and none return.”

Wow. Interesting gentleman. A bichon shih tzu walks up to me before I can make my way to the opposite gate and gift Peter the discreet meet and unique departures shot for the spy-movie on repeat in his addled mind. Yap yap yap. Yap. Yap yap. I retrieve one of Serenity’s dog-class business cards, which I usually save for Van locals, but I underline the ‘online tutorials’ note in black Sharpie, use inductive reasoning (which

everyone usually calls deductive) to observe the dog and then determine which of the identical Karen haircuts in identical Costco-discount Eddie Bauer jackets and identical Roper fake cowgirl boots owns the dog, and then give her the card. “This will help with your, well, you know.” None of the gaggle protest, but I doubt that’s because they agree with me. I take care to close the gate secure behind me, Bichon brat tailing close and ever-yapping.

*

Three photocopied local news articles, a catalogue list with a bunch of books published in the 60s and the 70s that according to google don’t exist, a hastily photocopied page from some other book on local waterways and water rights, and a photocopied postcard with font so faded all you can make out from the missive is “hates his bus driver,” and “can’t eat cabbage anymore.” Articles list the bus accident that Frieze had mentioned to me a while back, but imply no one was hurt. Lonny takes me kayaking on the Bow River, we park one car at the end then drive upstream to the other. He’s determined to make the most of me being here while I am. He flat-out refuses to ask anything about my partner, or anything he thinks is a little too slick, a little too city for him. My sneakers are soaked by the end of it, and we didn’t have a lick to talk about on the way down, but we make out in the Denali after like frisky teenagers, and, well I blow him because he’s practically begging for it and why not. He chats at me while I play crane-game to get a pube off my tongue, rub my eye that must be sore from allergies. “I’m sorry Uncle Pete wasn’t much use,” he offers, struggling to re-buckle his belt. “He’s been sick a long time, we think, but he was always able to work.”

I retrieve the manilla envelope from the dash, pull out everything again. Lonny snatches the envelope from me and presses the edges to pucker the thing like a mouth, then reaches in and retrieves a small newspaper clipping, an actual one, not a copy.

“Caught in the bottom flap there.”

“TWO KILLED WHEN FIELD TRUCK LOSES CONTROL, STRIKES DITCH-BOUND SCHOOL-TRANSPORT.” Vigo Von Maledict, local craftsman, and his gal, High Schooler, Kirby Margin. They hit the upright bus, and it tore the top off the truck. Kirby was driving, steering column through her chest. Vigo’s head clean off.

“I wonder how no one in the community can remember something like this?”

“Might be a country thing. I often don’t hear the old boys I worked for growing up passed away until a year or two later, lotta times by chance, Tim’s lineup or down an aisle in Costco, run into a grandkid. We tend to die quiet out here.”

“But these Royals, they’re a big deal, no?”

“Own a pile of land, but not sure I know much about them past that. Couple of their boys played hockey with my buddies, but wasn’t ever my sport. Played on the dugout, I ‘spose, with Peter’s kids back when we still talked.”

Yap yap yap. You fuck a guy one time, go kayaking, and he’s drooling out his whole life story. “What about a castle in the foothills?”

“Oh, you mean Ailing Point?”

“What’s that?”

“Where we are here, McKinnon flats, we’d portage across, couple backpacks with booze and a few with food, hike a couple hours up to this old fake castle thing, big high school thing. Dried up moat and like a draw-bridge, and there used to be a lot of tools and

lumber and cement bags and some insulation lying around, but that was all gone by senior year.”

Yap. Yap. Yap.

We meet next night to look for the weird half-baked castle attraction, go hiking, play a bit of grab-ass, sore knees fucking on a wool blanket in the wood but whatever, keeps his mouth shut. We don't find the castle, maybe because it's dark, or he's tipsy, or maybe it was just an excuse to lure a pretty young thing like me into the dark, scary wilderness. I don't reply to his “Night Night (Black Heart Emoji)” text he sends at 1:28 a.m..

*

“Larry, you found the Von Benedict fellow and his head?”

“Well we never did figure out whose head it was.” Larry is working with a lean young Scandinavian looking fellow, guiding the young fellow as he runs the forklift with the ball-hitch on its left fork, an old ugly Cessna getting towed into a big hanger in the back of the farmyard.

“What's with the plane?”

“Son used to spray crops. Encouraged me to get my pilot's license. I did. I didn't take to it, in the end.”

A couple bulls squint at me, mouths stupid and full of straw or whatever, looking not unlike Lonny's O-face if I'm being honest with myself. “Bought a plane and then decided you didn't wanna fly?”

“At auction, and at less cost than the pinball machine I keep in the paint-booth.”

“Still certified?”

“Yeah, I don’t like not being *allowed* to do a thing I’m *able* to.”

“Ever flown out over the foothills?”

“Sure.”

“What about over the Royals’ place?”

“They’re not in the foothills. They’re up by the hospital. Most them live in Vancouver with the rest of them rich Chinese folks.”

“I thought they were Austrian.”

“Some of ‘em, sure. Blemished that bloodline. Shame.”

“Sure, sure. But I’m talking about that castle.” I scrape my boot on a big white rock outside the hangar, wipe as much cattle-dung from it as I can. Scent’s gonna follow me, I just know it.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well what about the decapitation. Can you confirm it happened at,” check my notes, “the intersection between range-road—”

“Yeah yeah yeah, the one you asked about last time you harassed me.”

“And who’s the reeve around here? Who do I talk to about securing a stretch for shooting?”

“I’ll forward your info. He’s a busy man.”

“I’ll follow up on that in a few days then.”

“I’m busy too, missy.”

“And what’s with the head? They couldn’t figure out which was which?”

The Nord putters out of the hangar with the forklift, hops off but leaves it running. He props up his collar and zips his jacket up to his chin, and then walks back in to start

tugging the chain inside the door like a blind's cord, the hangar's door easing down in successive spurts.

“Come in the house.”

Larry's coffee-table is lousy with glossy flyers, and “return to sender” piles of post bound like banker's bills. He gives me a glass of water, some strange flickering glitter to it, but just from the sink, not drugged, just, mineral-y, I guess. “Drink.”

The glass is cloudy with the scum of men-don't-know-how-to-do-dishes. Oh well. Hot water. Asshole.

“It wasn't Von Maledict. Couldn't tell who it was. It was his truck. Pretty young girl in the back seat, unbuckled, she got thrown out the windshield. But whoever was driving lost their head.”

“And it was beaten up too bad to identify?”

“It and one of the truck's tires rolled almost three miles East, into the field.”

“No.”

“I was there, so I suggest shutting the fuck up.”

“Sure.”

“So, I find it, I saw the tire before the accident. It was still rolling when I was coming down the road. Murray's didn't like folks ever going in their fields, so I parked and jogged in. Head and tire both there. I left the head, but brought the tire, and ran back to the truck as quickly as I could. Couldn't've been a whole head. I was looking at some chewed up animal, some bit of bale must've fallen off the back of a truck. But later, I found out it must have been the head, because the head wasn't there.”

“And it wasn't the Royal?”

“No. About the right build, but the head wasn’t anything like his. And they never had a funeral proper either. We always wondered.”

“And so why don’t you, or any of the kids on the bus talk about it?”

“Family paid us not to. I’m surprised you found out any of this at all.”

“Is the intersection any safer now?”

“No, folks grow sunflowers sometimes, canola others. But lotta tall crops on all corners. You can’t see much until you’re already there. But us local folk, we seem to have a rhythm figured out.”

“And what do you mean they paid you?”

“Gave each family a section of land that they had otherwise rented. Huge payout. Tax-break, we all rationalized it as at the time.”

“Any of them still live around here?” The water slimes my throat and tingles like Pop-rocks, so I set the glass down on a flyer.

Larry stands up and takes the glass off the expired A&W coupon-book immediately.

“Manners manners. I don’t know what I’ve done with the coasters.” He scrutinizes me, squinting and rolling his head back, acne all across his frog bulge neck looking like it wants to make a break; acne that age? My god. Can’t imagine.

“Are you done then?”

“Yeah, full up.”

He heads down the hall to what looks like the bathroom, pours the water slow into the sink.

I stuff one stack of the bound ‘return-to-sender’ mail into my messenger bag, and he doesn’t notice anything amiss. The Nord comes in the door, “Larry, I’mma start the sand-blasting. Call the shop you need me.”

Larry comes back, nods, neck bloody with a constellation of fresh-vanquished zit welts.

“I’ll get in touch with the reeve. Have a nice day.”

“What about the castle in the foothills?”

“Urban legend.”

“But, we’re not in the city?”

“You have my number should anything pressing come up.” Larry holds the door open for me as I swim back into my boots, eye a little cast-iron dachshund boot-scraper he has inside the door, immaculate of course. I pull out over the rattling cattle-guard, Larry hits a hidden remote somewhere in his house and the gate swings closed behind me. I sit at the end of the lane a little while and go through the mail I stole. All this bound mail is for other people, and never the same person twice. Bills for lighting equipment like we use in the industry, for fertilizers, a quote for a bomb-shelter, an invoice for an excavator, an update on a Mission-sponsored African kid like those ones in the commercials—chiclet teeth and no eyebrows, but big big glasses and a smile to match. I don’t recognize any of the family names from anyone I’ve talked to out here. They’re all addressed direct to Larry’s spot, but under the wrong names.

*

I seem to have scratched my cornea going down on Lonny, on his pubic stubble. The doctor fits the eyepatch to my head and makes a pirate joke about I go by *Rrrrrr*, but

I don't get it until I'm at the pharmacy filling my antibiotics prescription. I swear I keep seeing a glimpse of stoney spire in my peripherals while I'm wearing it, but nothing's ever there. I break up with Lonny over the phone, while he's still laughing about the eyepatch anecdote, before he can react one way or another, but I ask him about the intersection before I hang up too. "If we shot out there, is it safe?"

"I mean, as safe as any other place. Just gotta look both ways is all."

*

I hop into my shower but leave on the eyepatch, tuck my curls into the showercap. Too lukewarm, like whatever the hell temperature the water Larry gave me was. I run it hot enough that I get spotty vision, let it broil me. Harley hates this, always turns it down when we hop in together. Surprised how much I'm missing her. I watch a couple porn-stars play Dungeons & Dragons while I bake in here a while, my phone precarious on the shower's high shampoo vista opposite the showerhead. There's one guy with a soul patch and then a bunch of Hooter's wannabe ladies in shirts two sizes too small on his left and right, and they're all rolling dice and hiding their shock at the results on character sheets they never show the camera. I can't hear what they're saying, but they all look like they're having fun, and the sound of it makes the house feel less lonely.

Fresh-pampered, I walk with an uneven stride from the Denali to 'The Wildfire,' nod curtly to Lonny out chewing tobacco by the INDEPENDENT VIDEO nestled between the butcher and the bar in this overgrown gas-bar strip-mall. The video store's OPEN sign is defective, the O the only lit letter, a wide-eyed judas-hole on high alert. I push the pull door, a little rattled to run into Lonny, but he smiles at me after he spits that bloody black chew gunk into a little pool of gasoline in a dip of the parking spot; maybe

less needy than I'm thinking? But no time to double-guess myself. March on into 'The Wildfire' to meet some city boy I'll have to check Tinder to double-check the name of before I open my mouth, nice of him to drive all the way out here too so I'll try and be polite, doing my best to sway sexy and sure and in complete control as I wobble uneven from the packed cow-patty deep in the grooves of my boots, driven and stubborn and winning.

GOLGOTHA

“Hold on. If love is the answer, you’re wrong. Hold on.”

—Daft Punk & Paul Williams, *Touch*.

2015

“I thought it’d be more like *Whip It*, with the banked track and stuff.”

“Naw. Our league’s pretty DIY. Flat-track can find a home anywhere there’s a skate-able surface.”

“Do we ever skate on concrete?”

“When hockey season’s out, sometimes. It’s more expensive to rent than something like a basketball court.”

“What about the guys?”

“They ref and coach? They’re here to date the girls, mostly.”

“No, the other guys. I don’t think they were reffing.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Those guys who came to watch the end of our practice.”

“Oh, they’re losers. We call it Merby! Men’s derby. They’re pouting bros.”

But let us speak no more of sulking men.

My porch is buckling beneath the thick ice slab, like weak knees after a sudden slap. It’s almost surreal, but this old haunt is surely wilting anyhow? The landlord makes good on prompt plumbing repairs, so this halvesie space of the porch, not quite indoors, but not quite outdoors, it can fall to the wayside—so long as my water’s running hot at least.

This ice-goliath tolling the back porch hasn’t quite melted, but beneath the gutter drip my goliath stretched into stiff translucent sheets like snot-stuck tissue, draped itself

like an exhausted hockey defenseman—a Frenchman, maybe—flings himself on creaking 'ockey bench at the end of 'is shift; the goliath is more a loose jersey on a pile of jerseys than something serious or formal, but if you looked too close, you might catch a sharp corner, might slip into the sweating mound and catch cold or catch a hook or catch something more embarrassing altogether, a rash or sutures to remind you of your routine making rash decisions when you've got too much momentum and can't rely on an intersection to stop you, a t-stop between your skates too slow to keep you in the know before the industrial reliable wood of the boards, fog and blood and snot-smear of the glass.

Someone rolled through the stop-sign down the street last night, someone pinched the neighborhood's stray-but-stays cat beneath the tire and a half-ton's froze-firm mudflap, someone's calico fur wrinkling and trailing, but no one's blood, somehow, caught up between the cogs of *no payments for nine-lives* and mudflaps with busty chrome silhouettes all spattered with road-salt and plain-old wear; I didn't see it happen, but I pieced the thing together this morning, gagging my mailbox with my fist in the search for impossible Saturday morning post.

I would love to pinch laundry along a distended cotton string again, let it roil and kink around itself in persistent shallows of wind, unwind like stray film off the reel, like a spring, turbulent against the jersey-knit way of life and weave of slip and skirts astray. I'd like to make a beeline across the yard buck-naked, re-string the laundry line like my rot-red rust-riddled speed-skates need to be re-laced; skates sat damp in tin-shed all last muggy summer, the lace-wax soft and staining my softer palms, shedding its slick secrets into my hands, secrets that won't wash away in lukewarm tap-flow.

I want to go and lash a new line up across the empty yard but this year I winterized the back porch door, and my ghosting sheer A-line dress would make a mess of the nice albino driftapalooza beleaguering the structural integrity of my neighbor's wooden fire-escape staircase—a real mean spiral piece of work, bloated bent with cheap frayed cuffs on the end of each mutinous swollen plank; I don't really know these people, but I know these Wednesday evening wine-drunk 'Shiac sounding multitudinous-tongue fucking frog fucks leave their porch-torch on all day and night, bright even through my bulky blackout curtains. The laundry line is a friendly reminder to these people about the boundaries between them and me.

I tried to scale my gorgeous goliath last night to grab the garbage-bin's lid. The lid was nestled between the hazard-orange ironing board and the crosshatched lattice gardening-fence we'd retired for the winter. I tried to get past my frozen prick goliath but my gloves froze to it, my gloves quit without severance and I tore topsoil off my hands, and too slick altogether, my boots slipped out beneath me, my belly snagged snug on some unseen angle; the gash brewing purple across my belly burns now, but I reckon it's a smidgen shallow for stitches. I won't succumb to a hospital visit unless it festers, don't want to strain healthcare's resources for something petty, and in its own unnerving way, something pretty.

The blood—my blood, I guess—melted a slick boundary into goliath, the slalom you might see at parties where people drink shots from a sheer ice block propped on the angle up against the bar, all hard thoughts and harder liquors running down to eager gullets. Or maybe it's more a skeleton-mishap at the national levels, some fingers beneath a sled's runner or something and a hot fast smear of red light as Paul Fraser rockets down

right-fucked fast but not quite fast enough; poor Paul, family friend with fastest skeleton push in North America, but shoulders a smidgen too broad to make the cut in skeleton, cleave through the air as quick as he'd like to, shoulders keeping him just on cusp of Olympic qualification. Sell his soul to shrink and take titles. And how'd we do in Olympic hockey last year again? Did the red-posts betray us, or ring out tocsin and stubborn? Keep the puck out? Fuck hockey anyhow.

Thick red line keeping some things out sometimes, some things inside others. When I play roller-derby—I signed up one metric mid-life crisis ago, to prove some long lost point—we play ball hockey to warm up some days, and our goalie is insufferable, they can't skate backward, and with the junkyard pile of broken ankles and plates and bolts and hardwood scuffs we've met lately we don't wanna risk the assured chaos of so many sticks on the wood, don't wanna let fresh-meat waddle and toe-stop wobble like newborn-giraffes around this messed-nest; she was the worst goalie out of the bunch, almost allergic to that toxic little plastic red ball, but if we kept on pushing we didn't have to worry about her, about her letting things in the back door, we could rely on the posts and our guts to get in the way, do double-time, second-shifts like working mothers, could keep her safe; she was more than ornamental, she was a goal, she was something to worship and a reason to check our rear-view, and it's nice having that kind of pointless gorgeous distraction on your team. Wish we had a real space, not some bastard basketball court; wish we had real warm-ups, not the derivative hockey-dick tricks. But alas, this is the lease we are afforded. Oh, that we could only sell our souls away for a little more room on concrete to skate and be free, to wish away hockey altogether and claim the rinks for ourselves for more than a mere month each summer.

The thick red line on my goliath, like a book's spine, or maybe more like a highlighter making a point on the thick-gloss pages of a didactic manual, looking for quick answers, looking like you read the thing at all.

“Let me read your tea leaves again, please. I got a book on it and everything now. And I learned Gingers have an extra consideration when it comes to their moon signs too!” Karin, the neighbor with the puppy in the apartment above mine, she heard the cat when the pickup made quick work of it. Karin said the folks across the yard, “With the porch-light on all day and night,” they were out smoking, “And menthols too, I could smell from here.” And they gasped and laughed when the cat got caught up, “Wait—wait—no! They cackled! They friggin’ cackled!” Karin is young, but her collarbones stick out so far, and her forehead skin is tight. Her hair is fried. But something about the naïve way she puts too-colourful clothing together keeps me interested in her, not as a real person so much, but more as a thing to study.

Karin always knocks on my door when she gets home from groceries, lets herself inside before I can get the door. She combs through the fathoms of her black tote for her weed vaporizer, puckers impatient, pulls on the mouthpiece before the nug is sweet cherry cinder, before she can pull anything worthwhile from it. I wouldn't have invited her in myself, but I never mind the deadbolt, and once I let her in the first time I couldn't muster the cruel visage to keep her out the second, the third, four and forevermore. I often hear the pup above, never barking, but always the claws rolling across her hardwood floors with a disciplined staccato oomph, like drumming against a table with your fingers after you've choked down a rich meal.

The French fucks next door come by to ask if I stole stuff from their boxes when

they moved in. “I don’t see what good a bunch of memorabilia written in nonsense-francaise would do for me.”

“Kitchen supplies. Our favourite jungle mug.”

“An incomplete set still makes for intriguing conversation.”

“It was on its own.” I can’t tell which one is talking at me at which time, both them mouth-breathers, the one with a dogtooth sighing halitosis against my constitution each syllable he snaps at me. “Jungle Jims, the rib place.”

“They must serve more than ribs.”

“Have you seen the mug?”

“An ugly one, or two, but not in my place.”

A Jungle Jim’s mug they must’ve stolen from the restaurant in the first place. Seems the way of life in the jungle: take, or get took from, dicks.

“Did you see anyone root through the boxes we left out overnight? On our front porch?”

“We live in Fredericton, folks don’t steal ‘round here.”

They both wear cheap t-shirts caked in white paint, and they both cross their arms, some weird psychic twin synchronicity.

“Anything’s possible, mademoiselle.”

I smile and shut the door without answering, twinkle my fingers in a goofy kind of wave. Why can’t they keep their kind in Quebec? They wanna separate? Let’s take affirmative action, sever them ourselves. The gall. The gall.

“I like you one metric-heebjeebee,” I tell my warm-up goalie, Lillith. We are in the tight hallway between the basketball court and the two private bathrooms, slipping

into bulk kneepads and the assured mumble of oft-gnawed mouth-guards. Her black Flemish Eye tanktop creases into unfamiliar polygonal folds, and she shudders as she pulls it on over her ox-blood bandeau. “Frozen,” she explains, “I leave my bag in the car so the rotting smell won’t scare off the boys at my place.”

“Roommates?”

“Guests.”

Of course. “Of course.”

“Plus laundry costs an arm and a leg these days.”

“If you’ve got an arm and a leg in your bag I can bet where the smell’s coming from.”

She smiles, but then she eases crabwise out the hallway to our thus far unscuffed hardwood court. I swan into my neon mesh pinnie, crane my neck to make sense of the panels of chilled sweat melting slow onto her slight frame. My shoulders are slender enough to slink past the rest of the girls, into the washroom, run my mouth guard under hot and sterile water, make it soft and suck it up tight, the heat teasing a second skin from my alveopalatal ridge. The pile of bodies between the basketball court and me seems choking, even for my slender shoulders.

My laundry mound grows to match the goliath outside the back porch door, creeps from the bedroom to the hallway to the den like mildew across the forest floor. Karin caught a rat in the pile last time she came by, with a staple through her thumb, where if I’m remembering correctly, with a bent butter-knife, I wedge it free. In delight and disgust she recoils, reels backward, she steps on some rat’s tail in the beltline of the blacks laundry pile. The squeak, quick and shrill, defiant, but thoughtful Karin, she brings

her bare foot back down hard, brews rat stew between her stubby toes, a mess in my mess of clothes. I got around to that part of the laundry pile some other time, partitioned it for toxicity, and replaced the curtains that leaks from her place above had wrecked.

“You should see the size of them out West,” Karin pours herself a glass of tap water in a dish I didn’t know I had, a yellow mug someone must’ve gifted to my house and me.

We skate tonight against the Edmunston Mutton BustHers, and we haven’t practiced in two weeks on account the blizzards. I tore my toe-guard sheer from skate-toe when I tripped practicing at home, leather toe-guard caught the stove’s bottom pan-drawer bending my ankle in some unnatural but not unforgivable angle my foot slipped free of boot. Sockless, my toe hairs upright like thunderbolts, and my hip outta line, the half-foot of difference between my loyal skate and my spooked foot pulling the features of my whole into a queer slant. My skate toe open to scuffs, to hardwood impurities.

Last week Karin came by with a camera. “Super8, family-friendly loading cartridges.” I put out my smoke in the Betty Boop drink-coaster nestled by the toaster. “I thought the landlord didn’t want people smoking indoors.” Prim Karin.

I enlighten her: “Peruse your lease carefully. They didn’t check off ‘no-smoking’ in mine.”

“Oh I checked real careful, it’s why I can keep Floyd upstairs.”

“Pet?”

“I prefer the term, fur-friend.”

“What’re we shooting?”

“I have no clue! Brush your teeth?”

“What?!”

“Brush your teeth?”

“It’s been a few days, if I’m being honest.”

“Even better.”

As I brush, my gums grease with blood, and it runs out my mouth into the sink that can’t quite keep up with stream, can’t quite drain, can’t quite give up the ghost. “You’re beautiful like this,” she says. My mouth full of blood, I can’t reply. “*Stop though.*” I relent from harassing my teeth for a minute, bent over the sink, paralyzed until I hear from her. She slinks back in and props her phone on the sink against the mirror, oozing music: “We’ll find a place where there’s room to grow, and yes, we’ve just begun,” and it’s The Carpenters, but as if telepathic, she interjects, “A lotta folks think this song is by The Carpenters, but really, Paul Williams wrote it. We love him back in Winnipeg. He’s sort of a superstar.” The camera zonks to life and purrs, and my blood and toothpaste undulate in sync as wrinkled roses atop the fervent surface.

I spit. Run my tongue along the ghosted scars of fat and split lips past. Check to see I still got my teeth, the couple baby teeth that I never grew out of, the adult ones I haven’t yet busted down the middle in skate collisions. I turn the water off one tap dial at a time, the hot first, running my fingers beneath the pure cold, cutting chill and pulsing away the toothpaste and spit that’d wormed its bloody way down the toothbrush as I cleaned. Karin is still rolling, so I dry my hands on the towel awkwardly, reaching past my comfort, still staring in my streaky mirror. “What do you pay down here?” Karin clears her throat. “For rent?”

“475. You?”

“Not that much. Does this city have rent control?”

“No clue.”

“It’s a good system. Keeps people from living beyond the price they can pay.”

“Nothing costs much around here.”

“Your HST is really high.”

“I suppose it is.” Above the camera’s chatter I hear her puppy upstairs clunk around, whimpering.

“But we’re in it together.”

One might say collared, leashed, and bound. “That’s what happens when you take all these old haunted houses and split them into apartments.”

“It’s haunted? Oh my frig, I thought—”

“No, it was just a joke.”

“Oh.”

Where’s that joke begin, what’s its origin again?

We lost tonight against the Edmunston Mutton BustHers, but I broke a thick girl’s thin nose with a clean can-opener: a deep-burn squat then all the revolting muscles between your dandelion-yellow bruised knees to your cramping hips and crinkled lumbar from the office chair 25-30 hours a week, all this hate frothing in your body and then you spring up, open a can of *back off, or risk the penalty*, and her groin slaps around your butt and her arms around your gut, or at least it comes close enough; but she toes out of it somehow, away from basting you in her belly’s sweat, and her in your back’s; your strategy; your mouth-guard’s salt scent, its ill-fit; and your itch to throw an elbow into an unsuspecting tender tit; she corkscrews away but the team’s thickest muscle, Mamasita

Muerte, a stoic gargoyle gal, meets nose, kneads her into the suicide-seating—where the audience signs a waiver that they might get a skate to a jaw or crotch—but even the gawkers skirt away, and the beer garden’s high fences make quick work of her soft ply nostril cartilage (*good fences make good neighbors*, or something to that effect).

Earlier though, before a game-end brawl yet-to-come, some nigh-unspeakable thing happened. Warming up to the sport, in the penultimate jam, we tucked our golden Lillith to the inside track, told her to hold that line, “stick your ass in the air like you’ll spray them if they come too close, and if they do, let a dribble dab them when they brush by you”; sage advice from our captain, Lady Speedstick, alongside other epics like, “if you can’t skate backward, imagine you’re fucking your girl, okay first, imagine you sprouted a cock overnight like a rash—looking at you, Neggy Nancy—and this cock, you know how you like it, but your girl won’t get up high enough because she’s, and oh yeah, you’re fucking her from behind, like doggystyle, so her ass is a little low and she won’t help at all so like the martyr you are you bring your hips down, pump out on your toes, and voila, you’re fucking rolling backward, and she’s cum by then and you can get your foul smelling snatch to practice on time.” I wish this were a joke; I wish I hadn’t learned to skate backward this way.

But new-girl Lillith still hasn’t learned this backward business, like a fourteen-year-old forgets to shoulder check and all a sudden the lane-change doubles back on itself askew like chiasmus, and an engine block is in a windshield and a seatbelt sits snug inside a comely revised collarbone, and an older sister who moved away for school gets a call and can’t afford to come out, that or tuition, and now the little sister never trusts her big sister ever again, and holy hell—hell, Lillith shrugged off my advice to check with the

elbow to shoulder, Lillith thought she had it, Lillith took the piss, and eager, her naive trajectory amputated the sweet-spot for the apex jump at just the right time and the BustHers's BubbleSissBooBoo—seven-three on roller-skates, pushing a firm three-hundo soaking wet with sweat like she was—broke Lillith. You—yes, gawking you, stray past this next piece if you mind a bricoleur-blur of sheer bone and broke flesh.

Tenting is the medical term for when the bone rolls on through, but not totally, close enough to bruise the mess; close enough to cut a smidgen into the stump it sprung from; close enough to make Roxy Acetylene loose her pre-game granola in a hot delicate slab across the hardwood; close enough that the skin's stretched thin and you can make sense of the soft calcium and Speedstick's weekly practice assurance "You sluts need to weight-train to save yourselves from death"; close enough to tearing through that you borrow a helmet to prop beneath her sallow calf so she won't let the leg laze and roll its tissue-thin connection to the foot right-gone; close enough to come through that you wish it would, so you could stare the horror down, but it balks at the thought (the gall), sits on the cusp of come-through until the paramedics come and can't corkscrew into a vein like they need to, to close down the slippery intersection between shock and pain: "You'd make a terrible junkie, dear." Three cotton swabs taped between her good foot's five toes, one to her good leg's ankle vein, and a final fourteen swabs more along her poor starch forearms, grisly mounds of stoic opiate-rejection, aghast impositions against a horizon of blonde pekoe field-fire across her thrush elbow, her eczema brail; what would you read to me, and what would the price be for me to read this secret text?

She asked I take off my wrist-guard as I held her hand, and she me clutched tight enough to crunch something, but I stuck with her wild eyes as they cut the tongue's

elastic, unwound the squelching leather labyrinth of skate from break, a thick needle in her starry-night blighted bum-bruise that makes for numb but not quick enough to come, and she sucks the gas-tank dry half-way through, eyes wider and wider until I can't tell the difference between platinum lash or 'brow, bloodshot eyes rhizomatic and red—lacking discipline—championing chaos as it chews through the foundations of her constitution, the overhang bending compromised somewhere in her tremolo-bubble lip, her euchre tartar tooth trim I hadn't noticed in the dark and blue hue of the hallway any time we'd stripped to our skin before; she's in a chair now, and they wiggle her down the fire-escape because the old Y's indoor staircase is too snug, can't breathe, and was built before fire-codes snuggled up, and when they tried at first they snagged her bad foot's toe on the banister and the backdraft of her bellows gave us all gooseflesh.

Tenting is what Karin and I did last night, camped out indoors in the mouth of my den on the cusp of the kitchen; flashlights and pillow-fights, some teen boy's wet-dream, but we were well-awake, we were well and awake, dipping into the well of youth to just let loose and when she kisses me I bite her back, her pout's sincere but incites even more spite from me. "You taste like menthols."

"Read my lips." Shut up you dork. Succumb. Succumb like the rest of us.

"I want to read your leaves."

"Maybe after."

My lips, hitherto the crux of my argument, wobble now, part bow-legged; the door between us opens of its own accord and the teeth of its hinges come apart, threatening to pinch whatever's between them whenever they see fit to rejoin the rest of the body. Our chasms clash, commute with us to some far-off place, some black highway, and the right

way to avoid the tollbooth, but maybe no way back. We are wide. We are awake.

I threw a fur over her crimped body, already swaddled in wool top sheet and a comforter, and she wept and wept; wept until she could ask no more price of her tolled body; wept until she slept. I expected something inside me to stir at this, but nothing came.

My belly gash is weeping wide, an aubergine chasm that pumps tufts of air out when my breath brings the stomach's plane below the rib-line, aspirates vapor sickness as I sleep. I didn't see this, but I pressed its walls together when I woke and curled, cold sweat, and the bedroom's walls were pocked with soft-focus spores and the blackout curtain was bleeding dye down the wall where I'd replaced the white-fringe last month. The wound was hot to touch, but the blood that lapped up along the face of the lining did so slowly, like it was too cold to slosh much faster. I take a selfie with my cellphone, flexing like hot-shit, the belly gorge gorgeous and sensational, send it to Speedstick, tell her I caught sick from some scratch from game-night.

“The Capital Calvary don't quit ;).”

“Yeah, us Cavalry don't fuck around.”

“Turn left. Hit hard.”

I feel like a dolt swearing in a text-message to impress Speedstick; the only real words are the sweet ones, and the only sweet words seethe like soft bells, or simmer like rashes in the boundary-ditch of rash-rankled elbows; language with purpose, it's all soft, all something you can smooch until it stops resisting. I snort through a quick choke on my plain-bran cereal, wipe the meandering milk around my mouth moot with my practice pinnie, and toss it back in the pile. I dog-pile on my moping mound, my overnight-guest,

but there's nothing in the belly of the blanket, no piggy, nothing to pinch or tie up and punish; no post-fuck feel-up.

The daughter of the owners is working on her homework at 'Coffee and Friends.' She is highlighting all the important parts of the body, the ones you can't dispose of: heart, brain, liver, kidney, big toes, pinky toes, arteries, eyeballs, knees and smalls of backs. I can piece it together from her seraphic posture. She is not highlighting nails, and how they are colonizing the bottom of your purse because—self-conscious—you clip them into the bag before meetings, or dates (typical lesbian, you), those unhighlighted exiles, coming to arms together, to scratch and claw their way out once they've advanced their prim and manicured civilization enough, bursting from the mouth of the black bag with a blacker flag, coming to claim this body for themselves again. The jasmine tea is bitter, all perfume stench, nesting in my nostrils rent-free; a ghost of my hopes for better tea, a burn-free tongue, and a stake in my own futurity.

Speedstick texts me pictures of Lillith from game-night: a thumbs up and a tongue-stuck out her comely mouth as I clutch her hand, concerned as a mother might be. I smile in the second photo, once I realize they're trying to capture us in the act, and my gums are bleeding bad across the otherwise white teeth, chafing from the rotting mouth-guard; how did I show that much gum anyhow, my smile tucking my lips so far out of their resting place?

I dream tonight. Lillith and my neighbor, across each other on my goliath, but neighbor is Lillith squirming, and Lillith my neighbor broken. The X of their peach and wan skin cut contrast against matching nude undergarments, *sous-vêtements*, interrupt the Frenchmen, one body, one t-shirt just below the knees and nothing else, unless you

include the dab of pee just above the bottom trim, the spreading damp shadow darkening the purple tee until all I see is a disembodied head rolling around the room, pissing off the otherwise preoccupied neighbor and Lillith, all fondle, all tangle, a fleshy intersection askew from a proper pure X with phantasmata en mass dragging themselves through its squelching sidewalks on their bellies, not looking both ways, snailing across my feet and cementing me into place in this frothing nightmare that I wake wet from, sweat-soaked, gurgling gut-puss.

I pull a damp padded puce envelope from my mail slot, put the DVD in the machine. I Partition my gaze to the film, a single hair bobbing across the movie in the foreground, but the follicle, the hollow it must've risen from, that imagined void stampedes across my stream of thought and make me anxious, but why worry about the darkness that we find ourselves ejected from after gestation?

It's me, all teeth, topless, smoking super-slims that are peeling back into limp ash-monoliths, but without the smoke reading at all, like it was all going into me instead of the camera's optics. The small of my back casts a goliath shadow upward and off my form onto the bare and distended walls, slimming as we follow it down and it nears my trunks' beltline, the sublime call of what's below in the blackest parabolic point unanswered, but equally, assured, disciplined and monolithic; some sort of supernal authority, smug confidence. Me brushing teeth at the sink, and the topmost skein of the blustered water is sundered by sanguine large-scale cells, scabs with whirling maze mitosis embedded in their bellies, articulate clusters of structure in their wild unruly wash. Then the film stops, rewinds, and all the scabs in whole come back into me, like a ghost, or history, but the smoking and the slender and impossible angle to hold in a pose

don't come back, it all reads unexposed now, safe and black (*you can fix it in post*).

Above me the hound's nails cut into hardwood and make wood soft and coil and ribbon, make the floor gossip about it, but I do not hear her stir, do not hear any other sign of life upstairs. I do not see the remodeling from the pup's hefty paw, but I piece it together from what she's told me about the thing. The wan light pulses through my window I gaze on my goliath, all a gummy pink, the belly blood seeped deep inward and pulsed through even, disciplined and circuitous, the boundary gone but now the whole thick block heaving red across my vision, a warning, maybe, or more likely, the warmth only a system circulating through all its homebrew and foreign data could provide—oh, my mathematical goliath. She above drips from on high into my goliath, but cannot penetrate it, beading off and into the parking lot's soil instead, thawing and sinking, but my block persists despite its sweating, protests the sun's assumptive boast and hot breath; my carefully tended goliath will not succumb to the irrationality and teeth of the disparate season cycling machinery. Leaves ghost from her screened-in balcony as I spray-paint the prim bile-yellow property line across the yard; my wandering mind means I have redraw one of the lines and the Frenchmen claim a foot and a half of gravel trim alongside the adjoining fence; they are invading our home, a virus with an accent aigu, and all you can do is remain vigilant, unlike I, gazing toward the sky at the fetid flaking tea leaves cycling out and away from her balcony, out and away from me, not coming down, roosting on unseen colossal currents that keep us all moving through the seasons whether we want to or not. They are invading our home and changing it and we have to steel ourselves, but how we go about that, I'm unsure. The Frenchmen watch as I double down on the line, thicken it one spray width wider on each person's side, more a chasm than a boundary

now, a no go zone; the Frenchmen wine-drunk on their porch, grasping one another in board-shorts, pretending the sun is soaking them warm, all gooseflesh. “Is that the line?” Their teeth are cherry black, their tongues with a white coat of tartar or something of that ilk—from the tip down the throat. “Between you and us?”

“I wouldn’t recommend you try to look too close; might bite.”

The sewer drain a block down is frozen over still, or was it before (*is stubborn weather contagious?*). The point is it’s frozen too, and you—yes, you—could look through the magnified masterpiece, ebb ekphrastic in a bathysphere moving down the Acheron, river-boat gawk and gaze at those rats down there nested up all winter. This isn’t Paul in Alberta’s sudden Faustian athletic prowess and prosperity, and this isn’t the ‘Peg’s praise of *Phantom Of The Paradise* anymore, this isn’t the prairies, pastoral sensibility, or anything in proxy; this is maritime reverse migration, where we all find work and meaning (*or did I get that backwards again, like history, or the ghost?*); the rats look comfy, domestic; you look at them, like them, but everything washes out disturbed as a car passes, perturbs the tired puddle’s surface, all twigs and odd ends, all the sticks bobbing on the ice make it too messy to make sense of, and you look where the rats were, where they looked comfy, but as the puddle settles nice again the ice might be cracking, dripping, and you look for comfy rats, and comfy rats look to have ran out for groceries, the laundry, on rat sabbatical; rat odyssey; at rat-hockey practice during absurd twilight hours for fire-sale prices, but was it a drip, or a shimmer, or something even thinner, like light looks through glass, shines through puddle through contrarian block of ice at the end of your block. I heard Paul Fraser smashed another record, even with those boxed shoulders.

Someone sends me letter-mail, but the moisture from the maw of my mailbox wears away the return address info from the envelope, like always. Lillith sends good tidings, and an apology for her cold shoulder. She crowns her i's with hearts. She writes too much, too maximal, too much to really look at right on. She says to me, "Ghost of Purrdition, I'm sorry I didn't look both ways like you told me. Come visit me, I'm not up for surgery for a few more days." They had to re-break her, something about how she fused together. She's on a list, or is it *in*? She's a part of the list in some unclear way. She tells me, "I plan to come back twice as hard, and bolted together now, I'm not likely to break. I will learn to tomahawk-stop, and hockey-stop, and pop my ass up too. No more t-stop." She will be fine. "I tried to call, but I guess I didn't catch your phantom area code when you gave me your digits. Not local, eh? Where'd you come from? Someone picked up but it was alien, not you at all. What's the deal? What's your secret codeahaha? I would've taken you for Freddy-bred and raised." But I would love to linger by her side as she amasses newfound steel strength like ice-goliath flexes sourer and stronger each day beneath the sun. "But for real, what's your real name? Who do you pretend to be when you're off the skates, huh? We look like a real pair of jackasses in the photo Dick Pounder took, inseparable :) <3." Heart? (*Oh my heart*). "Love from, Lillith."

Someone knocks on my door, but nothing comes in through the peephole as I gaze through it.

Your shoes are soaked a little from the wake awry in the wash of the car that's long since passed, your itching wet-wool sock the icing on your cake, and you can eat your pride too, and I'm sure the rats will gulp down the flood of Spring tidings as we all go garage sale galloping, interlopers in secondhand loafers, low and personal to better

gawk at each detail, talk to cute girls about the retro-skates with the high suede ankle cuffs, how they're good for stability, but to really make initiation "You'd have to bleed and buy new bearings, sweat your ass off and then some"; your woolen sweater tugs your belly's itching addition each time you twist or bend to examine some new yard-sale curio—glimmering trinkets exiled from inhospitable homes (and that strikes some submerged chord in your core)—your sweater keeps the cicatrix on its toes and far from settling as spring or worm mid-travel pump and squirm might, you keep it from ever coming down to that, even if the salty sweat sticks and stitch-rips every time it beads unto, around, and into your hysterical wound; your belly's bottom is chill, because your shoulders, stronger, broader, keep the woolen wind-shield from fitting like it did when you were younger, your shoulders, swollen, knotted beneath the strain of all the weight of the heavens above bearing down on you; but don't knock Spring quite yet, don't sweat it, you filthy gawking sweater you, just let it melt at its own pace, blow over like tissue blown snot right through. Stop over-thinking it; stop getting ahead of the buck, and instead, center yourself to plant your feet in for a firmer block; stop worrying about the stop sign snug up to its throat in snow—we all roll on through that one anyhow.

FABLES OF THE T.P.K

(THE NECROPOLITICS OF MELANCHOLY STORY with GARY GYGAX)

—or

GEAS

“I take in the lurking world like a scratched Leica, a security camera with duct tape on it,
thoughts dark as porter.”

—Mark Anthony Jarman, *Fables of the Deconstruction (The Bra Story with Jacques
Derrida)*.

“In context with other punishing spells like *chain lightning* and *disintegrate*, the *power word: take* spell might not appear terribly horrible or evil, and even its name radiates only those most innocuous implications. But take another look at the second line in the description which nonchalantly states that ‘[victims] cannot roll to save, nor can dispel magic undo its effects’! In other words, the spell utterly annihilates the victim's agency, past all hope of magical restoration—even that of the otherwise boundless *wish* spell.

‘Onomancy’ and ‘Victimancy’ variant spell-casting traditions are contentious among many players of the game, and should not be introduced into a campaign without serious consideration, and consultation with your players. In order to make the evil nature of this spell painfully clear, the DM should feel free to improvise, exaggerate, or embellish a particularly dry description.”

—Adan Calderon Nevis, *AD&D: DDG* (1979 Advanced Mailout Ed.,).

2019

1.

This rink shared a parking lot with a little brick elementary school that it looks like has been closed for some years now. H wasn't exactly sure what it meant to be back, but was too run off their feet to actually figure that out. Well, *back* wasn't entirely accurate either. On paper this was just like Summerfall, where they'd grown up—or, lived a long time, whether or not they'd ever approached something like maturity in those 20-some hellish years—but it didn't feel the same at all. Summerfall was a province over along the eastbound TransCan, and this shitty little hamlet had a hockey rink appended to its curling rink, unlike Summerfall's rink's lonely twin sheets. The rink canteen here was open year-round too, though H couldn't fathom how they afford to run it like that. H wasn't sure if they'd changed, or small towns had changed, or if this blight on the 22X was just not as nice as their own had been. H supposed it could have something to do with the accommodations here.

The house Yannick'd bought to put up the crew seemed to bother most of them, though few could agree on what was troubling or unnerving about it; for H, it was the sound, like the house wasn't sealed properly, like the worst of the wind was getting blown in one way through a ballast, but not pumping back out anywhere else, like the carbon dioxide levels were building up steadily like trash along the ocean floor. No one mentioned it to Yannick, because his temper was 'European,' and while H hadn't heard that description before this shoot and this crew, it draped itself over him accurately—he was literally from some shitty little Scando-country somewhere, a national treasure, internationally renowned for his brutalist graphic frank-realist cinema of the soul; H

wasn't sure if shooting reputedly un-simulated ten-minute rape-sequences and continually letting Sean Penn improvise whatever he wants for six months on end until there's enough of something to cut together into a film deserved renown, but this was a very well-paying job, and H had never experienced even a lick of shame in earning money.

The rink's lot's snow plowed up high and dirty like some gothic cathedral barbican, just waiting for you to slip on it and sully your palm, cold and dirty, dirty and cold, the hot sink and soap stinging like a divine smite to punish you for wearing sneakers outside in the winter. They were late getting in for the game, but it was a session-zero, so it probably wasn't going to be a big issue.

A tall guy in grease-tie-dye overalls with the name-patch *Colten* smoked while he tried to fix a stubborn pickup's tailgate, easing it up, but the lock never catching. The ash hung on for dear life as he mumbled pursed curses around the shape of the smoke dangling from his lips. He didn't notice H.

The shoot this week had been pretty chilly, but nothing life-changing. H hadn't had to teach themselves how to re-wire a lamp on the fly, or to stand in as an extra without notice. H worked diligently, if not sunk a little into the mire of their thoughts; since they'd come out, they'd been thinking about how nice it was to be away from, well, not the city, but from the people in it.

*

H hopped into the director's van with the blacked-out back windows, and winced at the roar of the sliding door latching into place. They pulled off their thin gloves, and piped hot air into their closed fists from their mouth, garlic back-draft warming their nostrils. Once the tingles came back to their touchers, they situated the Arri's 400' film-

magazine and the film canister within reach, and buried their phone deep in their back pocket to smother any unwanted notification illumination.

H hadn't ever played D&D proper until they'd moved to the city and met all their boring queer friends, which had pretty much swallowed all H's social energies and infringed on every boundary; they all had tragic coming-out stories, and were slighted 100 times daily, and it was for stuff like strangers not anticipating and preemptively accommodating their needs, when all it'd take was a bit of earnest communication to bridge that gap. H had been so quiet as a child, almost hadn't spoken at all until they were sixteen and joined musical theatre for the medieval-themed *Saturday Night Fever* knock-off production, *Friday Knight Fever*, a combination of cod-pieces and roller skates and an extended period of time where a drunken theater teacher bullied H into a voice, into volume and taking up space; none of this went over terribly well with their father, Howie, and H spent grades 11 and 12 crashing on friends' couches in the winter, and living in their old IH-Scout, showering at the school before class, living off the cafeteria meal-plan that the office-secretary hadn't realized wasn't paid for in-full at the start of the school-year.

H never shared trauma stories like this other than with their partner, and only sparingly with them, this *oh you poor thing* pout coming across her face, this relentless pity that city-queers treated as an emotional adhesive, that our greatest connections were rooted in suffering, in how and who we fucked.

In the total dark of the tinted van, they could find the film canister without any trouble, tap on it, its lid sounding the same way a peanut-brittle tin's lid did. They found the Arri magazine equally easily, but, now in the dark, they couldn't remember which

side the feed came from. They plowed their fingers gently along the cast-metal, finding first the coin-like tab to pop the lid, and second, the embossed F, for “FEED,” and set about loading the core into the light-proof belly of the magazine.

H didn't 'identify' with any of these 'citiots,' while the citiots 'identified' with countless things without ever grounding them in real practices, in real experiences; H was sure they themselves had an inner-world of some worth; it felt like a series of slim blueprint drawers in an old oak desk, and not like a vast warehouse with fluorescent overhead lighting, packed to the gills like the Indiana Jones movie boon of evil artifacts the government holds onto for safe-keeping.

These city-queers were relentlessly traumatized, and trying on new pronouns weekly, and constantly policing one another and others, and none of them could stand losing the pity-Olympics; whenever they quit a job or got fired for taking several sick days a week (several months in a row), they always had money from somewhere, a rich cis-het partner, parents who'd been paying their rent and didn't mind picking up the groceries too for a few months, until another unpaid internship or modeling opportunity reared its head, so eager to be snapped up by these glowing, conventionally attractive skinny white people who listed every slight on their grant-applications (because of course, they were all 'emerging multidisciplinary artists,' and a few of them 'genreless,' which H hadn't unraveled the meaning of yet), all of whom claimed some degree of transness or enby station but none of whom ever visibly performed that (and gobbled up offense any time their complex identity wasn't correctly inferred by some stranger) and all of whom were bi or pan but none of whom ever dated anyone other than some conventionally attractive cis-het partner.

H lowered the van's partition, let their eyes adjust to the gray prairie light stampeding in through the small pass-through. Their phone buzzed a few times, but they ignored it for now. They found the tongue of the film sticking out the end of the magazine where it was supposed to, and went about leading it through the white painted sketch describing the various movements necessary to load it to the camera's satisfaction; the Arri let you know when something was off, and three times too many this shoot today, its readout read: "LOOP ERROR." H only had a bit of experience with film, and even less with Super-16, but they could follow instructions well-enough, and they took over for the nervous Camera-Assistant, Gabe, his first union-gig getting the better of his nerves. H was a gopher, as in, "go for this, go for that," which on the average shoot, is an essential skill; flexibility went a long way when trying to hold back the real world long enough to stage your fake one. Yannick was continually kind to H, and used neutral pronouns to address them all the time, and hadn't made an awkward scene of asking about it all, getting the info from R in advance and internalizing it.

And the citiots were all sex-workers, or thinking about that line, but none of them were doing physical sex-work like dancing or hooking, and uploading pictures of your toes in various footwear twice-weekly to a Patreon where (overwhelmingly, straight cis) men paid you \$50 subscription fees monthly to write an occasional lengthy post about how things have been hard and it's the planets' movements' fault for that, but you really feel grateful for all the support and connections you make, and how you can't wait to go back to Bermuda again, and how we all really should just be real and take it one day at a time; H had actually been paid for sex when they went through school and their inheritance had dried up, and had been hurt, and had had photos taken of them by ex-

partners without their permission that were eventually sent to some of the remaining family members they still had connections to, but H never chimed in on these things, because H didn't want to win the pity-Olympics, or compete in the first place.

H fussed with the recalcitrant loop, a little too long for the Arri to be happy, pressing various nobbs and nipples until the desired one depressed, and H cranked the one sprocket independent of the rest of the collocated mechanisms, shortening the loop a lickle when you wound it one way, and bloating it with an opposite twirl.

H dressed kind of like a tomboy for work usually, tucked shirts into jeans, carabiner jangling too-many keys and a micro-hex key set for when they needed to swap the tripod-head out for a slider or a dolly shot, nice heavy steel-toed boots, a ballcap to keep the sun out of their eyes, and their hair up and out of the way. But H wasn't allowed to dress comfortably around the citiots because it wasn't ironic enough, thrifted or new-and-distressed enough to fit the fast-fashion normcore look their entire social circle wore. H couldn't tell the difference between how they dressed, and how the rest dressed, other than H repeated outfits, and didn't have stupid crayon-looking 'ignorant-style' tattoos in pastel hues. H felt continually under surveillance anytime they went out with the gang, and even worse when everyone came over to them and R's place for D&D or to get ready before going out dancing.

The loop caught one sprocket's tooth as it shrunk, and caught, the rebellious long tongue relented, subsumed by the rhythm of the overriding mechanism.

H tried to stay home sometimes, or to go cultivate their own circle now and then, but R was intensely jealous, and took deep offense to them not wanting to spend every minute together; H wasn't sure when the last time they'd even developed any film or

made prints was, and hadn't even unpacked the enlarger since their last move a few months ago. When H showered, R loudly played podcasts, or called friends, allergic to a bit of quiet.

H laboured to swing open the sticky van door again, thinking that they might have to bring a can of WD40 out for the shoot tomorrow, and here was Yannick, his quack-grass jet-black hair flickering in the wind.

When H didn't have time to shave, the city-queers instantly fell out of they-them she/femme-ing them, and most didn't even realize they were doing it until R blew up on them, and then most of the citiots would hold a grudge at H even though they were the ones who'd been wrong in the first place, until someone else got cancelled or whatever, for some indeterminate amount of time (the prettier, wealthier, and more talented you were, the shorter it took for someone else whose popularity held sway over the community to determine transformative-justice had been truly enacted, and to get invited back into the clique with open arms); H hated R speaking up on behalf of them, and used standard she/her pronouns at work without everyone having to go around in a circle listing their astrological sign and pronouns; union conduct guidelines and a loud-enough lipstick told people H was she/her, and H was fine with that pragmatic fib on set; professionalism was important to H, and H wished the queer-community had some sort of professional guidelines imposed on it, that you could fire annoying immature people who spent the whole day on their phones complaining and making everything about themselves.

"We good to go?" Yannick's eyebrows peeked out just above his cat-eye sunnies.

H replied with a quick thumbs up with from their free hand, while their teeth pulled a glove across the other.

But with D&D, H could stand the city-queers as well as the city-normies (who seemed generally more accepting and insightful than the supposedly-woke citiots), because all of a sudden they knew they were affected on purpose—leaning cane-hard on ‘aesthetics’ and busted old ‘problematic’ fantasy tropes (even though they just turned all of it into horny queer humour), this strange demanding entitled (and almost exclusively white) crowd became somehow tolerable; maybe it was that if the dice deemed so, you lost your money, you lost your Vorpal sword when pretending it was some giant dildo to try and seduce the ancient bronze dragon, or you lost your goddamn life; a game with real, lasting consequences.

The shoot resumed, the Arri bleating no protest for the rest of the day.

H knew this hatred was poison to their heart, but their partner talking down at them re:that just solidified their convictions, the lecture being the greatest tool of ossification H’d ever encountered in their thirty years on this earth; “ten to forty,” R had joked after birthday-sex, and since then, outside of D&D, H hadn’t talked so much; they felt like they were coming down from fifteen years of mania, and like shutting up altogether was the only way to keep from shouting.

*

H bought a lot of the books when they were younger, if only to check out the sick illustrations. The trouble with wanting to play a nerdy game wasn’t that it was nerdy, but that you’d need enough friends you could stand to get together with weekly, and you’d need a basement or somewhere you could hang out and maybe smoke and drink a little

without getting harassed, and the table had to be as big as H's own childhood bedroom in the double-wide (which, split between H and their two brothers, didn't add up to much) just to accommodate the snacks and soda and the books and the dice and the miniatures. But really, the problem boiled down to friends. H's friends were wary of anything remotely resembling the occult, some latent Christian behavioural programming hanging over all the farm-kids, even those who'd never set their muddy rubber boots in church.

H didn't think they'd have much downtime on this shoot, based on the terrible stories they'd heard about Yannick's unending shoots, running cameras 72-hours straight until the computers gulped footage and shat out render-error notifications, thanksgiving-full with sheer nonsense; slow-cinema, an art form beyond one's appreciation? Or an elaborate prank on everyone who's worried about seeming cultured? Hard to tell some days. The crew were safe from that shit as long as they stuck to actual film, but who knows if Yannick would honor that the whole way thru. H hit The City in the southeast quick to grab some McDonalds, and a set of the standard-array 7 D&D dice.

In line at the game-shop, close to close, crew-cut buddy in front of H, 5:45 on a Friday night, holding hostage the kind clerk with the Neckbeard, "You seen those videos of Bruce Lee, right? Where they put lightsabers in his hands? I hate that shit." Buddy's turned the till-monitor out to himself and clicked through YouTube suggestions, and then moments later, "You know it's really irresponsible of them to even think about crossing streams in front of a building, like, they could kill people, like I'm not saying anything about their gender, just their qualifications to be Ghostbusters in the first place."

The clerk tries to steer it somewhere better. "I'm in the minority, I know, but I liked it."

And Buddy, “Well I hate what they did to Thor, they basically castrated him in it. He’s good in stuff like Cabin in the Woods, though.”

The clerk, sensing an opening, rebuttals: “Well same role, right? Dumb eye candy.”

Buddy taking some irrational level of offense, “Well that’s not a fair appraisal, he was affected by drugs there, yano?! Though he was studying *sociology* before the trip, so maybe you’re onto something, am I right?” Buddy tries to lean across the counter to slap clerk on the arm, but Neckbeard clerk is leaned back on his stepstool as far as he can be without making it obvious, and so buddy turns the swing into some sort of elaborate hand-talking gesture, and the nice old woman who H assumes owns the shop comes out to rescue H in line, starts ringing H up on the other till, and looks just *ill* about buddy, who must come here all the time to complain.

Now buddy is going on about Don Cherry, about how *he didn’t mean nothing, he didn’t mean what the liberal media are twisting his words to mean*, and buddy’s not even convinced the remarks about eating seal were about Newfies, and he should know, ‘cause his buddy’s from out that way, Moncton or somewhere like that.

“\$5.25,” the old-lady says to H, her rose pussy-bow standing out like a distress beacon, like a *please don’t leave us with this asshole, we work here, we can’t say anything back to him*, and H is wondering how in the world a woman with this old-world elegance who’s gotta be in her sixties and still makes time to beat her face for her day-to-day job, working at that age and prettied up and good at the whole lot of it, H wonders how she ever ended up in a store full of graphically nude young looking discounted Japanese loli dolls, and as collectible as they are poseable (which is to say, not very) My

Little Pony figures; how did this austere beacon of poise and professionalism get stuck lighthouse-still in front of the Babel-boundless wall of ‘Magic: The Gathering’ singles, individually sleeved and on display in great big sheets long and heavy as blackout curtains; how did she come to stand bookended by such a polite young Neckbeard praying to his HALO 3 lanyard like it’s a rosary, and this fucking boring crewcut 40-something asshole with nothing better to do than commit emotional terrorism fifteen minutes to close on a Friday night, how did she get stranded in between two holographic mutavaults with their lime green \$100 tags stuck on their sleeve slots proud as swastikas?

*

H finished their menthol, and put it out in the trench of the snow tire on the rental. The government stopped selling these a few years ago, but the crew found cartons on cartons of them on black plastic Princess-Auto shelving in the basement of the house, back when the crew piled in to the house and rushed to dibs on rooms like they were all claiming dominion on best bunks at summer camp. H spritzed their mouth to keep R from nagging at them for starting up again, plunged their hand into my pocket to palm the seven loose dice with their thin glove, too thin for the unforgiving prairie cold, but just thin enough to feel all those alien angles and the language of each of those embossed values on the dice face. H loved these strange shapes folded together to make these little agents of fate. H thought about how much they loved tactile things, like cigarettes between the fingers, and how it all started on the farm. That glimmer that garden soil’s minerals leave on your fingers like fairy cum. Clichés aside, connecting with the earth and gardening and farming is good for you, work is good for you, and sometimes you *are* indeed an inflected expression of the circumstances you grew up in, and not your own

complete maker. Yeah, H liked that thought. The snow is crunchy, but thin on top of ice, so H took care to not wipe out and anger their sciatica. The front rink door, locked against my tug, my thin glove cold and frustrating. H checked their phone for texts, and followed R's instructions, to come in through the side-door through the canteen's kitchen.

H didn't understand exactly why Yannick was making them all meet here to play D&D twice-weekly in the evenings, but he was paying them all their hourly to do it, so no one complained. H was surprisingly kind of excited to play this again, with real people, they guessed, instead of R's friend-group in Vancouver; no more Serenity trying to bring her dog training bullshit in by polymorphing every bad guy into a three-legged King Shepherd, no more Velma complaining about how guns would do more than a d8 damage and she should know because she read that *Guns, Germs and Steel* book in her intro to Sociology course a few years ago—and no, it didn't matter, Emily, whether she passed the course or not.

*

You sit down in the uncomfortable blue chair, a little too low for the conference room table. An old-boy George R.R. Martin lookalike with a sweat stained flannel shirt and functional suspenders greets you brusquely with a grunt, passing you a completed character sheet and then returning to his seat at the head of the table; opposite him, Yannick sits, cross-legged and inscrutable in lamb's wool slippers, and your colleagues and one stranger line the rest of the lengthwise seats at the ugly particle-board conference room table. You start to speak to the farmer as you wrestle off your fat goose-down jacket, loosen your scarf noose: "Oh, could I get a fresh sheet? I was thinking I could play something that was more about high DPS, but also earned some spellcasting and

multiclassed as we moved along, and it could be this way of introducing something in their genealogy or whatever, and,” and you lose steam as you notice everyone else at the table eyeing you gravely, as though you’d committed some egregious sin in speaking at all, and you stand up just enough to tug loose the caught bit of goose-down jacket still under your bum. The name on the character-sheet disarms you, Hauweetzür Sorin, because it’s just like your dead father’s name. The farmer continues with whatever ambling world-building intro he was delivering before you so rudely interrupted.

The farmer sniffs the dry room’s Pine-sol scent in through his swollen turnip nose, his alcoholic blush like a slow-moving Napoleonic army in Russian winter, trying to march right off his face and swallow the whole room. You feel bad for recognizing those symptoms of alcoholism, and you feel worse for judging him based on them, but you also feel like some trap-door has given out beneath you. The farmer clears his throat and inhales strongly once again, and looks to you:

Roll a D6. On a roll of 5-6, advance to section 1A. On roll of 1-4, advance to section 1B. You may choose to add or subtract your Dexterity-Modifier (+1) to/from the result. You cannot consult the results in advance; re-rolling and page-thumbing is punishable by cosmic law.

1A: Farmer carefully closes the coil-bound book he’s reading from, bound too close to the edge and on the verge of destruction, its black and white photocopies pages worn treacherously thin at each and every coil. He glides his one hand across the cover while letting his other sit on it, as if to smooth a top-sheet sheet, or spread a rolled blue-print against its inherent curl. You’re struck in the eye faster than you can account for the farmer’s anger, his having thrown this book like some catatonic bat at you, and he booms:

“you shall shut the fuck up when I explain the encounter, and the module we are running.” You palm your throbbing eye while he continues.

[Go to resolution, and mark “eyepatch” in your character-sheet’s manifest.]

1B. Yannick speaks up on your behalf. He relays that you’re very sorry for arriving late, and were completing an errand specifically for him, and that if the farmer, “Mister Lorne,” has a problem with that, he can take it up with payroll. You realize the farmer must be getting paid a wage to run the game, just as you’re being paid your hourly to play.

[Go to resolution, and mark “Yannick favour” in your character-sheet’s manifest.]

Resolution: “For everyone who heard this already, I apologize, but I’ll keep this brief. This is a high lethality campaign. There are consequences for your decisions. You leave the milk-maid unattended to go spy on the mayor, she gets killed by Goblins when they raid in the middle of the night. You try to seduce the milk-maid and spend the night with her, her father tries to kill you. You fight back against the father, you lose the milk-maid’s trust. You don’t fight back against the father, he kills you. We are running 5e rules for you idiots, but I am running an old module that I’ve ran conversion on the stats for. Don’t get sentimental, because you’re going to be rolling new characters all the time as you die off. You play smart, you might win. You treat this like a game, and you’re going to regret it. If any battle results in a T P K, we end the campaign altogether, as no character lives to connect the threads. Cowardice and fleeing are options, though when abused, will be curbed.” No one in the room looks to you, or really, anywhere other than their sheets and their shoes, as he finishes his louder-than-necessary speech, withdrawing his clammy palms to his belly, and orphaning wet specters onto the conference table, shiny in the

warbling fluorescent overhead lights' glare. "I expect you to understand the mechanics of the game, to make timely decisions, and to know your basic modifiers off-hand so that when I drop an anvil on the coyote, you can tell me whether or not it gets crushed; if you take too long, I take the opportunity for saves away, because that's how the real world works. And now that we are caught up: welcome to the Dominion of Forgetfulness."

*

H spent the time it took to defrost the inside of the rentals' window reviewing their uncanny character sheet. They'd been assigned some obscure class, and the farmer had pulled them aside after they'd all finished braining goblins in the tavern, handing them photocopied pages explaining exactly how to play this class, first in official RAW (rules-as-written), then errata with RAI (rules-as-intended), and then the final few pages messily written in what must've passed for cursive in grade-school forty years ago, explaining his justifications for the conversions for how he fit things into the 5e action-economy, and some notes on how he'd played this exact class in his favourite campaign, signed with a little smiley face with a curlicue perm. He hadn't apologized for his brusque introduction, but he seemed to intone that H playing this class would mean a lot to him, and help the party overall. In fact, the Grip had been eviscerated, and the Best-Boy was being choked with Grip's intestines and making death-saving throws before H, or, Hauweetzür Sorin rather, had intervened, finding 'the right place at the right time' with a class feature they'd never heard of before. A luck-based class seemed like it could be a bad time, but the dice hadn't punished them tonight, and it was kind of exciting to have the real-world rolls have such far-reaching meta-gaming consequences, in a way that it

didn't seem to for the rest of the "I swing my sword, and I do 8 damage plus 2, in bludgeoning force" normies.

H had felt a bit dispossessed when they'd been given the sheet, but the Grip must feel even worse, talking all week about how his race-traitor Hobgoblin Paladin was going to break the game, writing pages and pages of cliché backstory on his phone all through lunch, stuffing his mouth with endless carrots until he choked and vomited orange slurry across the folding table to everyone's wordless shock, then cannon-ball laughter. In-game gutted, and then guts pulled apart by a fiend with hopes to use said guts to kill another person. And he had to reroll a character on his own time now, and get prior-approval before he could bring it to the table next Wednesday night. H supposed that maybe they were spared the discomfort of having to lose something they'd spent so much time on, and that they could play a bit more freely with nothing to lose. "Life isn't like that for most of us, except those city queers," H thought.

It was scary to think of how quickly they'd forgotten about the film-shoot while daydreaming of the game, but play was a rare indulgence for them, and they cherished it whenever the opportunity presented itself.

R rode back to the modular house with Yannick, hoping to get ahead of the game by picking his brain on what exactly "the man without qualities' inner-psychic landscape epiphany" would look like, and if a leaning decrepit barn fit that, or if they were looking more for an annihilating boundless field and gloomy sky for that. R did a little bit of everything, but she really excelled in location-scouting and working in the camera department; finding things that you could make look just like other things, denuding their context and making the skin of the thing fit the director's grand-vision. R and H were

sharing a room in the modular home, but separate beds like they were siblings. H's dog slept just below the pillows on their bed tonight, but would sleep with R when H was restless.

R always stayed up late, thinking out loud about locations, about lenses and crop-ratios, phone-glow making her look sick and tracing her double-chin with LED white light while she used it for complex math to make sure we could punch in far enough later without losing fidelity if the director needed us to, using her two thumbs to zoom around a spreadsheet with precision to budget time to things. H just gave their dog a belly-rub until R had finally talked themselves to sleep, often taking the still bright phone from R's clutch and plugging it in for them, and then sneaking to the kitchen for one last quick glass of water. H never tried to interrupt or contribute when R was going on, because they either didn't notice, or chose to ignore all of it. "I really am losing my voice," H thought (and wouldn't dare whisper out loud), and wondered if it was such a bad thing to be quiet.

H's grandfather, Howie Sr. hadn't talked much apparently, though he'd killed himself on their second-birthday, and this was all just stuff they'd heard from aunts and uncles after Howie'd died too. H worried that their own recent quiet was shrinking them in a similar way, locking those few blueprint-drawers they had and reducing them to a mere piece of furniture with a leather-padded top to spread out others' ideas across. Howie Sr. hadn't talked to anyone the last five years he was alive, he'd just come in and grunt with pleasure or disappointment at the fair meal his poor wife'd managed to pull together from often putrefying root veggies, and then go and read in his rocking chair until he went to bed. He was always up later than everyone in the house, and out before anyone else woke up. Thirteen kids. H wasn't sure Howie had even met or remembered

some of his own older siblings, moved out by the time he was grown up enough to start filing memories in his brain. Howie Sr. started speaking again two weeks before he passed away, long enough to tell Howie's wife—Hs' Mother—how much he loved her, using it as a weapon in a way to express how he didn't think his son deserved her, but the Mother, Wendy, ever the Saint, didn't take it that way. First words in five-years, to let the wife of your least-favourite most-of-beaten son know that you think she's some celestial being casting radiant light across this terrible black prairie. And then he killed himself, on H's second birthday, and there was no consensus on if he knew that he was doing that on H's second birthday, but there was assurance it wasn't his first attempt, just his most successful. H was never sure if they should feel less sad about all of this, a rational voice in the back of their head saying "you never really met the man," but a realer, feeling voice in the front whispering "he hurt your dad, and that hurt came to you too."

H hated having thoughts that made them feel like a cliché in someone else's story, and so they spent the last minute of the necessary post-game parking-lot defrost developing a character voice for Hauweetzür Sorin, wondering what kinda name that was, and if they had to play it one gender or another. The windows thawed enough now, they fumbled with the dials until they found something that turned on the lowbeams, and made two sets of tracks not long for the world in the snow, scraped stucco heaven coming down on them something terrible tonight.

Once they got back to the house, they sat in the rental for a while, looking through the farmer's notes with the overhead light toggled on. H was bothered that they hadn't stood up for themselves when the farmer acted like that at the game, but they were desperate to play nice for Yannick, and they would put up with a hell of a lot worse for a

wage; professionalism always simplified these kinds of feelings of injustice. *30-foot teleportation racial-casting at third level. Doesn't count as a spell, but requires a bonus-action or reaction. Resets daily at dawn.* They could work with that, if they lived long enough to level that was. All the lights were off in the house already, and they checked their phone to find a text from R:

“walked the pup already.

wake me when you get in, plz

<3”

H got out of the car, and struggled with the fob to get the doors locked; the battery was low in it, or it was too cold out, or maybe it was the angle they held the fob aloft, but whatever it was, it was frustrating beyond all hell. The door didn't have a keyhole, just a keypad and the fob, and the rental-place didn't have any clue what the code was supposed to be. H knew they were being paranoid, locking the door to a car in a parking lot of a house with full security measures, a bright yard-light visiblizing a great halo glob of the snow coming down, a car they didn't even own, but H knew how assholes would come knock over a house once, wait for insurance to replace everything, and then come back again, sometimes with guns, take what they want, hurt whoever they wanted, and then set fires to cover their tracks. It was never anyone from within the rural community itself, it was always some junkies or other specialized kinds of assholes from the city, bored out of their minds and looking to terrorize a rural family for kicks.

H looked at their breath taking form then dissipating in the cold, like the old 20s ectoplasm from the séances rich people would pay for. It felt magical. It helped ground

them in their body. They looked at that conveyor of snow coming down in the view of the yard-light, at the long shadows it cast from all the cars.

The house Yannick had set them all up in was a model home, something come in advance of an anticipated golf-community, to eventually be swallowed up by the urban-sprawl of the city. The road off the main highway was gravel, but from that the tarmac came down a quarter mile lane shouldered in by juvenile trees, and then the big gaudy mansion looking thing emerged, one house in a paved cul-de-sac that could have held six or seven. It didn't quite look right out here, but once the city caught up, it would probably be worth millions. It wasn't ugly, per se, but it wasn't right for out here, and without identical ugly siblings there to bully by majority, it really did disgust the eye and mind alike.

Crawling into bed, R and the dog didn't stir from their twin, divided by a small end-table with the hypersensitive touch-lamp; you could look at it too long and it'd turn on, which, H laughed to themselves, was kind of how R operated too. H decided to leave their socks on, having kicked the sheets off the last few nights and waking up with blue toes. Lowering themselves carefully into bed to spare their back distress, they noticed an image of pure light trundle across the room, about five feet up, like a pinhole camera; heavy curtains that let through just a sliver of light work like a projector, inverting the outside world's image and casting it onto a surface. H let their hand climb the headboard, and as the streaking car moved past, the light crossed their hand, and they felt a tingle; psychosomatic, but satisfying, another feeling of "being in my body, being here, my body and me working together."

H rolled carefully out of bed and peered out to see which way the car had gone, but couldn't see any output anywhere in the total black.

H had a dark, dreamless sleep, and woke with the sheets still on the bed, their back loose and limber, and the Artemis on the pillows, grooming her genitals close enough to splash a little spit onto H's eyelashes. R was still asleep, snoring, her hand curled up and still sitting between her breasts, squeezing for the phone H plugged in the night before.

2.

It hadn't taken long for spent McDonald's bags to overrun the rental's passenger seat floor-mat. The dash so dirty you swore it was growing potatoes. R picked up a crappy handheld squeegee from Princess, mad H had forgotten a full root-beer in the cup-holder which had in turn froze up the whole interior windshield. The small-gripped gadget was surprisingly helpful, with a hard plastic scraping edge, and firm enough rubber to zamboni all the free moisture to the corners of the windshield while you blasted defrost with hopes you had enough gas to get all the way into town.

Since this squeegee came in with such startling utility, H had been checking out the flyers for Princess, Crappy Tire, Home Hardware, and wherever else for upcoming deals again, a lapsed ritual they learned living with their Grand-dad on Wendy's side when they got kicked out now and then in high school. To H, newsprint was good for the skin, not so crisp and sharp as printer sheets, but pulpier, more giving. They tore out a few ads from each flyer, but never made the leap to purchasing anything. H had been hoping to really save, pay off their last few outstanding debts, and then start looking into property.

*

As winter drew everyone further into its terrible gut, the crew was leaner now than before as stragglers quit, and lovesick suckers fled to lovers they hadn't realized they'd be gone from indefinitely; "still too many of us" H reckoned, too many P.A.'s standing around waiting to be told what to do instead of just knowing. Every morning, a few opting to ride to locations with H never had radio on, and they had permission to eat breakfast on the way in the rig; R, type-A all the way, would vacuum and scrub and scrape pills and spit-shine rims and pull out every stop on this rig, if made it back to Hertz in one piece, that was. The shoot stretched on, but all H could think was *steady wage; no time to squander it; good deal*. Yannick was never known as an easy director to work for, but it wasn't the job that was difficult for anyone on the crew, but rather, the ennui that comes from living in the middle of nowhere without much in the way of internet, no quick trot in sweatpants and slippers to the Sev' on the corner.

*

CAIRN OF UNDYING INSULT

D/44/OO/?/D

CLOSED SET

LOW BELOW ZERO, LIGHT FLURRIES: DRESS APPROPRIATELY

HIGH FOUR DEGREES CELSIUS: DRESS APPROPRIATELY.

CREW CALL: 6AM

SHOOTING CALL: 7:15AM (7:30 SUNRISE)

MEAL: 11:30AM

SHOOTING CALL: 12:30PM

EST. WRAP: 4:00PM

TALENT:

1. LVC CALL: 5:30AM (MAKEUP).
2. L-F. LORNE. CALL: 12:15PM.

CREW:

1. Y.D. CALL: 4:45AM.
2. R. SAENZ. DOP. CALL: 4:45AM.
3. N. NOOK. AD. CALL: 5:00AM.
4. N. TREGILLUS. 1AC. CALL: 5:00AM.
5. H. WELCH. MISC. CALL: 4:45AM.

MAP ATTACHED REAR.

*

H fell suspiciously well into rural hermit routine once the snow started sticking to the ground, devouring some harlequin novels left in the nightstand by the realtor when they staged the home last, four or five years ago according to Yannick. In the collection there were a few choose-your-own-adventure books, one they recognized by R.L.STINE, and another called *Deathtrap Dungeon*, by Ian Livingstone. H's mum had bought them lots of Stine at the Scholastic Book Fair, and they'd gotten in trouble from homeroom teacher for getting too impressive an order, embarrassing the other kids in class. H hadn't loved reading unless there was a free personal pan pizza waiting for them at the end of the book. But they'd liked impressing their Mum.

H penciled their way through the Livingstone in an afternoon, rolling great opening stats, only getting turned around once or twice, and never cheating. H left it on

the nightstand with the clouded water glass that they refused to wash proper, giving R a migraine over the tedious argument that water isn't dirty, and H ain't dirty, so the cup didn't need water in it unless H was going to drink that water. R's argument that *water doesn't do what soap does* didn't float in Harlanne's opinion. R knew better than to push it, or to push things from that angle, but she picked up the choose-your-own-adventure book H'd left on the nightstand, and all Sunday night she sat there with various fingers plumbing separate paths into pages, trying to build herself a several-move rewind. The book was the first thing H'd ever seen get her to put her phone down for more than a few minutes. The second day in, she Googled a map for the dungeon, made it to the exit, and got electrocuted for not picking up the necessary escape jewels along the way. Amateur mistake.

"I didn't grow up a boy, so I didn't develop some latent gamer-sense." R doesn't look up long enough to process the indignity of such a sentence, the way H was expected to grow *around* a sentence like that, have it permanently in the middle of the thing that was "*us*."

H suspected R loosed these barbs unconsciously, but deliberately put herself into the best position to enable the faux-innocuous venom strikes. H loved R about twenty percent of the time, though H's dog Artemis truly adores R in a ride or die way. That R would stand against H at all endears some probably *toxic* trust, that she doesn't treat H like a fragile ship in a bottle, but what wears on H most is the curious position of both being *a thing* R can queerer-than-thou woke-brag about, and *a person* she can invoke poisonous gendered peripheral visions at. Some days it feels like their whole relationship is a merely re-skinned hetero arrangement, the cis-het wolf in grandma's clothing, having

a shouting match with its partner outside the Walmart SuperCenter in the middle of the day. The ease with which R constantly vowed to respect who H was—who H hated having to claim, to *out* herself just to exist—all while antagonizing the way H'd grown up, it guaranteed that once Artemis has grown old and died, H would dispose of R at the earliest convenience. “But then,” H thought, “I'd have no support network, and who knows how much pull she has to squeeze me out of union jobs too.” But plenty of time to scheme yet, water dribbling down their chin from their last gulp of the night before they rolled over and away from the lamplight, embarrassed on R's behalf that R's cheating fingers are trying to hold so many former page options open at once that H knew she'd never find her way back to the one she wanted anyhow. Without a voice, the way it was getting to always be, thinking hard at R as if that would get the message across: “Just go to the beginning, reroll your stats until they're satisfactory, and go a page at a time you idiot.”

“I think Artemis needs the light off pretty soon, whenever you're ready to pause your progress over there.”

“Uh huh,” automated response.

The closed closet door is out of H's line of sight when they sleep on this side, and gooseflesh riots along their arms and neck, something about it bothering them, that they can't see what's coming. A prod from a no.2 pencil, right in the tit-pit. H rolled over, boiling with rancor. “What?”

R's one hand still disappearing into the book, the other twirling the pencil like a cocksure drummer. “Hey, hey Harley, do I need to drop into the pit to find the sapphire? Or will that just kill me?”

*

“You roll to save.” You roll to save. A 19, +3.

“I got a 22 with my modifier.”

“Well this spell you have to roll under your number actually, so you fail.”

“Since when?”

“In the time you’ve taken to argue with me the second kobold has rushed up behind you and,” the telltale roll rattle, “he crits on you for,” that knitted brow math, “you drop down, and you’ll make death saving throws if they don’t desecrate your body before we get to you in the initiative order.”

You look to Yannick, but he’s looking closely at his character sheet, pencil horizontal, inching lower, framing whatever solution he’s looking for, how he’s going to get you out of this one.

Roll a D6. On a result of 5-6, advance to section 3B. On roll of 1-4, advance to section 3A. Add or subtract your Charisma-Modifier (-1) to the result. You cannot consult the results in advance.

3A. Yannick doesn’t look up from his sheet, engrossed with some doodle he’s manically cutting in to his sheet with his stressed #2 pencil-tip.

[Go to resolution, and mark “Yannick distance” in your character-sheet’s manifest.]

3B. Yannick pushes himself up on his armrests, crosses his legs onto the seat, and, without looking up tells Larry “I deferred initiative earlier, so I’ll pop back in here, run over to Harley, and pour the potion of revenant’s brow-sweat in their mouth.”

Larry rolls some dice behind his screen, “sure, you do that. You save her,” misgenders you, clatters more dice, “but there are complications. I’ll have to do some math to determine those.”

[Go to resolution, and mark “Yannick favour” and “Complication” in your character-sheet’s manifest. If you already have “Yannick favour” in your manifest instead cross it off, mark “Yannick penalty,” do not add “Complication,” and proceed to 3C instead of resolution].

3C. Larry flips aggressively through some binders, and you can see from the edge of the DM-screen that he’s dragging his finger along tables, looking for a desired result. “I’m sorry, but you are actually encumbered between your armor and your inventory, so you can’t make it there in one turn. The Kobold lancer kicks his lance into Harley’s jugular, and the arterial spray blinds everyone within 15 feet.” Larry smiles hard, flips his binder shut, looks back up. “Yannick, you’re not there, so, no blood on you.”

[Proceed to resolution.]

Resolution: “We’re going to end our session here today.” Larry forces his many binders into several tired looking reusable grocer bags. No one looks at you, not even Grip, who’s been reveling in your discomfort this whole shoot since you shot him down.

*

When Larry killed one of the crew, the routine was always the same. First he lectures them, on learning how to play the game properly, as though he’s mad at them for dying. “It ain’t never been my fault you got yourselves killed, and you know it.” Grip was on his fifth character, and on Reddit most nights trying to research advanced tactics for survival. Larry’s scorn caramelized into something they’d all grown suspicious of in the

last few months, though, each time someone stayed behind to roll a new character, no one with the balls to quit. Usually Larry pulled however many of the crew died that session aside, told them “this is a learning experience. When the world goes to shit, this practice being brave now is going to pay off. Bravery in the game is practice for bravery in the world” Larry would hand out three d6 to each of the dead, this time small ivory ones with horseshoes on them to H—which admittedly rolled really well—and they all started over, rolling attributes out, as low as 3, which meant severe penalties to anything you tried to do; the minimum stat to add no bane or boon to your rolls was a 10 of a possible 20; most DMs let you roll 5 d6 for each stat, and keep the highest three values to ensure you don’t get stuck completely useless in saves in any particular category; Larry wasn’t most DMs.

Larry always acted as though he didn’t just kill 75 percent of the party for failing to kiss a centaur’s ass hard enough when bartering with it for oat rations, giving them disadvantage on their rolls from acting out of desperation (because, of course through no fault of Larry’s antagonistic world-building, plagues, and hatred of them, the adventuring party is starving).

Larry acted like all this was a clear-cut, don’t cry wolf moral lesson. The trouble was, the stakes were relevant. If the crew suffered a ‘Total Party Kill,’ Larry claimed he’d rescind his permission for us to shoot in those back acres of his, and all of a sudden none of no one would be getting paid to play this stressful, impossible game, and it’d bungle the whole film production because Yannick ‘needed to find *it*’ on the Forde-Lorne property, though, none of us understood just what *it* was.

R hadn’t believed Larry when he proposed the D&D demand at first, which had offended him. Yannick agreed to it all over the phone, and Larry happily signed the

boiler-plate location release with the tiny “crew must play D&D weekly with me” additional clause, faxed a copy back, bundles of unopened mail and an old water cup both sitting on top of the decrepit fax machine transmitting the legal agreement across great distance in no time; kind of a magical thing to think of, though now a true headache.

Just one of the party needed to make it out alive each game to continue, live long enough to recruit new allies and continue the quest against the BBEG (big bad evil guy); they still had no bearing on who or what was pulling the strings that put the realm in peril, nearly a full year into the campaign.

Sometimes Yannick missed a game to go field calls from investors and media folks, and in turn, Larry—no, bandits that would’ve been there anyhow, not sweet innocent Larry—killed Yannick’s character in his sleep. Yannick seemed to be the only player the game wasn’t getting to. The shoot was cresting the butte of intolerable at this point because the crew were all cross with one another for their roll and roleplay failures from each night prior. Yannick stopped letting any of the crew watch the rushes a week ago, drawing inward and quiet (but nothing you wouldn’t expect from an art-house cinema weirdo), and the production’s Lead was draping on enough weight that he doesn’t resemble the stricken, edenic martyr that Yannick knew embodied the film’s message, whatever that was at the time—maybe *that was it?*

*

Just like the film stock, in the cold the crew’s patience curled to brittleness. The shoot was beginning to wear on H for what they felt was a handful of clear reasons. First, and most obvious, the hours. Second, being killed over and over by the petulant Farmer Fucker had eroded all of the foundational fun out from underneath the compulsory D&D

sessions. Third, and H couldn't believe they were thinking this, was that they missed the city. The anchor of H's cynicism toward general debility, inability, lack of work ethic and practical skills, constant trans auto-infantilization, that anchor had always been rooted in an unchecked vision of the rural carving out room in you in advance for all the hurt the world would bring to bear—the rural was the grounding reality. That if you just grew up a little more lonely, and had to work from the age when you were able to, you'd get used to the reality that it's hard to be a person, and that you weren't going to ever win; H didn't want anyone to have to *lose* at all, but the world wasn't fair.

Being stuck with a different subclass of citiots in this awkward, faux-suburban simulacrum had scuffed the reflection off that rural utopian fib H had long told himself though, and they wondered, no more than the slow drip of a leaking tap, but enough, if they didn't feel *sad* for those other folks who took losing personally, and not just angry at them; Serenity taking a month off work because someone she gave dog lessons to told her she smelled like shit and should wear deodorant, ridiculous. Velma quitting her job in protest the bus boys won't stop asking her on dates, then living off her parents money another six months? Well, part of it was almost noble. Scuff scuff. It felt bad to learn the world that didn't care, that wasn't integrated, the middle of nowhere, *outside*, was maybe as bad as the barbed world with the rich idiot kids who didn't treat anyone very well; all bad. Scuff scuff.

*

H had to come home one day to get Yannick's sketch-book over lunch, the director with a migraine and needing some word of inspiration from his past-self to get through the complex dolly shot that rolled along the dale's natural curve, trying to not

rocket down the decline, and to keep the camera level as its mount should tilt along the track too. They'd wasted a few thousand feet of film already.

They ran to the house, locked the door, set a 15-minute timer on their smart-watch, and rushed to the bedroom without taking off their boots. They flopped on R's bed and snaked their hand down their pants, touching themselves in true privacy for the first time in almost a year. They didn't watch porn, or think of anything other than their own body. Long since they'd actively been on HRT, since they'd been even able to afford it, cumming had come back into the realm of true possibility, and H wasn't sure they could live without that.

Artemis did not stir on H's pillow, though H knew that Artemis was embarrassed by this juvenile behaviour, and was likely feigning sleep to avoid the embarrassing confrontation this would come to. Artemis was a good creature to share space with.

H kicked off their right boot first as they realized they were really mucking up R's sheets, and flung their left one without care at the closet door. The door opened just an inch, but that was enough. As H came, they noticed the light seeping from the gash that was the closet's gap. H pulled their pants completely off, ran to the bathroom to clean up. When they came back they approached the closet with trepidation, then flung it open all at once.

H couldn't process what was going on in the mirror, not in the moment, and only in fragments on reflection later on. The thing in the light wasn't defined the way most things are, whether or not they move they have features that bear a likeness or connection to what they are, a rule of some inherent thingness; it would be rash to call it kaleidoscopic, as even that seemed governed by rules, by sets of things mixing and

generated by some apparatus devised and defined by man, but this was closer to when H was new to the west coast for film school, and they'd stand at a busy intersection in rain when it was dark and they couldn't totally remember the way home because cities didn't make sense, and dark was only just after four in the afternoon at the time of year they were recollecting now, and the rain, redistributing glasses' lens properties in chaotic ever-morphing shapes, would catch the reds of the stoplights at one angle, the greens of the antagonist angle, and the many waiting white and amber and—the worst of them—LED blues of headlights, cold cold blues, all of these many lights catching of their glasses lenses, and catching in so many barbed transforming traps; this thing felt like that more than kaleidoscopic, like some dangerous, unknowable, wet rotting flame.

*

Unable to, in the middle of the night, find a clean cup anywhere in the modular house, H returned to the shared bedroom to retrieve a relatively fresh bowl R'd eaten cereal from in bed that night. H took that bowl to the bathroom across the hall from the shared bedroom, easing open the groaning door gentle and quiet as possible, and just as gentle, rinsing it with cool water, H drank tap water from the bowl the same way R often did with the leftover snowy slurry of milk and sugar, sssslurp, or like Artemis might drink from a bowl she not grown so accustomed to and fond of a particular plastic Tupperware dish during H's bachelor years, vicious and defensive of it.

H drank deep in the dark, their wool socks riding up the leg at heights uneven to one another, the cold of the floor knifing through the socks into the feet, and through the feet, straight into H's heart. They shivered, naked but for their bandeau and socks, and caught some strange gold light drifting in and out of clarity in the last shining wet of the

bowl. They refilled it, the gentle shh of the bathroom sink filling the room's gray gloom. H's eyes adjusted to the dark now, and, they were sure of it, some of that strange beckoning light as the mirror in the closet, that strange putrid wet light was drifting somewhere in this bowl now. H's mind, still set partway in the mire of dream, both rationalized and recognized the irrational truth in the moment, disaggregating the present information in a way that made it hard to perfectly recall the morning after, that this gold glint must be some sort of effect of fracking, some poisoning of the well-water, was not wholly correct, but that some *thing* might have been drawn out from some aeons-sealed fault, and intent on luring curious pilgrims down to meet it, this horrifying thought rang cold the way the rational part of the brain usually cooled a subject, hemmed it in and denuded it of joy; this was not a welcome feeling, and H tossed all night, their dog hopping off the bed to lap from her plastic dish, and then relocating to R's bed, where R slept the dreamless sleep of the dead.

*

There is an idea of a problem in the mirror. In H's mind, there is something wrong with the way the mirror is catching light, throwing pinhole reflections of things they cannot fathom onto the walls without correlating stimulus from the material world. The idea of the problem in the mirror begins to recognize this truth, itself, but cannot do anything to correct its influence on the real world because it is bound to the reflecting body of the mirror. The problem in the mirror is offered a solution, however, when H brings the b-roll Super8 camera into the bedroom on a day off, and films Artemis—legs behind her body like a frog—snoring on R's pillow. The problem in the mirror devours the distance between its body—the mirror—and then pools into the reflective body of the

lens, circling as a starving tadpole might. And the problem in the mirror wasn't that anymore, because the mirror quieted down, and H thought they'd seen a glint or splinter in the mirror for a second, until the tender motor of the camera scared Artemis awake and yelping, so they set to correcting the scare they'd caused by accident. H kept the camera around for behind-the-scenes b-roll, but it made its way into the regular shooting schedule pretty frequently too, the small format invoking some purer nostalgia, rendering LVC younger or more naive or some shit; Yannick withdrew even more lately, and his usual improvised poetic speeches about why to do things the way he wanted them done grew at first subdued, and then vanished altogether.

*

Halloween and no plans.

Back on the coast, H had been living in what could have been any one of many indistinguishable “family affordable” neighborhoods, which, to be fair, was full of quiet honest kind folks, and was dog-friendly. Two years ago—well, almost three now, with this shoot dragging on—the city had started ripping up the sidewalk across the street from H's place, but budget cuts had left the project unfinished. Neighbours' cars' trapped eternally in their driveways short the brave few putting down planks and trying to drive across, most of which took a tumble and never got back out.

Three years of Halloweens on that block, always dressed as Mickey or Minnie depending on their mood, and Artemis as Pluto; when H felt edgy and meddling, they dressed as Artemis as a debarked Goofy, carrying a whip to drive home the slave-driving Ratararchy of the Disney food-chain; R's queer cult loved this look because they said it was “so kinky,” which they all seemed to be experts on, dating their conventionally attractive

cis-het partners and having boring missionary sex all the time and knowing nothing about the worrying fascist ties to kink, and never having worshipped a boot, polished the toecap 'til they saw themselves in its black black grin. Those last two years of Halloweens one half of the neighborhood towed their heavy curtains closed and didn't hand out candy, the trench along that stretch thick as an India-ink map-border.

H had traveled East to the production just after Halloween last year, so they were coming up on the full first year of the shoot.

*

Yannick had a bonfire about four months back, got a ticket from the reeve for not getting a permit first. H thought it was probably Farmer Fucker's doing, tipping off the reeve. Yannick could afford to pay it, but it was an indignity, and Yannick wouldn't suffer that, and thus he refused. The bonfire was of all the footage that Yannick said was "compromised," but none of us knew what that meant.

R's theory was there was a boom in the shot, or the meter on the camera was faulty and the exposures weren't right. Grip had tried spreading a rumor that it was light-leaks, that H didn't know how to load the film into the magazine, but one black eye later, courtesy of R, he shut up. It took violence to make men listen. H'd learned that growing up as a failed boy, and it was a lesson they didn't often inflict on others (because an angry trans person delegitimizes all trans people, or some garbage to that effect), but H appreciated the staying power of that lesson when others taught it. H's theory was Yannick was bothered by something the rest of the crew couldn't see, some mathematical genius principle of composition that the rest of them couldn't fathom because they didn't have the brain-wiring for it.

It snowed the day after the fire, and all the melted emulsion was frozen in the backyard, a cairn to re-shoots.

H had already saved enough money to qualify for a mortgage and purchase their own house, even on the coast, and the rest of the crew was in similar positions. Yannick stayed locked in the basement office for the day, so the shoot didn't go ahead, and H ran into town to try and find a costume to no avail. H assumed Halloween was going to be pretty thin for trick or treaters, the only house in the cul-de-sac, the only cul-de-sac in a five-klick radius any direction in the middle of the country.

That evening, H and R sandwiched Artemis, the trio snuggled in on the couch, scrolled through websites looking for a copy of Carpenter's *The Thing* to stream. H could smell R's period was coming on, some obscene trick they'd cultivated who knows when. R might not even know they were coming up on their moon-time, but H did. H didn't mention it, because R took it personal that H knew her body better than her. Before Artemis was spayed, H had known that too. Artemis can't even tell where she's pissed on a single walk, following her own urine trail in excitement as though she might meet a mate. But H, grown up angry in a house full of men, somehow knew. Worst kind of ESP to have, H reckoned.

The rest of the crew was volunteering at a haunted barn that Farmer Fucker ran, or in town trying to pick up strange on the sluttiest bar night of the year. It would be a slow, private night, one where H could pretend to love R again a little while, for the sake of Artemis.

But this miraculous modular blight, this house that should not exist out here in the middle of nowhere, two chartered buses full of rural kids came out to it with fantasies of

full-size candy bars, and maybe a can of beer or two from the old widowed men in the community who's nagging widow-ghosts couldn't penetrate whatever hearing-aid frequencies they used.

H had read about this, about how less folks lived in rural communities now than before in ratio to urban populations, but how the actual hard number of folks living out in places like this had grown steadily, that these communities were alive and growing; it seemed the citiots were just breeding faster overall. H hadn't fathomed that they were actually *in* the convoy route for these candy-seeking children, that anyone even knew they were out here shooting this doomed film.

A third bus sleuthed off the gravel onto the house's vestigial culdesac, and H and R rushed to the pantry for things to give away, Artemis barking in excitement at the sudden exertion. Menthols? No. No those wouldn't do. Grip's private cache of all the novelty Oreo flavours? A start.

3.

Farmer Fucker kept a beat by beat journal of damage outputs, average dice rolls, deaths per session (for and against the party), and then mapped it all put spreadsheets to determine who his BBEG needed to target, and sometimes to force the players to hand over their dice for a set of his own, which he claims are more balanced, expensive from some shitty Etsy shop, not commercial and therefore to be better trusted. H wanted to take that book and piss on it, cover it in peanut butter and feed it to the coyotes. A big fat list of death and how to continue to inflict it.

On H and R's first date, which was three days snowed in together, and then R come back with a toothbrush the next night after just a few hours apart, R told H that the Iliad is just a manifest of deaths, with a bit of flourish. H'd rather read Patterson than that boring old shit, shit like their Mum might've read. "Like, if you were watching the most important chess game of your nation, and someone was really hyping it up. That's Homer." Still, no appeal.

H'd had to turn in their dice three separate times since my first character died, "rolling suspiciously well in and out of combat, Haley." He knew H's name, but claimed it was too hard to recall when he was busy "running so much math for so many amateurs." H's new dice, an ill, daylight-balance yellow, rolled terribly, but apparently that's 'balance.' No one can beat the referee in D&D. That's why H preferred wrestling.

"Make a grapple check with disadvantage."

In wrestling, when you need the ref out of the way, to really take it to the bald man in flashy underwear across the ring from you, you just hit the ref over the back of the

head with a metal chair and knock him out. During our evening foyer debrief, bending to unlace H's shoes for them, R pointed out "but wrestling is fake."

"So is fantasy."

"Well wrestling is a person against a person. You're a person against a god."

"Don't say that too loud. You know it'll go to his head."

"I'm just saying, the way to win this jerk's game is to win it on his terms."

"I'm not interested in that respectability politics bullshit."

"Well it's just a game."

H winced, worried R might be right. "But I still like wrestling, because it's gay as fuck."

First unaffected laugh either had heard from the other in too too long.

*

H increasingly found comfort in time alone, and spent many of their evenings driving to the city to shop, to eat out, to just cruise a while and get away from the crew. With a house ever-aboiling with people, R got her super-social extroverted itch scratched more thoroughly than she'd ever known she could, and H had freedom from the jealousy and the neediness that seemed to be helping open kindness up between the two again.

*

In the city, the dour Doppler of a lapsed engine belt as a beater drifts down that road which runs parallel to the stalled McDonald's DriveThru you're stranded in, the bar-hours crowd in the car ahead of you yelling at the poor clerk on the other side.

Another day, parked in a community held hostage by the infinite Christmas light chain, you walk along and admire the vintage plastic Santas and Snowfolk that somehow

haven't busted yet. Walking closer to peek on a fully done-up backyard too, you see a laundry line flywheel that resembles a 100ft 16mm reel from this distance, and it sours your Christmas cheer that everything you see reminds you of filmmaking.

Unpicked cherries from some resilient driveway shrub plummet into the snow, their little stem antenna sticking out and murmuring a half-hearted SOS to the mindful, to those nose-curious dogs happy for a mid-trot snack.

You go home, but you grab the dog and head out for her walk before anyone can talk with you.

Dark comes. Glitter of the packed snow thick and manic as T.V. static. 100 percent phone battery forty-two by the time Artemis has found her spot to piss, and dead by the time she's shit. Mean *take-it-personal* cold. She finishes pissing, but you know R is charging her phone right now, and you've only got the one charger between the two of you, so you decide to drive in to town to rectify that, ask if anyone wants a "fancy coffee" as you head out the door, knowing none of them will say yes because they all prefer Tim's, but putting in the required "friendly roommate" offer. R texts you something about "didn't you just come from town," but you're not looking to get into an accident, so you leave it and forget about it.

You pick up a trunk shovel, some popsicle sticks and glue, and another pack of bacon, only remembering as the scanner bleeps that you already have a deep-freeze full of meat. In the parking lot, obsidian plow filth kicks out from a loader's blade, rolls like a severed head onto the sidewalk, coming to rest on its pseudopod appendage, which of course resolves into a trapped engine oil bottle, as it must.

The next night at D&D you look at Farmer Fucker's neck, like you might notice he doesn't have a pulse, some proof of his inherent evil, but all you find is a zit pressing past his neck-stubble like a wanting udder. Roll a luck check on 1d20. On a 1-18, his zit marbles down his neck like a white curd vein. On a 19-20, it holds fast.

Roll 1d6. Apply your constitution modifier (-1). On a result of 5 or higher, proceed to 4A. On a result of 2-5, proceed to 4B. On a result of 1, proceed to 4C. On a result of 0, game over; return to start, and better luck next time.

4A: You aren't paying much attention. FF demands you make a save, but you roll the wrong die. The pike pit trap's many sharp teeth eagerly await your fleshy falling form, but Grip, playing the human female rogue Anabellarosé Gaunt (in ridiculous boob armor, which FF thinks is funny, and thus doesn't punish mechanically, as per his usual MO) spends his held reaction to grab you, to save you. He affects a high voice, which is the worst way to pretend to be a woman, and says "couldn't let you go down like that." You and a few others all snicker at the emphasis he puts on 'go down' but FF doesn't get it, and gets grouchy. Grip gives you a nod, smile so wide his cheeks are rosy, having fun finally, for the first time since the first session many characters ago where his spilt guts just about strung up another player's character, and the session proceeds without any player deaths, without any loss of boon or ally or anything. FF is flummoxed, but unable to find a way to punish the group. [Add "Grip's Giddy Glee" to character manifest, then proceed to Resolution.]

4B: Consult your character sheet's manifest. If you have "eyepatch," instead proceed to 4C. The session goes along without much trouble, for the players on the film shoot at least. The party's favourite NPC ally, Nullbroth the goblin, was dragged off by a dire

troll. Colten could have saved him, but chose not to. When the party didn't chase after Nullbroth, FF began describing the pops and crunches and wet sounds and screams and kept making them more and more graphic until Grip finally decides to do something about it. FF is pleased, knowing he could goad at least one player into his punishing trap, but what Grip does isn't what FF thought the group would do, namely run off to try to save the little one and get killed in the process, but Grip's human rogue, Anabellarosé Gaunt, instead activates a spell-scroll containing Geas, and Colten's character fails his save, and Colten is forced to wander to the dire-troll by himself, and FF can't go back on how vicious and bloodthirsty this creature is, and kills the farm-hand's character. FF shakes quiet with a vibrating Churchill jowls rage, frustrated his failsafe sleeper-agent was routed, and looking inward, sure to get his revenge later on. [Proceed to Resolution].

4C: The group suffers a complete wipe short of Grip's human rogue, Anabellarosé Gaunt, who escapes the trap FF laid for us. Grip is very good at this game now, but FF rolls a die behind the screen, affects a sad groan, and gives Anabellarosé Gaunt a countdown, telling her she's got dementia of some sort brought on by, well, stress? Trauma? Seeing all her friends killed by the skeletal dragon zombie that emerged from the evil sorcerer's arcane tailings pond. He approached several hypothetical triggers, but ultimately ruled that whatever the cause, she had too low an intelligence stat to not eventually develop dementia, and thus, the cause was a moot point, but the effect was clear. Grip pulls a potion from her bag that arrests degenerative disease, that she stole from her evil father when being encouraged to be ruthless by FF, and FF argues that this kind of dementia is magical, and thus doesn't work that way, but Grip passes FF's own homemade item-card down the chain of players, H the last of the line, having a chuckle and then handing it to

FF himself, and FF is forced to honour the unique properties of the potion. FF complains about meta-gaming under his breath, and ends the session early. [Add “Spent Elixir” to your character sheet’s manifest, and proceed to Resolution].

Resolution: Colten doesn’t return to the table next session, and FF makes no mention of him again. FF assures the group that they are on the path to end-game, and everyone levels up. Everyone rolls well on their long-rest watch shifts, and nothing emerges from the mists to devour them in the dark of night.

*

Since R and H stayed in what everyone else deemed “the kid’s room,” sharing the two beds and the smaller dimensions, the rest of the crew left the bathroom adjacent to them private. H hadn’t made any reference toward ever wanting kids, but R had been hounding them about the possibility since the first month they’d dated. It didn’t translate to R that H’s fears they’d suddenly be a “father” were harmful to them, that they didn’t want to give up the gender wiggle room they’d gnashed and clawed so long for just to have a long-term nuisance require their attention whenever it felt like it; if H wanted more of that they’d encourage R’s neediness more often. This didn’t feel like a kid’s room to H, with the troublesome mirror in the closet’s corner, with the two tired, angry adults in the beds with the snoring dog somewhere in between them. This felt like when H’d squat their first few years in Vancouver, like tenement housing, or those idiots in LA who pay 1200 a month to rent a part-time hammock in a reworked warehouse without heat. This just felt like a death to privacy and solitude and mourning. H supposed this is what it had felt like to live with their brothers too, though. But it afforded the couple a bathroom. They were the chosen ones, the ‘crew Mom and Dad’ (*ugh*), and there was a general

atmosphere that folks were ‘rooting for us.’ R was adamant about this being proof of the arrangement’s flawless design. To H it seemed like another thing you did when you got home, took off your boots, and turned on a show you didn’t like at first, but filled the time and had so many seasons ahead that you were guaranteed some longevity; it felt like prestige T.V., real pretty but just the same as the rest of the garbage you’ve seen, but now with an attitude that it’s better than everything else.

*

H is having a hard time not picking a scab on Artemis’ neck. H had a similar condition, *pili multigemini*. Too many hairs trying to do the same thing in the same pore. Felt like the film crew some days, too many people for such simple gestures, for a camera following a half-naked LVC around fields as they accrued and then surrendered snow, grew tall and then were mowed low. FF and Yannick too, too many heirs to masculine power, H thought, emancipating every innocent single whisker from the dry patch on their own chin skin.

*

H never got ‘the talk’ from Howie. The closest thing they ever got to that was a false memory, something they dreamt up of their mother and slotted into the blank space for ages 3-4. That talk, the one that couldn’t have happened, wasn’t about genitals, but about migraines; H’s mother suffered them daily, for years, until one day the common flu flew in and swelled their brain, a tumor pressing against the skull from the swell, delivering a permanent palsy, and weeks later, a sudden death at home, on the couch, H finding their Mom there, flowers from her dad on the coffee-table; this too, was a false memory, if Howie’s irradiating ungenerosity and the corresponding unlikelihood of gift

flowers wasn't proof enough; this memory came from the only episode of Buffy The Vampire Slayer with a cold open and no intro credit tune; Netflix had altered and ruined the cold-open, back when it hosted the franchise, and H emailed them once a month every month for two years to fix it, to restore it to its proper vision, but they never did. H's simulated mother taught them that when they got old their sinus would develop, and this change in their body would bring migraines, and it was true. Whether it was sympathy pains for the sleep-deprived Yannick, or just the chaotic Chinook patterns, H was even having trouble driving some days, acting nice to R long enough to get a ride in to town to get out of the house that'd completely taken on the stink of men.

4.

Howie passed away in a movie theater, went in for a matinee and never came out, a stroke or something to that effect, no need for an autopsy. Found with a rested look on his face in a seat in the back row. Dark room with a bright screen. H's headaches had kept them from watching movies lately, though reading in good light didn't seem to aggravate the condition, and so they threw themselves into proofing Yannick's increasingly erratic shooting script drafts, trying to decode various sketches of enochian looking figures, of angels throwing lightning bolts into thirsting sunflowers, and of completely unshootable scenes of dismemberment of the Lead, LVC.

R sat at the kitchen island and asked H if they ever called back their brothers, about the homestead. "No. I'm not sweating it." H ejected all the slimy bacon into the pan at once with a sharp crackle. Artemis hopped to R's leg, and then R pulled Artemis up like a baby.

“I think you should. It’d be good for us to start looking at property.” R said this in a way that didn’t draw attention to its inclusiveness, but fear spiked into H’s heart anyhow.

“Yeah, I’m sure you could look somewhere out here. This house didn’t cost Yannick much, did it?”

The two didn’t speak for some time, but Artemis didn’t notice her parents’ dispute; bacon, crackling just feet away. “Soon,” she thought. “Soon.”

“Should you flip it?”

“No, you have to let it cook the whole way first.”

“It doesn’t even all fit in there though. It’s not getting cooked even.”

“If you want to do the cooking this morning, be my guest.” H’s rebuttal cracked with the same ferocity as the bacon, and then a flame erupted between them all. Like it were muscle memory, H snuffed the grease fire with a sauce pot’s metal lid, like they were cracking down a menacing goblin bandit's skull with a shield.

“That was pretty cool.”

“Yeah. I guess it was.” Artemis looked to the two with frustration, thinking, “Is it ready yet?” Heedless of the danger that’d flashed before her eyes.

*

In D&D, Hauweetzür was reincarnated, the cleric needing some piece of information that only someone from the “Order of the Tantrum” would know, but which had been wiped out by the BBEG off-screen sometime in the past. Larry treated this as some kind of favour, even though H was now forced to run two characters at a time, and Hauweetzür was severely under-equipped and under-leveled compared to the rest of the

party, who, almost two years in, had found their rhythm, and were beginning to make serious progress. Yannick had retired completely from the game, and Larry's farm-hand Colten, who H remembered from their first game fixing FF's tailgate in the parking lot, had filled in the spot for a little while, but the crew managed to drive him out once they realized he was a plant for Farmer Fucker. Down a player, but almost experts in the game, things seemed to be steady. Hauweetzür had all these homebrew mechanics that weren't written in the same style as the proper rules. It was cool to once-daily, on a d20, either die (result of nat1), do nothing (2-19), or call magic out of outrage and roll a d100 to cast a random powerful magic spell (nat20). But the class just wasn't viable when you weren't lucky, and when your dice were acting lucky on your behalf, they were confiscated. But Larry had eased up on gunning for everyone so hard now that they were closer to his pre-ordained railroad narrative, moving toward the magnificent ending H knew he was trying to recreate from his own first ever campaign.

Roll a D20. Apply no modifiers. On a 19 or 20, add "Lost Art of Tantrum Banishment" to your character sheet. On a 1, you die. Game over. Return to start. On a 2-18 do nothing. Your group spends a while lost in the wilderness, but aside from a few easily dispatched sickly black drakes, some irradiated tamaracks, and an errant lightning bolt killing R's character (only her third, in the whole campaign, which she was heartbroken for), you make it out unscathed. The ill drake's hoards are likewise lacking, slim pickings, mostly bones.

*

Hauweetzür played different this time around. H'd had to return the Denali to Hertz in exchange for a Jeep, and the handling was so terrible, and no running boards

meant a spectacle just hauling yourself into the rig. R loved it, though. H had gotten pretty far in with Hauweetzür in the beginning of the campaign, had donned a real guff, tenured smoker's voice, but part of the resurrection's compromise was their slit throat from their initial death sequence wasn't restored.

This meant no verbal components, so spell-casting was reduced to only that which relied on somatic and material components, and their class was already so restricted. H pressed the toggle in to spray the windshield, and the dash beamed "CRUISE." Hauweetzür tries to tantrum-smite on the froghemoth only to burn the spell-slot and achieve no arcane result. They were sure it'd come together eventually, the Jeep's rearview placement would become intuitive, and the capabilities and strengths of Hauweetzür would come into clarity probably even sooner than H would figure out just how far they could safely pull into a parking stall before rolling up the turtarrier. H's sight had been failing toward dark, but the optometrist couldn't determine the cause, as they tested perfectly in the clinic's optimized conditions.

Roll 1d6. Apply your constitution modifier (-1). On a roll of 1-5 go to 5A. On a roll of 0, go to 5B. On a 6 or higher, go to 5C.

5A: You find your clip-on sunnies are too-scratched to use. Driving is a hassle, and so you lose some of your freedom. Nothing in your manifest changes, but you wake up most mornings having clenched your teeth all night long. Proceed to Resolution.

5B: You roll the Jeep into the ditch, and R is thrown from the vehicle, then pinned by it when it comes to rest. Your eyes close. Game over. Return to start.

5C: Cheater cheater pumpkin eater. Game over. Leave this alone and go away, you're not welcome here anymore.

Resolution: With this dimness all about them, H relented and let R cart them around on days off, and the two of them, cool to one another, hung out and got incredible work done, the muscle memory of their shared bodies giving them an ease their hearts didn't feel, freeing up their brains for higher functions.

*

Grip was lingering around H again, but a lot quieter than he used to be. It was a slow month. Yannick was putting them through some conceptual phase. Some farmer-engineer types, whom FF introduced Yannick to, built the crew an incredibly precise, slow motor. It guaranteed a slow zoom, or a slow pan, that could take hours approaching a full day if it needed to.

Some folks in Toronto had old mega-cartridges lying around from the 60s and 70s, when folks like Michael Snow—who H hated but had to study in film school—did all these durational projects, these excruciating extensions of the moment. It was like amateur writing, ending on a description of a photo, or a portrait. Kodak was happy to deliver the specialized film reels, and even shipped it out for free, which was more than fair given the exorbitant cost.

*

H remembered back in high-school, torrenting art house films on GOEM.ORG, weird shit that made them feel superior to everyone else in the shitty small town of Summerfall. They had a terrible seed ratio because their internet was beyond atrocious, but the forum's community hadn't minded, and let H download as much as they wanted

without the usual penalties. They cleared out everything from their iPod, all the music, and loaded films like *Mouth to Mouth* onto it, an early Elliot Page cut about a kid that ran away and got caught up in a punk cult, one that of course never came to theaters anywhere near Summerfall. They'd drive the tractor and the harrows along the field, going slow, because you had to pay attention, but the GPS kept you going straight, and you only ever really had to look up from Elliot Page's shaved-head visage on the iPod long enough to turn the tractor around, kick yourself for not loading a second movie on there too.

Filmmaking this slow, it was no different than farming. You sat around, did your best to keep your thoughts quiet, your mind steady. You got up too early and stayed too late and ate not nearly enough. The only difference was filmmaking paid, and very well. H's wage had actually doubled not long ago. Yannick didn't come to set anymore. Only H & R ever got to see him, and he'd sit sick, scared almost, in the dark of the master bedroom, like a hurt animal, iMac display dimmed as low as it could go, and H and R would slowly ease in and shut the door behind them and then go through footage with him. "Harley, can you take on some of Rebecca's tasks? Just a few?" It was rhetorical, and he talked like he was somewhere else altogether. "I need her to run interference with some of the investors while I keep cutting that thing out of this, before it spreads." Neither one knew what to say to that, but he'd been talking in this cryptic way for quite a while now, and whatever it was he meant, H worked to the standard they always had held themselves, said yes without batting an eye, adding, "We'll get it sorted out together tonight, start first thing tomorrow."

And it hadn't been much more work, in the end. It meant less having to socialize, more barking orders. Grip had warmed to them in a more neutral, less horny suspicious way, since H assumed the mantle of authority, and H was grateful for that. They'd had no more than one brief laugh a few Halloweens ago, when H had asked Grip if he was scared of blood, having brought home a date from the bar, both of them dressed as Green M&Ms, and H knowing that the date was on the cusp of period with their useless ESP. Grip said something to the effect of having earned his red wings many years before, with a shit-eating grin that compromised the single moment of ease that they'd otherwise enjoyed. Grip was pretty pretty when he grinned, and described himself just like that.

*

Roll two D6, one an insight check, and the other a charisma check. Apply relevant modifiers at your discretion (Charisma now applies a +3 modifier, given your new title. Insight +1). If the combined rolls and modifiers exceed eleven, proceed to 6A. If the combined rolls and modifiers equal ten exactly, proceed to 6B. If the combined rolls and modifiers equal less than nine, proceed to 6C. On snake eyes, or double-sixes, proceed to 6D. Consult your character manifest. If you have "Yannick penalty," or "Complication," instead proceed to 6C regardless of rolled result, and remove them from your sheet. If you have "Grip's Giddy Glee" you can opt to proceed to 6A in lieu of any rolls, removing all of the three listed conditions from your manifest.

6A: You sit down at the picnic table to have your smoke, and you know you oughtn't, because R hates it these days, and your throat is so tender you can't swallow some mornings, but this is the tiny bit of control you do have over your

life, and as such, it must be exercised. If you don't smoke through those many cartons of ailing, stale-cusp menthols, who will? You play with a pocket knife your absent father, Howie, left to you. You wriggle the blade's bald blunted tip in some split faults of the wood table-top, drive the walls further apart from one another. Your slippers are slippery, slide back and forth like skis underneath you on the hoar-frost, but those reading-socks R gave you for Christmas are so thick you don't feel the cold at all. You're not sure when it was Grip sat down across from you. FF is meeting property assessors today, so you all have the day off. No one is sure what to do with their free time. You don't say hi to Grip, because he's a creep, and you don't want to give him an inch that he'll try to transmute into a mile. You do give him a nod, to let him know you've sensed him, to give vague indications that you don't hate him, that he does a good job and the film might one day come to an end, despite all evidence to the contrary. You're not sure your nod conveys all of that, but you can't worry about that. The knife pivots, the cigarette whimpers and extinguishes in your absent-mindedness. "Do you remember how you knew, that you were, you know, a sissy? Like when you were younger, when you were a guy?" You think about what bad timing it is for Grip to ask you such a fucked up question like that, that is so wrong on so many levels, while you drive a tired old pocket knife into a cheap picnic-table. You think about the city queers, that at least they knew you were enby (well, when they weren't being assholes at least), not a 'sissy,' or that when you performed the exact way they wanted you to perform they treated you right, but Grip isn't educated at all, and when you finally meet his gaze, you see his question is genuine, from a place of need-to-know and

not want-to-hurt. He tells you he read a book by Casey Platt, that a military guy in it gets head from the narrator who is a *tranny*, and, well, this military guy likes it, and shows her his high heel boots, and, well, Grip admits he'd spent the morning in The City, trying on high heeled boots, and how like the guy in the book he wants to be a girl, if that's what the book was saying, and he says he told the salesman it was for his fraternal twin sister of the same build, and how everyone knew he was lying, and it was so humiliating. You don't ask Grip if he really still thinks you're a girl after all the discussions R and you have had with him, and you don't feel your heart crack just a little when you realize he was only ever attracted to you the way Laird had been before you really took control of your life, as something close enough to a girl as to just be a girl, a defective girl, that you could toss away if you found 'a real girl' down the line. You take a breath, he lights your cigarette, bums one for himself off of you, and the mint burn he coughs through gives you a berth to finally reply. You go through a few basic questions with him. You know before he does that he's definitely a girl. You couch everything in mayes and mightes: "Well, you may find it useful to try this," and you, in your new position of power, tell him you can get in touch with a counselor, a queer-sympathetic one even, and that the production will of course subsidize those costs, and that you're happy for him and his journey. He cries a little bit, because he never learned to do it better, or he did and had to unlearn it, just like the rest of you. Thanks you. Fist bumps you, despite your hesitance to indulge that. The next morning he's not around, off down the yellow brick road to the Dorothy he ought to be. [Proceed to Resolution.]

6B: Yannick calls you in for a meeting, without R. Grip is inside, ill with some sort of fever, wet with sweat and something resembling fear. Yannick asks you if you can help Grip type up some hand-written notes, maybe take over the task altogether. You hop to, but find by the time you've sat down on the swivel stool at the kitchen's island, half the notes are blank, and the other half too sweat-wet and smeared to recover. You go to Yannick immediately, ask him if he remembers what the gist was, but he doesn't recall your earlier conversation at all. The next morning, Grip is nowhere to be found, off to work for some cousin in some fridge sales division somewhere back on the West Coast. [Proceed to Resolution].

6C: You wake up to R's panicked shaking, and Artemis growls at her, protective of you in a way she's never been before. R leads you to one of the ground floor bedrooms, to a bed full of bloody sheets. No one hears from Grip again, but everyone knows it's his blood. You file a report with the police, and they're as useless as they always are. You have the day off, but that makes it worse for you and everyone else. [Proceed to Resolution].

6D: Add "Lucky" to your character sheet's manifest, which allows you to re-roll up to three rolls before the end of the story. Proceed to 6A.

Resolution: You call someone you went to film school with, asking them to come fill the vacated position, the crew getting thinner every day, but they've heard about this film, about how it's not going anywhere, and then they call you he, and you lose it on them, and you know the word will spread that "an angry trans troll" is trying to lure unsuspecting union members to a trap, and to stay the hell away from it, and that you should be more professional, that the world ran on rickety bridges that haven't been burnt

no matter how bad we wanted to, but fuck him, fuck him and his attitude problem. Your stomach sinks a little, and you've run out of nail to chew down in passive anxiety, and you look at the shrinking corral of your worried colleagues, the cryptic script notes from your unwell leader, struggling with your outdated glasses prescription and the headaches and the fuzziness, and wonder if there's a meaningful future for any of you.

4.

Six months out from a four year anniversary on the start to this film shoot.

R chuckled, "If I wasn't privy to your proper blueprints, I'd say you're having morning sickness."

H voided their guts again, unsure if it was a bug or not, the filthy communal toilet's stench and smears helping them along and then some. "You wish."

"I do wish. I'd love to raise some kids with you. You know that."

H hated having this argument while they were sick. R was a highly empathetic person, but in an intelligent way too, so, she knew the exact worst time to say the exact worst thing, understood you deeply, and used that to hurt you when she felt she needed to. H didn't have the energy to keep arguing, and waved R away.

*

Artemis was missing. Someone had left the back door open, trying to cool the house down, but hadn't hooked the screen door shut. None of the repair guys for the heat pumps ever showed up, something about the address not going into their GPS the right way; Black Diamond, Olds, Nanton, sure, but that wasn't where they were. It was like the crew existed in some aslant parallel universe all their own some days. No one admitted to leaving the door open. They all said the door must've blown open on its own, which sure,

the screen door did, but not the inner door, and “I’m not a fucking idiot” implied “but you are” as a reply, at least R told H.

H was on what R called “the warpath,” a term which H heard “that’s problematic” in reply to from the chorus of the judgy ghostly city queers that lived rent-free in the back of their mind; city queers, none of whom kept in touch with H but all of whom snapped R every few days, sent annual Christmas postcards to R without mentioning H, but once with passing reference to Artemis, like she were R’s dog first; Serenity sent condolences, like the smug bitch she was, as if there were proof Arty were gone forever and ever already; R thought H was overreacting to that postcard.

R was on a speaking-basis with most of the locals from her time spent scouting in advance of the production, and so she took a stack of glossy MISSING posters out which H had printed off at the shiny new library in The City. No one had seen the dog, and a few had the balls to say “probably coyotes got it,” but R left posters anyhow, adding her own cell# to the back of the sheet in forest green sharpie, and implying a high monetary reward too, which H was too naive to have remembered to put in the description.

*

FF was scheming. The crew all knew that he was but wasn’t sure just what he was planning. Hauweetzür kept having “dreams of significant import,” but even on a nat20 hadn’t been able to make their saving-throw to remember what they were. FF implied it was language specifically, not images, and that maybe at a higher level, or after training in some way to grant them proficiency in intelligence saves, then H would be able to recall their dreams, and that without this knowledge, the final battle would be very very difficult.

H was having horrible dreams the same as Hauweetzür, but they remembered theirs. Yannick, fangs bared, bloody red pupils, chasing Artemis into a large round mirror, Artemis gliding through its surface, and Yannick hitting it hard and shattering it. Artemis nowhere to be seen in the scattered shards. Those were the tamer dreams. Not all of them were completely recallable, but the consistent theme was Artemis was gone, and someone from the film crew had driven her off.

*

H loves that real deep dead quiet, but R always has a podcast on the go, even on set sometimes just quiet in her airpods, that parasocial buffer between her and being alone really kinda 'too much' in H's opinion, but R didn't wanna be miserly and lonely, now did she, and why should H force her to be? The crew keeps to their rooms, for the most part, and go into town to folks they're fucking, dating, go shopping, do whatever they want but never together; the dissonance reflected the play in D&D, no less, but no one had died yet. R was even worse now that no one else was feeling friendly, and now that Artemis was gone, the absence of those white-noise-reliable snores meant R needed to leave on some sort of sound all night, sometimes music, sometimes language instruction tapes, but always something that R acted like H didn't hear, even though they did.

Even more hoar frost on the ground the other day, a pall across all the crops, like the world had stopped living altogether. H's vision and hearing growing dimmer and more distant, underwater, everyday.

Things were dire.

H's fix for now was working closely with Yannick on the edit. H can see perfectly fine when the room is dark, and a small screen. Likewise driving, window not unlike a

monitor, the yellow highway scratches ticking away under the booming headlights. Daylight was a waking fog. Doctor in the S.E. said it's tied to grief, didn't listen when H clarified the timeline. Didn't matter, in the end, because there was still work to do. H's HABU—"highest and best use," something Howie'd taught them—had changed, but the edit was piecing together, a bit tricky, like advanced Tetris. In fact, H and R watch movies in bed on the laptop until R's asleep, last night the adaptation of Jennifer Eagan's *The Keep*. Weird project for Soderberg, the hack.

Last week Yannick hadn't even noticed H, getting an early start, already in the office chair editing. He sat down on their lap, and only a mirthful gasp alerted him. Yannick stood, H slipped into the less comfortable dining room chair, Yannick sat down in the better, wiped away some white gunk caught in the corner of his mouth, and went to editing. H came and went as they needed to, and found their way around the dim house without much need of sight. Night and day were one.

H lay in bed wondering if the McDonald's drivethru clerk who hadn't given them and R straws with their drinks was also up tonight, worrying about having dropped that ball. The meaner, dimmer part of their heart hoped so. The other part, the smart part (was it the brain?), figured they were probably working overnight and didn't have that luxury, and that they didn't make enough money to worry about stuff like that neither.

In their separate beds, pushed apart again since Artemis' 'departure,' R clacked away on her phone in the dark. R's phone too dim to really spy on, but H recognized the telltale right swipe left swipe thumb motions. The ice rolling to the rim each sip was too cold for their sensitive teeth, and their mustache was full of cool soda.

*

FF seemed to try on different coloured contacts each session, sometimes switching at intermission. R had to whisper H's own roll results to them, and piloted Hauweetzür while H got daily ill. R had to re-state H's weak, sore voice and wishes to FF and the rest, throat tender with the menthol chill. The doctor couldn't figure out anything wrong with them, said it was psychological, a refusal to mourn their dead dog. The dog was missing, and yes, that was so much harder, but it was the doctor talking down to them, like a cop would, that made H dig in, refuse to mourn until any fresh news turned up. H sat in the passenger seat, waiting for LVC to finish his STI tests at the same clinic.

"I'm too dizzy to drive yet. Can we sit a while?"

"Don't see what choice I have. They take a lot of blood?"

"Not much, but just watching them do it, that's what got me. Watching it travel down that sterile plastic tube into the little vial. Looked like a pipeline. It felt scary."

"You never been tested before?"

"No. I was a virgin when we started shooting."

"No way."

"Yes way."

H doubted that very much. LVC had been a very prominent French-Canadian actor through the 90s, acting alongside everyone from the expected, like Roy Dupuis, to Keanu Reeves in his Idaho-era.

"You never fucked anyone before this shoot?"

"Still haven't. But I let a man perform fellatio on me behind the bar, a few Halloweens ago."

"And you're only getting tested now?"

“Yes.”

“Why now?”

“Well, I want to know.”

H looked across the street to McDonalds’ beautiful blonde arches, bright against the winter gloam, a perfect beacon for their tired, bunk eyes. “You eat meat?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll get you a bacon and egg mcmuffin.”

“I’ve never had one before.”

“Want a hashbrown? an orange juice?”

“Yes please. Thanks, director.”

H hiccuped when they tried to laugh at that. Funny funny. The parking lot was empty, their appointments early enough to drive into The City and then back out before a lunch-hour shooting start. H was about to hop out when LVC touched their hand, asked, “Do you think they’re going to like what I’ve done here?”

“Who do you mean?”

“The public. The movie-goers.”

H retreated from their own insecurities about having been trapped in this botched project, *Apocalypse Now* without a point. They relied on their bedrock, professionalism. “Yannick and the rest of us have all been very very pleased with your performance so far. We’re very excited to have a union actor of such renown working with us.”

“But, Harley, tell me. Will it be good? I haven’t worked in so long. I just, I need to know everything will be okay.”

“Guaranteed.” H slammed the Jeep’s door shut, marched bravely into the street without looking both ways (what good would it do?), grabbed three breakfasts, and extra hashbrowns. Everything in a tray, tray in a big, sturdy paper bag. Talk about professionalism. McDonalds never let them down. LVC recovered quickly, and drove them back with time to spare, the leftover meal without meat for R still warm. The house has a manic energy to it, and H doesn’t like it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Harley. Look!”

Someone on the local Facebook animal-watch group had seen an injured dog, heavy with bloat and bloody eyes, wandering the highway, but it had run away when they’d approached. The blurry picture, it could have resembled Artemis, but Artemis was slender, lithe, and jolly. The crew, trying to cheer H up, left food and water out on the porch as though Arty were just in the yard camping, and the food was often gone, probably coyotes H rationalized, but, the water was always untouched. The dishes were from some vet off the highway who R knew, which H figured might have meant “who R blew,” but didn’t care at this point.

In a fit of energy usually reserved for mania, H took the water dish and frisbee’d it as far as they could into the field. H tucked the scratched old Tupperware Artemis actually drank from into the vacancy of the cast-iron food and water stand. So cold every day, and Artemis out there alone in it. H then broke up the last spare hashbrown and mixed it in to the kibble, knowing better than to get their hopes up, but fibbing to themselves, that they were full, and couldn’t have finished it otherwise, that no one else in

the house would've wanted it. H eased into a metal patio chair that should've been uncomfortable, but in such a state of despair, H drowsed off without trouble.

*

R's phone died completely. Faulty battery, something like that in the cold. They want to borrow H's, but H doesn't want to share. "But Serenity has a couple new puppies in the litter, and I've been chatting with her, and," but that conversation didn't go anywhere. "Well, some of my friends might call me on that line, so, don't be surprised." Her friends. Not ours. No one'd called them anyhow.

Before the phone had died, R'd been mumbling "Feed" in her sleep. R circled their bellybutton with their finger in their sleep too, their jagged overgrown nail leaving a significant, lasting scratch. H wasn't bothered by the cryptic repetition as much as the drone of the podcasts R left on; H woke up one night to R's phone generally quieter, TikTok open and only little quiet bing bing bings of donations rolling in, R live-streaming herself sleeping and apparently there being a huge market for that. Over a thousand people were watching her sleeping. H couldn't believe that R was comfy being constantly watched like this. H had had a kink leaning that way when they were younger, but it was all bundled up with Laird, their boss at the time, catching him jacking off to the security cameras. H had felt a lot more in control then, but had learned how much safer it is to be on this side of the camera.

Yannick was missing one morning, and H woke up on a patio recliner that didn't have a cushion, Artemis asleep on their lap, little pat pat pats of pregnant kicks.

Perfectly healthy, according to R's Vet friend. Just knocked up. H had shown the vet the spay scar, but the Vet said it hadn't taken.

“These things take.”

R had the posture of embarrassment, which H couldn't quite so much feel as sense.

“Well, you evidently didn't take her to somewhere that provided proper care.”

A long silence followed while H formulated the exact way to tell the vet to go fuck himself.

“No, we did,” R finally piped up. “Must just, I'm not sure this is the right thing to call it, but it might just be a miracle.” R hadn't been there when Artemis was spayed, but of course they wanted to pretend like they'd been around, like they'd cared.

“She's due any day now.”

*

No one had realized Yannick had been missing. Even H hadn't thought anything of his absence, if they'd even noticed it. It was like he'd just been sucked up into the film, and that he wasn't really gone. He'd felt *gone* for a lot longer than this already. They'd found a jerry-can of purple gas, who knows where from, in the basement office's closet, and a shattered pocket mirror in the bottom drawer of the desk that H hadn't remembered being there before. The exec-producers offered H one month to finish it for an obnoxious bonus. ‘Director Welch.’ They didn't like the sound of that at all. They were sick morning and night alike. They could hardly see a thing other than a phone or movie in the absolute dark.

But their sweet baby—who they'd never called that before, always making jokes about a cheap shitty roommate who didn't pay rent, about having not fucked a dog and

thus not being its parent nor it being their baby—their sweet baby A back, and safe.

Maybe things were looking up.

Over 9000 hours of footage, though a skeleton having finally revealed itself already. H stitched together a bit of puffy, bloated LVC with the early skinny LVC, same framing, scrubbed back and forth; it was like time-travel, like meat-puppetry. And it all felt real the whole way through, the film-grain telling you every shot was real, and worthy, contrary as that was.

*

“You feel the scorpion sluice between your kneecap and the bone. Roll a constitution save.” You do, and R calls out “24” for you. You wish you were home with your severely pregnant Artemis, who, when you think of it, hasn’t been like this long; dogs gestate puppies eerily fast compared to the rest of us, us being *humans*, as though we deserved to be the benchmark.

FF calls out, “That’s a failure.” LVC gasps, and R sets into FF, an unusual zealotry to her protection of you.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Hauweetzür is just pregnant now is all. Sorry, the bandit says: take that, you fat squire! Who’s weak now? Enjoy motherhood.” FF’s voice-work is killer this week, sounds like Ted Danson almost, but, wait, what?

“What the fuck, Larry,” R takes their parasocial withdrawal out on FF. You raise your voice as loud as you can, but only FF is listening to you, watching you. “Twenty-seven? to hit the scorpion?”

“No need to roll damage, that’ll do it. Hauweetzür crushes the scorpion with the pommel of their glaive, and the rest of you have no trouble subduing the bandit. Do you

kill him? Or spare him?” They all look to you, not that you can see that, but you can feel it, almost *hear* it. Everyone at the table feels how close we are to finishing, and now that you’re director too, it’s like they’re putting all their hopes on you for the D&D game too; we win D&D, the film is saved. We fail? You and the rest don’t want to think about it. You raise a thumbs up, and the bandit scurries away, grateful for your mercy.

Roll 1d6. Apply your wisdom [perception specific] modifier (-3). On a roll of -3 - -1, proceed to 7A. On a roll of 0, go to 7B. On a roll of 1-4, go to 7C. On a roll of 5-6, go to 7D.

7A: R is distracted, testy tonight. Nothing specific catches your attention. You’re happy to be approaching an ending, whatever it entails. [Proceed to resolution.]

7B: If you have “Eyepatch” on your character manifest, proceed to 7A. You notice R notice something, but she doesn’t tell you right away, and has forgotten what it was by the time you haul yourselves with difficulty into the filthy Jeep. [Proceed to Resolution.]

7C: You notice R notice the red blip of a cheap nanny-cam in the ceiling tile, and despite your dim vision, you recognize it for what it is. You’re being taped, or broadcast, or something to that effect. You don’t know how long it’s been going on, but you begin to form a plan. Mark “Hourglass” on your character sheet’s manifest. [Proceed to Resolution].

7D: Tsk tsk. Game over. No one likes a liar.

Resolution: The roads are slick with black ice the drive home tonight. You and R argue about taking a day off this weekend. You don’t want to, because there’s only so many viable shoot days left before the snow completely derails the last window you need for

stitch shots, to put LVC, thinning again, through the works. R wants a day off to go buy a new phone, hurting without that world from far away at her fingertips. You tell her to ask for the day off if she wants it off, but she wants you to tell her to take it, for you to enable her. You can see the claw-marks where other tires have skidded on the deadly invisible top coat of ice, lighter in the high beams. Everything else is sheer black, satisfying in its vacuum. You feel her asking for the world and then some. You think about when she proposed to you a week after you started dating, how you'd laughed at her. That hadn't been kind. The satellite radio blips "LOOP ERROR" at you. You think about how every argument with R feels like the first one all over again, like you've been arguing since you ever met. The rearview's tiny corner readout flashes "FE" then "ED," those piecemeal alarm-clock-like letters. The Jeep tilts faster than you can process it, but the actual flop into the ditch seems to take forever. R must have been thrown out the windshield, and you can't open your door, nor can you pull yourself up all the way to the driver's door. All the Jeep's heat is flowing past you and out the windshield. You grab your miraculously unscathed phone from the floor, then worm out the window. Too cold, so all those nyooming silverfish you see must have to do with you hitting your head. You can't see anything on your phone screen in the headlights of the Jeep. R is breathing, but unconscious. You can't see to type 911. But you breathe. It's not that hard, now is it? You let the phone's scan-pad lick your thumbprint, hear it click unlocked. You plead with the phone to call 911, to get help. It does.

5.

R cradled her iPhoneXIII like a newborn babe, so many tubes moving into and then out of her; all those bloody pipelines that LVC had been wary of at his STI test, what

felt like ten lifetimes ago, ten D&D character lifetimes ago. H left R there, hopped in the Dodge Demon—that Hertz even had one, and that it was the last vehicle available for the entire month, suspect, like they were in a simulation, like someone had rolled a nat 20 to find riding horses and the DM was feeling generous. LVC didn't like the car, so he'd stayed home for the day. Someone from the crew, H wasn't even sure who exactly, had grabbed the keys and walked out with them when they called out for the favor in the foyer earlier. Even with the accident, everyone was feeling upbeat, perhaps that H had emerged unscathed, and that R would recover without much fuss bolstered their spirits.

*

If you have acquired 'Spent Elixir,' the 'Lost Art of Tantrum Banishment,' or 'Hourglass,' continue reading chapter 5. If you do not have any of these items in your manifest, proceed to chapter 6.

You call Serenity to update her about R, to tell her "FUCK YOU MY DOG IS ALIVE."

She thinks it's "*So* funny" that none of you have realized you're part of a super successful D&D actual-play show. "Like, how could he even stream you without you knowing?" The yap yap yap of her granola puppy-mill scheme in the background, and the needy cry of "Babe, what's difference between baking powder and baking soda" from her cis-het boyfriend in there too. "Yeah, it's like, mm, couple nights a week? Are you joshing me?" You don't reply to her inquiries about Artemis and her troubled pregnancy, and this "supplement that's really gonna help her coat shine while she's going through it."

You ask her how the West Coast D&D game's been going since you and R left. "Oh, we quit playing that years ago. Like, right when you and Rebecca left?" You inquire

why, and she tells you R had asked them to do it for you, “Yeah, like, she was worried you didn’t like us all? What a laugh. So she asked us to try it out. It was fun, I guess? But we’re all a little old for games.” You wish her well. She misgenders you, calls you Harley, which only R is allowed to do, and then signs off with a “Ta ta for now.” You chew on all this for a while. On if there’s a way to put it to use, and you decide there is.

Add “Lucky” to your character sheet’s manifest, which allows you to re-roll up to three rolls before the end of the story. If you already have “Lucky,” add three charges to its use. Add “Obscure Module” to your manifest as well.

6.

H and R broke up proper, and the relief was huge for both, well it was as long as H didn’t think about what the world might look like as soon as the film was done. Twice this week H went to visit R in the hospital and found distinct fawning Tinder boys at her bedside. She always did have a way with people. Artemis was due to burst any day now. H didn’t tell anyone, but they hadn’t eaten in days, and finally started feeling better for it. Artemis slept in the living room, always under a mindful eye of one crew member or another. Down Yannick, R, Grip and Colten, the adventuring party was rather thin, though their plan to confront Miserian the Miserly was sound, and they had a fair shot to keep him from uncapping the crock jug that held their very universe, or whatever such nonsense it was.

H had been perfectly content to close their eyes, listen carefully and be ushered through the world by many attendants, that was until Farmer Fucker wouldn’t let them into the barn on the backacre that backed right on to the foothills right behind the train

tracks, the one they'd been guaranteed in the contract, but which he'd apparently snuck a "on condition the campaign is 'won'" clause too that Yannick signed away on.

H had seen what it was in the edit that Yannick was afraid of. The thing in the mirror, the shimmering thing, the wet rot, the diesel reeking flashes of possibility. H had thought they were going crazy before, was used to being written off and used to not trusting themselves, but now they were sure it was in here. The pinhole specter loped around the footage, never twice the same movements, and always toward the foothills; it was like flame, mesmerizing. Farmer Fucker's barn, in the background of a highly compressed shot where LVC simulated masturbation in front of several unamused mallards, was the only shot in the 9000 hours of footage where the thing from the mirror settled, rested. They needed to beat Farmer Fucker to get into that barn, let the thing in the mirror have its way. But H tipped their hand too soon, and now FF didn't want to let them have their way. He'd proposed they start a second campaign, and continue shooting for another year, and wanted them to sign a contract that they'd keep coming. No dice. Whatever came, came.

Artemis burst one day, strange puppies, coydogs, H reckoned, though R's Vet-boy disagreed, said that wasn't "even physically possible." Citiot. The party marched along the shores across from FF's tussock, a little floating island, with a sever mountain rising from it, a mean mouth in its base. The party supplicated the DracoPogo's god with a worthy sacrifice, secured a safe arcane barge for passage, and came onto the tussock's shores. The island shot like a bottle rocket into the sky. Three players fell off and died instantly when they hit the water at that velocity, and one more when drove a rod into the earth to try and secure themselves with a magical self-knotting rope, the mossy tussock

corner giving way at the gentle rod prod and sending them to their doom. They just need one day to shoot. One day. Down seven players. Just the five left in their party. They'd be fine. But then H didn't reply quick enough for a constitution save, and Hauweetzür went into labour as the wolves circled. The party cut the baby from his gut, and fled.

Hauweetzür lay there bleeding to death. FF ended the session before H could raise their voice loud enough with a plan. H's own guts rattled with hunger, but not eating, they didn't void. The exchange of loud hunger to avoid constant acidic discomfort was well worth it. But something in H broke when they couldn't protect their avatar. That night, with a soothing voice which H had learned to be wary of R using, R quit the production over voice-mail. It was the first thing H heard when they turned airplane mode off and lowered themselves into the Demon in that frigid, shithole curling rink parking lot.

*

H didn't want any of it. H didn't want to be single after this many years, to have to go through all that bullshit again. Nor did they want to be the director, whatever everyone else wanted from them. Damn their work ethic to fucking hell. H didn't want to have to worry about Artemis' precarious post-pregnancy recovery. H didn't want a mortgage or to ever pop the ridiculous financial bubble that this driven, delirious film shoot had afforded them. H didn't want to step through all these thresholds of change, and the thing was, they all looked like the same damn doorway, like they couldn't be pried apart from one another, not unlike the gap to the bedroom closet, to that, that *thing* in the reflection of the mirror that they were trying to help set free. R had offered this reply to H's metaphor: "Maybe it's like those disgusting weird whiskers you get. Like the

cheesestrings. Maybe it's not one thing. Maybe it'll peel apart if you poke at it a while, reveal a beautiful baby soft blonde hair in its center or something.”

It was like R wasn't even trying to help. R didn't have to step through this door to a world completely unknown. R had grown up monied. R didn't have to find a way to save all their fellow adventurers, to save this cursed film, to save their dog's life and be a grand-something-or-other to a litter of bastard puppies; R wasn't suffering sympathy morning-sickness for a dog that might not live long enough to finish nursing its rape-begot coydog pups, and R wasn't suffering sympathizing mourning for a D&D character they'd fought so hard to master, to be brave through (or as brave as, when they worried they would never be so strong), to protect others with. R hadn't ever had to leave one world for another ever, and H was getting too old to keep stepping through these thresholds, to always go it alone.

7.

The rink was 'closed for renovations,' FF claimed. H didn't buy it, but it offered them a chance to play in the barn they were, according to Larry, "honestly a bit too desperate to get into.”

Its cupola like the ice-pick Stalin drove into Trotsky's skull. It was bigger on the inside than it should've been. Its loft window like some long-vacant third-eye's hollow socket. The wind was muted as soon as you stepped through the sliding doors, but it didn't make sense that it was so quiet in here. H always thought those doors were odd: barn-doors were drawn aside, not swung, and were closer to theater curtains than they were doors the way we all thought of them. Who was setting the stage? And for what production? Deeper in, in the back, a chrome door with a rubber seal leered, maybe built

into the sea-can sitting out behind the barn itself. Nothing but a long, last-supper-like dining table, rotted by ants and worms and wet rot, a maze of tunnels, a stippled nonsense braille.

H stepped outside for their last menthol before the final struggle; if they won, they were going to quit—R said she'd believe it when she saw it, wise and cutting in the best ways, ways which only reemerged now that the two were apart. Past the flurries H swore they saw a shimmer of a golden castle behind the barn, but it was a trick of the light, the hard winter light bouncing from the snow to the ochre shipping container behind the barn and into the atmosphere, that's all it must have been.

*

The one who drove H in to see R, H wasn't sure their name, couldn't remember their face, they called out H's rolls for them. They were playing a cleric, who H did remember the name of, Nudie Coney, and having discovered Hauweetzür's magical child was actually still-born, an imp with a lipless grin, they burned their only 8th level spell-slot, cast antipathy to drive the wolves away, give the party time to save Hauweetzür's life. Nudie, or whoever played Nudie, rather, whispered to H "He made you pregnant as a joke, he told us last session after you left, because you can't get pregnant in the real world. He made you feel it to 'punish' you. Let's get this fucking asshole." H squeezed the stranger's hand.

*

Font in italics is for players who have "Obscure Module" on their character sheet's manifest only.

You let most of your fellow adventurers die to not tip your hand too early. The wizard is wise and wily and excited to punish you all; Larry Forde-Lorne has been looking forward to ‘letting you lose’ for a long time now, and he’s damn near guaranteed it—or he would’ve, if he’d had any imagination. As it stands, he’s obsessed with one obscure print module from the old days, one he’s clung to. If he’d deviated even a little he’d be able to kill you, but realizing he was watching you, that thousands of people were watching you unknown each night you played, you went looking, and you found the thing he’s obsessed with, that he ran conversions for. You watch each trap come up: Gators and lasers and swinging scimitars and acidic-blobs and deadly mold, and too many more deadly and damn-near traps—you do nothing, with purpose, watch them come and grimace appropriately, mourn as much as each roll demands—take away nearly everyone you love, projections of a better self we all might want to be, and whom you’ve grown to truly love (if not recognize the names of, the dim, familiar silhouettes of). You watch each dead player leave the table, wait in the blacked-out van outside the barn, but they know the plan, and set up for the final shots. You keep LVC’s barbarian alive as best you can, use him as a meat shield to push through to the inner chambers, because you’ll need him in here when the time comes, before FF tries to find a way out, scare you off with guns and dogs and threats of lawyers, with gates and fences, with his indomitable will. FF acts as though he and the land are one, that he’s a roaming rupture that could swallow up anyone he wanted to on the frozen earth so long as it’s within his property-line; he extends this narcissistic angst to his whole damn D&D world.

*

H, stomach roaring with over a week's hunger, a deep, pulled-muscle need. Hauweetzür Sorin, mithril staples holding their guts together where their allies' broadsword-sarean had plucked the still-born imp from like an errant ingrown whisker. LVC's shot nerves had drawn out their Quebecois drawl, and the rest of the crew waited in the van. Each time a player died, and thus left the barn, the room blew out a perfect white, flurries piled in as the sliding barn door whinnied in distress. There wasn't a man-door, just the great big laborious thing out front. FF would relight the candles that'd just been blown dead, reset the mood, but only the candles in front of each living player, and so the table grew dimmer and dimmer as the party's spirits dimmed alike.

H was left with only Nudie, LVC, and Larry Forde-Lorne. High up, gas-station shades shuddered in the wind, cast a little weak yellow down H couldn't see, but everything else in here was silent, as though the weather outside was a fib, or the barn was in a whole different world altogether. Even in the tiny bit of candlelight the chrome, almost fridge-like, door beckoned like a lover at H's peripheral, like it was willing itself to be seen.

“So, that's the crux of the problem. You can pursue Miserian to the turret, or you can try and drop down the well, to the otherwhere, to the center of all things, and try and start ‘the fire that burns for all time,’ or, rather, burned a long time but ain't no more.” FF is pleased with himself. If the last three standing party members rush Miserian, they doom the world to eternal winter. If they drop down the brimstone well they fight the chronophage drake, which entails all sorts of tricky navigation, and Miserian fully escapes. Neither task is possible without at least the three together. Either way, FF wins, and the party, the crew, the film fails.

So, what do you do?

Roll 1d20. On a roll of 1-19, proceed to 8A. On a roll of 20, proceed to 8B. If you have “The Obscure Module,” on a roll of 1-17, proceed to 8A, and on a roll of 18-20, proceed to 8B. If you have LUCKY, you may choose to re-roll until your charges are spent. If you have “The Lost Art of Tantrum Banishment,” you may treat the additional roll in section 8A as a 20.

8A: You split the party. As Hauweetzür, you give chase to Miserian, the wry old wizard desperate to scramble to his teleportation circle atop the rickety castle. Nudie and LVC vault over the well’s lip, plunge into its dilated sable pupil, to sure-death. FF refuses to resolve Nudie and LVC’s battle with the deadly dragon in the black heart of the earth until you and him wrap up at the top of the earth, duel at the punctum of the highest peak on the earth. You strike him once, but he doesn’t go all the way down. You action-surge, and FF gets the smart coyote glint in his eye, the one that knows the value of retreat, of winning by stalemate; you assume he’s going to lie about the remaining hit-points, no matter how much damage you do. You opt instead to roll your once-daily ability.

Roll 1d20:

- On a 1, you raise your glaive to strike down the wizard but his leer, his *look*, cuts into you, and he mutters “take,” and you’re on the ground cowering, looking up at your beloved body, staples straining to keep your guts together, your brutal, mannish body, with Miserian’s needy, uncaring eyes, and it strikes you down; you are dead. Game over.

•On a 2-19, you call all your hate, your frustration and hurt, you will every wrong the world has ever suffered to come to you, and like a lightning bolt it does, but as you pivot with your glaive to strike him down, he vanishes in a wink of arcane light. He's escaped. [Proceed to Resolution 1].

•On a 20, you look into the face of the wizard who's killed all your loved ones, your lovers and your friends and your family, who's hounded your every step as you traveled 'his lands,' as you tried to make sense of Farmer Fucker's desperate desire to turn fun inside out, to recreate the conditions of his own suffering in his own youth. You hold your glaive high, call all your hate, your frustration and hurt, you will every wrong the world has ever suffered to come to you, and with an actual lightning bolt it does, fusing your arm into the glaive, and like a jousting rod you thrust its point into his raisin-black heart. The wild-magic surge gurgles through you, and your mouth opens with a voice you physically shouldn't have, and you say "leave." The banishment starts slow, strips his favored guise, and then all the others, and all the swallowed souls, sending each thieved, innocent element of his makeup up back to its respective home plane, as per the spell's description. He reaches out to touch you, to cast his secret, once-per-body spell, "Power Word: Take," but parabolically cannot close the distance, close as an onion skin, but never connecting, your fed-up, *never-again* hatred boiling him down to nothing. The glaive explodes in a final blast of energy, and you're thrown from the top of the tower. You catch the briefest glimpse of the battle with the drake through an embrasure on your way down, thunder-step in, and raise your shield, put yourself between the time-warping beast and buy them the time they need to elude the

Drake. Nudie and Biggum scurry around it, and around, to the frozen grotto the heart of the world lay under, a small ember in its center. As they chip at its frozen surface with pick-axes, you drive your shield into its snapping jaw; arm crushed, you wait for your punishment, but a blast of heat roars out the heart of the world, and you black out. FF blows out all four candles. [Proceed to Resolution 2].

8B: You were ready for this. Nudie activates the spell-scroll your party bought several months ago in real-time, a week in-game time, to cast “reduce” on the step Miserian monologues from, and Miserian tumbles. Miserian’s strength is his only low-stat, and thus he is unable to right himself. He attempts to cast feather-fall to slow his descent, but Nudie counterspells it; Miserian attempts to counterspell Nudie’s counterspell, but LVC, rather, LVC’s insufferable elven bard-barian multi-class, Biggum Lindaelantha, counterspells Miserian’s attempt to counterspell Nudie’s initial counterspell; the stack of dirty arcane dishes undoes itself, and Miserian drops toward the well, not quite toward its mouth. You, Hauweetzür Sorin, spend your reaction to activate your held action, to grapple Miserian, which Larry Forde-Lorne had laughed at the condition triggers for—that Miserian come within melee range of the Tantrum Paladin, the strange, banned subclass only ever found in one module, a module Larry Forde-Lorne has never been able to let go of. Miserian fails the contested strength check, and the two of you plummet into blackness. Miserian, even with full-health, won’t survive the full drop, the 20d6 average bludgeoning damage value. Hauweetzür, who might survive had they not slogged to through hours of traps to get here, was likewise doomed. You can’t see a thing, but you can hear your position as the air blows by

you, all the heat above and gone, the cold snatching your breath a little. You feel the pressure change as you breach the bottom of the shaft, just ten feet to impact. You announce “As a bonus action, I cast Tantruming Smite.” Larry Forde-Lorne scrambles. He fibs “nat 20” on his skill check to break the grapple, but it doesn’t matter, because your smite, should it land, will paralyze him, and render him vulnerable to all forms of damage; no reactions, no saves, only death. The God-Bled Glaive so hot your fist fuses shut around it; your hand above just above a candle, steady in that invisible pitch where it’s hotter than in the flame itself. Miserian and Hauweetzur scattered across the aberrative drake’s lair, splattered flesh and dandruff-fine bones, down like christmas-morning snow, the few bigger chunks thunking down quicker, like hail, but only for a minute. The drake distracted by what, to it, was an anti-climatic pair of ‘poof’ in frost, doesn’t notice Nudie and Biggum float down, and around, to the frozen grotto the heart of the world lay under, a small ember in its center. As they chip at its frozen surface with pick-axes, the drake nudges the laundry-piles of flesh the two bodies made, and then raises its wings, a leg, and pisses. FF blows out all four candles. [Proceed to Resolution 2.]

Resolution 1: You grab LVC’s hand, squeeze it tight. “We’ve lost. Move quickly. LVC rips his flannel off, and Nudie’s on the radio. The crew bursts in, all the candles blow out, and the light’s too bright for you. A grip drags FF back in a sleeper hold, and you press against the wall, dizzy with hunger. The clapboard clicks. “Action.” The many small motors in the several cameras all at once, LVC the only one in the shot, but you know,

him and the *thing* are both there. He shoves the table over with great effort. He approaches the door in the back. It's locked. THE END
—though perhaps not the one you wanted.

Resolution 2: “I guess you win.” His voice seems to come from everywhere. “You win, you stupid bitch.” You squeeze Nudie’s hand, but you hear a gurgle, and something warm as blood squelches across your face. Your eyes begin to adjust. Nudie’s grip gone limp, and LVC grunting, but mouth covered, in some sort of struggle. You fumble for Nudie’s radio, and depress its toggle. “Now.” You reach into your own messenger bag for the Super8 camera. The barn-door shuffles just a little, but won’t budge. You can see FF dragging LVC to the chrome door, still with that little lick of light, though there’s not a candle left alive. You wedge the Super8 into a fault in the table’s top, slide its clasp to lock the camera running. You give chase. You feel the cold again, all your body heat dizzy as a drunk bee, inhaled down the chrome door’s throat.

“If you come in here, you’ll be trapped with both of us.”

Your voice is weak, and hunger seems to be gnawing at your very marrow, compromising your farmer waddle forward, like you’re saddle-sore, but really, your feet wide to keep you stable. “Where are you taking us, Larry?”

You swear you see an ex—not Rebecca, but the first person who ever gave you attention, who wounded you deepest and with no remorse—in the glint of a tear running down from FF’s one eye, and Dad, Howie, in a wet, unbreached clot at the punctum of FF’s other eye. Like these men who hurt you are trapped in this bad, bad man, who has never lost a fight in his life.

“It takes us outside.”

“That’s where we want to go, Larry.” You speak as loudly as you can, though it’s rather cat-like, and not the assured motor purr you might expect from, well a camera *or* a cat, but instead, the hacking, deathly hairball retches, the compromised film loop pooling in the camera body like internal bleeding, brittle from the cruel cold. FF doesn’t have trouble understanding you, though. “We have people ready out there. They’ll be able to help”

“Not outside, there. *Outside.*”

The meaning upsets you, but eludes you at the same time. “I need to take Lee and Nudie out there anyhow. I’m guessing whatever you’ve done, they’re gonna need some help, am I right, Larry?”

“Who? Who are you talking about?”

“Larry, let him go.”

FF’s tears bungee back into his body, then your own start, dash themselves against your glasses lenses and then web up, thicken like muscle and throng. Your glasses crunch, and collapse into themselves, and the thing from the mirror sparks like lit grain alcohol, the stone tunnel aglow, Laird a frightened animal ensorcelled by headlights of motoring death.

*

You come to energized, the taste of a bloody steak all along your gums. Your teeth all dull with the ache of cavities, maybe. LeeVC is heavy, but you’re carrying him like a child, like you carried Artemis when she was too young to leap up to the bed, like she’s getting to be now in old age; strange, how those poles always come to resemble one another in the end. You can’t find Nudie’s body anywhere. As you approach the door, it

slides to the side, like one of the many side-wipes in *A New Hope*, you think. The crew are confused when you ask about Nudie, because that's a D&D NPC, not anyone on the crew. You're too tired to argue. The snow drives in too quickly to shut the door again, and begins to swallow the inner barn. R, frazzled and limping with a medical boot, rushes to you, you assume at first to hug you, but then instead past you, to retrieve the Super8 you'd wedged into the table. It could've only captured a little over 2-minutes of footage. You wonder if it caught whatever happened between the thing you saw in the mirror, and Forde-Lorne. It'd be nice to know what happened. But you sense in your heart, in the kind part, and the smart part alike, that you're better off not knowing.

“We've gotta get going, Harley” R shouts into your ear.

“Sure! I'll drive.” You can't see the sea-can behind the barn at all anymore, berm high and above it, almost up to the barn's shingles on the eastern face now too, as the Demon struggles to get traction. You punch it, and R is thrown back into her seat, laughing wildly at your seemingly miraculous recovery.

“I never noticed when you wore your glasses, but your one eye opens slower than the other after you blink.”

In your rearview, the barn shrinks as small as a six-sided die, and then to nothing.

NOTHING EVER BOTHERS JUULAR

“Alberta’s topographies of immigration, the restlessness of a rural, religious society that became urban and secular only during my childhood, still trace me. Parts of its landscape still inhabit and compel me. I still remember ‘stooking.’ I still want to say: ‘the stooks of yellow barley’ as if everyone will nod at what I am saying...I write each day in a terrible urgency, against death, I write, literally, so as not to die.”

—Erin Moure, *A New Bird Flicker, or the Floor of a Great Sea, or Stooking*.

2030

EVENING DAY ONE.

Air Canada lost Artemis on the flight from ‘Hollywood North’ to the prairie homestead, the place Howie had grown up in and, contrary to recursive rumours and assurances, Howie *had not* willed to my dickhead older brothers.

They’d given me grief at the terminal for the X on my passport indicating gender, which B.C. had had no problem with, but the ‘incoming district’ would. I argued until I picked up they just needed a bribe, subtly waved my phone at them to transfer the ascot-clad terminal attendant one-hundred ration tokens, and then boarded. Apparently they’d marked my baggage to not be loaded during that check-in fiasco. The thing was, my suitcases made it.

Only Artemis was missing. Artemis’ body, rather.

West Vancouver Ltd. had restrictions on burials the last ten years, and it was illegal to bring home ashes of loved ones (from vet and mortician alike) if you weren’t a public servant, a ‘toxic-waste hazard.’ Bullshit. It was what came after capitalism, more and more nepotism and hierarchy. It was some botched in-between thing. The planet was

dying anyhow. I was lucky enough to have a permissions pin to not need to wear a mask in public—based solely on my income bracket—but I wore one anyhow; I didn't want to get sick, didn't want to get others sick—that was the point. But having 24-hour bio-curfew permissions was essential to the successful running of the film-industry. The original unions had dissolved in a slow domino from Atlantic Canada to the west coast. They had no pull, and the 'foot-print' of film was so severely restricted under the new mandates that many studios couldn't figure out how to tell a worthy tale anymore. Middle-class feature folks like me and my kin had always known how to bend around a problem, flexibility and comfort be damned. We were thriving. And then, after a few years of okay turnouts, high stream *and* theater turnouts, and with our eco-record proven, they gave our production company permission to go big again anyhow, the strength of a union wedded with corporate bailouts, in governmental favoritism; we can trample a bit of moss, kill a couple horses on a bridge, as long as those deaths outrace the little deaths we all suffer when we can't watch new movies.

I traded ownership for the whole damn studio, which I'd inherited from Yannick for no good reason anyhow, to finish paying off my brothers for something that wasn't theirs in the first place and booked the million-token plane ticket with the remainder. Artemis wasn't getting tossed in a garbage bag and dumped just off-shore from Hong Kong, not if I had anything to say about it. What kind of dog-Mom would I be if I let my baby suffer like that? I hadn't let her suffer, by the way, I'd put her down even though it left me alone, left the loft so quiet it felt haunted; I put her down so her blindness, and the speedy sarcoma we'd found in her hip—the one she'd always slept on, couldn't get comfortable sleeping off of—wouldn't make her struggle even a few days. I worried it

was too quick, but I hadn't had the choice—you don't let them suffer. One of the few lessons Howie ever gave me explicitly. I would bury her on the farm, where I owned the land and could do whatever the fuck I wanted to it.

*

I'd near-about blown off my eyebrows starting machines up with ether in my youth, back when it'd seemed like a magic trick, to say nothing of the many habitual "fill a Tim's cup full of diesel, light it on fire, throw it on the frozen river down at McKinnon Flats," and "spell your name in Grain Alcohol and light the garage floor on fire" rituals I'd grown up with too. The way the engine on this cobalt blue trencher went together didn't make any sense to me though. I thought "I've gone soft," well I knew I had, but I didn't know I'd gone so soft I couldn't spend time thinking on a problem and eventually get a handle on it. Homem, one of the kids come home to hide on their farm after getting fired from a job they'd trained long and hard in school for—and hadn't ever figured out how to do a lick of other work apparently, because 'engineering' and 'coding' were safe, safe the way all those laid-off accountants had been safe too—Homem Jr. hadn't had any problem loaning out the long disused ride-on trencher to me, assured I'd let him be an extra next time we shot something out here, and that I'd reconsider the restriction on his water rights.

I thought hard to try and manifest Howie's voice in the back of my mind, him yelling at me about how I oughta know how to do the thing and in his anger actually accidentally teaching me how-to, but apparently dead Howie was too busy playing crib with the rest of the dead old farm hands in heaven, flicking twice-toasted four-cheese Tim's bagel crumbs off their suspenders, out from the folds their crippled posture vested

in their anonymous flannel shirts, crumbs flung out and then down onto their beautiful, polished crib-boards forever and ever amen.

It was dead in the clearing, the rotten red cedar chips long since grayed, and the markers of many anonymous dead dogs in the impromptu pet cemetery in disrepair. I picked out a spot I was sure was clear of earlier burials. I couldn't seem to recall a dog to correspond to each grave. I figured the one at least must be for middle-brother's chinchilla, Agathocles; what a fucking idiot, the brother, not the pet. But still, even with the rodent that was too enfeebled and thin by the end to have made for a fingerless glove on an especially petite woman's hand, there were more markers than pets I'd remembered growing up with.

This was the one thing Howie had been good for. Without the assistance of a laser level or a right-angle he could dig a mathematically perfect grave for a deceased pet, because he really knew how to mourn an animal; a mother? A wife? Not quite. Good for that, plus he left me all that money, and not to my dickhead brothers, not any uncles and not any charities, just me, even if I'd had to buy my way back into the very thing I was entitled to; had he not trusted me to make my own way? No, this had been an apology. I was not faring as well in the grave-digger business here today as Howie would've. I dug as far as I could with a shovel, above the hard frost. I needed to go deeper, or the coyotes might dig her up. The Sawzall blade had busted on a particularly hairy tree root (of which there were many more), and there weren't any fresh blades in the case to replace it. Then I got back from town with a pack of fresh blades and the battery was dead, and I could not for the life of me find a plugin for the charging dock in the shed.

Nothing but the sad white plastic coffee machine sat on the kitchen counter, a decidedly not-native Tim's pot on its launch-pad. It gurgled to life after a slap upside the head, and then I plugged in the charging-dock in the same slot. The power dimmed a little, but then recovered. The red steady eye on the dock indicated the battery was still coming back to life, and a green one should show up eventually to tell me "go." "Gas and go, bud." A Howie-ism. That, HABU ("highest and bestest use"), and "Welch time" (meaning *being late*) stung and stuck around in my brainpan, though they were only a few of the many stupid slogans. Every time he talked to anyone it was some sort of pitch, some opening to a joke, or a story. He used to tell people I'd won a big prize for writing an essay in high school about the origin of the word *fuck*, but I never wrote anything like that. He didn't know how to have an earnest conversation with anyone, how to deviate from the script at all. And the most important rule with Howie was you didn't interrupt his stories, his jokes, you didn't intervene when he forced the waitress to flip a coin for a bigger tip, brave trouble for giving away the secret: *he'll give you the bigger tip whether or not you call it correctly, so long as you're brave enough to call it*. Howie didn't think it was funny when you showed him the bad guy in "No Country For Old Men" doing just about the same thing, but to torment strangers before killing them.

*

The charger's red eye steady. The house was musty, which it never had been growing up; asthma had been bad in the arid prairies, and the exhausted humidifier on the highboy with the crooked mirror was the only thing that got me through the night some days. The stairs to the basement were swollen with humidity, dalmatian with mold. The light socket was unresponsive to the fresh bulb. I fished a loose 1936 penny out from an

empty fuse socket. I screwed the fresh lightbulb into the empty fuse socket and it yellowed up, which meant—what would Howie have yelled at me here?—it meant, there's a short in the circuit, which means it's a bit beyond my skill-level to repair.

All the old boys I might call to ask for a hand with this, all the men Howie knew and who would do about any kind of work for a ten-token Tim's card, they're all dead. Some before Howie, even. I'll have to call the son of one of those good old boys now, who's going to nickel-dime me half-to-death and force me to put in a whole new fuse-panel, replace all the wiring, and, oh, he'll know a *real good guy*, who'll do the same but to work on the bit of rot along the foundation, and he'll know a *real good guy* who can get that back porch demo'd in no time, no time at all, and even though he refuses to quote the cost of 'his machine' and his 'man,' neither of which show up the day they're supposed to, he'll charge you plenty for them both, and he won't pay for the repairs where the hydraulic sledge slipped and punched a hole through your foundation, because that's on you, but jesus-fuck he knows a guy, a *real good guy*, and by the time you're through with these idiot children of the actual *good old boys*, dead old boys, by the time you're through with all this you'll have to hire someone better to come and fix all the work, and all these *real good guys* are gonna laugh their asses off in their shitty brand-new exurban homes on the outer scab orbit of the urban sprawl in town, houses that you pray will fall in on them and all their spoiled children in ten years (and might just do that, whether or not those prayers are answered from above or below).

To think, I could've been one of them. I could've been one of the cowardly, ungrateful inheritors of the land and the craft, complaining about my cheap father while turning around and refusing to do quality work, to treat customers like human beings.

Sure, I saw how I might, in a warbling fun-house mirror, appear to resemble all that. But I'd left. I only came back to bury my dog that deserves a burial, deserves dignity being dead now. I didn't come back to shoot some spiritual documentary, to document "the rural decay" myth that Vice and the rest of the edgelord fascist-haven publications were desperate to push. I didn't come back here to slap a coat of ugly anonymous settler-white paint on the house I grew up in, just to turn around and flip it and the land it tottered on to some blood-thirsty golf-course developers. I came home to give Artemis the goodbye she deserves.

MORNING DAY TWO.

The power seemed fine in the kitchen, the den, and three-quarters of the rooms upstairs. The outdoor plugins, the basement, and the shed—if it did have an outlet underneath all that hoarded junk, ancient gas-pump globes and spent lawn-mower blades and a whole damn plastic rack of bloodied sprung rat-traps. Howie'd never gotten rid of Wendy's ashtray from the kitchen pass-through counter. When I lift it, a perfect ring of varnish peeled away with it. Like an eye, or a shocked mouth. The wood was coarse here in this circle, had texture the way all the gloss and varnish on wood usually hides. The kitchen window's fake stained-glass window gels hadn't peeled up anywhere either, though they certainly felt a little less colourful and brilliant than when I was little. No DVD player in the den. The Sega and the Tube TV both booted up, but "The Adventures of Batman and Robin" cartridge wouldn't load properly. I couldn't find Sonic anywhere in the T.V. cabinet, though I swore we'd had that game too.

The floor was so cold in the basement that it hurt my feet even through my sneakers. In the back of the furnace room Wendy's pressboard bookcase stood tall and

proud as a grain elevator; they just didn't make piece-a-shit pressboard furniture like they used to. The million-torch flashlight on the floor real yellow but underwhelming, subbed out for the potent LED concentrate blasting the room—like a mean-spirited neighbour's snow-blower, well, when we used to get snow at least—from the outdated iPhoneXV. Lotta King on here: Gerald's Game, Salem's Lot, Pet Sematary, all seven The Dark Tower books (out of order, which I fixed). A big fat hole where I remembered plucking "The Stand" from, to loan to Laird who loved all those nuclear apocalyptic zombie movies; he hadn't liked it, I remembered him telling me that when he gave it back to me, that "it wasn't really scary? And there weren't any zombies." Couple Bachman too. I ordered their spines in accordance with where they lined up with the King counterparts, where the wraparound cover from Bachman's "The Regulators" meets the one from "Desperation," where the worlds meet.

I'd interviewed a porn-star years ago when I worked on that Herzog documentary, just before he croaked, Herzog that is, and porn buddy, he'd written his media thesis on something about how King just recycles things over and over, how he promoted fascist ideologies like *accelerationism* by just saying the same things over and over with diminishing returns. Buddy wouldn't shut up about these two specific books, about how King "Oughta have just picked the one," and how pseudonyms were a disingenuous gesture—he didn't take kindly to being asked what his real name was, when not performing porn, was. I didn't remember these two books the whole way, but what I did remember, well, they were different worlds, however much they resembled one another, and they hardly felt like greedy grabs at saying the same dumb thing over and over again.

I was never an academy dickhead though, so what did I know? School for me was a direct pipeline to working in film. That's what it'd been for almost all us farmkids, really, though I was one of the few who went into a trade that was *actually* forever in demand—film, the great escape. Sure, we think about what goes into composition of a shot, we reference movies and seek to understand their construction to inform our own 'practices,' but other than in just one misguided professor's class, I never had to hear nor use "Lacan" and "Bergman's incestuous mirror-laden death-drive" in the same sentence. That's not to say idealistic kids with English degrees didn't beg to work on our films when they graduated, just that, well, they weren't very good on set; you needed to get electrocuted now and then, you needed to freeze your ass off, you needed to not post on social media—*anything* from on-set—nor be on your phone the whole while (this was their greatest struggle); you had to have skills to help *build* a (real-adjacent) world, not to just *think* about it.

I hadn't had these deep, long and lonely internal rants, lousy with angst, in a very long time. Not until Artemis died.

AFTERNOON DAY TWO.

They'd run internet to the house off of Fritz's corner, instead of Frieze's. It didn't do a lick coming off the line, so they'd sent the same tech back, and he'd been mad about it, maybe embarrassed, and frustrated that I'd chastised him waggled my eyebrows and tapped the bridge of my nose when he wore his mask below his nose; I didn't want to catch death because some idiot, nametag: LARRY, doesn't like to smell his own horse-shit breath.

"I think it'd be best if we went in through the basement."

“You already trenched up the driveway to the living room corner. Just use the same line, move it over to the correct pole.”

“Do you know anything about fiber?”

“I know the proper pole is closer to the house, so there should be plenty slack.”

“That’s not how we do it.”

“We’re not putting it in the basement. The power isn’t reliable down there yet.”

“I know a guy who’ll look at that for you.”

“I’m sure you do. But we’re sticking with the den.”

The standoff continued like that all day while the citiot replaced the router with an identical new one, drilled a second hole so close to the first one that they joined one another, and plugged the former with a cheap gel caulk. Then the citiot almost flipped their trencher off the trailer, having not fastened the ramp slats in any meaningful way before putting it in reverse. He knocked feed forks off the front end twice, and tried to tell me I’d have to pay extra for all the line he’d snapped and wasted each time he fucked it up. The waning grass was already scarred yellow where the first line was. It would look like a few-toothed comb by the time he was done trying to do the simple job he was supposedly trained for.

“Would’ve gone quicker if you’d prepared the approach for us,” he mentioned, blotting his brow sweat away with a small teal glasses cleaning cloth.

I looked at the cobalt blue trencher, still dead in the dead cedar-chip grove.

“Imagine you would’ve charged the same?”

His water-bottle straw scraped and struggled to deliver the last dredges of dark soda pooled in its bottom gutters. “You know, that attitude pisses me off. Always making things about money. Whatever happened to treating your neighbours right?”

“You live out here?”

“Don’t mean that literally.”

“I know you didn’t. You didn’t mean anything literally. What you said means nothing. The company you work for pay you shit, and trick you into thinking it’s someone like me not doing heavy lifting for you that makes you feel like you got ripped off somewhere along the line.”

He was gobsmacked, I reckoned because no one had talked like that to him, that freely to him, ever in his unremarkable life. I continued. “I don’t do favours for folks I don’t know. My dad was like that. He would loan thousands of dollars out to a drunk who asked nice and just met him at the cafe, but he wouldn’t take care of his own. Your bosses make you feel like the customer here is the enemy, and like customers don’t respect your expertise. But your bosses don’t respect you. And their bosses don’t respect them. And by my bet, the servers we run all this internet on are gonna get too costly to maintain, and we’re all gonna lose the internet again, and the world is gonna shrink, and you, you who don’t even know how to tilt a trailer safely, or drive slow enough your machine that puts the line in *for you*, so you don’t have to dig the path by hand and you don’t have to lay the line by hand, that you don’t know how to drive slow enough that you fuck it up and bounce the forks and snap the line, when the internet’s gone and the world is small, you’re gonna be nothing. And that’s your bosses’ faults. And their bosses’ faults. The whole way up.”

I buttered a slice of plain white bread, set some sprouts into the butter—real butter, not cheap—and then freed a slice of cheese from its static cling, laid it down and then did the same with two slices of blackforest ham. I folded the single-slice bed of bread in half, and took a beautiful, articulate toothmark chomp out of it. Mouth still full, I continued, sensing his understanding, his heartbreak. “I get that they ask a lot of you, and that they send you to do it all alone. That’s life, I guess, and it sucks that they re-perpetrate the crime that is *being alive* on the scale of your daily duties. But mind your fucking mouth. The world isn’t bad because folks don’t do favours for one another. That we’re driven apart and all have too robust’a personalities. It’s bad because the people who own everything drive us all apart and then tell us that’s our fault.”

He finally gulped, retrieved his off-the-rack prescription glasses from his shirt-pocket. “But I’m saying, it would’ve gone quicker for you, you know, if you’d dug the route for me before I got here.”

“I imagine they wouldn’t let you use my perfectly good line in the first place anyhow, right?”

“Maybe not. I might not have told them.”

“Well then you’d be getting fewer hours, paid less. They’d love that.”

“I’m salaried, actually.”

“You ever think about unionizing?”

*

The internet was actually faster out here than in the city. Too much interference in the city, too many microwaves and satellite dishes and routers and too much traffic and too many users &c.. I signed a little check-mark on the installation form about the

experimental wire, that they might need to replace it if the winter dipped under -40°C (and that wasn't unlikely), but that it should be fast otherwise, and to just let them know. I'd have to fill out a survey in six months. I went to type "side-saddle" and by the time I got to "si" it was the top result. It was like the internet moved at the rate of my thought (or just head), but perhaps that was Google's algorithm knowing me better than I knew myself.

Gone were the days of being fourteen and waiting 40 minutes to load into a match of Battlefield 1942 that I would've just lagged out of five minutes in. The tortured-bird caught-in trash-compactor yodel of the modem. No more Josh and Gord snuck away from the rest of us on GoldenEye64 to go try and look at porn on the computer, and finding the internet so slow that they leave the room before the pictures can finish loading, which you get shit-kicked for later when your dad whisked away the screen-saver with a shake of the mouse—even though, I reflected on now, he was probably doing just the same thing after everyone went to bed. Now that I needed the internet for nothing but emails and research and access to news, *now* it was fast enough to fulfill all those youthful longings that I had no intention of reprising.

The dining table chairs were all wobbly on the cusp of collapse, like their glue'd come undone, and the living room's sofa sank in toward its center like the sarlaac in *Jedi*. I sat upstairs in the master bedroom, on Wendy's side of the bed; something about the window in my childhood bedroom bothered me, and the brother's bedrooms were full of reminders that they existed, which I preferred to avoid. Wendy's side of the bed had so much more life, I suppose because she'd been dead so much longer, had a smaller window to make her mark on the mattress.

The internet, finally, the fast, real-world internet, not the sad early draft of it I'd grown up with, was finally here. It was like the hermetic seal that'd hidden the acreage from time was finally ruptured, like the world could come rushing in. The browser blazed alive white, fast, and eager for me to get back to work.

Work? Well, what was work? I'd handed over the keys to the whole thing, and flying back here had nearly tokenrupted me. What would the rest of my life look like? I supposed I could find work on someone's production. The board at the studio would probably be okay with me coming on as an 'independent consultant.'

That had been the way of the world for many of our fathers, not Howie, I guess, but Josh's dad, and Gord's dad, and, well, everyone in oil at least; you worked a long time, got out, and then went and worked for better money for shorter periods, paid out by someone else who missed having you around, who hated the new generation of workers who just didn't get it. It was an honourable thing to be—a *consultant*—unlike *retired*, which for a farmer, meant nothing, even when they claimed they were.

I'd wiggled just a tickle to get comfortable, and the bed-frame's rail-clip bent and the corner crimped and, tossed, I knocked my head off the nightstand and ate decade-dusted carpet. A lot of blood, as a head-wound is wont to gift you, but all right overall. Underneath the bed, in my line of sight, a squished banker's box propping up the mattress some, like Atlas holding up the heavens.

*

I wasn't sure if these were things Wendy'd held onto for herself, or Howie'd hung onto. "Yer '73 Rodeo Queen," Wendy glimmering like a pointillism painting if all the dots were rhinestones, side-saddle and nearly goddamn horizontal, in full chaps and

denim, cowboy hat hanging on by nothing but its drawstring. This was an official bit of C.Stampede merch. I hadn't known she'd been riding horses that late in life. I mean, she was barely on the damn horse in the photo, so *riding* might not've been the word for it. I remember she'd made a lot of money driving chuckwagon, roping cattle, but I didn't know she'd had this, well, this glamorous side.

I'd made a few thinly veiled scathing films about Howie after I blew up from finishing Yannick's *Cairn of Undying Insult*. It wasn't my best work. It was, well, it was this moment where I'd really begun to see myself for what I was, what I could be; something clicked when I took myself in in the mirror. The most vicious version of myself. It was a nightmare. The myth of how cursed the production was, how many folks quit and died and all that, that carried the film into unearned acclaim. No one ever found Yannick. But everyone loved the movie. How it 'said so much by saying so little.' It was like Yannick had smuggled all the good of silent cinema into the contemporary moment, and showed the world that words were the worst part of the visual medium.

The films I made as retribution against Howie were usually pretty simple. Fell happily and snugly into the canon of 'folks mad at dad,' who left home and had to figure out the whole damn world from scratch. But I'd never thought to make a movie about Wendy. She hadn't pissed me off. I kind of forgot she'd ever been around some days. What a rich reward for being a good parent, for dying before your kid grew up to find some way to loathe you: *who are you again?*

I looted the closet next, with the stiff doors that had the unmoving shutters. They'd been white, but some oily brown gunk had spotted them all over. Not mold, but not something I wanted to scrub at without gloves either. More "Wailing Wendy"

memorabilia. A couple pairs of white leather gloves long enough to creep up onto my shoulders, pinch my armpits. A black denim jacket—no pockets—big enough to cross my bust; I'd always been built that way, better fit her big-boob blouses than Howie's tired-collar tees that flowed down past my knees. Lotta busted old boots.

I realized now that I'd left my sneakers on all day long, and onto the bed, my feet still froze from this morning. The dark comforter's rose motif marred by many muddy scuffs. Too bad. The washer and dryer were on the dead basement circuit.

A shelf with a few books. Proud and at the front of the shelf, a couple cotton-cover early 20th-century ones Wendy'd inherited from her mother-in-law, Howie's mother, who Howie hadn't been on good terms with at the end. I didn't remember her either, just that she drowned a cat that had threatened Wendy while Wendy was pregnant with my oldest brother.

I snuck my shoes off, tugged on a pair of baby-blue boots, and stood awkwardly in the closet thumbing through *Wild Geese*. Some import Scandinavian gal who thought that farms were a lesser kind of civilization. Wendy really loved this one. I tossed it on the bed pillow and it flopped open like it longed for an embrace. The house was quiet but for the stairs, pregnant with the sound of 'no-dog.'

I made my way into the backyard, bent like a less-than sign into the tire-swing >O. The black black tire looked like it could hit the road happily if you slapped it on a rim, spanked it and said "get goin'." the only thing on the property to outlast the sun-kissed bleach of time.

EVENING DAY TWO.

The sun would go down soon. I opened the PetrolPass app, registered my use of Howie's old IH, paid the 200 HT for the two hours limit, and with a happy electronic BING the gov.-mandated collar choking the starter relaxed. I drove down the road a while, center lane (if there were lanes at all on the gravel), slowing down and sliding to the shoulder when I passed folks in newer, bigger trucks than me, none of whom I recognized from the community, but none of whom seemed to look twice at me. Lotta tired old livestock fences. Not much crop left for anyone, but a Homem Jr had mentioned about a thousand acres that just wouldn't dry out for him. No combine putters. Not a horse in sight. No smack of cow-chews-grass.

I'd dated someone a long time, Rebecca, who I'd never forgiven for letting Artemis run away once, and come back pregnant with Coyote babies—all those mixed-breed puppies vicious and mean to their poor mum, Artemis. Rebecca had taught me the game "my cows." Cows are worth a point. Horses five-ten. The values were negotiable. A gray fox would win the game regardless of points. An urban fox, in turn, might only be worth fifty points. Lots of birds were worth less than a point, but added up quickly if they were in a big cluster. Cows? They were always around. They were the baseline by which all value was derived, just one point. Whoever said "my ___" first got those points. The game was incredibly hard to win when you were the driver. The trick was, whenever you passed a graveyard, whoever shouted GRAVEYARD first could wipe out another player's points completely. It was a cute city-people game, I'd thought. That only city people could reduce the pieces of the prairie to a points system like that. Could imagine an animal like a cow that you spent all yer heart and soul raising to take to market was worth a single point.

I remembered watching a horse stick its whole head into a bale once, pulling out half a mouse, a big mouse, could've been a rat if there'd been rats here back then. Its front half was strung to its back half with a spitty strap of unspooling guts, which had reminded me of a fire-hose in a way, the way they unfolded and flopped. The horse stuck its head back in, and slurped the whole mouse down. It sneezed, then looked at us couple kids like we were voyeurs, like we didn't have permission to watch.

How many points would Rebecca have given me for that?

The crushing orange cuticle that was the sun eventually relented, and that flat, bored horizon snuggled into darkness like a bachelor to their single top-sheet. An hour later, exactly, the doorbell rang. I had been asleep in Howie's rocking chair. The blue-jay doorbell with the drawstring wasn't dead, really tweety tweetied. Wendy had loved that stupid doorbell.

"Hey Miss Welch. Heard you had electrical problems. I been down the road helping Homem build their new tin shop, figured I might stop by."

Hot. Farmhand hot. Sweaty and filthy. My god. Like Henry Cavill with a proper dim prairie timbre. I hadn't dated a man who'd been born and identified just that way since my 20s—for good reason. Had to play it cool. "Bit late to call on me, innit?"

"Apologies, ma'am. I'd've come earlier, but I bumped into a couple folks dumping garbage over on Wagners' corner. Had to have a quick chat." His knuckles were swollen. From work? From beating up city-slicker idiots? But which was I to him?

"I don't think we've met."

"We may have, when we were kids. Fishing out near Cremona."

"Lost Lake?"

“That’d be it.” Ah. So he’d known me as a shy, confused platinum blonde boy. But he was up to date on my name. Didn’t love the ma’am nonsense, but liked the formality that implied, the form, the attention.

“Well, Howie never replaced the old panel, with the glass fuses, right. And I know that’s a pile of labour. And I’m tight on tokens since I flew out, so, I appreciate the offer, but—”

“Flew? Like, an airplane?”

“I did indeed.”

“You in the mob?”

“Nah. They don’t take kindly to queers.”

“Too bad.” He thumbed his chin, thought hard a minute. “I actually bought a plane at auction, a few years back. Old crop-sprayer. Cessna. I should take you up sometime. I charge a whole lot less.”

“That so?”

“While I’m at it, fill up that old Scout out front with purple gas. See how many ways I can piss off the feds at once, pardon the language.”

Pardoned. Oh, pardoned again and again. “Well, I appreciate the thought. Just not in the budget at the moment.”

“Panel’s downstairs?”

“It is.”

“Well, you gonna ask me in, then? Getting real dark, and coyotes are known to stalk men who stand shivering in doorways unawares.”

*

“I’m so sorry, but your name has slipped my mind.”

His tape-measure thwipped back into itself as he finished measuring the width of the electrical coil. “You don’t remember me from that weekend fishing? What about with your cousins, at Sikome, few summers later? You pushed me off the floatie, told me it was sissy island now?”

Oh god. I’d never been good, and my whole life until my 30s was just a blur, like watching a warbling western VHS on FFWD. “Doesn’t ring a bell. Probably my brothers.” My hands shook with sad, horny nerves while I held the phone’s flashlight over his shoulder while he surveyed the panel. “Okay, so, I think there’s a short. I screwed a bulb in, and it lit up? I’m no expert. Not at all.”

“That’s a realllll old trick.” He turned to look at me, hot garlic breath across my face like waking up with a drowzy sunburn; a good sting. “Very thrifty. Saves me a ton of trouble.”

Oh, that validation, that I’m not an idiot, not someone to take advantage of. I could’ve cum where I stood.

*

Mark Jordan. A bitta uninspired name, but what a frame; what a silhouette that bulk cut out of the light, like Howie cut tree-roots from a dog’s-grave.

MJ promised to call on me tomorrow when he could come back with a new panel, “might not be until after dark, if that’s alright?” He didn’t make it past the door before I made my move. “Can’t let you get got by coyotes,” get got?! What bullshit hick accent was I trying to pull here, to impress him? How ugly and desperate I’d looked. But it didn’t matter. He recognized the need in me. He stayed.

He rubbed my shoulders in the bath, bathtub itself so cool it hurt the bum and the toes, but the water the same problem on the other end, the hot end, so hot you can barely breathe. “May I smell your hair?” he asked, polite to the point of nuisance. I pat his knee in assent. He sniffed my hair, deep and long, and his chest and wing-span grew so great in his inhalation that the bathtub could barely contain him, that water curled over its edge like my toes did mid-cumming, and we had to draw more to keep ourselves submerged.

“How are you real?” I asked in a sort of drowsy ecstasy, my elbows on his knees, curling the thick wet hair on each of his shins like driven screws.

He was imprinting my sensitive back with his Lincoln Log thumbs, busting through knots and clumps like long-lain tall-grass, the kind that sat so long you can’t mow it, you got to whip it down precisely, sweep it up, and then go back for a second pass. “What makes you think I am?”

*

I was restless all night long, dreaming of a PTO ripping off a farm-hand’s testicles; of Howie grinning like an idiot, dead in the theater, the dark room with a bright screen; of Artemis in the middle of a badger burrow, surrounded on all sides by hellhounds, demons, bats, and, rats, paladin rats gushing forth from the hole and holding the baddies at bay; restless, but MJ cradled me close and steady like a broken-collarbone sling. The final time I woke up, he was gone, the sun just realizing the horizon and battering the dew into its usual morning glisten.

MORNING DAY THREE.

MJ had left a note on the table by Wendy’s ashtray, with his cell# on it “in case of emergency (big or small, just call).” Beside it was Wendy’s *Wild Geese*. I don’t get that

motif. I never saw geese out here growing up, and, well nothing flies out here but the occasional crop-duster and overgrown mosquitoes. What I'd do to see another barn-owl with my own two eyes. But this Scandinavian woman was big on geese. Guess MJ must've brought the book down this morning, after we'd knocked it off the bed in our getting to know one another; he hadn't noticed the dried blood all over my side of the bed, or if he had, he hadn't asked. I checked the linen closet for replacements but found nothing.

The cheap white coffeemaker was drooling black fuel into the stolen Tim's pot blushing with hot condensation. Well that was nice of MJ. And the coffee wasn't even bad. Where'd he find coffee? And coffee that wasn't stale? Did he bring coffee in his truck to the house? What did he drive again?

Looks like Homem Jr. is out in the field north of the quonset, checking the stooling crops, making sure they're all spread out and pandiculating the right way. Bit late in the year for all that, but nothing seemed to grow up straight anymore anyways; farming might not be easy to learn now that the world was dying and none of us wanted to give up trucks and air-conditioning and burgers and the people who we elected to manage all this were as crooked as the capitalist dickheads that'd run the show before; the world seemed like a raccoon trap, like we had to stick our hand in to grab at it, but couldn't safely pull out our clenched fists.

"Christ it's sunny," I said to no one, naked but for a silk blue smoking jacket, something in Wendy's proportions but Howie's gender; clothes, man. What in the fuck. I walked out the back porch to give HJr. a wave, hold my coffee cup up and let the heat blast my chin, my neck, all the places MJ'd paid proper attention too. I shivered once

with ache and once with chill. HJr. waved at me, turned his truck off, and walked up.

“Mornin’ Welch.”

“Homem. Thanks for sending that fellow about the power, by the way.”

“Which?”

“MJ?”

“Don’t recall. Lotta folks out working on the spot though. I don’t catch all their names.”

“Well he was a real treat. Good people. Pretty late to be growing, err,”

“Cereals? Yeah. It was too wet all year to seed, so, here we are. Probably gonna get froze or hailed out, live off insurance for the winter.”

“Funny how that works. How we all were ‘important,’ ‘essential,’ as food-growers, but when god turned on the shitty-weather machine we had to live off of insurance payouts, no one wanted to take care of us even though we grew their food.”

“We?”

“Yeah, farmers, I mean.”

“Are you gonna start farming?”

“No, I just mean, I grew up like this.”

“Ah, I catch you now. Yeah. We’ll see. Well I’m off to Dixon’s golf-course.”

“The one Howie hated?”

“Yeah, bungled the water table for some other folks. Not yer dad, I don’t think, but Howie stood up for the rest of them when they were too shy.”

“Ah.”

“He was a really good man. Great community leader.”

“Mm. Sure.”

*

I wiped the thin rose slippers off on the floor mat and refreshed my coffee. No new emails. No missed calls. No dead dog body. I dragged more of Wendy’s shit out from the closet: empty old pill-bottles like baby-advil, chewable Flintstones vitamins. Howie didn’t seem to leave anything here. I’d cleaned out most of his shit from his apartment in town, Summerfall, a long time ago, not long after he died. A beautiful chrome radio of some sort is the last thing I find of note, with a little panel that pops up and shows a black and white map of the world, some countries long gone, the etched planes above and below the flattened maps with their dotted trajectories a little laugh, that the world had seemed so small then, when the radio had collapsed everything, when the plane could take you anywhere.

I plugged it in in the kitchen on the pass-through counter. I turned it on and it got hot too quick, so I flicked the chrome bulb off, dialed the volume down. Was that right? Howie almost coming to the back of my mind, something *like* him, something impersonating him, sneering that I should know better than to turn a tube radio on with the volume all the way up; *you need to warm these things up slowly, gently*, “like butt-fucking” I laughed to myself. So many small things, small asks, small gestures of grace and patience to remember. How had Wendy and Howie ever been able to do that? How had anyone? The world hadn’t ever been small or simple, and it felt stupid I’d ever bought into that bullshit in the first place.

*

My room was not unlike the master bedroom. It was just as big, surprisingly. It hadn't been touched in a long time. I pulled a shoebox from underneath the bed and looked at little tchotchkes and tokens I'd pilfered over the years: the Monopoly thimble; ripped up liner notes from my middle brother's autographed copy of a Wide Mouth Mason CD; a burned out old radio tube I'd used as a great big electricity pylon in a sci-fi holocaust diorama that my social studies teacher had failed me on, convinced Howie had helped me, and disturbed I was thinking of a world where Nazis would come back and do what they did all over again (this was before they'd actually tried to do just that); a curious little glass die that reminded me of sisters I never had (outside my daydreams, at least), but the more I focused on it, the more I felt like I was about to trip on a gopher hole, like something would happen if I reconciled what I saw in there—like the thing in the mirror when we shot *Cairn of Undying Insult*; nothing but madness that way.

I heard the radio static downstairs resolve into some angry radio play. I dropped the strange little die back in with the rest of the orphaned nothings, closed the tiny Nike shoebox, and headed downstairs.

AFTERNOON DAY THREE.

Nothing there now. Just the satisfying interstice static. The sun was warming up the den through the rose curtains, doing the slow, one-way wave as it crossed the room. I blew into the Batman game cartridge again, and, with the timidity of someone trying to get their recalcitrant debit-card to work inserted, jammed it in quick, with as light a hand I could. I turned the TV on with my hopes halfway up, the static ozone across its face alight with life, and, the Sega said its name: "SEEEGGGAAAHHHH." The first thought that came to my mind was that I might get some adapter, hook this up to a

capture device, stream it. There's lots of money in playing out this kind of retro content. Rebecca's budget for 'tipping' streamers (on top of supporting them on their services with a monthly subscription fee already) took up ¼ of her annual tokincome, though, much of it was tax-deductible through some contorted, stupid loophole.

Batman's quarter-note *thump thump thump* with the sawtooth synth just chewing its way along overtop it, the descending curt *pingping pingping* stabs that sounded like they were skipping down a septic line you were at the bottom of. The clipped bit-crush explosions as clown henchmen burst through windows. The reverse delay *rushhhhhHHHHS*LAP of each punch, you know, where the sound hits its hardest attack at the end of the whoosh. You could add a second player, but not when you were in a boss fight, all of which were giant robots. "CREDIT 06. BOSS TIME. PLEASE WAIT." Crunch crunch. Thwud thwunk. Mm. Every punch and flung batarang and every damn collapsed goon subsumed into the hypnotic 90s centrifuge of the soundtrack, sitting a little under your usual heart-rate bpm, but busy enough to still make you agitated.

I didn't realize the day'd gone by until I had a little tear of piss well up at the eye of my member, that the only light in the room was the throb of the T.V. I'd been hitherto tattooed to. I pissed in the dark, the knit mouse toilet paper holder on the back of the tank deflated, wanting.

EVENING DAY THREE.

I was in the bathroom when MJ knocked twice, let himself in, headed to the basement with a coil of heavy wire and a tool-belt around his huge hips, tools clacking like spurs with each waddle wiggle down the tired old steps. The radio was still on, the

static louder now, maybe more insistent. I jogged down the steps and fiddled with the dials.

From the basement: “Welch, could I be the biggest nuisance, and call in my payment? A cool beer or something?”

“Preference?”

“Alcoholic.”

“Gotcha.”

Nothing was in the fridge. What had I been living on this week?

“I may run to Summerfall, get a couple things. Can you wait an hour?”

“Yes, of course. It’ll taste all the better then I imagine.”

I drove into ‘town,’ a gas-station and what had been a butcher and then a video-store and then a butcher again, plus a tanning and nails place called “Sunny’s Claw Spa” at the end of the strip that never seemed to be open, even though its open-sign was always on. There’s a Tim’s now I guess, and a sad Subway that never has the herb-y bread you want. No name grocers. I sit at the tracks outside of town, waiting for a gasp of reception strong enough to add a few more tokens to get the truck fully into town. Gas would be cheap, because no one used it anymore, because you had to pay twice. The tiny little staircase-like cell-signal grew tall and proud and I added time to the Scout on the AutoApp, then rolled forward almost straight into a passing train; I hadn’t even heard it, part of the sonic wallpaper out here, the mournful cry of the rural; is this what the Geese lady felt about geese? The sun backlit the Rockies like a clattering lower jaw, an orthodontist’s nightmare. The gravel dust ruby in the hellish red brake-lit rearview, fine as screen-door’s mesh.

Silence chased after the train like a dog chases cars.

I was pumping my own gas, and before I could process where I am, the implications of 'I'm here and doing this, just like I did for so long in my twenties,' I see Laird in there, behind dark glass, and stretched like a chewing gum bubble in the obtuse security-mirror, elbows on the lotto-ticket mat, really interested in whatever the two *girls*, because that's certainly the only word for them, really interested in the interesting things these two interesting girls had to say, turtle-shit green slurpees sliding up the giant metal straws they'd brought from home to their glossy puckered mouths, how cold that must be, the cream hand-knit sweater on the one, the boyfriend hoodie baggy over the yoga-pants with some snarky phrase across the ass of the other. Watching them with his lifeless shark eyes, black as a cctv lens.

I can't breathe.

I waved my phone at the gas pump, and then the pump vomited out my receipt.

*

I got a case of some blonde beer named after one of the many mosses that had helped us slow down how fast the planet was going to kill us. I drove out to the pond, well we called it *Lucky Lake*, but it was really just a tidied slough, shaped kinda like the way Howie would eat ice-cream from the tub, pistachio, mm, the way he wouldn't scrape down the walls, but cut out the big uneven pit with the spoon; tidy pet graves, but messy ice-cream tactics; he'd eventually take down the walls when he was finished, but then he'd put the completely empty container back in the freezer, like we wouldn't notice it was empty when we went to draw from the treat well later. Maybe *Lucky* had been a

slough, and they just carved away at it a few times, decided it looked too programmed, and took a few more slashes, digging the hole deeper, wider, wilder; dig up, stupid.

The sky was bruised purple with twilight, and a huge truck, big enough you'd need to leap into it, with the soothing diesel rattle, runs at the parking lot, by the first little pagoda and the couple paths that branch out through the wetland trails. High beams on.

I felt anxious to get back to MJ. I'm not sure the last time I'd been anxious for attention. This was one of the hellish things about getting older, that you couldn't rely on your memory, on your moods being stable, that everything made you afraid even when you did the right things, and that you would find new ways to crumble and hollow out like a man-made lake. The pond at first seemed marred by slime and scum, but when I sipped the blonde, hoppy thing, cold in my hand, so cold, and walked along the left entrance to the trail, when I made my way out a bit, I saw all those cum-like white strands were actually fog sitting just above, a thing haunting the surface of the water in the seance the diesel forced with its obnoxious LED hi-beams; long-cast cat-tail corn-dog shadows, steam threading between them like a loom.

I remembered the pond sprung up like a Chia Pet, what felt like the same day they'd torn down the first of the two community grain elevators, the teal green one, the sky menacing its way into where the sky ought not to be. It was a great new attraction. I remember a swan, not a goose, but a swan, they brought in a swan. Big to-do. The swan had bit Curtis Heenan, who hadn't been able to run on account of his cerebral palsy. It almost killed him. Was a swan just a fancier, meaner goose?

There's a dad and his son out here, fishing. He's telling the son, a platinum blonde little thing, "look, in the light, can you see in the light, that shadow? Just wait for it to

meet your hook. That's right. That's great."

I slurped up the little bit of feeling this cute little picture brought me, that'd pooled in the beer can's lip, and I grinned like an idiot. I missed Artemis. Before I could picture her, they've landed a fish, and they're freaking out. The dad doesn't know how to kill it. He didn't think they'd catch one. Speaking with that voice of expertise, coaching his son well enough to land the damn thing, but an amateur, clueless. I hesitated a moment, but then started to walk toward them, looking for a piece of slate or something large enough to smack the thing dead on the way.

The dad coughed twice, wet, and it was like a gun-shot. Teens making out in a short little electric Chev broke lip-lock to look down the trail, and I ran into the grass, into the wet up to my knees. A flotilla of ducks howled at my cowardice.

No train to race the way home. A new van in the driveway when I pulled in the driveway. Must've been MJ's. Maybe he'd needed more parts, like, wire? Was that what he needed? I hadn't asked. I hadn't noticed the van when I'd left. I was nervous to go in, to ask, to check on it. I wanted him to hold me and to reassure me and to peel apart the many tangled roots that my bad back was built of. Would he mind taking that time for me? How could he be real, how could he have shown up in my life when I needed a distraction, when I needed a fix and someone to do just some of the heavy lifting. How little I knew about him, how the general idea was so potent so as to carry itself; like an action-film, not much in the way of complex emotional plot, but what a stunning thing to watch.

MIDNIGHT EVENING THREE.

I guess I'd forgotten to turn the radio off. That couldn't be good for the tubes. "Perhaps I am a man of exceptional moods...roll for initiative...Do you tell them the truth and mention the plastic. Or do you just make them feel better and just mention the dolphins. That's for you to decide. And I think one day we're all going to be faced with a situation like that and I just hope that you'll make the right choice."

Shout to the basement. "MJ, how you making out?"

No reply.

I set the sweating beers down on the countertop, opened the fridge, and too depressed the beer would be the only thing in there, I left the beers to warm on the countertop instead. A smoldering cigarette in the ashtray, a thread of smoke drowsy as a dizzy bee, drifting to the smoky glass fixture full of dead bugs above. The living room TV on, the snowy static channel. The radio was still making a fuss: "gotta go fast...the impossible 'Contact' mirror shot isn't quite so impossible, and today, we're gonna show you...something's happening to me, I can't control it." Hadn't I turned it off?

A floorboard groaned in one of the upstairs bedrooms. MJ waiting for me? "Another slumber party so soon? You better be careful, MJ, or I'll start to think you're sweet on me." The top of the stairs, in a black balaclava, the whipper-snipper in their hands that banshee-howled awake. The front door slammed shut locked before I could reach it, and the bright eyes in the dark mouth were coming down the stairs, the plastic line needling the railing and the rail clips and the drywall too, buzzing closer and deadlier. Into the basement, the cold basement, to MJ, who hadn't been there, who I only now realized wasn't here. I slipped on Wendy's slipper and fell like Buster Keaton, but not being Buster, toppled into darkness.

*

There were three of them. All in balaclavas. I could see 6 hi-beam headlights from various contractor vans in the driveway. The house was dark, other than the brutal crude LED lights crashing through the den's windows, and quiet other than the three of them snickering, chatting about some upcoming UFC fight. I couldn't see out one eye, felt the swelling keeping it shut, like when Wendy pressed the warm face-cloth to my face, promised a sty wasn't forever, that I wasn't ugly, that the world was ugly, and, and well I couldn't help but wonder what movie I was remembering that from, because it felt especially real. The one leaned on the whipper like a walking stick, the shortest one to his left held my sawzall in his hands, and the last was smoking a mentholated cigarette.

“Could I have a smoke? I can't remember the last time I saw a menthol.”

He looked at me with worry, but didn't say anything. The other two hadn't noticed me ask a question at all.

I was wrong. The radio was still on, in fact, it had this night-light glow to it, “Dicksons coming in the yard, hop to...there's a war inside of me...what if you whispered it real quiet like.” That sounded just like Howie.

“Howie?” I asked, but no one heard me. They'd restrained me to a dining room chair with a tow-strap, which I felt crushing my ribs, heard the little crunchy weeze of when I breathed in too far.

The radio: “Your birthday's September 14th, and you don't like mayo, which your mum never ever seemed to figure out.”

“Howie, what do I do here?”

I squeezed my good eye shut as hard as I could, tried to think about what the other bindings were, who these men were, what they were doing here.

The radio: “Bart! Did you kill that poor bird? I didn't mean to, Mom. The gun pulled to the left. You disobeyed me, snuck over here, and murdered a helpless animal? I know, I really screwed up. I deserve to be punished. What's the point, Bart? I punish, and I punish, and I punish, but it never sinks in. So you know what? Do what you want. You wanna play with little hoodlums, fine. Have fun killing things.”

Howie, I thought, just tell me what to do. I'll do anything. Just tell me. I don't know how to handle this. How can I know if you won't tell me?

Radio: “I wouldn't like me if I met me...I like you one metric-heebjeebee.”

Menthol seemed to notice I was talking to myself, listening to something, but he didn't make a move to tell the others.. The house was kind of beautiful in this fucked up blue hue, the little orange tube-radio drawing the eye away from the otherwise whelming cold light. That dad trying to kill the fish while his truck-light blinded him, the son watching the fish choke to death, all its life boil off like steam on the dirty man-made pond. Me at the vet under the fluorescents with their nauseating hum, nails chewed down to nothing, fingers swollen and probably infected, holding Artemis' paw as their suffering curled out of the body, as their hip, hijacked by cancer and pain and injustice, finally relaxed, finally safe from the reality that I couldn't give her a good life for any longer, maybe never had—that I'd let her suffer too long.

Whipper-snipper said to the others “Time to get back to work.” He pumped the ratchet strap twice, and my eyes blotted black with pain.

Sawzall rifled through the T.V. cabinet. “You guys remember Sonic? This guy’s got Sonic. My kid loves Sonic. This hedgehog, he’s got a human girlfriend! It’s kinda hot when you think about it? What’s a hedgehog dick like, eh Larr—”

Whipper-snipper slapped Sawzall upside the head. “No names, idiot.” Menthol watched me, wary, but then broke his gaze.

I felt my consciousness starting to slip again, but something in me kept it there, like a finger in the cheek, like a fish-hook. Howie? Howie, was that you?

Radio: “Only fools go seeking it, and none return...these guys, they used words that we’re used to, but mean a little bit different things here. They’re setting us up to fail...How many survivors we scare away today? Seven already?”

It’s, it’s not Howie. It’s some garbled thing, some black hole drawing in a bunch of disparate stations. How could I have thought it was him? That he’d help me? MJ? Where was MJ?

Menthol put out his smoke, and then opened *Wild Geese*.

“Please, that’s my mum’s. Leave it.”

A voice familiar, more familiar than whatever thing was playing at mischief in the radio, spilled from Menthol’s body. “‘Work did not destroy the loneliness; work was only a fog in which they moved so that they might not see the loneliness of each other.’ Sounds like a miserable life.” He set the book down by the ash-tray, the toaster-glow of the radio in the corner finally catching his attention. The six headlights winked out, one after another in perfect order, like a computer sequence had made it so.

I heard the front door drive open, MJ flying in like superman, with such strength and speed it frightened me, an inhuman grace. Sawzall threw a collapsed TV tray at MJ,

but MJ batted it away with his arm, arm like a scuba tank, chest like a compressor, this great big lung of muscle and respite come to save me. Whipper-snipper cracked MJ across the back of the head with a small ball-peen hammer, but nothing came of it, like MJ hadn't felt it. Sawzall revved his little sadistic weapon, but its battery died before it could eat through MJ's pristine Carrhart overalls. It hurt my neck to turn far enough to look at Menthol, but from what I could make out with the tiny bit of moonlight, he was scared in the kitchen corner, blocking the radio's warm light; I felt cold without it, felt myself going out again.

MJ held my face, "I need you to exhale all the way out," so I did, and he let off the strap, and I fell forward into his chest. "I need you to pay attention. I'm about to disappear,"

I looked to Menthol, clutching *Wild Geese* like a riot shield, like a bat with its wings spread wide.

MJ pulled my face to his. "Welch. I need you to listen. You need to stand up, you need to run."

"But—"

MJ jump-cut into nothing, and Menthol held the book closed in his hands, went rifling through the drawers to find a knife or something else. Whipper and Sawzall were doubled over, and I made it to the front door before Menthol could catch me. Into the moonlight, beautiful and slow and shitty and cold and light enough to show them where I was running. The three anonymous white contractor vans all smoked with crushed pop-can hoods, and the gravel bit through my shitty ankle-socks, the dew and frost soaking them once I made it to the grass.

I ran into the cedar-chip grove, the lazy willows hanging low and dead, were they dead? I hadn't been here in so long, and this time of year. And. There was nowhere to go. There was nothing but field. I flopped and rolled underneath the trencher, trained my eyes back to the house. I couldn't see anyone giving chase. My teeth chattered loud and hard as a drum-roll. No one following me. My little mousy footprints in the grass would give me away, if they wanted to look.

Whipper had me by the scruff of the neck. I grabbed the can of ether off the trencher's seat, blasted him where his mouth would be, and he went limp. I was shivering, I needed to sleep. He was dead. He was definitely dead. Dead as Howie in a dark room with a bright screen. Dead as Artemis in a bright room with a loud hum; dead as Artemis lost in transit, deserving better. God what I'd do to lie down and sleep.

I ripped off his balaclava, and found the careless grimace of Larry, the internet guy. I pulled on the balaclava before I could think about it, and ethervision roared alive.

“Larry,” called out Sawzall. “Larry, you get the fag?”

I rushed him, and by the time he reconciled the mask with the body, with the fag body, what moonlit streak I was, I had him by the pony-tail, had dragged him to the dugout. He hit my swollen eye, and my knees locked so that I wouldn't collapse altogether. We both hit the icy scab of the water, but I was madder, meaner, and my hands were on his neck already. I kicked off his body, drug myself up the muddy cold bank, and marched to the house.

“Where are you?”

Menthol wouldn't answer me. I marched upstairs. I didn't arm myself. I had the spirit in me. The radio in me. I turned on the lights in each room as I passed them. I saw

myself in my sister's body-mirror, and I punched it like a teenage boy punches drywall. I spidered. I took one piece of mirror, like a forked tongue the size of my thumbnail. The house lit up as I traveled through each room, I turned the radio up but the static was thick as wool now, and I struggled to hear distinct things in it now. I knew my body was shaking with sick, but I was hot.

Menthol wasn't anywhere here. He'd either fled, or he was downstairs. I knew I'd pass out soon. My only safe play was to push through. "That was great. But let's shoot another one for safety." My body writhing like a fish on the muddy slipway, choking, but time, just a little more time. I took a beer bottle from the counter, let it slide through my hand, the fat bottom dropping, my hand squeezing its tiny neck. A bottle in one hand, a broken fork of mirror in the other.

The steps made no sound, the ether light and floating me down. The floor was so, so cold. My eyes refused to adjust to the dark. Where was my phone? Where was MJ? I breathed in through my nose, the sweet, pungent rot of ether boiling my resolve.

He threw me into the wall across from the ghost-sheeted couch, the unfinished wall with the pink-rose itchy insulation; if I'd hit the stud I would've been a goner. I crashed the bottle over his head, drove the mirror into his hip. He dropped to his knees. I ripped the balaclava from his head like the son had caught the fish. I felt his face, knew his face. Laird's black eyes caught some hidden light from somewhere else. I heard the chittering of many ravenous rats from the room the deep-freeze should've hum in. Laird's eye hurt. Like he didn't recognize me. Suffocating. I felt the darkness coming, but kicked the book at my feet open. The book must be so cold.

MJ's flying fist drove by with the whoosh of almost-hit-by-car, and Laird crumpled like a struck dog. Mark Jordan cradled me, carried me upstairs and gently pried the toque off me. The lights were off, or, or something was wrong with me.

"You're not real?"

"Well, no. Enough to help."

"What happens if I finish the book?"

"Nothing. I'm here in the evenings, when you read. That's all. It opens, I come."

"But how?"

"Your mum sent me."

"Did she know you?"

"Not like you know me, if that's what you're worried about."

"Eww."

"Aha, yeah. Eww."

"But you're not real."

"Well, I'm here."

THE SUN CAME UP, LIKE IT MIGHT IN A BOOK.

He carried me out to the driveway. "I'm gonna have to go for a bit."

"You're not gonna ghost me?"

"Aha, not in the way you mean it."

All that orange. That tube orange. "Was it you in the radio?"

"No, your dad sent that one."

"Did he now?"

"You've met it before. It's in you."

“Next thing you’ll tell me I look like him.”

“I would never. In fact, you remind me of yer mum.”

I sobbed so hard, snot strung out like a trapeze act’s safety net across my chest. I didn’t feel an emancipation from Howie then, but I felt a comfort I hadn’t known was possible, a tether to my Mother.

As my vision started to clarify, as I pulled focus on the yard, I saw the UPS truck ease in, heard its sore brakes whinny, the man in the too-short brown shorts, so much thigh. A squat box the size of a toddler. A kiss to the top of my head, a pat on my back. A short whisper. “See you tonight, if you’ll have me.”

“Are you okay, umm,” he looked at his clip-board. “Are you okay, H. Welch?”

“Sure, sure.” Mark Jordan’s hands weren’t on my shoulders to hold me up now, but I pushed up from one knee, like you do after you fall down skating. “What’s this?”

“Umm. It’s, it’s your dog?” He looked to the wrecked anonymous contractor vehicles, to the busted front door. “Do you need me to call someone for help?”

“No, no.”

“Sorry it took me an extra day to get out here. Couldn’t find your place on the map at first, it’s like it sprung up from nothing overnight. These rural places, it’s like they just don’t exist some days.”

I couldn’t open my hands. I pushed my good eye open with my fist. And there she was, deliverance.

OUT THERE IN THE DARK THERE'S A BECKONING CANDLE

“And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.

Out, out, brief candle.”

—Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

“A careful lamplighter worries but does not chase the dumb heat that plods behind all incandescence...He knows that nothing expends, only changes. But to what?...I did not, did not take my sparking candles to water”

—R.M. Vaughan, *A Wise Host Snuffs a Guttering Candle*.

2008

It's the fucking merge lane, and he's drunk, no one on the road, only me behind him, but he stops in the middle of it, and I 'Eskimo-kiss' his bumper (I'm 18 so don't know whether it's politically correct to say that, in fact, the term *politically-correct* isn't imported to the public lexicon yet, hasn't needled a sore spot into pop-culture criticism yet, from a useful way to describe white folks coding their hatred for others and then inverted into a way to imply over-sensitivity, and me, 18, well, that's all well beyond my idiot Mountain-Dew pickled brain); I boop Buddy's bumper, bumper long past chrome, more a rust negligee coasting behind the truck—but not even hard enough for my iPod to slide off my bare knee, and I remember this clearly, because I take the time to pause Tegan & Sara (*I wouldn't like me if I met me*). Someone told me Buddy touched his daughter and that's why she doesn't drink milk at school or talk to her popular friends anymore, but I saw her take pills in the band room at lunch and eat a cheese string so I think she's just allergic. I could be recalling that rumor to make it less my fault that I rear-ended him, as if by some logic, if he molested his daughter, then he deserved to be rear-

ended. But what if something actually happened to her? And how did this happen to me? iPod not even sliding off my knee, tap tap to the rusty thing stopped in the middle of a merge. Thomas in the passenger seat examines his eyebrows in the passenger visor mirror, hasn't even noticed we got into an accident, us *in* an accident right now.

I don't know it, but Drunky's going to back into a gas pump at Petro two months from this exact moment, soused as all hell, crank hard into a yellow Jetta as he tries to compensate, pin a JV basketball player. JV, who gas-pedaled me during dodgeball in gym the year before (sent me to the hospital, my right ball twisted and swollen stuck in torque position). No more right ball. No more dodgeball. No more JV bball career on account of hips out of line, cracked pelvis. In ten years JV and I match on Tinder, and their profile says *MASC for MASC*, but it's a joke because they're *enbee* by then, (*non-binary, for those not in the know*), and they're coaching the high school boys' basketball team now even with their own mean limp, so there's a whole cohort of young basketballers who know to respect pronouns and that gender is a spectrum.

My pickup line for JV is *AMABBALL?*, like, "assigned male at birth/basketball" cleaved to a gif of Buster Keaton towing an obese wiener dog with a roller-skate under its belly. I don't think they remember me from High School or that they sent me to hospital with a bad ball but they smile anyhow and are of few words which is a fucking relief and we meet up and fuck in their truck on gravel roads each of the Christmases I can afford to go home (and we continue to do so indefinitely, in that queer futurity kind of way—my foresight is infinite in these matters).

Drunk, Buddy twists his cane's handle-head and it whirrs off and then a small vial zings out from the shaft like a over-handled pen's emancipated clicker spring, so this vial

hits the blacktop and rolls under his shitty rust-rot truck, and I feel acute guilt for the first time since I nipped him a few minutes ago, so riled up on adrenaline and rumor of incest (in twenty years, over rum and eggnog at an unfortunate reunion, we all learn his daughter killed herself the weekend of the reunion, and those rumors come back to us like they'd never left, like so many of us at the reunion never left). I agree to bug my Auto-body brother-in-law to install an after-market bumper, that we don't need to involve insurance. I retrieve the vial for Buddy because he can't bend over and looks even like he's faking a neck injury now and I don't wanna push it, and the vial is plastic, sticky, and dark soda-like slosh is in it, though the vial itself is yellowed like old book pages wherever the soda isn't settled right that second. I lean into his window to give him back the vial and then thank him for his kindness (though I don't feel it, I'm just fight/flight brown-nosing, on total auto-pilot); and there are many Pepsi cans across his passenger floor, many more Tim Horton's wrappers. "You a frequent flyer, too?" I point to the floor full of Horton's junk.

"No no. That wasn't me.

*

"Do you have a crayon on you?" My Dad is mad that I'm still going to go camping. But Josh is finally turning 18. And I haven't had a fucking day off all summer after brick-lining the culvert in our yard-slough, after finally paying off the radiator I bust with the PTO two years earlier—jamming it into the Chalmers' radiator, the towing tractor stalled on the gravel and the towee tractor like a menace still rolling forward anyhow, eager to gag on those 3-point-PTO prongs, to get me in fucking trouble for another thing—after getting yelled at for harrowing the same stretch twice (it all looks the

same to me), after a diagnosis that I'm dissociative, not suicidal (tell that to my dead grandpa, to me 6 months ago, asleep in my running rig with the garage door down), I just need a goddamn weekend. "You there, Shorty?"

"I have a pen, yeah." He dictates all the things I need to check on my own bumper to make sure it won't fall off on the way up to Cremona.

This is the first year I'm here and not planning to get wasted, and if you can see how things blow forward too, you'll see that I'll never be drunk again; I will bring manipulative girls who get drunk and beg me to fuck them in the tent, and then tell everyone I'm a bully when I decline, and I will have beer spilt all over me, I will bathe in beer as my friends pour it into the river upstream from where we all go skinny-dipping, but I won't ever again be out of my mind in Cremona more than I am dissociative, and that makes me a threat to this social order. I've been asked to wear a blank and featureless white theatre mask this year, for *betraying the boys*, and I have to do it, *furda (furda boys)*, or I'll get beat up, humiliated, who knows. I'm allowed to lift the mask to eat and drink, but I'm committed, and rather than break character I spend my time eating privately, drinking non-alcoholic beverages with a straw that runs up behind my mask, almost grotesque how it slips in under the jaw, but of course I can't see any of this with my reduced field of vision, my glasses sliding off the smooth white face as often as they stay put.

I'm camping, though we have a cook-shack, and bunks inside it, ungainly things with piss-repellant mattresses, hinges cleaving them to the walls on one side, chains holding them up on the other; very reminiscent of prison, or what I reckon prison must be like (and I am not seven years old anymore—eleven years ago, romantic and fantasizing

about going to prison because they cook for you and you can read all day)(and it is not two years from now, when I'm reading lit journals like *The Fiddlehead*, telling myself *I really do like this* even though I don't understand a word of the stories [and I don't touch the poems at all])(and it is not 4 years from now, when I don't touch the stories at all, but scan the back of the journal whenever it shows up to see if I know the names of any poets on it).

I'm camping and the accident was just earlier today and I am bone-dry sober but my friends are *all* stoned out of their gourds. I am camping but the accident feels like ages ago, long enough past to reminisce about. And we're camping in this cook-shack, but I'm sober, and Josh wants to stay there and it's his parents' property so he gets his say, even though Renae brought a tent for the two of them (the chilliest couple in our friend group, haven't broken up despite a year apart in separate provinces, one with 4.0, another a Christmas graduate), and Renae offers me their tent, but Josh insists Christina stay in the cook shack too, Christina fresh from de-coupling with Tom (who Josh did *not* invite camping), and each prison cook-shack bunk is only big enough for one, so Renae has to pitch the tent built for two anyhow to sleep in all her lonesome, and none of us say anything about this strange unspoken severance because language is not quite there for us, and no I don't think it's a lack of communication skills, I think it's an actual lack of familiarity with how our voices sound croaking out of our mouths as anything other than snarky sex jokes or drunken Metallica yell-a-longs: "BLOOD. WILL. FOLL. OW. BLOOD. DY. ING. TIME. IS. HERE."

The accident that won't be much fuss to fix in the end, other than the power going out over and over when I go to torch off the old rusted bumper; the accident was not

today, it could not have been. If only I could corral sense from my latest haunting dream, where JV was an auto-salesperson, a job that I didn't understand, a job that did itself for them, was *auto-* in an aslant tugged-away kinda way; imagine if *auto-* meant something more similar re: auto-body & autobiography, than odd body and sad boy biography, than any of these definitions do in waking hours; as much as the constellations supposedly represent gods and belts; is Orion's shirt tucked in tonight? Imagine if your body *worked?* Automatically? The way a magazine tells you it ought to, or without an SSRI prescription? If you could press out a dent each time your inner child got crimped in by a drunk driver's back bumper? If how sticky, how steady my knee is made sense to me (maybe sticky as eating waffles—as my harvest-beard one year proves, small syrup pillars I never comb out, never wash out, sixteen-hour days, general prairie malaise)? If my foot attached to the shinbone attached to the sticky knee had braked more efficiently? If the 'starter-body' gender'd worked out for JV, or their hips'd came with warranty? If you could author yourself associatively, without having to research who everyone already thought you were?

In four months my sister sings karaoke at my brother-in-law, but I see something thru the ghost of awkward family gatherings, into some routine Christmas-yet-to-come: "Be a simple kind of man!" Sister's boyfriend cringes, in his leather jacket, listening strictly to Depeche Mode to and from work (despite the massive stolen auto-body piracy CD library he has access to, still distilled to Depeche Mode; I'll get to explaining this in a minute, just hold yer horses); thru that bead curtain of the future, in the future I know now to be true, he is too tired to fuss, may even agree with this stupid song, all Pepsi after 7PM, soft-top Mustang metamorphosed into Mini-Van. JV is simple, but not a man, and

in this pure simple ambiguity I suppose they cannot be truly simple, the way it makes sense to fuck someone at Christmas while you're visiting, make it a tradition, but always have to lie you're going to Timmies with Josh instead, and that Timmies catchups must always take four hours, and make a mess of my beautiful half-pony up-do (Mom and Dad enforcing a rule of *hair can't touch your ears, tie it back*, even at 26).

I push open the door for the larger and cleaner of the two outhouses, catch Gord knuckle deep in Kass, our thrash metal lead guitarist noodling inside Josh's Winnipeg cousin; is she cute, or is she shiny and new? No matter, Gord wants her. She tries to pull herself straight up but can only reach out to the toilet-paper roll, and it's unspooling all over the mulch-stained floors. "Sorry, occupied." She lacks a self-consciousness that I've come to expect from everyone, that in my sobriety I've come to demand from everyone. Gord winks, blush either from booze or from fuck, "Want in?" And Charisse's head lolls back, either in disinterest or in ecstasy or maybe ennui. I won't fuck anyone, not if this is what sex is supposed to look like; I won't fuck, try fudge, or smoke weed for two more years yet, and when I have that wild week, I'll really only love the fudge; 1/3 ain't bad, but I don't want any third-wheel weird outhouse fucks. I make my way back to my Pathfinder to pull my seats down, unroll my sleeping bag, and the horizon is time-lapse quick, or maybe that's only how it looks when you're wearing a mask for six days in a row (so far).

The boys have used my truck as an overqualified stereo while I was out having my cry alone, scratching my thigh with a baby branch, broke near the trunk, all green, but still sharp enough to cut me. "Battery died, bub, sorry 'bout that." Windows are down, and the rain is coming down some too. They stacked all the wood they chopped behind

my rear tires, left my back hatch up to keep the rain off the pile. Someone cries out, Christina or Renae (though I can't remember which) has slipped, broken an arm, and they want me to drive to the hospital because I'm the only one sober and with a license at 5:45pm, but Josh's SUV is in the way, and he won't let me drive it, and my SUV battery is dead, and they are all mad at me, want me to "Take off that dumb mask," and Josh is calm but drunk and pulls his Jeep close to mine, boops my front bumper with his, and we get me boosted, and I am about to take off my mask but all of a sudden a bright flash stuns me, and Josh and I get out and look at my driver's side bulb, burst, a crack in the casing let rain water down, and the second it came on, bang.

I drive into town with one headlight, but there's light enough left gushing thru the leaky firmament, summer and all, and whichever girl it was who slipped drunk while playing on felled tree, she's grateful to me, and we're listening to Martha Wainwright off her iPod (*Who was I kidding? Who was I kidding?!*). I like it but won't admit it. She is so calm. I am terrified that I should want her because Josh does, whichever *she* she is, but I feel like letting her pick the music makes me a martyr, and I judge her, like *who takes the time to grab their iPod when their arm is bent like that?* You see I am afraid of language still and I don't listen to Bill Callahan and Cat Power and Nick Cave and Slim Twig and U.S. Girls yet, I have an iPod for the four or five metal albums I love, and if I can only love four or five records, how can I fathom loving something as messy as myself sober? As someone else *less-than?*

This is the intermediary age between streaming music to themes (stars in our own movies, branding ourselves), singles in mixes (to the very atom), endless sub-genre-ized playlists (we can tell you what music will sound like whether or not we've listened to it

and that is good for a particular kind of practice though perhaps not for those who'd rather stick with a record for life and make it a reference point by which we might measure ourselves and our values against)—and LPs, the ritual of preparing a record, the condom-close fit of a wax cylinder to the mechanism, listening the whole way thru. This is the age when my auto-body brother-in-law has broader musical horizons than anyone else, because he and his colleagues poach the boon of the CD wallet tucked in the vehicle (usually beneath the passenger seat)(this is still before the era of 6-CD changers, in the thick of fat CD-wallets and CD towers and people desperate to recreate mix-tape culture but in my case, never knowing anyone who had a computer that could actually burn a CD), and carefully they rip each record to their shop computer, then put it back in the exact order they found it. And I am ahead of the curve with my iPod I guess, so maybe this age I'm invoking is a bit more slippery than I thought at first, or I'm straddling the CD/MP3 era as I recall this moment from this arbitrary anchor, this particular race to the E.R.. A drunk is in the weave lane curling from TransCan into the smooth curve of Chestermere's bridge (straddling the man-made lake, always curdled with jet-ski wake), and my iPod does not judge an inch of movement is necessary when my bumper belches on his, does not budge a cunthair. But this is her iPod, her incongruous clavicle craziness.

But I myself wiggle a lil', gulp when she says Gord grabbed her, she didn't slip on a log at all, hasn't drank all day, all weekend, but that I am not allowed to say a thing. Language, that thing she can wield, I wouldn't dare, even if I wanted to. I get her into the E.R., tell her, "I'll be in my truck" because hospitals make me sick. By the time knuckles on my window rouse me, it is dark out again. We'll all convoy home tomorrow. Thomas has gone home early, but he didn't tell me he would be. I will be driving home alone. She

is offering to ride with me, though. I can't even look at her. She tells me "I like that you didn't take that mask off to eat. I like that it pissed them off you didn't do that. I like that you stayed sober. Thank you for sharing your Mountain Dew with me at breakfast this morning." I can't muster anything to interrupt these glancing blows of kindness.

The mask isn't even on right now, well, it's on top of my head, because I realized when we got into the E.R. that I must look like a psycho. And she kisses me on the lips and it does not feel like the movies; the only thing about the movies I ever really remember is Bukowski says something about being lost, and finding water after being lost, and drinking slowly, in slurps, like they do in movies, so you don't die or something; I'm glad she isn't going to drown me, even though a tow-strap of spit conspires to keep our mouths together. It does not feel like anything. And she looks in my eyes, sees something in them, pulls my mask over my face after I park back at camp, and it does not feel like I am Spiderman in a superhero movie either. But in her eyes all these things must be true. I envy her, collarbone broke (surprise, not even I could see that coming), arm fractured, blue velvet Adidas track jacket too tight to zip up over her breasts, zipper stalled halfway down; I don't feel anything now either, even as I stare at her, her good elbow on the console, pills in her pocket rattling like a sickly maraca at me. Josh opens the door for her, says something in a real voice, unironic, but I can't hear it, can't even believe it, because I feel no more mature now than before I stayed sober, drove her. My truck is still running, and I hop out quickly to examine my headlight. It looks like an empty pie-tin, battered, and I'm sucking blood from a finger now, not realizing I'd fingered the crack at all, and licking JV's cum from the constellation in my palm in the future, and biting my nails so short they grow thick and purple with puss and whatever I

am reading at age seven is scaring me so bad that I long for the safety of prison, where food and books are always free.

We take a group portrait. I wish Thomas were here to stand behind me, tall and gangly, those huge mitts on my shoulder to keep me from floating away like the spent garbage bag I am. My attempt at a mustache is still soaked in Mountain Dew. I drank myself to sleep with it, woke at four A.M. to throw up outside my truck door, just like all the cool kids we invited from Calgary this year have done outside their tents, though theirs is booze, and mine is neon yellow ooze, about the same colour as infected finger puss, but more luminescent; by the time I'm 26 I'll develop acid-reflux from Dew-abuse, drinking it right before bed, 2L at a time, belching myself awake at four A.M., writing critically acclaimed Canadian-long-poems. But right here right now in this place that's so fuzzy, they're all grumpy with me, asking me to "take that mask off already," and Joshy's Mawmy (I didn't remember his parents being here at all) is drunk and leaning into me for support, her tacky two-inch canola fake nail on her pointer-finger sluicing the distance between my face and the mask, like she wants to draw me close for a secret, or a spanking, comely canola gloss, and while you can't see my eyes in the photo because she off-set the mask, you can feel my clear discomfort in my posture. Dark pocks instead of eyes. Sunken things. Like Elvis, so handsome, not that I would say that out loud, or listen to him (unless my Mother's C.D. had somehow made its way onto iTunes, onto my iPod, crawled in one day on shuffle, somehow a secret more shameful than any part of this Scheherazade of debacles that should have been a simple camping weekend). I realize I've lost my glasses sometime this trip, but don't tell anyone, embarrassed I haven't realized, mad that this is another thing I will be beaten for (or kicked out for) when I

arrive back home. I will live in my Pathfinder often in the future (and have a few times already), as is the fate of most queer poets—those of us so privileged with wheels at least.

*

It takes nine business days for the aftermarket bumper to arrive. Drunky doesn't have a CD player. His cassettes aren't much to fuss over either, though I do steal Pat Benatar's *In the heat of the night*, leave the case but take the cassette. I have a sunburn. It feels like I tapped his shitty truck this morning, which is silly because it felt so long ago even as it happened. I cross the yard from the Quonset to the shop, my brother-in-law in the yard having a second smoke (don't give him a hard time when he takes up vape-culture in eight years, it might just save his life). The drunk dude's truck is parked by my sister's blue Beetle (we're painting the gas-cap cover we copped at pick-a-part later this afternoon, her former clocked clean off in some story she won't elaborate on, and we let her story go unwritten in this way), and the shop doors are down because the wind is givin'er today, keeps blowing out my blowtorch. The power goes out as I'm on my back and underneath, trying to cut off this stubborn bumper—rust so bad it needs to be cut off, hardware slippery in its disintegration—and in the torchlight I catch my reflection in an unlikely swatch of inner-bumper chrome that escaped the rust thrush that seized the rest, and my eyes are pearls of flame.

POWER CREEP

∞

Are your eyes still bandaged? Are your arms still tied behind you? Through a gap in the forest the night looked down upon the roofless shell of the Black House studded with fires and jewels. And above the gap, floating away forever from the branches was a small grass-green balloon, lit faintly on its underside. It must have come adrift from its tree-top mooring. Sitting up-right on the upper crown of the truant balloon was a rat. It had climbed a tree to investigate the floating craft; and then, courage mounting, it had climbed to the shadowy top of the globe, never thinking that the mooring cord was about to snap. But snap it did, and away it went, this small balloon, away into the wilds of the mind.

And all the while the little rat sat there, helpless in its global sovereignty.

—Mervyn Peake, *Titus Alone*.

“The vampire Alberta drools a perfect inky tailing pond / And shakes awake”

—John K. Samson, *The Vampire Alberta Blues*

1.

The poly-something-or-other stuck to Laird’s sallow flesh gasps loud as church bells as the skin-like seal on the coffin fails, and what must be candle-light drools through his closed eyelids. He can’t breathe, and it’s the force of falling four or five feet from the coffin to the floor that winds him, which kickstarts the respiratory cycle his body hasn’t had to self-regulate in a few hundred years. He clears the cum-thick preservatives from

his beautiful boy-long eyelashes, his arm twitching and burning with exertion from the simple task. The first thing he can see for sure is the room is bombed out, and recently. It's all chrome, and, no, his hands weren't failing him, Bakelite. He's who knows how many floors up, nude, and knows better than to approach the corner of the room torn asunder. The sun is sick, up where it should be in the middle of the day, but only spritzing the forested expanse beyond with twilight. He vomits, and his purge resembles diarrhea more than any vomit he's known before. He holds onto the coffin that juts out like an underbite from the wall's morgue-like filing system.

Laird knows his hip may be broken from the fall, his knee tingling with a slipped cap, and he knows in vomiting that he's pulled some muscle somewhere between his taint and his sternum. The coffin-mold he rescued himself from, it's the texture of a flesh-light, of a still-warm lubed-up sex-toy, still slick. The fire-alarms are wailing, but no one has come to check the room. Each coffin with a winking, failing red flashing light by its control panel. Laird can't tug the one below his own out, nor the one to its right. Laird can't find a tool to bust out the glass for the encased fire-axe either, and winces as each of the coffins' red lights come to a rest at random intervals.

The tinnitus eventually thins, and whatever preservative gummed his ears up melts away after a few minutes. The fresh bouquet of nauseating tocsin wails nearly drives him back into the unconsciousness he'd just woke from. After thirty minutes the washer-dryer-like alarms quit on the failing coffins, and the fire-alarm as well. The fire-sprinklers finally trigger, too hot but sobering, like the still water in the long-lain lawn-lain summer hose, that bites you before that cold at the tap catches up.

The first tribe he meets doesn't speak English close enough for useful communication. They rip out his eyebrow piercing, but run away afterwards. Their skin is too white, almost phosphorescent, and smooth, waxy. He waits until they go to sleep, which is most of what they do, as the sun is only really out about six hours in the day, and they seem afraid of the dark. He steals cured meats that look like they might be bats, but, well bats the size of wolves. He does his best to re-stage the drying rack so they might not notice the theft. He takes a cloak as well, military green, a rain cape of some sort, that must have at one point had button clasps, but is now eyed with rust-licked rotten holes. Incredible shape for its age, whatever sort of plastic this is made of, and it keeps the frequent rains off him.

There's a watering hole he tracks them to, too, but he recognizes the pollution in it from photos his 'political' aunt, who lived her entire life complaining on Facebook (*we get it, you got a sociology degree before you popped out four kids*): it's a tailings-pond. A few meters down, only visible along those few feet of shore the scum doesn't swallow, you can look right down, and heavy theatre curtains, in quality and size, roil underneath the water, some living, thrashing black mass underneath. The waxy folks work in teams of two, one to splash the black surface scab away, and the other to quickly fill a plastic pail of water, set it back on shore. He watches them a little longer, and as they leave the pond he scoops a little of the scab himself, sets its writhing mass in the pocket of the cape.

The waxy pair carts their water back to camp, but Laird sees they don't bother to boil the water. He suspects he won't get away with that, but dares to steal one quarter-full bucket's worth filled from the single large communal reservoir-drum, and carries it as far

as he can until he feels as though his lungs blister from exertion. He's lost much of it to wild sloshing, but there's enough left to boil, to have a glass-worth. He starts a fire without much trouble, the hissing and squealing black sludge from the pond roaring high and hot at the first spark he musters with his hazy Air Cadets training from the back of his brain; "hair above the ears," so he'd quit, before he got to fly a glider, fire a gun.

The cast iron pan he boiled the water in was retrieved from an overgrown campsite he'd found the first day he escaped the coffin building; the tent had largely been subsumed by a tree's trunk, and by the look of the few sooty bones that he was forced to pry the pan free from, maybe the camper was somewhere in its center too. He'd found a flask in the empty security room of the coffin building, downed the Fireball in it, and then filled it with the hot sprinkler water. A nude man from the deep past, running around with nothing but a rusty cast pan and a pristine chrome flask.

He doesn't remember all of the world from before. But he remembers enough to know he's not in the right place. He remembers being sentenced for a crime, holding up a liquor store, he was pretty sure. He'd been drunk, he thinks. Not sure. Might've been for stealing from the gas station, too. Time was, well, ill-fitting here. "Out of joint," he hears in the voice of his educated aunt. And though he'd been back so long already, it felt like there was some sort of prism distorting the flow before it got to him. Whatever had been done to him, that coffin coma thing, Laird didn't think it was legal. Whatever had happened since then, to lead to all this, well, he reckons the world must have deserved it more than he'd deserved that coffin.

Laird fires the tube of blue concentrate like a roman candle at the heavens, and the scout slinking along the I-beam walkway takes it in the chest, breaks their everything when they hit the mossy forest floor. That would send the appropriate message. He thumbs the peppercorns stitched into his hood's seam, valuable little pricks; he's finally stopped sneezing at them, and has a buyer lined up for them in Free Folk Fort.

Laird frisks this poor snapped girl's vestments, retrieves a few bits of jerky and a saran-wrapped poultice. He can bring in the scalps of various wax men tribes to the cities, or better-rewarded, whole damn bodies (best if they're still alive) to the wizards in the western reach, the cabal's many manses like herpes sores along the lip of Center Sister's caldera. Laird doesn't resort to this bounty-collection business unless a ridiculous debt he's had the misfortune of acquiring has an unfortunately pressing deadline.

Someone had done this to him, in fact, in his first month after coming back to life, and if it hadn't been for the tendencies of Nimdrod, the wizard to whom he'd been sold, which included ridiculous monologues on 'praxis versus preparation'—and the handy tube of blue concentrate close to hand (tight in his grip to this day) and then unattended, on a tea-cart near the procedural table and sitting beside a deck of cards and scummy forceps—he wouldn't be anything more than a footnote in some smug jerk's writeup on "necrosis rates on living early-epoch flesh when subjected to my particularly excellent prismatic spray," or something to that effect.

A bloody snot bubble respire from the broken girl's blackened nose, and her jade green eyes assay him without anger. Unfortunate. The bloody bubble pops, and a little dribble extra runs a tightrope from her nose into the split of her lip, her orange orange lips in the orange orange twilight, doubled down, the blood like lipstick and drawing Laird's

attention, in a way he knew guilt for. The world had gone inside out while he was asleep, started right over, but the sun hadn't gotten the memo apparently, still shrinking, still forgetting to come up altogether some days. It was like a neon basketball today, almost beautiful if you didn't process the possible implications that colour entailed. The moon disappeared well before he woke up, so dark comes and dark stays.

He removes a ring from his right hand's pinky, throws it as hard as he can against a slab of erupted obsidian a few feet back along the trail, and in an embarrassingly slight toot of smoke, a cot appears where the ring had rung the black rock. With a careful prayer to cast a spell of stasis, to steady her, and a slow, twice-fumbled and then eventually manual-consulted casting to summon a mute Sandestin to carry the other end, Laird sets out to find someone capable of restoring this green-eyed unfortunate to better health.

4.

Gurglevast insists on scouring her thoughts before he restores her. Laird recognizes many of the apparati from his own time, one called an orrery, which he is pleased to have remembered the word for having never done well in the sciences, and another a gas pump nozzle; a dream-catcher; a startlingly long silk Waifu body-pillow, with some anime girl he didn't recognize. Laird suppresses a chuckle when the wizard peels the backing off a latex bandage, sticks it tight to green-eyes' head, and calls it an "eldritchectode," a focus to channel her thoughts, to dive deeper into her damaged brain to find the faults and more adroitly address them. "She may even come out speaking proper common, and a few others. Of course, not the primordial language of Joald, but, at least enough to converse with us somewhat legibly."

"She might already speak some of those."

“The Tamarack smooths don’t use verbal communication. Nicobane’s survey of the lesser races would have mentioned it. Trust me, it is quite extensive.”

Laird crosses the observatory, so many stars visible, but no constellations he recognized from his own time. That might not mean much, given he could never find the little dipper in his own time either. He sits the body pillow up straighter, smoothing the stomach crease that frustrated the eye.

“Exercise caution, Woke One. That witch is dangerous!”

“I don’t use that honorific, Gurgle, you know that.”

“I prefer the old ways, and I will follow them as I wish to.”

“What makes you think this witch is so dangerous?”

“She was a real woman, in fact, trapped forever in this smooth, spider-poop golem body as a punishment for seducing young men in her village. Likely a hedge-witch. Only my careful attention and arcane pedigree keep her from ambulating, from lurching forward to rip you limb from limb. She of course hates men specifically, but I think she’s grown to love me. Look at that twinkle in her eye when she looks over to me.”

“Ah, I see it, surely.”

“Her name is Alberta.”

Laird clenches his teeth in surprise. Not much naming language from his own time survived. “When’d she tell you that?”

“Not her. This one.” Gurglevast’s fingers hover about an inch outside green-eyes’ scalp, a web of lime lightning flickering to tether the two. “The golem’s name is too powerful, and uttering it aloud might crack the earth in twain.”

“What if you whispered it real quiet like?”

5.

“You need to go back to your own folk.”

“You have sullied my pedigree. If I go back they’ll kill me. They’ll smell the failure on me.”

“I thought you smelled just fine, lilacs and lavender.”

“I do not know these names, but even if you hadn’t doomed me to exile, I owe you a life-debt for the work the wizard did.”

“Forgiven. Pinky-swear. Just stop trailing me, please.”

She doesn’t register what pinky-swear means. And truth be told, he doesn’t actually mind her being around so much, and he thinks he’s maybe a little too obvious about that.

She doesn’t seem to think through the problem in neurotic little circles the way his brain does, a dog nesting. Maybe they are completely too different. She is most comfortable when sitting in silence, but even just her breath soothes him—specifically the quick *hmp* of hot air out her nose when she disagrees with something he’s done—or it could be the delicate crunch of moss behind him while they travel, or maybe even just that with a second traveler a second torch casts twice the shadows while they scurry through the dark; more shadows at more angles, a second path where once there seemed but one.

6.

“This is clergy-town, no way they fall for this ruse twice in ten days.”

“Bert, be quiet. I’ve got a good feeling about this.”

Laird's neck is a little sore. His canteen strap lately raw against his sunburn, but today the solid silver crucifix and its chain exercises its own specific punishment on him. There hasn't been enough consistent sun to get a burn in a long time, not in Laird's second-lifetime at least, and against all odds and common sense, Laird thinks the sun might be coming 'round, like an aimless thirty-something finally finding a good-fit antidepressant.

Lots of magically abjured old-world structures here, a few stone abattoirs with a glamor to look like a Hansel-Gretel-esque cottage, and others which were stone-for-stone reproductions (and maybe just one or two *original*) of exurban McMansions, where the town's leaders live. Alberta looks a little sick at the blood dragging itself through the dirt and away from its owner, appearing from nothing as it crosses the glamour's inner-threshold into the street with startling *nowness*, the building like an old pharmacy, big glass windows, amber glass bottle tinctures, but human, human howling from inside. In the window a little video-like loop of a kind old man in forest green apron and heart-patterned bow-tie, handing a carton of Du Maurier cigarettes to a freckly, eager red-headed child of nine or ten. Laird doesn't want to know what actually goes on inside.

This is a religious town, run by literal vampires. Not the usual, psychic-vampire, judgy church-folk Laird had known in his own lifetime, small prairie town types where everyone knew all about you and a bit better than you about all of it. Instead, red-wine-lip-lookin' motherfuckers, hoary-skinned, fast mean and faithful skeeter types. Lotta cultural memory in a place like this, given the life-spans of the smart ones; being stuck alive forever gives a lot of folks a need for God, for someone even more miserable and old than you.

Bert and Laird have it on good authority the PalmCaster was in the hands of a low-level trader named Wallet. He doesn't know what he has. It gets into the hands of an Elder who understands its value? It'll disappear and never been seen again, stuck in some antique high-boy drawer full of other immensely powerful relics, in some ridiculously anachronistic booby-trapped old-world house (or a seeming of one—a dungeon).

Alberta lets Laird lead, frustrated with all the dust the tamped dirt path coats her sylvan boots with; better to stalk the woods, avoid any place the folks thought would be here long enough to be worth altering the natural order of; better to admit to oneself the sun is on its way out and that gestures that ignore that, that strive toward a future are especially spurious. Laird not-so-respectfully disagrees, just one expression of the pair's ill-fit, which he comes daily dangerously close to misinterpreting as 'opposites attract' chemistry.

"Why do they settle here, again? Sun's up almost three hours longer here than Hussar valley, and just a day's ride away."

"Because, Woke One, they don't care if they get a little sunburnt. They do what they want, because they can. They like to show they can do whatever they want and get away with it."

"Please don't call me that."

"It is your duty to wield the title with honour, Laird of Summerfall."

"What's with your fucking 'tude today?"

"I don't feel very well."

"Told you we shouldn't eat uncooked fish."

"It's not that."

The argument dissembles into solemnity as Alberta and Laird close with the oft-sought booth, violet tomatoes and real fleshy, dermis-like grapefruit in plastic shopping baskets, baskets wired down real secure at their bottoms to the large cart that serves as base for the whole booth.

Wallet's fangs stick out like proud chiclets, goofy, but sharper than they look, Laird reckons. "Velcom to ze bazaar! Freshest fruits west of Moon-crater, east of hearth's-end." Wallet squints, nigh-blind 'til sundowning, an Apex predator in desperate need of simple sunnies.

"We've heard! Haven't we, Brother?"

Alberta hardly bothers with a persona at all, performs their bit of the take with a deadened, rote delivery: "yes, brother and lo', we have heard this noble fruit-man of sound business mind and sounder business ethic perhaps sells religious relics of fair price, and to us, those crusaders who report back to Him with his sundry treasures, and—"

"Vell yes, my bluthers, I havv always a few tokens of my faith on me, and vor a very vair price, one vvich the church can always avvord—"

Alberta closes in, drops the act she's hardly committed to in the first place. "It's yay big, liquid-crystal display, a little special stick that sits in its back pocket, maybe an animal skin sack the whole thing sits in. Thirty canola crowns in this pouch, all yours. Retrieve it and with haste, Skeeto, and our God shall gush his many blessings straight through yer gapp-ed teef."

Laird chimes in like clockwork, "My apologies, ribald vendor of severe repute, as my page is still learning the fickle intricacies of candor, and rhetoric. I'm sure those

fortunate souls in your employ are further along their journey than insolent Low Wren, here.”

Wallet squints at Laird a hard few seconds, and then without looking to Alberta asks, “Iz the vomen for sale? I vant zis zest and spunk to grease my veinz. I vill guarantee her servitude of a period of 5 seasons, or van year, vvichever comes firzt. And you shall be free to collect her after zis period, should she not, how ve zay? Hexpire? What does your cloister say to this? Do you speak for them? The relic for ze woman.”

“Sure” Laird offers, and shakes the vampire’s hand before he can think twice.

*

The glen the relic is hidden in is almost Edenic, all dappled in coral light scattering through the canopy, and a Jackalope bounding away with a pat pat splash splatter as it clears the creek, where they ‘Buffy’ Wallet real quick and quiet, and they’re on their Dire-Mules and wary for Pelgrane and whelmed by the unseasonably balmy night before anyone even thinks to look for a few nomadic church folk or a missing produce stand vendor, neither an uncommon sight in that wretched overstaying daylight.

7.

Laird can’t figure out how this pump is still dripping, like someone’d just filled up their rig. Alberta is sure she can’t sniff illusory magic, and that this whole station is the real deal. “Not the only one like this. Our tribes guard another. And the one old wizard—who hurt Mother Moon, in the before time, to try to block the sun’s light, harmful then—he took one like this for his manse, before he disappeared into a spell itself.”

“How reputable is that info?”

The padlock on the door is sound, and the drawn security curtain behind the bulletproof plexi seems likewise formidable.

“It’s one of those many traces of Lord Gurglevast still scouring the shadow’s in my mind.”

Laird hasn’t forgiven himself for the specific, saturating trauma Gurglevast had ‘accidentally’ inflicted on Alberta when he ‘fixed’ her. “You know, if I’d had the stomach for it—”

“Yes. You would’ve killed me then. But you couldn’t hurt a hurt woman. You could try and kill her from a distance, not sure of her age, her beauty, but no, not once you had to come close. I know. We’ve spoken too often of this, and I prefer we halt altogether.”

The display for the fuel-tank’s digital readout long dead. Dead as the Palm Pilot tucked in his Pouch of Plenty.

“Do you see the light inside?”

Laird doesn’t, but slouching now to Alberta’s posture, through the grimace-like break in the security curtain, Laird sees the teal register readout, and dropping to his numb knee and leaning, the luciferous blink of a security camera’s red “rec.” blip.

“What is it?”

“Can you get me to the roof?”

“No, but *you* can get *me* up there.”

And so he does.

*

Laird's numb knee extends its necrotic tingle down to his toes, struggling to drive up the thigh a little too, an old-world salmon writhing hard up-stream. He can't find his nylon fanny-pack in the shared kit. Too many cheese knives. Who could need this many cheese knives? Some scuttling creature in the guise of Irish moss on the corner of the canted fuel island, standing still as it can whenever Laird looks its way.

"You okay in there? Find a way to raise the curtain?" Laird calls out.

"I'm fine." Alberta calls back from inside the shuttered station. Quieter: "Just like I was ten seconds ago."

An ocher jelly tartar creeps up the neck of the ONE DOLLAR AIR pump. Its side panel details: "Proceeds from this device go to United Nations Children's Fund. We help you get where you go safe, so you help them in turn." "Preachy," Laird thinks. "Money for free air to benefit those who capitalism couldn't care less for. And then spend whatever's left in your wallet to put dinosaur juice in your tin-can simulacrum of many driven horses. And then drive into the sunset that's the future. And mind you don't dawdle, sun's going down any minute now, this I vow."

Laird's tender fingers find the sub-pouch full of sheathed precise micro excavation picks, clean linen squares in individual Ziploc bags, and finally, the fanny-pack. All the old-world coins, worthless now. Laird likes to collect the Canadian ones, though the last big find was in a rotten safe in an old sandstone foundation along the coast, where surely a house had once stood, but now nothing but the ghost of a basement; in here were high-silver content early 1960's American half-dollars, very useful spell components, and of great value in trade for their millesimal fineness. Laird doesn't spend those, and hides them at closer hand, in case he needs to work a spell with alacrity.

The Vancouver 2010 Olympic Loonie sinks into the pump's coin-slot, and nothing happens.

*

Alberta always softens under the stars. When he'd found the fanny-pack, choked with loonies, toonies and wrinkly two-dollar bills two years earlier, Alberta had asked him why they were all so uniform, and why when she bit them none were soft like gold. She had locked on specifically to the "Lucky Loonie," wondering why it deviated from the pattern.

"Well, they had a big competition, like how the wizards bet on whose golems will win in a fight. The countries that we used to have, they did the same thing."

"I thought golem-craft was from our time."

"Well, yes. Our countries picked people who were very good at specific things, and trained them, and pitted them against one another."

"Sending your best and brightest to death seems unwise. This is how we inherit the world I am born in?"

"It wasn't to the death. We actually only ever sent the poor to death, but not in Canada so much. My aunt would've said the natives, especially the crazy, err, mentally unwell ones, or, the french, maybe, but sometimes the french hated black people and the natives and. And, well, I tried to keep my head down, steer clear of all that much. There was always war, and war was rich people's way of offering meagre opportunities to poor people, and, well, no matter where you lived, even the middle of nowhere, it wasn't safe anymore, or, it wasn't like, *a full world*, well it was, but it didn't feel that way when you

were young. Now the world feels big again. And. Well, fuck. I don't really know how we got to your world."

"Our world," Alberta nodded in correction.

Lair shivered at the thought of a shared world with Alberta. "And in the USA, or, mm, you know the sepsis wastes? Down south, if you had dark skin there they killed you for no good reason sometimes."

"Would they have tried to kill you?"

"Nah I just tan real well." One meek chuckle. "Can't keep me down. Pale people doing the killing back then weren't pale like you, though. Pale like *me*. You're like, mm, a jellyfish. You glow. It's kinda magical."

"Chock your compliments."

"So yeah. Big competitions. Cold ones sometimes. Hot ones other times. Lots of 'honour' and 'glory' to compete, but you still needed to work all the time while you trained. It wasn't a way to make a living. And then they forgot you once you got old. Maybe you opened a car dealership, or visited a middle-school gym class."

"Too many old-world references."

"The big competition, no murder, no death, not usually, this specific one was held out past the western reach."

"In the ocean?"

"Well, there used to be land past The Sisters. And the logo for that competition, it was these stones." Laird gently tapped the coin almost floating between Alberta's two luminescent right-hand thumbs. "People called them Inuksuit, or, singular, Inukshuk. Not

sure how you said them exactly. My aunt, she was always complaining about things. See this looks like down in the Tall Grass Foothills, their wicker-titan, right?”

A small hum of assent.

“So my aunt says, that’s not Inukshuk. That’s In-oong-lak. I think that’s how she spelt it. Inukshuk stood to tell you where hunting was good, fish are plenty. This In-oong-lak thing, it’s a cairn.”

Laird thinks back to the last talk he and his aunt would have had, but can’t remember it, having been blocked from her profile after sharing some harmless meme she’d flipped out over.

He turned to steal a glimpse of Alberta.

Alberta had rolled to look him in the eyes, a sign she needed context, but Laird looked away scared, glued his eyes to the stars instead, imagined spinning them with sheer will one at a time, never getting anywhere, just another twist of the twice-stripped screw.

A gulp. “A cairn. Okay. We see them all the time here. Like outside Free Folk Fort last winter. With the rosary on the split tusk, right? Okay. The cairn.”

Alberta didn’t roll away, and Laird could’ve just died. But he didn’t, heart thump-thud-da-ding hard enough to mix paint.

“Well, it shows you where someone died. Murder, or suicide. Someone left behind leaves it for someone else who’s gone.”

“So who did they leave behind, on this, *luh-kee lew-nee*?”

“We didn’t know what it meant, or maybe the organizers did but didn’t care. Pale

people. Maybe they were admitting they left behind a lot of folks. All the people my aunt felt compelled to stand up for from the comfort of her keyboard.”

“What if you change one day? Like the PalmCaster can do.”

“That’s just a rumor. I’m sure it doesn’t do that.”

“But if it does.”

“Then so what?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will you build an *in yoong lack*? For who you were?”

“Ah, I think the indians would have a problem with that.”

“Indians?”

“Natives? I don’t know the word. They were a bunch of people here before the pale people and they had all these different nations that they lived in.”

“Nations? Like families.”

“Sure, sounds right.”

“But not like your countries.”

“Correct.”

“What was your nation?”

“I didn’t have one. People like me didn’t have a history.”

“And you thrived, without a family?”

“No. I suffered the whole way through.”

She kissed him on the side of the mouth, then the earlobe, and then, no more kissing, but she drew her body parallel along his to keep warm, her girl-cock warm and throbbing against his thigh just above his knee. “I am sorry you are suffering, Laird.” She

pinched his belt-loop between her two right-hand thumbs, hitched her hand there for the foreseeable future.

He told himself he didn't want her to kiss him out of pity. From shared misery. That he didn't want to disappear into her. She was snoring before his threadbare fib gave way.

*

The air-pump comes to life with a contrary death-rattle. Laird jogs behind the station, then lifts a timeless, un-aged fixed-gear bicycle up, afraid to test its chains, to push his luck. He carries it back out around front to the thrumming air pump. The bike sits all the way down onto its rims, tires oil-black but flat. The snake hiss as the pump nozzle bites onto the valve stem, before it gets flush and the sound shrinks, like it's far away, underwater maybe.

With a bit of creativity, they could turn this bicycle into a base for a lightweight wagon. Cut out cost of feed for mules, or hire hands. They could spend longer scavenging, bring more back. *Thwip* as the nozzle slips off, the tire fat and firm, and its valve cap threading back on right after that. The second tire's stem, Laird back in routine now, hardly has a second to hiss before the implements are coupled, the dreamy inflation sound far away, but something strange in its center.

The pump's timer runs out and the dreamy elsewhere disappears. Alberta's bloody wailing emerges from its dissolution. His numb knee gives as Laird rushes to the door, rolls his good leg's ankle. He scrambles awkwardly on all fours to the door, alert and eye on the purple mossy thing, but even it seems frightened by Alberta's timbre. He can't see

her through the mouth in the security curtain, until he identifies her point of audition, catches just her hand slapping and slipping on the lotto-ticket counter beside the register.

No way up to the roof to drop in to help her, the rope still dangling anchored to something by the sky-light she'd descended down from. The door wiggles but too little to force further, and even if he could get past that, the chain and padlock, then the curtain.

“Bert, what do you need from me?”

“GEEET ME OUTT OF HERE!”

Inner jacket pocket, heavy, conductive coin: thumbing “64,” then “Liberty” and “In God...,” but trusting no one but himself, recalling throaty, unearthly syllables with impossibly precise glottal stops in their centers, rut-driven irrational anti-rhythms, her hand bloody, and visible, two thumbs splayed across the many unclaimed scratch tickets, just enough of her for him to concentrate on to direct the spell, “Bonny’s Boorish Banishment.” And she was gone, per the spell’s description, to the farthest, non-deadly point of arrival on the earth from him.

The lotto display explodes upward as whatever is left in there, whatever fiend forced him to send his love away, bears out the skylight, blotting out the sun but an instant until the sun itself confettifies the foul thing.

The purple moss is shivering against Laird’s calf, frightened half to death of the falling gas-station defender. He gives it a scratch where he thinks it might have some sort of bone, finds no precise center, just a series of soft static pulses, and the softness of a dog’s fresh-washed blanket.

Laird can’t see so well now, something in the spell taking more from him than he should’ve been able to give. The thing that got her, that he sent her away to protect her

from, deconstructed in the weak stare of the sun, the last thing in his mind as he slipped into sound, sable sleep.

8.

“Cowboy!”

“That’s a new one.” Laird dips his hand into the bag on the skeletal truck’s dash. Pulls out a quarter-pounder carton, and an empty fries basket.

“The mark of Miserian! The rapeseed arches!” Jank covers his eyes in mock fear.

“I think that might be a coincidence.”

“Sure, cowboy.”

“I need to quit teaching you words.”

“I like these cowboys. They settle dangerous land. They wrangle untame beasts, then slaughter them for supper.”

“You know, I had a real smart girlfriend once.”

“What does her gender have to do with your friendship.”

“It implies romantic, when it’s one word like.”

“You teach me more, I am honoured.”

“Anyhow, she’s real smart. Real worried about gender and stuff. She grew up as a cowboy, in a way.”

“Cowgirl?”

“Not exactly.”

Jank is unperturbed by this seeming non-sequitur.

“So anyhow, she was into book stuff. Never went to school proper, not when I knew her, but read a lot on that thing I told you about, the internet—”

“—web of lies, yes.”

“Sure, and she said they never were called cowboys way back when.”

“So they were called *cowgirls* before.”

Laird can't help but laugh out loud.

“I am pleased master is pleased with my joke.”

“Knock that master shit off, man.”

“Okay...mistress.”

Laird's smile cools, but in wonder at Jank's wit, not in anger; Jank has to hold his own stomach to protect his sutures as he cackles at his own joke.

“They used to call those folks cattle hunters. They stole ‘cowboy’ from people way down south, a place called Mexico.”

“I like that better. I know hunting.”

Laird dares to pop open the quarter-pounder carton now, all while eyeing the bit of stitch-rip blood that Jank's shirt is lapping up, shirt a dedicated, almost religious kind of filthy. The top and bottom buns are long gone. Small crab-like legs—unmoving, thank god—punctuate the hoary, rock-hard burger-bloat left behind. Turning it over, a teal lupin, tired, past its super-bloom best, in a mean, tight spiral along the bottom, not unlike a trivet. Laird closes the carton, sets it back on the dash.

The bag is wet with grease from its bottom to its top, and the web-frail napkins fall out the bottom and into the exposed yellow foam of the remaining seat. Laird pulls the top napkin aside, gentle, but it undoes itself and ghosts away like a rogue eyelash in the wind. Revealed, several immaculately salted bag-fries. Warm. Perfect. Laird does not

share with Jank, who would not know what this signified in the first place. Laird could die. Wishes a little he had.

9.

Laird mumbles the power word, “creep,” and the portcullised Texaco station’s foyer reveals itself, its blood-red black fangs retracting, the sentient Zouzou rug unrolling itself out the front door, rug’s closest tassel kissing Laird’s blood-red black boots, right boot’s adamantine toe-cap gummed with some blooded blonde scalp-slop.

The happy register *bing* and the cash-drawer roaring out, Laird retrieves the lich-bone skeleton-key under the hundred-dollar bills. Laird pinches the fat stack of hundreds, slides one out from the top, and sets it on the lottery ticket screen. He snaps, from his ring to middle finger, having never learned the proper middle-to-pointer way in either of his lifetimes, and the register drawer sucks itself shut in response. Laird pulls his chain cowl from his head, rests it on his silk cape. Bending from the hip and deliberate about it, Laird brings his nose down to the hundred-dollar bill, scratches the bill with his forked black thumbnail, and breathes in. The bill sticks to his face as he draws in. The bill dribbles slow maple blood where Laird scratched it, and he presses his face down to the lotto display again, where he runs his tongue from the bottom of the bill to the top, a spitty sheen lingering and the wound seemingly dried up until it isn’t, and runs again but now into the spit, mixing in a galactic swirl.

The metacarpal bone is carved into a key at the thinner end, with a small tag that says “WASH YOUR HANDS” clipped to its other end, though one can still see the faded “men’s” in tidy cursive underneath the fresher instruction. The bathroom door *thunks* unlocked, and eases open with its own weight, crying out for WD40. Laird passes through

the postern doorframe and into the long and lightless earthy mottled stone hallway.

Before he can make it to his chamber his attendants assail him.

“Maester Woke One—”

“JJ, what the fuck do you need?”

Jank Junieur, the one-eyed construct, the lesser *thing* Laird made from sand and oil and what blood he could salvage from its former self, it winces as Laird chastises it, both its remaining eye and its lost one scrunched in fear. “Nothing. I am very sorry. We missed you. We’ll leave you be.”

“You’ve already interrupted, so just out with it.”

“Oh, oh okay. May we smell the bill?”

“Fine.”

Jank Junieur drools creek-fast and earnest, like a stunned dog or a leaky sieve. He almost inhales the whole bill up his beak, but Laird snatches it away before it can disappear.

“The scent of male is so delirious, Maester.”

“Maple. It’s maple.”

“How did they enchant these so, in your simple, spell-poor epoch?”

“They didn’t.”

“But then who did?”

“The bills did it to themselves. Money is magical. It doesn’t exist, but it, well it kind of makes itself real, do you get that?”

“I understand nothing, Maester.”

“Everyone was convinced these bills smelled this way, and they didn’t, but now they do. The idea itself desired to be real, and thus made it so. This is the consequence of willpower, as is my manse, and my power.”

“Yes, of course, your Wokest one.”

“You are the consequence of my willpower. A shadow of what was taken from me when Miserian made his move, surely, but Miserian is dead, and you are alive.”

“And grateful.”

“Leave me be until sundowning.”

“But Maester, I can never tell when the sun is down, given my being trapped inside the manse.”

“Then you’ll just need to be very careful about interrupting my meditation.”

10.

The lost continent was a barb in Laird’s mind. Alberta had been sure it existed, even after they’d discovered so many other land masses analogous to Laird’s memory of the world, that the world Laird had known had changed in many ways, but would always be scarred—and in this way, knowable—by the acts of those in his own time. Laird thumbs the cicatrix that partitions his left eyebrow from itself, where the first folks he’d met had ripped his piercing from. It was what his enemies knew to identify him by, resistant to glamors, poultices, transmutation magics and even simple makeup.

Laird stares into the still black pool of his scrying basin, keen and able to detect even the slightest blush in what looked to others like fathomless, vacuous black death. The fey, long-eared and dreadfully pale steward of the cabal’s communal arcane study helped Laird the first few years of research, similarly compelled to learn more about the

lost continent, but had as of late abandoned hope for the resolution of the matter. The tomes Faerthenwilaliendunmdra had pulled for the two to study had been full of earnest, thoughtful writing on the continent, but all of those spine-rotted books suggested the continent's utter destruction even prior to Laird's epoch.

It was simultaneously a mountain-capped inhospitable rock, while also a motel (Laird had needed to explain portmanteaus, hotels, and motorways to Faerthenwilaliendunmdra at this discovery, none of which the Elven woman believed he told the truth about), and an inland island from which one could see nothing but endless ocean expanding into blackness; on the continent, the sun was always healthy, never flickered, and it was ever-punctual; verdant flora and virile fauna thrived always, and death was a small blip in an otherwise constantly purified, recycling life cycle that all could experience, in many forms and without judgment.

Laird knows the continent exists in some capacity, as his scrying-basin relieves one healthy single belch when the continent has been freshly speculated and studied and then called upon. The spell has never failed in those many paperclipped histories of the world that overlap to form the record that is reality, and it isn't failing now. Laird has scoured every terrestrial place in the world, with magic and his own eyes alike, and never again has he found Alberta.

Tonight, Laird's sleep is disturbed. He dreams of a long-lost lover, who'd left him in a moment of need, when he'd been beat near-to-death by bikers, stabbed even. He dreams of his dad's funeral, where bikers from the same gang had come to pay respects, which had upset his mother, who he hadn't been talking to at that time, couldn't comfort. He dreams of Alberta, warm along him. He dreams of spells he can't yet cast. He dreams

of the times he bought his under-age girlfriends booze, cigarettes, and took the one on her 18th to get a tattoo of his name in her bottom-lip. He dreams of his chance encounter with Ms. Marion, in his early days, when he thought he might bend her will to his, to send him back to where he belonged.

*

Sorceress Supreme and Chronomancer, Ms. Marion, commonly misnamed Misserian, High Wizard of the Rapeseed Arches. She had cast a geas against Laird to protect herself (and apparently, any woman at all) from physical harm, which Laird knew to be a misunderstanding, that he never meant to hurt her, that he just needed her help and had only ever met a wizard like Nimrod and was thus frightened, and then she pissed him off and talked to her page in some other language, so he freaked out, threatened to cut her throat should she not send him back to his own time, but of course he couldn't of. He'd barely been able to walk then. He'd had no power then. She'd said it.

“Woe, ye wicked Lairde ou'time

For your rest of my life and of thine

You shall not touch we wee ladies while my face is mine

And yours is yours, so ends this rhyme”

Many thought her dead. Her stooge, a man she gave scrolls of power to, paraded around and collected other's implements, blew up mountains and bent the will of fair maidens and sullied her 'brand.' So she sicked him on Laird, knew the puppet wouldn't stand a chance. That voice. Didn't want to help him. The Palm-Caster might subvert this tricky little binding, if Laird could get it going. But he hadn't yet. Alberta had said once

she knew where a charging cable might be. But Alberta was gone. Laird clenched his teeth in his sleep, felt a rustling at his feet, and summoned flames.

*

Jank Junieur burns to death without any pain as Laird bolts awake in bed, watches the sand and blood that had hitherto bound JJ boil apart. Laird does not know if he is screaming at his cramped calf, or at his burning friend. Jank Junieur looks confused, hurt by the surprise, but not by the flames. Jank is holding a bar of fast-failing soap, something he often tried to sneak into Laird's sheets at the end of the bed to keep Laird from growing more restless, a folk remedy for protection, as JJ knew no magic. The soap unwinds like a frayed candle's wick, pools then cools to a waxy cast atop the ash at the foot of the bed. Alone again. Alone again.

11.

The makeshift Inukshuk, proud as an oil derrick on the shore of the impossible isle. It was out of time, was the trick. Laird had read countless comics where secret bases were shifted forward a quarter-second, so that they existed not hidden in space, but hidden in time. It was stupid. He wobbles like a newborn calf on his abjured log-raft. He hadn't figured out how he would phase backwards in time a quarter-second, but skipping forward, well he clearly had an innate talent that way, like it was destiny to do so. Laird is sure to find answers to rejoin the central stream soon. He isn't sure who or what had so permanently affected this displacement to the lost continent, but he was happy to finally be here. That Ms. Marion, the foremost, perhaps *only* true chronomancer, had found it first, and who knows how long ago, didn't surprise him.

Ms. Marion's crushed velvet teal dress a lily pad afloat around her as she walks off the beach, waist-deep in the ocean to confront him. She calls out like a reprimanding teacher "You should've left, Petrolmancer. You are not welcome in this unsullied place. You're about to ruin it." She doesn't waste a second to stress any syllable, to bring any emotion to bear on anything she says. Ms. Marion twirls and marches back up the beach in fresh footprints having already ariven, having anticipated her, the teal-algae dress skirt dragging behind, which smooths, no, fills an already smoothed slipway in the sand ahead of her, the dress already sandy, water-logged.

Laird watches as a set of tubular impressions scar the slipway, and then the current draws him and his log-raft ashore, to fill those scars, snug like an onion-skin. Laird grips the gas-pump hilt of his arcane-broadsword, thinks very carefully about his next move. Before he can make a move, MM calls out again.

"Whatever you hope to do, you've already done it. That's the thing about the future."

12.

Alberta had been here, Laird is sure of that. But, well, she's not anymore. She's come undone. One with the land. Like she was the living matter of the island itself. He feels her everywhere he sets his head down, where he had set his head down, rather, and merely moves to fulfill the proof of; the saddest dress-rehearsal in the history of the world, this future. Laird feels like he's in his teens again, on auto-pilot, dispossessed and forced to marvel at all the hurt he's wrought. Ms. Marion moves with a grace that suggests she's suffering the same dispossession, but at ease with it, knows how to surrender to it.

Laird wakes up soaking wet one morning under the healthy, throbbing sun, only getting wetter, and colder. Then the promised monsoonal moody weather hits. Ms. Marion and him hide out in the motel, its parking lot a long green tongue, ochre and violet wild-flowers where the guidelines would be, calcified turtarriers. There's a tide-pool in an all-glass citadel, though swimming is particularly disorienting in the chrono-wrinkle, water in the mouth, spitting up and then it comes, gliding through and then kicking after. There's a parkade lot on top of the rest of the building, disorienting in its own way. The rain does not look to let up anytime soon. Laird pays close attention to when he suddenly no longer feels hungry, then goes to the buffet, stocked by some sort of unseen servants.

Neither Ms. Marion nor Laird have seen any other living being in their time here. She speculates it has to do with everyone else living in the central stream. "Then take us back, together?"

"If I could, it would've already happened, wouldn't it have?"

Their conversations all end this way, the same rut, a loop like the vampire village's apothecary window. Laird isn't sure he trusts her, given her specialty. He's wary of this intact motel, its electricity, like a hangnail from the past, so stubborn and infected that it persists forever and ever onward, though so does his cozy Texaco manse, where he 'saved' Alberta by surrendering her to the ends of the earth, the deadly trap he'd eventually conquered.

Laird's Violet Moss familiar shivers, snuggled along his belt and under his chain shirt. "Time-sickness," Marion posits. She doesn't offer a solution. Moss is warm, but

stabs of cold flash through it. Laird sees Jank, Jank Junior, and himself all alike, in the dynamic electric moss that suffers alongside him.

*

After a dreamless night, the weather breaks, and Laird, surrendered finally to intuition, rushes back to the shore he landed on. He doffs his armor where the sandy impressions imply they were already discarded. He stabs the hilt of the gas-pump broadsword into the deep gouge where the dune grasses thicken up. He sets Violet on the split log he'd first sat as he reconciled his displacement when he made first contact. He swims out into the ocean that rings the impossible land-locked island—impossible, as though this place had once been the bottom of an ocean, and was again—those shores that drive through and around, like a pair of scissors handles. He swims until he feels his breath shorten up, and then a little more to fulfill the lung burn. He looks back to the island. He looks through the slipshod Inukshuk, its little center cyclops eye, its window, which by virtue of the stones' stacking, squared, and a blue-gray gloom is too thin to hide the whole sun, well, the little pool-chalk square frame of the sun.

The afterimage burns in before Laird knows to look away, because it already did. He swims ashore, and his things are gone. Violet gone. Alone again again again. The yellow square afterimage growing, and eventually swallowing his total vision. He calls on every volatile oil drop left in the world, anything at hand to restore himself, every dead dinosaur, every rendered enduring plastic. Nothing comes.

The sun so bright Laird can't see another thing. He grinds sand into his eyes with the heels of his palms in frustration, and then he gives up trying to feel anything at all.

Then the world stutters again. Laird clicks back into place. He can't see a thing, but he hears the familiar frustrated breath of Alberta, and little ones alongside her, their pat pat padding feet wary in the wet sand. The six fingers resting on his shoulder, then along his back, cold like a stethoscope. A second hand joins, and then both drive past his armpits like forklift forks. Alberta pulls him to his feet, and though he can't see the impressions he's left in the sand, he knows they're there. He's sure they're there.