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Cult of The Day Moon

Markham Sigler

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Cult of The Day Moon

by

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Abstract

This book is a collection of short stories and miniatures. A variety of themes and styles are employed. Themes include environmentalism, the family, late capitalism, and alienation. Styles include surrealism, neorealism, hysterical fiction, and science fiction, as well as speculative fiction.

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“Chapter 1: Old Fictions”

Horses stand over the trough by the gravel road. They nod their heads, jingling. A rocking chair sits on the porch, and a cloud of dust rises in the sleek distance, a woman appearing on the porch, dress drawn by cold pastels.

The riders are four men with cornrows and long noses. There is a fifth man in the rear, pulling a small wagon. He is short and round, with a bald head and lively idiot eyes. The riders look around, not at the woman, not at each other. Space flattens into auburn hills.

A small noise comes from the front corner of the inn. A boy emerges, wielding a makeshift slingshot. His hair is scattered and he's shirtless. He creeps toward the men, intoning old fictions, horses over the trough, eyes of all on his form.

“Chapter 2: Winter Melody”

It was early winter and I had a moment of reflection as I walked to her apartment, regarding the pale sun. As soon as I entered the building it was forgotten. There were quiet whisperings in the stairwell, almost real. I knocked on her door and heard her tell me to come in.

She was sitting on the plaid couch with her legs hanging off the arm rest. A music I wasn't familiar with came from the kitchen. I walked to the window.

“What are you looking for?”

“The sun.”

“It's December. There is no sun then, as far as science is concerned.”

I told her it depends where you are.

“That's your answer for everything,” she scoffed.

A glass of orange juice was on the coffee table. I looked at it and waited. The sound of a garbage truck floated skyward. An iguana appeared in the hallway.

“Who's this?”

She looked around. “Oh, him? He was a gift from my uncle, who thought I might be getting lonely.”

“Did you tell him you aren't capable of loneliness?”

She smiled at me for the first time in several days.

“I didn't want to be rude.”

I sat down beside her and touched her leg, watching the new pet graze along the carpet. I was struck by the way he resembled a tortoise. She sat up and began breaking

a nug of weed. I stood and stretched. I leaned down to touch my toes, I reached toward the ceiling, I reached down to touch my toes again.

“The music,” I said.

“What about it?”

“Did you choose it or did the iguana?”

“He has a name, you know.”

“Then tell me what the name is.”

“I don’t know.”

She looked at me, licking the edge of the rolling paper.

“I didn't know you had an uncle.”

“His name is Gordon.”

I began drinking the orange juice and walked back to the window. Infrequent traffic populated the streets as evening fell. Tall men were walking their lush dogs.

“I can’t go back to work again.”

She lit the cigarette. The iguana cocked his head at the smoke twisting calmly across the room.

“Don’t think you have to tell me things I know.”

I put my hands on the windowsill. “I’m telling everyone except you. You’re my witness. You and the iguana.”

“He has a name,” she said.

“Today someone asked me if I wanted to go for a drink after work.”

I paused and noticed the iguana was closer than it had been before.

“The look in his eyes killed me.”

“There is nothing more pathetic than the look of some men.”

There was a knowing in that room, something of pseudo-celestial allegiance. In the past it had been a distraction, trying to attract your focus. Recently it had begun to assimilate into the background, along with the burgundy carpet and old-fashioned television set. Suddenly she said we had to pick a name for the iguana. The smoke seemed to disappear into the lamp. The sound of the garbage truck came again. I was thinking of something else, half-listening to the music. She moved where she was sitting.

“I was thinking something dramatic,” she said. “Like Pablo.”

“My name is Pablo.”

“You never told me,” she said.

I thought of telling her she hadn't asked, but I had forgotten. There was no impetus to leave the room, no fire. The room was cozy and still, like something you took out of a package. We were both there, inside the room, with the iguana and the glass of orange juice. I realized that I was struggling to say something.

“What if spring doesn't come again?”

“Don't be silly. If spring doesn't come, then winter doesn't come. And it's winter already.”

Her reason made sense, like the colors of the iguana. There was an aspect of paranoia to it that suited her style, I thought. I wondered if at the end of the day it might be autumn. What would that imply? She put the cigarette out, curled against the couch. I sat across from her this time, leaning over to scratch the reptile's back. I finally noticed the spikes there.

“The spikes couldn't prevent him from becoming your captive,” I said.

“He was probably born a captive. My uncle owns a pet store. Unless he goes hunting iguanas in the dumpsters at the jungle.”

“If he did, and he asked you to join him, would you?”

“Would you?”

I thought about it. “I think so.”

“Well maybe he does. Maybe you can become his assistant. A career change might be the thing you’re looking for.”

“Who says I’m looking for anything?”

“You did,” she said. “You said you can’t go back to work. And I already knew, anyway.”

“I like my job. I like it a lot.”

The iguana was on her foot. I took the glass of orange juice. I smiled at her and held it up.

“You took my advice and got the organic.”

“Yes. I like taking the advice of people that care about me. It’s something that makes me very, very happy.”

“Chapter 3: The Day’s Special”

Jack watched Merc scale the fence with a certain practiced ease that made him wonder if Merc had done it before. In reality this was merely a fence like any other, like fences they climbed together and apart on a regular basis. Jack was worried about security. The zoo was not known for security, but it was not known for break-ins. Merc had convinced him that the two of them were each much more intelligent than anyone paid to watch the animals. Jack had thought that this was a cruel they to say, but he had agreed. Merc looked through the black bars at Jack, waiting.

“The longer you take the less likely we catch the feeding.”

“This is why I suggested we come early. I need time to mentally prepare for this kind of lawlessness.”

“Look at yourself,” Merc said. “You call yourself a boy.”

“I should feed you to Chin with a side of marinara.”

He climbed over the fence now, making sure to climb faster than his friend had, making sure not to look at him as he landed on the cool earth. They walked with bent knees and heads on swivels through the section of tropical birds.

There was no need to speak, no desire to speak, just the reverent sound of silence that accompanies the sacrifice of whatever’s on the menu.

Merc looked into the broad cages, and the birds were still. Since it had been Jack’s idea to come he didn’t look around out of boredom or curiosity.

There was a heaviness in the air, a volume of sensory data. Jack tried to ignore this and stayed close to the walls. They heard and saw nothing. A few weak lights kissed the treetops. Jack looked around, understanding something, and didn't see Merc.

He breathed in through his belly and tried to recognize his fate through a lens of pragmatism. An animal made a noise. How long had they been walking? How long had he been walking? How long had him and Merc been friends?

Merc was his oldest friend, the friend who he knew the most about and therefore was the wariest of.

He made the decision to go on. The aquarium was nestled at the bottom of the steep hill. The panther was on one side of him and the panda was on the other. He had never been awake at this hour, according to his watch, and he had never felt so awake. He felt like he was in a dream. He wanted to ask his dad what the difference between a dream and this moment was, exactly. What is the difference between being awake and asleep? Chemicals, eyelids, his dad would say.

Chin's cage was on the far side of the aquarium, outside. Jack pressed against the cage through a series of bushes and watched as a figure emerged from the aquarium, pushing a waiter cart. A monkey hooted. Jack was the one who had wanted to see this happen. Merc had come for the thrill. Merc was pushing the waiter cart. He had a dopey smile on his face, and he squinted into the bushes where Jack was hiding and waved. He scaled the fence and went down to the pond where Chin was lying. Jack watched as Merc began stroking Chin's long back, singing an old-fashioned tune with a wispy tenor.

"What are you doing man?" Jack hissed.

Merc continued singing momentarily and then looked in Jack's direction.

“I’m comforting the lonely Chin.”

“Should I help?”

Merc shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

Jack wondered if he really did want to chance it with Chin. He had never been interested in being Chin’s friend, only his audience. Merc continued singing lightly and stroking the alligator’s back. Jack realized with some fascination that the song was in Chinese, and that he understood the language, in the moment, in Merc’s song.

“Chapter 4: Hunters”

It was the fifth day of the hunt. She came out of the tent, trademark garb, green headband and black robe. The trees in this segment of the forest carried a particular sway. She was the first one up this morning. This surprised her, indistinctly. They were hunting the wolf cat, a hybrid descended from a certain mutation. Wolf cats were growing slowly in the area, killing the small children who strayed with an air of natural selection. She was a mainstay on these hunts.

They had been tracking one for two days now. The animals weren't large enough to be caught up with in a shorter amount of time, usually. Laren exited his tent. It was normal for the animal to be sighted in the late evening today, she thought, gathering herself by the self-made fire.

“If we kill today, they will want to go for a second.”

There was a small bird, in the tree, making a dove-like noise. They were rewarded well by the local officials of the segment where they killed the animal.

Axmand exited her tent.

A sudden rush came behind them, a troop of white monkeys. The hunters were silent as they passed. No one paid attention. Axmand began sharpening her sword. They were nomads. Vincent emerged, and Dante. They were the newest members of this party, young brothers.

“Axmand and I have decided that after we kill today, we'll continue searching,” Vincent said, scratching his beard.

“It's simply a matter of balance,” he said.

Breakfast was passed around. Dante hummed quietly to himself. After she sharpened her sword, Axmand began meditating. Elisa ate with an empty expression. Vincent and Laren began conversing in *The Way of the Abstract*.

“One moment is both the next and not the next,” Laren said. “That’s what the character in my dream kept saying, while we climbed the tree.”

“Is it complicated?” Vicent said.

“I think that’s what I was supposed to design.”

They drank tea, listening to the day open.

“We promised them we would be back by the end of the week, for the preparation of the confrontation with the Siboans.”

Elisa looked at Dante. He spoke above his tea, looking at the ground. They would have to get moving soon. Not much had been said by the boy or his brother during their training.

They were slighter, with long hair. Dante was the older. She didn’t want to make anything of this comment, sitting still.

Vincent looked past Dante for a few seconds, paused, and looked away.

“Let’s get ready to go,” he said.

There was a bustling. She stretched the bow. The taste of the tea left her throat. They began moving through the forest at half-speed. Small creatures paused to watch. Axmand had taken the lead, the brothers the flanks, Vincent the rear. Elisa roamed to Axmand’s left, holding her bow in. Laren was on Axmand’s right. There was a general awareness of Axmand’s direction.

They ran through morning, not stopping for more than a breath. The sun was deep behind the clouds, painting an iron shadow across the trees. Dante and Vincent

swerved between each other as they ran. They were able to tell they were encroaching on the animal's territory as Axmand's pace decreased. Suddenly they all stopped. Axmand was crouched, moving her palms in circles over the earth. Vincent moved in through them to take the lead. He held a blade skyward, crab-walking into the brush. Elisa stayed to the left. There was a play of colors. She opened outwards, keeping the attackers in her purview. Axmand was over Vincent's shoulder. The rest had formed a horizontal line behind. The trees staggered together in gentle blues.

She saw the wolf cat in a higher tree. It was there for a second, a gray body looking down. She followed its plunge as it fell onto Dante, who tried to throw it off as he was knocked to the ground. She couldn't see through the brush what was happening. Vincent leapt over, using one blow. The forest did not move as he relaxed.

She sat by the fire. Two children stopped to look at her. Their mother was behind them, shooing them gently forward. Her face seemed tense in the late evening light. The smaller child looked at her with some intensity. She had a tuft of hair pony-tailed over her head. The elder, a boy, lost interest and continued toward home. Vincent appeared in the middle distance. He strode with a normal confidence. The child and mother ghosted away, trailing the boy.

They sat together on the same log. They were given fifteen cows in return for the hybrid. Vincent looked into the fire with her. He put his hand on her shoulder, looking into the fire with her.

“Chapter 5: The Smiles of Their Grandmothers”

Icicles hang from the sleek cave top. I haven't bothered asking how cold it is today. Horace's cough sounds from behind me. The land places silence like body with no soul.

What did they discover? This is the question I am asked, daily and forever. The discovery of these people, possessed with a need to know more, is the reason I, a man who takes pictures, am in Antarctica, true Hell.

Sanders pauses where he stands, pointing at the odd plant with a child-like smirk. It is pink, with nemo-orange stripes and yellow hair. It has been suggested that this plant is an indication of a period missed on the geological timeline some 700,000 years ago. It has been dismissed by the old guard as pseudoscience. I take pictures, orbiting the plant.

This is our third day here. When we return to camp in the evening we go our separate ways to nap. I see Horace at dinner in the meal tent. There is not much verbal intercourse. It is a serious time in all our lives. My twelfth girlfriend calls me while I chew my pasta, half-imagining Horace falling into his plate of tortellini.

“How goes it in the union?”

“They're saying it's the bladder. His bladder has cancer. How can that be?”

I try to meditate after dinner, but I am overcome with visions of the planet freezing over, some 456th century ice flood, shamans in parkas interpreting the smiles of their grandmothers.

“Chapter 6: The Types”

One week before the fight he dreamt his dead grandmother’s dying form. She spoke to him from her bedroom, a room he had been in only once or twice as a child, and she wore an ascot with white-warm coloring. He had just returned from a mountain biking trip, in the dream, and he was an adolescent, he was softly aware of the fact that there were no mountains within spitting distance of her home.

“Have you been a good boy?” she said to him.

“No. Being good makes me feel like a mutilated fish.”

“Well then,” she said. “That’s all fine and dandy. But keep it up and you’ll look back like a cross-eyed fish.”

“I eat fish for breakfast.”

He waited for her to respond, but she only smiled, a smile of the purity age is apt to stand for in certain types of figures in certain types of dreams.

He ate a fruit salad when he woke up. After the fruit salad he cooked a slab of chicken on the stovetop and ate it. His wife wandered into the room, hair black and flowing from Roman mythology.

“How did you eat breakfast before me?”

“I was hungry. I had no choice.”

“The fight is in one week,” she said. “What’s wrong with your head, man? Did you have another dream? You’re not supposed to dream. You’re not supposed to dream.”

He took a bit of toast and covered it with peanut butter. The countertops were still wet with the shine she had apportioned them yesterday evening, after their friends had left, four bottles of wine in their wake.

“I’m thinking,” she said.

The shine glanced off a bead of sweat rolling down his temple. It was only then that he looked at her.

“I made myself breakfast last week.”

“Don’t lie to me. You know I’m not as discerning as I was when I was a child.”

The fighter came forward onto the table with his elbows and looked out the window into the landscape his wife had designed six years ago, after he’d won his fourth professional fight and earned a fine sum of money, more than the Navy had paid him for eight years of service. The landscape was the nearest thing she had to a child, and, oddly, no one, at least that she was on speaking terms with, found her strange for this.

At first he had denied her a child and then, when he was winning fights, she had denied him a child, citing her dwindling capacity to do anything besides support his professionalism, which he found unnatural, a sentiment he told his elder brother, who laughed and told him that his wife did not want to be pregnant on live television.

“They say Varejao’s father has organized the deaths of twenty men,” she said. “He himself may have executed three. He even has a calling card. He shoots them in the right eye.”

“And if that doesn’t kill them?”

“He shoots them in the left eye.”

He drank a cup of water. Elisa moved to the fridge. The old dog, whom he’d left with his parents while he was with the Navy, entered the room. They were a black and

white television show. He rubbed the dog's skull, laughed at a meme involving a character from *Lord of the Rings* and international politics, retweeted the meme, and looked up to see his wife looking over her landscape. She wanted the landscape to resemble one from the Triassic period, massive leaves and flowers, kaleidoscopic and deadly. He looked over her shoulder and saw a small spider with long legs in the upper corner of the window, bobbing spatially, an air of duty and sensuality in the mind, a thinness so aligned and so fragile.

He jogged because he hated to jog. That and coach said it was a good way to loosen the lungs and ease the mind not involving physical touch.

He ran and there was a thought about how the wealth of the neighborhood evoked a mausoleum energy, a thought that belonged to his wife.

The fighter turned a corner and saw a crowd of people. From this distance he heard their voice. The quality unsettled him and he wondered about turning around. The wind caressed the oaks staring down over the street and he ran toward the crowd, their signs coming into view.

It was a setting for a crowd, a wealthy neighborhood in the suburbs. The crowd recognized itself as symbol, believed their anonymity would tell a tale on an underworld scale. The signs that he saw made general sense, decrying bloodshed, but he did not look hard, and he avoided eye contact.

He turned a corner to head home. It was late morning and he wanted to eat a snack and go to the gym, listen to the old man's schemes, get distracted and nod. The man he was fighting had won four fights in a row, no small feat in the welterweight division. Varejao was a wrestler first, and he would get you on the ground and mount you, get you from

behind, control you, thump you on the head and when you squirmed in an attempt to break away he'd grab your throat with an elbow. He was main event material.

Footsteps were the only sound. He ran beneath one oak and turned a corner and saw two boys. They were partly hidden in the shadow of a mesquite and there was that pathetic energy of children being careful. He did not slow his pace as he went by. He noticed the larger of the two paying him serious attention. He looked over and the boy asked him to wait.

They approached him with the manner of woodland creatures. He bounced from foot to foot, unconsciously.

“My brother wants to ask you a question.” “A question.”

The smaller boy said, “I’m wondering.”

The fighter wiped sweat with an arm and bounced, trying to give a perplexed smile that he wasn't sure was coming across as friendly. The smaller boy had stopped speaking and he looked as though he wanted to go on.

“He wants to know if you're that fighter.”

“What?”

“The fighter who lives in this neighborhood, the one they're protesting for.”

“I don't know what you're talking about. Do I know what you're talking about?” the fighter said. “I don't. Sorry dude.”

He smiled with less effort at the boys.

“Televised bloodshed is evil,” said the little boy. “That's what the bald one was saying.”

He bounced from foot to foot. The boys were right before him, mobile, and his emotions remained in his feet.

“What my brother is trying to say is he thinks you’re the one they’re protesting.”

A car rolled down the street. The fighter captured the opportunity to mirror it, because he was confused and hungry. He nodded and smiled and said sounds cool, waving to the boys, who replied with waves of their own.

He watched the old man.

“Elbow.”

“Okay.”

The old man strapped himself into the pads. The fighter talked with the sparring partner, who made one hundred and fifty dollars an hour.

“I ran into these boys today.”

“Boys are cool.”

“They gave me the creeps.”

“Good.”

The old man stood in the ring’s far corner in a way that was scarcely perceivable.

The old man looked at the fighter. “Watch the knee. You win this fight that’s a nice new contract, a chance to be in the Top 10 for the first time, a serious deal.”

The sparring partner said, “Barry. You look like the mascot of that basketball team.”

“Keep it up pal and you’ll be delivering mail to widows and derelicts.”

The fighter worked through the armor on the old man and there was an insectile aura, a play of biology. The choreography was the only thing that were not vain. They crouched and whispered strategies, television flashing on the wall.

“Direct his energy back toward him.”

“Bottle him up like Moby Dick. Slip through, drive, drive, drive, fuck him until he bleeds shit.”

“Watch the knee.”

The sparring partner shadow boxed. The fighter drank a veggie smoothie and then he spent two hours rowing in place.

There was a painting on the wall. The painter was a woman from Oklahoma who moved to New York and then Mexico. He did not want to know this. His wife told him he thought the painting’s intrigue was to spell the quasality of significance with counter-movement. It was red and blue, oil spills and modes of Jupiter light. In the red there was turquoise and in the blue deep-sea green. Quasality was a word she had invented. He lay in bed. It was late. He clicked between baseball and a game show inside a taxi. His wife appeared in doorway gloom.

“The fighter lies in bed,” she said, “flesh and flesh alone.” “Are you a Pisces or a Tarantino?” said the television.

“Listen to yourself.”

“Honey I have something to tell you.” “Tell me quick.”

“Varejao is a Catholic,” she said.

He watched television. The taxi driver deposited a Chinese couple who did not know which shaving cream brand Derek Jeter sponsored onto the street.

“The Chinese lose again.”

“Of course it’s important. Listen to me, Majek. This man is a passionate believer. There are nails tattooed onto his palms. Palms that come together in prayer in the morning, in the evening. In the cage?”

The dog came into the room and watched them. The wife came toward him and knelt, elbows on the edge of the bed. She laughed and smiled and said she was praying.

“You’re crazy,” he said. “Crazier than the Chinese.”

They had met in their twenties. She was protesting the size of the minimum wage and he was jogging.

The phone told him it was 3:38. He couldn’t fall back asleep so he rose and went to the fridge, where he gathered kiwi. The dog followed him with his yellow fur. They sat out on the patio overlooking the yard.

The dog rustled and ran barking into the darkness.

“Hey,” he said. “Shut up.” He lost sight of the dog. “What is it, Friend?”

He ate another kiwi and turned on the patio television. The television told him the time was 5:18. He scanned the display for something interesting. One of the Netflix boxes contained two hands in white gloves, similar to the kind worn by Mickey Mouse, Goofy. The show was called *Howl*. The dog’s barking had assumed an undeniable beat. Majek studied the hands, and he selected the box with the remote.

Out of the darkness came the dog, hairy and grinning. He ate the kiwi and fed one to the dog. The hands were on the screen, larger, the same image as before except larger, and he watched, a contour in his eye.

“I’m the left hand.”

“And I’m the right hand.”

“Together we make plays and sing songs.”

“Together we grit our teeth and stir dinner up for whomever’s at the table.”

“Love and forgiveness.”

“Enmity and strife.”

“We share these things because we are the left and the right.”

Chants pulled him from morning sleep. He thought by the measure of sun splayed over the room it was past lunchtime.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, fighting’s in the DNA.”

A note was taped to his wife’s dresser. He looked at it and then he put on shorts and lurched about the room, half-believing the chants.

“Hey hey, hip hooray, bloodlust is a lovely game.”

He pushed open the front door, holding a pear. The reaction of the crowd was ambiguous, as though they didn’t know what to make of his body.

A bald figure stepped forward.

“We just want to wish you luck in your upcoming bout, Mr. Majek.”

iPhones were hanging in the air.

“I appreciate it.”

“The repression of the demon within us has served only to frustrate our higher calling,” the man said.

Majek pondered the idea of the man being a representative of an American religion, Seventh Day Adventist, modern spirituality in the shape of a well-moneyed man.

The man turned toward the crowd and raised his arms.

The fighter went inside and put on some jazz, washed dishes. He checked his phone and saw a pair of missed calls from coach.

“Where the hell are you?”

“Had a rough night. I’ll come in later.”

“Majek, the fight’s in three days. Do you want to show up or fuck off to Zimbabwe?
You degenerate wuss. You potassium nicotine cunt.”

“There’s a crowd in my front yard.”

“Less than an hour.”

“Mormons in my front yard.”

“Say hello to Ellie for me. Give her a nice smack on the toosh. See you tonight.”

The fighter looked at his dog, the dog wagged his tail and approached. They sat there a few moments, listening to the chanting.

“Toosh,” he said.

The coffee was in the pot, the crowd was in the front yard. His wife had not been home. Sportscenter was on in the background, speaking of football. The fighter looked through the window over the sink and saw the boys, playing under a tree. The older had curly red hair and the younger straight blonde. He watched them for a moment with recessed confusion. He poured a cup of coffee and went outside. They kind of looked at him. They were clearly playing some type of game, pretending to be animals, panther and jackal, robin alighting from branch into summer breeze.

“Excuse me, sir.”

“Afternoon boys.”

The older boy had that look. “What kinds of trees are these?”

“No idea, son. They’re my wife’s.”

The boys contemplated this.

“What are you guys up to?”

They didn’t respond. The crowd’s chants hummed across the earth.

Majek said, "Oh, just a little make-believe."

"Yes," said the younger one. "We're having fun."

The older one asked if he was the fighter and Majek said yes.

"I knew it."

They watched footage of Varejao. The one thing Majek had was four inches of reach. Coach smoked a cigar. Majek drank water.

"He's quicker than horse piss."

"Right."

"Stay on your back foot too heavy and he'll chop you up like Lancelot."

"Right. Lancelot."

That night he lay in bed and turned on the show with the talking hands. It was one continuous stream in his mind, dozens of hours. His wife walked in the room.

The left hand said, "The body is the mind."

"I had the most wonderful experience," she said.

The right hand said, "The mind is the body."

He paused the show and raised his eyebrows at her.

She looked at him and said, "I have something to tell you." "Okay."

"What is this anyways?"

"Hands," he said. "Hands with personalities."

"To defeat Varejao you must follow these instructions."

"How much did the shaman charge you?"

"You must believe in God."

"I believe in God."

"Believe," she grinned, arms opened wide.

They spoke with a tribal clip, homegrown, the black screen carrying the occasional string of wavering being, digital color, writhing with indications. The fighter watched with disembodied glee.

“I’m Jack Frost.”

“And I’m Homer Simpson.”

He wanted to wake his wife for the first time in years. He researched the show on Wikipedia and found a quiet page. A small group called The Etruscans had made the show for Netflix; the show had been outright panned.

The hands looked at each other and danced a jig, fingers acting as arms, palms as bellies.

The Etruscans were an anonymous group. Storyboarders for children’s cartoons, content creators, manuscript editors. He watched the hands. There was a cool performativity, a dread that lingered into the next sentence. If he were a character in science fiction, would he see the hands moving like jelly fish among sea plants?

“I see you.”

“You see me.”

“Guns and butter.”

“Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon.” “Ectoplasm.”

“Unspeakable words.”

He left the show running, wife sleeping, and went downstairs to the kitchen. The dog’s tail thumped against the tile, expensive enough to feed Nigerian royalty mass-produced cupcakes for one thousand years. He slapped mustard on a piece of bread, cold roast beef and cheddar cheese. He talked to the dog.

The sparring partner was young. He had the haircut of someone with hopes and dreams. Majek watched him hanging against the chain links and tried to remember his name.

There were no windows in the gym, and a few people working out, pedaling the speed bag, jumping rope, working the mitts, rolling. The lack of windows gave the room the quality of prisons and nightmares, something else he could not place, a quality nonetheless he did not dislike.

He stepped up and into the cage. They sparred. There was added energy today. The partner's left cross evaded Majek's defense, kissing his chin. He noted the extra measure of confidence in his partner's feet. He tossed a left cross into the young man's kidney and grinned. His partner grinned back. He put his partner through the windmill of submissions. He heard the grunts of the amateurs.

There were reporters sitting beneath the stage where they stood, the nostalgic smolder of cameras.

"Third from the right, fourth row."

"This question is for Varejao. Would you say this is your most important fight?"

"I would not."

"This question is for Varejao. What are some of your concerns heading into the big fight?"

"My concerns are nonexistent. I want to stay present. Execute. This is me."

"Do you have anything to say to your opponent?"

Majek was on the other side of the stage, beside his coach. He had considered growing a mustache for the weigh-in. His mind was vast and blank. Cups of water lay before those on stage.

“I have nothing to say. He is a fine fighter and I look forward to the fight.”

“Second from the right, second row.”

“Majek do you have a response to Varejao’s rather dismissive comments?”

“No. You know me, I love to fight.”

They each were weighed, beckoned to the center of the stage, where the flashing intensified and they each registered a pose of confidence and strength, and their eyes met and Majek was filled with an overwhelming pity, less for Varejao than the idea of Varejao, and he wondered humanely at himself for it was possible Varejao’s inner life was rich, and he found himself whispering through the corner of his lips instructions to the man to watch the show on Netflix with the talking hands, it seems up your alley, he said, and Varejao smiled politely and nodded, and they turned away from each other, and the flashing continued, the bodies of those in the room dissipating into its infinite light.

“Chapter 7: Seven”

He wanted some of them in the building when it came down, 7 to be specific. It wasn't in him to kill en masse, but he needed to make a statement, so he chose a number, imaginatively fraught with meaning. He wore a white t-shirt with the Blockbuster logo. The flowers were asleep. In the unfocused distance there was a highway, trailing into lanky night.

He had chosen the number 7 as the amount of people that would die.

He saw his face pass before his third eye, and maybe it's because he hadn't much life to speak of, to pass there. He was a man who had only an idea of his face.

The parking lot was vacant. He moved across the slate and entered the hotel, holding his jacket up to his face for some reason. The lobby hung there like a cheap painting. He met eyes with the clerk and was struck by how her dim expression hardly changed as he sprung over the desk and stuffed her with chloroform.

It was a hotel in the strip-mall boonies, flanked by fast food and oil.

His plan was rotating. He had a master key in one hand, an opened bag of skittles in the other. He entered the first room, chewing a skittle. No one was there. He entered the second room. An old man was asleep, belly impressed beneath the blanket. A cowboy hat was on a hook.

“Shut up,” he whispered, shaking the old man. “Don't say a fucking word or.”

The gun was on the old man's third eye. The old man looked at him with pure terror and he led him into the lobby. He took a pair of handcuffs and handcuffed the man to a chair bolted into the floor besides the television. He placed a sock in the man's mouth.

He took the next two people, a couple in their early 30's, down the same path, skipping behind them like a lost pirate. The old man lay there in the fetal position, same eyes. For fun he took the shirt off the young man and choked him with it, and when the young man had enough he beat him on the head with the gun until he was proper and bloodied.

He moved into the last room on the first floor with someone in it who he wouldn't kill.

He opened the door and saw that the TV was on.

"Who is there?" said a voice.

"Sorry, sorry. I thought this room was empty. My apologies sir."

He was closing the door when the speaker moved into sight. A boy about nineteen, skinny and defensive.

"Yes?"

He stood there, motionless, the door almost shut. Something came over him, a kind of mundane intensity, a smooth urge. He opened the door and swarmed the boy, who fought back. They crashed into the television. What was the boy watching? He began questioning himself, recognizing that he had mistaken the boy's youth for weakness. He realized the boy was probably an avid swimmer. The boy had his hands around his throat and was beating his skull against the floor. He grasped around for the gun and shot the boy through the face, redsplatters on the ceiling.

He was no longer sure what he was doing. He heard yelling coming from the top floor.

The thought, I won't be able to use the bomb, passed through his head.

The fire alarm went off. He sprinted into the lobby, where the clerk was zombie-walking toward the prisoners. He put a bullet in her. He heard the mindscreams of the new wife and the old man. He heard a grunt behind him and looked around. A large man in a cowboy hat moved toward him. He flicked his wrist and shot him. He heard screams.

He leapt over the desk again. He forced the cash register open and took the money. He ran through the sliding doors into the parking lot, wishing he had time to check the pockets of the prisoners.

“Chapter 8: The Moat”

We were all waiting for CJ. The situation was almost romantic, but there was something in the air, a subdued uncertainty that was, in reality, certainty, and it harkened the energy earthward. Isat beside her brother on the wall overlooking the moat. Since I'd arrived to visit his sister a few days ago, we had become good friends.

She was late. I was becoming accustomed to this, I hoped. She could manifest in the living room, reciting the events that had hindered her arrival like a grocery list. I would look at her without words, aesthetically, trying to convince her I was immune to her world of emotions, and that this was good. At the end of these speeches she drifted into airy states that were essentially yogic.

“Tom,” I said. “Has your sister always been late?”

Tom crossed his ankles. The blue earth split into mountaintops. “CJ was the eldest and our mother became a drunk, you see.”

“And that's why CJ is always late?”

Tom looked at the moat. I heard the servants chattering as they prepared dinner.

“That may be why she's always late, Kris.”

I plopped onto the ground.

“I don't see what the two have to do with each other,” I said.

CJ's dog was walking from the compound toward the moat. He was odd-looking, neckless, with the interiority of a tropical ape. My heart rate rose as he stopped at the water's edge. I had seen the dog swim well a handful of times, but I still became nervous.

He was a rescue, like all of her animals.

“They are totally unrelated, indirectly, it’s true,” Tom said.

I watched the dog enter the moat. It walked into the water and continued to walk through the depths, as though it were by nature an aquatic creature, some sort of newt. Ostensibly then there was no dog. I felt panicked, but did not want to say or do anything, since Tom was unmoved. The sound of music came from the compound now, a Latin funhouse atmosphere. I sat there. The dog emerged from the water. It was the same, except covered completely by a kind of moss.

“What is he doing?” I said.

“I’m not really sure,” Tom said. “It’s one of his habits, I think, a trick to know himself.”

We went into the house, where dinner was almost ready. CJ’s mother kissed me on the cheek and seemed generally anxious.

“I don’t know where CJ is,” she said. “But her father is going to join us tonight.”

I was considering leaving. I had always wanted to be a merry man and had caught wind from the servants that Robin Hood and his troop were in the nearby mountains. The twins were seated at the table already. I decided to sit with them as I considered. They were handsome children, quiet and intelligent. The boy sang beautifully and the girl made fires outdoors and danced around them while he sung. I sat with them. Finally I stood up and walked off, patting the boy on the shoulder. The girl took my hand and smiled at me. I passed by the kitchen. CJ was in there, holding a new kitten, with her brother and her parents. The father and CJ were the first to notice me. They smiled warmly at me, but I couldn’t help but feel cold. Tom approached me. I kind of shrugged at him, and he nodded. CJ and I met eyes with mild and absent connection and I stepped out into the night.

“Chapter 9: The Gift”

The moon seemed to be erasing itself from the sky. Electronic drums came over the sand. I was afraid of the woman who was chasing me. I stumbled through a small settlement of bodies singing and dancing. They told me not to worry, as though I were having a bad trip.

“Leave me alone,” I whispered. “Don’t touch me.”

Giant vans sat on the earth like sacred elephants. I ran to a nearby arrangement, staying low to the ground. She was a friend of a friend who had drunk some unknown drink. She had begun groping me, making strange faces. I asked her to stop and people laughed. She seemed encouraged by this, validated in a proto-religious sense. She slapped me, and instinctively, I kicked her in her small paunch. This had caused an increase in the volume of the laughter.

Now I was hiding under a van. I saw her feet in the festival lights. I should walk into plain sight, laughing gloriously, fend off her attacks like a shogun. But I preferred hiding at this point. It felt safe. The frequency of the vibrations connecting us was falling.

I watched her recede into the event.

Now I was on the edge of the encampment, admiring the black sky. There was a door in the night, offering a faint teal glow.

I knocked and a midget opened the door.

“Come in, come in.”

“When I was a child, I asked my parents to paint my room teal.”

“Please come in.”

He led me deeper into the void-like sanctuary. There were benches facing a stage, white curtains hanging from the ceiling. It was sexually quaint, I thought.

“What is this all about, my little friend?”

I clapped the midget on the shoulder.

“I don’t know. I’m just the doorman.”

I sat on a bench, feeling relief. Without a trace of music, the friend of a friend appeared on the stage, moving like a hieroglyphic. A toning had taken place. Her body had become covered with blue and red tattoos. I sat there and watched. She moved with that certain clinical grace. I got up and walked toward her, unsure what I would do when I got closer. She was humming, like a bee. She had this expressionless face that intrigued me. She motioned to me to follow her led me to a back room, filled with maps of the world. I went from map to map, grinning.

“I’ve decided to give you this room as a gift,” she said.

I looked her. She was looking at me. I decided not to reply. All of a sudden, I was suspicious.

“I’ve decided,” I sighed, “to give you this room as a gift.”

“Excellent,” she said. “Excellent.”

“Chapter 10: Lifespan”

There are two gangs in the beachtown. If they are each to write a creed outlining their system of beliefs and purposes, the creeds might very well resemble the other's, although it isn't certain. This is important because in essence the gangs are quite dissimilar. Each gang nominally serves the community, protecting it from miscreants, serving it during natural disasters, rescuing the tabby cats of widows, etcetera. The first gang does this, as well as functioning as a kind of mascot for the community—wherever they went in their caravan of golf carts, spirited morale followed. The second gang, however, spends much of their time harassing easy targets, peacocking in the streets, and dreaming up Cainite revenge on the first gang. Additionally, the first gang is made of both males and females, while the second gang allows only males. This is, of course, an indispensable distinction.

Bill is the leader of the first gang. Bill is a hero: tall, with long straight blond hair that isn't too long or too straight. He is of average build, but he has long arms and good hand-eye coordination. Bill's girlfriend is a girl named Brunette who has a neat, close-cropped haircut. She likes to play soccer. She rarely speaks. She likes to sit in the middle of the back seat of the first golf cart in their caravan while Bill hangs from the front passenger seat, teeth showing in the ocean wind.

One day Sal and I are hanging out at the main intersection. We are members of the first gang. Sal likes to ironically direct traffic. The citizens of the beachtown enjoy his round sense of humor. I lean against the light pole drinking a root beer milkshake. Could the day get any brighter, I wonder, seagulls floating backwards through the air.

An elderly tourist couple is sleepwalking from art gallery to art gallery, wearing matching pinstripe hats. I drink my milkshake and watch, a sense of pride in my heart. The old lady turns toward us as though made of slow motion, pointing passed me at Sal. She has a forgetting smile on her face. Her husband's infinite boredom twitches, understanding that he, too, used to feel. I drink my milkshake and hold up my hand in greeting. I have to lower it just as quickly, however, and there's a sinking feeling in my stomach. Members of the second gang have moved into sight around a street corner, their eyes on the elderly couple. Before I can swallow my milkshake, they are in the elderly couple's faces, pulling off their pinstriped hats and jumping up and down on them, jeering at them for being relatively near death, and exchanging compliments with one another.

I run toward them, followed closely by Sal, but it is too late. One of them has gently shoved the old man and he has fallen through a windowpane. By the time I get there he has bled to death. The goons are hunched over him, apologizing to me and the old lady.

"They've gone too far this time," I screamed.

The murderous goon looks at me. The look became pained as I kicked him in the rear end, before taking the back of his skull and smashing his head onto the nearest brick wall. I don't stop until I have heard several loud cracks, and when I turn around Sal is chasing the rest of the goons down the road with a piece of broken glass in his hand. The old woman wails and calls for me to kill her as well. I sit with her, holding her hand.

"This means war," Bill says. He is standing over the red table, staring into the wall. The rest of us circle around him. There is a need, a compulsion, to listen to him. The sound of air filters trims the fullness of the room. We go into the garage and load into the golf carts. We move along a spiral toward the second gang.

"Do you think they'll be expecting this?" Iron says.

“I don’t know Iron,” I say. “Just keep your nose on straight.”

I look around at my friends surrounding me and shake my head.

“It’s like slaughtering a mad cow.”

There is stillness as we turn onto what will from then on be known as Desolation Street. Two of them are guarding the second gang’s doors and they shout hysterically as we roll down the street. Within almost no time at all golf carts are peeling into the street, firing shots at us.

We return fire. We move into the city and grenades fly back and forth like the yoyo of Ares. I wanted to have a full experience of the event, so I fling a harpoon into someone’s sternum, shrieking merrily as he topples into the street.

We quickly establish control, as the second gang is not really cut out for true competition. Though in some respects they match us, they have trouble forming a sum greater than their parts. They are in one another’s way, they are panicking, and they lack a Bill. Our cart pulls alongside one of theirs and Iron leaps onto the roof of the leader’s cart. He slides into the back and starts stabbing the driver. The leader puts his gun against Iron’s head but before he can pull the trigger Bill blasts his head off with his comically elongated handgun.

The other enemy carts are being rounded up and we began relaxing. Bill’s hand moved to his hip and a shot rings out. Brunette slides over, her chest stained crimson. A hail of gunfire sounds and then there is an eternal silence.

That night Bill drowns in the ocean. It is well-known throughout the town that he can’t swim and when the wake is held three days later the response is muted. People seem hesitant to mourn the death of someone who has killed themselves in such a masochistic way. At the reception, which is held at the mayor’s house, Sal and I start a

game of poker in the billiards room. There is cheese, crackers and the question of how the next leader will be chosen. We speak in low voices, not out of respect for the dead but so that we won't be overheard by the children and the elderly.

I get up to go to the bathroom. The walls have been painted Indian green. The sink shines like moonlight. I stand at the stall and whistle. A figure saddles up alongside me.

“What song is that?” he says. “None of your business, Shoes,” “You don’t like my shoes?”

“They’re beautiful. I want to take them off your feet and beat you with them.”

“Milkshake, it’s me. Bill.”

“Oh, Bill. Hello?”

“Fine, all things considered.”

“What can I do for you?”

“I want you to tell Brunette’s mother that I intended to marry her daughter.”

I examine myself in the mirror. I am surprised to see Bill’s form there. He looks the same, if not like a better, more whole version of himself.

“That’s real romantic, Bill. No problem.”

“Thanks, Milkshake. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

He looks very carefully at his reflection in the mirror.

“What’s it like without me? What do you think it will be like when the mourning period is over?”

I want a cigarette, pretending not to think about it, and I comb my hair back.

“Everybody misses you Bill. It’s not the same. It’ll never be the same.”

I return to the table. I think quietly to myself while I wait for my hand. Suddenly I hear Freddy saying my name. I look at him. I tell them the story of Bill's ghost. Everyone has a good-natured laugh.

“Chapter 11: The Partner”

The man stands outside, on the porch of the bar, and lights a cigarette. He wears a long black coat and sunglasses. The game he has just left goes on inside, and the players laugh about an unfortunate card. That oft-mentioned smell is in the air. He rubs his hands as a cold wind carries across the street.

There is a boy at the end of the porch, in the dark. The man notices him with some curiosity. A couple exits through the swinging doors, leaning on each other for balance. The boy has red hair.

The man is waiting for his partner to arrive. The players laugh again and the man smiles to himself, pleased with life.

At the docks the man's partner steps off a small motorboat. He is the last of three clients to leave. The ocean laps at the bottom of the pier like a small mammal. There is a bicycle there, as the man on the porch of the bar has promised. The partner rides to the bar under a sky that is lit by the eastern rim of the moon.

The man on the porch of the bar considers asking the boy if he is okay, tapping the ash into the street, trying to look in a way that is not obvious. One of the whores appears at the door. She joins in the silence for a familiar amount of time. She asks the man why he isn't playing anymore.

“I'm waiting for a friend.”

“What friend?”

“A special guest. A guest of honor,” he said.

He has only met the whore tonight. It is his first night there, first night in town, theoretically.

“I’m going back inside.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you when you go back to playing.”

“Okay.”

He smiles. He wonders if the boy is dead, momentarily, a kind of fantasy.

His partner brings the bicycle to a stop as a peddler approaches. There is unsold fruit in the cart. They barter over a price for two blue mangos. He wants to bring one for his partner. He thanks the old man and goes on his way, the town coming noiselessly into sight.

“Chapter 12: Snake in Deep Yellow”

Agent Tendril stopped short of the porch to admire the red flamingoes. Her hair was pulled behind her head in the shape of the professional bun, and she wore a burgundy pant suit. An abstract smile lay across her face.

The porch was painted indigo green. She pulled her notepad out of her suit pocket and held it in her hand. There was a fictional reassurance in the texture of the pad, semi-conscious. This motion of ascending the porch and taking her pad in her hand held significance. The pale fear seconds before I knock on the suspect’s door, she said to herself. Sharing her experiences with her colleagues was how she achieved union with Brahman. She drew a smiley face in the notepad. A little girl on a tricycle passed in the background.

She rang the doorbell. In her early days, when she’d first arrived on the scene, she reviewed the facts with a serene, manic edge. What do we know? (At the time she referred to herself in the first-person plural). In recent years she had begun to do the opposite, unwilling her mind into a state of scattershot oblivion, trying to allow the connections to form themselves. She thought of groceries. She thought of the way groceries fit into her trunk. She thought about how this might relate to her present experience.

Professor Jack opened the door. She grinned at him. This was against protocol. He was hard not to grin at, senescence whispering through his body that emanated a crazed welcome, a tuft of electric-white hair on the crown of his skinny head.

“Well hello,” he said, a mock-movie voice. “I’ve been expecting you, Agent Tendril.”

She was careful with her grip. The old man's was soft. He was dangerous, but not to her. The little girl on the tricycle glided up a distant driveway like a speck under a microscope.

"Agent Tendril. But you already know that," she said. "Good to meet you, Professor."

"Do come in." He used a different voice this time, in the same vein, leading her through tall stacks of newspaper, light creeping in through the blind-drawn windows.

"How long have you been hoarding?"

"Since Esmerelda's barracuda died. She sensed it was a message from God. A message commanding her to hoard. I can't complain, I can't complain."

"I see. That must be some aquarium."

Mr. Jack said, "We won the lottery in our twenties. The money goes to a state-of-the-art aquarium where the house's basement used to be. But that's why you're here."

That's why she was here. An important aspect of the job was misdirection, but the old man already knew everything. That's what made him an old man. He sat her on the bureau- maroon couch. She decided to persist.

"That must be some aquarium."

"Yes."

"I'm using a direct tone, Professor. Please respond accordingly."

"Actually it's fine," he said. "Tell me my dear. Are you an innie or an outie? I'm trying to train myself to infer this by the width of the subject's nostrils. Perhaps I should have left that part out."

She looked at him.

"That's a private matter," she said.

“What do you mean?” the professor said.

He was sitting there looking at her.

“Where is your wife?”

“Dead. I’m kidding. She wouldn’t dare die, it’s too expensive, and she’s rather frugal. She’s at work. It’s Tuesday after all. I don’t mean to be blunt.”

“You’re rather talkative.”

“Everyone knows the suspect suffers from logorrhea. Can I offer you some Himalayan tea?”

She crossed her legs and accepted with a short nod. The old man moved out of the room like a crab. This was a moment to relax, to let one’s mind wander. She had a date tonight with Buck, a former Ranger sniper whom she detested. He had a slim mouth and the aura of an iceberg. She wanted to see herself in him. He was taking her to the botanical gardens where a friend of his worked. The friend was an aficionado of night vision goggles, buying and selling them across global platforms. He was the man she would fantasize about while being with Buck.

She removed her notepad. She looked at the smiley face. She was curious if the way in which she drew the face changed, over time. She lifted a foot and moved it slowly back and forth. Her mother had told her, when she was young, about the energy carried in the foot, anxiety and stress, and how that if someone had toe cancer, they were evil.

Professor Jack, aka Professor Quack, under investigation suspected of Illicit Genetic Tampering, punishable by 70 years in federal prison, although most believed the sentence was anachronistic in its severity. Mr. Jack had served as a professor of Artificial Biology at a school in the Netherlands until it was discovered he was surreptitiously dosing one of his grad assistants with a liquid believed to allow the subject to empty their mind, automaton

style, on command. Suspicion was aroused when the student grew gills where his eyebrows used to be. No one wanted to through the trouble of charging a deranged man, academics being private people. When the locals caught wind of it urban art was created to commemorate the manfish. This was years ago.

A caller had reached out to the bureau the other day, disguising his voice with helium. The man who answered the phone told Tendril about the conversation: “I have reason to believe I’ve committed a crime.”

“Name and address.”

“Marshall Jack, 809 Cooled Street.”

“And that was Cooled Street?”

“Yes.”

“And what crime do you believe you are committing, sir.”

“Is there any way I can make a special request for what agent you send to my house?”

“Of course.”

“Lady Tendril.”

“Excellent choice.”

“I’ve performed an experiment involving a gill-inducing liquid, my firstborn, and my wife’s aquarium.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Listen I have to go but call me if you have any questions.”

“I will. Have a nice day sir.”

When the old man returned to the room he found Tendril settled in a deep squat, toes pointing outward. Without hesitation he joined her in the position. She did not look at him,

but she knew, like the great poker players, that he was looking at her. From a distance they seemed to be amidst some antediluvian ritual, two figures on the sunswept plains, and as they were, rather, seen in a dark room filled with word-stricken newspapers, it was similar to when you look at a painting of persons and know their actions would be irregular in another space, and how this means that their actions are inherently irregular. They stayed like this for a time. The old man showed no signs of restlessness.

The sound of a motorized vehicle came through the walls. Tendril stood up and fixed her gaze on the old man.

“Your wife is home.”

“Did I forget your tea?”

“Maybe your wife can tell me more about what you are doing.”

She listened to the car door shut and another door open, from where the old man had gone and come back, and she realized that unbeknownst to her, her mind was conjuring a myth of sorts around Mrs. Jack, who many believed was the “social thrust” behind Professor Jack’s experiments, that she was the one with the vulpine grip on the “natural ethics” absent in modernity, and how this correlated, inversely, with her husband’s sick genius. Of course the plodding, authoritative matron from deep within the FBI’s netherpsyche was not who the woman was. There was a shuffling in the kitchen. Professor Jack returned to the squat and stood up, before he repeated the action while the shuffling continued.

“I see you are doing your exercises.”

Mrs. Jack was even smaller than her husband, a pulse in the doorway. Tendril could only give her an honest look of absolute confusion.

“Well she seemed to know them already,” Professor Jack said.

Two cats bounded across the newspapers, motley patterns of chocolate and vanilla. Tendril wanted to resume the interview. Mrs. Jack looked at her in a way that was almost endearing, if she hadn't been squinting with her left eye.

“Would you join me on the couch?”

“I wanted to sit in one of the armchairs, but if you insist I suppose the couch will have to do.”

After a few moments of jostling for position, Professor Jack couldn't take it anymore. Mrs. Jack had taken to leaning over the side of the couch with her torso, a tired grin on her face.

“I had the most dreadful day,” she said.

“I'm fed up with this dance,” the Professor said in a loud voice. “I'm sorry Agent Tendril but I can't keep it a secret anymore. Not that it's a secret in the fullest sense, but a secret in the subjective sense, in which we are all pretending it might not exist. The fact is there is no secret. What there is is something we have reason to believe you are interested in.”

He used air quotes around the phrase, reason to believe. As he spoke a slapping came across the room, originating from someplace beneath the floor. Tendril's hand moved to her gun. Mrs. Jack was lying on the couch, the back of her hand over her forehead, and it was hard to discern whether she was being ironic or sincere.

“What have we done,” she moaned. “What have we done?” The exaggerated quality of her voice was precise, easily feigned, easily real. Tendril watched the old man, who was concentrating deeply, and would have appeared indifferent to the persistent slapping if someone else was watching. A smell like the smell of one hundred bodies of water entered the room. The old man motioned to her to follow him.

“Ignore her,” he said. “She’s auditioning for the local theater this weekend and it’s taking its toll.”

“So she’s acting?”

“No, no,” he said. “Wrong. She’s worn out, wearing her emotions on her sleeve.”

Her moans followed them through the kitchen and into the hallway, the smell of the water growing stronger, the sound of the slapping dissipating. The old man told her he felt she was going to be the most popular agent at the office for the story she would have to tell. She did not know how to take this. How was she supposed to take this? She knew what was happening, what was going to happen, knew her role, monetarily speaking, was to be an active witness to the complexity of meanings in this moment.

She considered herself a hard worker, liked to patiently rebuke herself when she overthought things. They walked down the staircase. A cool chemical spirit trembled in the air. She felt it in her thoughts. The old woman’s cries circled down through the air toward them as they walked. The old woman was moaning those same words like some Russian empress.

Buck’s friend, owner and operator of the botanical gardens, recently appeared in the dreams of Agent Tendril. In her dreams he was a man with onsetting middle age, dark gray sideburns, a sexual chin. It was strange to have the image of a man you’ve never met impressed upon your nighttime experiences. The coded simplicity integrating the unknown and the foreseen, laced along blood and brain. In the dreams he was squatting over a bathtub, and there were Christmas lights strung across the ceiling, and on the back of his head, shaved into his head, the letter X dyed violet. The nexus of the dream was sliding up the wall, a snake in deep yellow, coral tattooed along its pretty body.

They were in the room, standing before the aquarium, and Agent Tendril felt dumb and small, and charged with a strange energy, the briefest anticipation of motion-activated bliss. The room was the size of a small gymnasium. A tank brimming with water rested in the center.

“No,” said the old man. “I do not have any sharks.”

She walked alongside the tank. What she was seeing was no simulation of metaphor, but rather a redistribution of fundamental linguistic properties, unsanctioned by the state and its gods. She smoothed a pant leg and looked into the eyes of a rainbow-colored marlin. Silence filled the gymnasium-sized room like a held breath. The old man seemed already to have forgotten her, walking astride his creation, clipboard in hand. She looked awhile longer, laughing with numb delight at the octopus arranging blocks into cryptic formations, the lobster that walked on two legs like man, and she felt a lusty powerlessness. Would she share the details of this experience with her co-workers? With Buck? With her husband?

When she saw the professor’s son he was walking between two tall sea rocks, stretching above his finned head, green skin agleam in the filtered water.

She pushed up against the glass and knocked so that he might hear her. She was witnessing an impossible thing, and he turned and looked at her. She saw the resemblance with the professor, the small face and the light-stained eyes, and for a second she thought she recognized him from when she a girl, sitting across the classroom in a box-like desk, and, as he came toward her she wanted to scream and run away but could not.

“Chapter 13: The Fourth Member”

As we approached the small grove I realized for the first time that I didn't really know the young man I was with. He was short and had wide shoulders, and he had a buzzcut. I thought maybe I should say something, to stir the cauldron. Maybe I should pause before the lime pool in the small grove and say, you know, I feel like I know you better than I know anyone, including myself, but the truth is I don't know who you are at all.

The small grove was a place we had been searching for for a substantial amount of time. I was glad to have arrived. There was a sense of accomplishment in our arrival, and yet the fact was that we had journeyed to the pool in order to establish an order of insignificance. In time the small grove constructed a house as though it were an exoskeleton, beams with angled roofs and windows cased on the sides. Relatives and non-relatives joined, of all genders. An ethos emerged, one that mirrored the natural environment and regarded the number of people present. Food appeared and was shared as though it was superfluous.

My friend and I were unwilling in the roles of leaders. We were leaders only because we were founders. Although we had conceived of the location as an opportunity for people to live a certain way, we generally desired not to have responsibility for the daily modes of the inhabitants. Those were my thoughts—once we had finished beginning, we never spoke—and I can only assume they were shared. There were essentially two things people did with themselves, besides eating and sleeping: copulating and swimming in the lime pool. For some reason nobody wanted a sexual partner to

themselves. Instead partners were rotated according to a combination of whim and other forces. The pool itself was shallow and yet people seemed to find enjoyment in it, often diving and coming up as though they had traversed down some great depth. No one had names to be called by. Instead, people were called by a trademark feature, or characteristic. What was interesting was that my friend and I did not participate in the lime pool activities. During the day I sat in a tree overlooking the scene, inventing a distance that contributed to the psychosocial properties of the location. My friend, on the other hand, often disappeared into the construction with a trio of friends, two of whom were cousins and one a man whose relation I did not know. There seemed to be no events. Each day had a clarity, if the thing could be called that at that point in its evolution.

As was the case, one day the notion strongly passed that my friend and his friends were not with us; that is, they were not inside the little house. It was striking because they were generally felt, and on that day the feeling was simply missing. One moment it was simply the case that they were gone: a grandfather on the rim of the pool and I locked eyes in mutual knowledge. The perception had the stillness of a certain white electricity I seemed to have felt once before. Following the eye contact came the desire to protect, which was arguably the most powerful feeling I had ever experienced in my life.

I moved to the back of the little house, where a hill rose steeply into the unknown forest. There they were, they four. I watched a bullet come toward the house. It carried a faint trace of cartoon smoke, disappearing harmlessly into the building. My friend aimed a hunting rifle from one knee, his cousins backgrounding him like cheerleaders. I watched them with curiosity. There was nothing I could do, and nothing, evidently, that needed to be done. Then I saw a figure swaggering down the hill toward me. The body was not too large, but it was still a larger version of my friend's, who was revolting against our creation. The

figure was the fourth member of their circle, and he had no face—instead his face was the black silhouette that is covered by a question mark on criminal television shows, the question mark on mystery lollipops. He came swaggering down the hill toward me, not menacingly, but forcibly, as though he simply wanted to prove a point.

“Chapter 14: Stadium”

Static ran along the top of the armored barricade, causing a strange light. Firefights were a common occurrence on this part of the island. It was a cluttered jungle, dotted with green flowers, lit by the morning sun. We were being pitted against the Moroccans, a team of nine guerillas. They were vying for a slice of the ruins in our western region of the Black Sea, and therefore, the offenders. Cormokav opened one eye at me.

“What are you looking at?”

“That light that comes off the barricade.”

“It’s magnetism vibrating through the glass,” he said.

I looked over the barricade. The corridor was packed with branches, an elaborate fear of war-made faces. There had been a sighting that morning, our third day on the island. A man parachuting onto the foot of the hills, wearing the Moroccans’ trademark blueish camouflage. Cormokav, a sniper, had been napping.

This was my second assignment on the island, where the former edge of major powers (numbers) has waned considerably in the past century. Minor disputes took place in this venue, commissioned by neutral Switzerland. I liked it here. I could see the stars at night. Neutral Switzerland had created especially diverse wildlife settings for the exaggerated prices the teams in the league could afford.

Cormokav’s sniper looked heavy resting over his shoulder. We expected the paratrooper to be a scout sent to map our team’s outline. Cormokav and I patrolled the top of the outline—I was his spotter. There was a pool of sunlight in a spot curled beneath an

opening in the canopy, on the other side of the barricade. I rested and watched it. I felt Cormokav nudging my knee with his foot.

“Eat something.”

“I’m not hungry.”

He rolled to a seat, staring into the barricade. Things sort of hung there, waiting. He looked at me and told me to eat something in a soft voice. I slid my hand into my back pocket for a granola bar. I chewed the granola bar and scanned the foliage, using the telescope. Cormokav brought a finger to his lips. I saw this out of the corner of my eye. I wanted to look at him, to verify my question through the simple use of his expression, but I had the sense that it was best to remain silent. The granola dissolved into my throat.

“Don’t move,” came his voice in my earpiece.

I thought of the grandpa I might have had if I lived in Poland, where hunting had become popular again. Cormokav rose like a mummy and moved away from me. I remained where I was. A few minutes passed. I sat there with my special telescope.

“I have eyes on him,” he said.

A crack rang through the jungle. Cormokav climbed down the tree, feet first. He paused at the bottom and looked at me, then moved into the brush, without a word. I followed him as the sun continued to rise in the sky, colors forming shapes in the middle distance.

A nest swung from a low branch. Cormokav stayed an approximate distance ahead of me, body gradually swallowed by leaves. We paused before a clearing. I crouched beside him.

“It was a woman,” he said.

“Interesting.”

“I think if we keep moving we can make it to the foot of the hills by noon. I wouldn’t be surprised if we find one or two more floating in.”

I cleaned my telescope. Cormokav looked at me.

“It is always a special moment, right before I pull the trigger. Some of them seem to feel it. A small glitch in time. A sad smile, the wince you make as a child after receiving a shot from the pediatrician. But maybe it is simply my own misinterpretation of space-time that are occurring.”

Bird calls overlapped. Cormokav sat against a tree. He became philosophical, sometimes, during late morning. He once said he found it the part of the day he was most likely to kill someone.

“She relaxed, I felt. There was a dimming to her countenance. I relaxed too, retroactively.”

He pulled out a granola bar and handed it to me. I took it without thinking. The voice of Nelson spoke in our ears.

“Status report?”

“Scout neutralized,” Cormokav said.

My mouth moved slowly, chewing the oats. Cormokav looked at me and mouthed the word, neutralized. I saw another blue body, flying into the air.

“Chapter 15: The Inwardness Center”

There was a place Cy had been hearing of for awhile. Women whispered of it in the twilight streets while their children ran back and forth, echoing one another. His brother mentioned it on Thursday. They all looked at him, expecting more.

“It’s called The Inwardness Center,” he said. “That’s where they’re disappearing to.”

They knew who he was talking about. There was a gang of toughs in town, rough men and boys of various colors. They were being gathered as troops, supposedly. The young and futureless were vanishing from their posts.

“So you’re saying they’re going to that ancient fort where John Elliot moved four years ago with his wives.”

“I’m saying that’s what I heard,” his brother said.

Silence lingered like an orange balloon tangled in telephone wires. Their father stared over the table. The sister paused with her trademark relative indifference. Cy stood up and paced, frowning, and finally, he looked at my brother and my father.

“I’ll venture into the forest. Josiah will come with me. We’ll do some scouting.”

Their family had been the town scouts for seven generations, since the Glacial Wars, when the Eskimos conquered the continent. The family had yellow bands around our wrists that represented our role in society.

The next morning Cy and Josiah rose early. Josiah was smarter than Cy, better tempered, and had first-rate hand-eye coordination. Cy was the higher-energy of the two, more physically fit, and crueler. They walked through the foliage, turning violet with time,

saying nothing. As usual, the only person who knew of their visit was the family, and, at some point in the day, the Chief Elder. They knew they were nearing the ancient fort when the winter sun was positioned squarely overhead.

“Gorgons,” Josiah said.

Cy looked at him.

“It’s the password to the opium den on seventh street we’ve been wanting to check out,” he said. “My mole told me.”

Cy nodded, focusing. There was a guard roaming the southern wall, some twelve feet tall. Cy didn’t need to look for Josiah. He moved low through the bushes, watching the youngman with his dark sunglasses and pink hoodie. As he neared the end of the bushes, he looked across the short space of clean earth at the guard, standing very close to him, looking right through him, it would seem, speaking to the excellent nature of the camouflage their mother and sister made for them.

A strange noise sounded in a tree down the forest. It was like a bird, almost, but deeper, more mammalian. The guard drew his knife and moved toward the sound with patience, in a slight crouch. Cy wasn’t sure if the guard thought it was dinner or a spy. Josiah had never explained that to him. The soundmaker was in fact Josiah. Cy snuck up behind the careful guard and knocked him unconscious as Josiah made his strange noises.

“Shut up,” he hissed, leaning over the guard to administer a sleeping pill.

Josiah grinned down at him and swung himself off the tree. Cy glared at him and then ushered to him to follow, and they moved along the side of the wall. He could just make out the dome of the old fort, wide and silver. They examined the perimeter and found no doors. Their options became risky. The wall was most likely deadly to the

touch from the outside, a feature that cost less than \$1 per square foot those days. The question was whether one touch would alert the staff.

Josiah smelled the wall and frowned.

“We have to go for it,” Cy said.

“Of course we don’t. We can keep watch on both sides and wait to see how they’re entering and exiting.”

“If we do that the first people who come out will be guards looking for their buddy.”

“Fine,” Josiah shrugged.

Once they were inside, they saw how the compounds were situated within the fort, surrounding the dome in the center. Naturally, a troop was jogging toward them in formation. There was nowhere to run. It was Josiah’s turn to glare at Cy.

“What do you guys want?” said the lead guard.

Josiah and Cy stared at each other, somewhat confused. They were waiting for them to bind and gag them, drag them to Elliot, rip their intestines out through our ears.

“Well?” he said.

He recognized the guard from childhood. The guard was blonde and very thin, almost unhealthily so, blue veins streaming beneath his snow-colored skin. He had always been despised, a compulsive liar whose father was rendered vegetative during the Simple Uprising. Cy knew he recognized them, him and his miscellaneous underlings. They must have known where he and Josiah were there for. He looked at the lead guard, angry and deferential.

“If you’ve come to find out what’s going on here, you can leave and give the town this message. ‘In the days of Lorissa Clay, Chief Elder of our Lord’s town, the

bottom will fall out, into nothingness, leaving the top to collapse into a spaceless heap all its own.”

As they walked home, Cy saw Josiah place his hand on a tree, gaze languidly onward, and felt a sense of thankfulness for being complete in his body, which he had never felt before.

“Chapter 16: Puppet Version”

It was the year children discovered that their parents might be animals. The news crept along the circuit with an artificial flavor, while cases spiked in the largest cities and the most remote villages. There was the question of conceptual implications. People were afraid and indignant. People were passive and understanding. I woke up each day and looked at my parents as though they were indications of a tremor in God’s divine plan while I ate my cereal. Ours was a mid- sized town, only four cases reported in the first two months. Two of the cases were subsequently confirmed to be fabrications—while the parent had animalian features, they were the result of incest.

Jerry and I played on the roofs in the projects. The houses and apartment buildings were lumped together such that you could leap across them as though they were one terrain. We performed all manners of activities children perform during tangerine sunsets. One day Jerry said that he had met a trickster in the southeast part of town. Tricksters were a common phenomenon in that we knew they existed to some extent, but they were seldom seen, and generally they only had some vain aesthetic reason for making their presence felt.

I told him not to describe the trickster because I wanted his appearance to be a surprise.

“It’s funny,” Jerry said. “The trickster told me you would say that.”

As we moved through the neighborhood with the faded Circle K we saw a collection of our acquaintances playing keep away on the stone courts. They summoned us with their

volume and affable haircuts. I told them we were sorry but we had a date with a trickster.

The shortest one, naturally the leader, made a special mocking face.

“Don’t you know that tricksters eat humans our age?”

“I think being eaten by a trickster sounds rather interesting,” I said.

This seemed to satisfy him and as we passed I caught the eye of a thin boy with blond hair who seemed to be the younger brother of one of the players. I knew immediately that I was supposed to motion to him. He came over and asked if he could join. I asked him why he wanted to join.

“For the same reason you would want to.”

“What do we call you?” Jerry said.

“Havala.”

“What an interesting name,” I said.

“My great-grandmother gave it to me. She was a stegosaurus.”

“Just what we need,” Jerry moaned.

“Another imagination.”

We passed through the park that was filled with palm trees and climbed onto a roof.

Havala and I followed Jerry. We climbed higher onto the roofs of apartment buildings that smelled like arsenals of narcotics, listening to the dogs yapping at us with expressions that pleaded for attention. The roofs were shades of red and blue.

Jerry slowed down by a large doghouse. Havala and I looked at each other carefully and followed Jerry’s gaze to a door placed on a triangular prism growing from the roof, opposite the doghouse. We stood there. I felt a presence to the off-centered right and saw a pale man with long orange hair and an orange mustache. He was wearing a dusty white buttondown that was not buttoned and he seemed both harmless and dangerous. He

sat leaning against an adjacent roof and he twitched as though he were the faulty projection of an ancient computer.

“I’m bored with y’all already,” he said.

“Guys,” he said. “I found out today that my mother is an elephant.”

He looked at us without expectation. It was then that I noticed the length of his fingernails. They were fashioned like a ninja weapon.

“Maybe we should go,” I said. “We don’t want to bother you if you want to be alone with this news.”

His eyes widened and he looked at Havala. “What about you? Do you want to go?” Havala said nothing.

Jerry suddenly shrieked and assumed a kung fu position. He leapt at the trickster who frowned as he sidestepped. For a moment it seemed like he would merely shoo us away but he caught Jerry’s arm and tossed him over the side of the roof. There was a plopping sound followed by silence. I rushed to the side of the roof and prostrated myself besides a large doghouse. Jerry was crumpled in a heap.

The trickster looked at us and clicked his tongue. There was a shuddering in the doghouse. I felt myself growing smaller, imagining a lumbering hound emerging with a fat chin. Instead, a lioness slowly loomed there, standing over me as I lay there. There was a swarming of thoughts, perceptible like a slow-grain organism. The trickster’s languid nature had been replaced with a spastic fear. He leapt into the alley where Jerry was lying, and I mirrored his action. I watched as he tried to decide whether to stand or hunch over Jerry’s body. The lioness stepped toward him with encyclopedic nonchalance.

In a sort of cosmic twist, a smaller trickster suddenly formed outside the trickster’s body. The smaller trickster had similar features to the larger trickster. He seemed to be a

representation of a child of the trickster, or perhaps the trickster's biological son. Instead of a mustache, he had a child-like beard. As I gawked at him I realized he looked like the puppet version of the trickster.

The lioness approached them. The trickster was now deciding whether to throw his miniature at her, but the fact that he could not stop hurling insults at her seemed to be distracting him from accomplishing anything meaningful. The lioness kept walking until she stood over Jerry's body. The tricksters faded into the earth-laden walls. There was a small satisfaction in knowing that they had each other.

“Chapter 17: Anonymous Clothing”

My neighbor was a man who wore curlers in his hair at night. He moved in several months ago. My wife and I took turns guessing at his age, job, heritage. He was 28, he was 44. At first we thought he must be doing blue-collar work, which was odd, since this apartment complex would have been out of his price range. Then we saw him wearing the hair curlers, walking down the hall late one night with a coke icee, and we didn't know what to think. I thought he might be part Slovenian, and my wife thought he was Hispanic.

We had been living in Austin since our college days, and we met at ACL. We had become like siblings. This was something we talked about at length and agreed not to be disturbed by. It was one of several household topics when the new neighbor moved in.

He was a bachelor, striding up and down the hall with an unconscious sense of self-enclosed love. I was friendly to him, and he was reserved, cordial. I rarely saw women or men in his apartment. After I saw him wearing the hair curlers, I stopped considering the possibility of becoming his confidant, not because I was easily judgmental, but because to me the hair curlers symbolized a level of being that I simply could not equal. The most distinct thing about me, my wife said, was that I wore Nike slides instead of regular flip flops, and I agreed. She began theorizing that the man was a professor, a software engineer, or an eccentric day trader. I saw what she was getting at the way a beast sees the sun rise.

When friends came over we said nothing of the man, pretending he didn't exist. I took the dog with me to play disc golf. There was a gang of us with our glorious hounds, moving through the woods as pink dusk fell.

Christmas neared and my wife and I decided to have a party. The former party-holding couple in our sizeable friend group had moved to Mexico. I wasn't sad to see them go. My wife and I wanted the opportunity to throw parties at the apartment. We thought it would spice up our love life.

A few weeks prior to the party I saw the neighbor in front of our complex. We stood on the tight street, entering the building at the same time. I was returning from a night of drinking with the firehouse, and was feeling good. As I looked at my neighbor, I found it interesting that I had never seen him in front of the apartment late at night. It was a Wednesday, which made it especially suspicious. We exchanged nods and I allowed him into the building before me. As we entered the elevator, I took account of his choice in anonymous clothing. He was wearing a trench coat. I decided to ask him name. His name was Kurt, he said.

"It's good to finally make your acquaintance Kurt," I said, unsure of why I was speaking in an old-fashioned manner.

"I was beginning to wonder if we would ever make the acquaintance of each other," he said.

I felt myself withdraw slightly.

"Yes," I said. "Yes."

He asked me what my name was.

"Jake," I said.

“I had a dog named Jake when I was a boy. I don’t know why my father named him Jake, but he did.”

The elevator door opened and I scuttled into the hallway, Kurt right behind me. I passed his door and spun around like a cinema Nazi.

“My wife and I are having people over this Friday,” I said. “We’d be delighted if you could join us.”

Kurt smiled at me and accepted the invitation.

I entered my apartment and lounged on the couch. My wife wanted me to paint a picture of the interaction. She wanted to visualize it, as though Kurt and I were great orators in the Parthenon, deliberating on the philosophical implications of the earth being flat. I did my best to mime Kurt’s facial structures and capture his tonal idiosyncrasies, affecting a social omniscience that I knew she’d appreciate. She stood over the coffee table and studied me. I felt myself inwardly rising to the occasion.

“Well,” she said. “This is exactly the boon the party needs.”

That night the sex was excellent.

The night of the party she looked ravishing on the balcony under the moon. We’d organized a system of lighting to compliment the psychedelic mushrooms we would be offering to guests. My wife walked through the kitchen while I rolled joints in the living room. We alternated tasks in order to achieve an artful balance. Friends arrived at a predestined clip. I realized about an hour after the party had begun that I hadn’t told Kurt what time to come. It didn’t occur to me to be anxious about this. It was my party and Kurt was my guest, the guest of honor, deep down, and so it made sense for

him to be late. I patted people on elbows as I strolled through the hallway. Kurt was just exiting his abode. He was taller than I'd remembered him, more acutely created.

"Kurt," I said. "I was just coming by to see if you were in"

He smiled at me and took my hand, leading me back into the party. We stood there surveying the scene together. The single women were paired together. They looked Kurt up and down, intentionally failing to mask their curiosity. I took pleasure in this, and as I took Kurt around the room, I could feel our confidence expanding. As I was introducing him to Mark and Nancy, owners of an aging record store that my wife frequented, however, I realized that I knew nothing about the man. Nancy had a nearness about her, a psychological marker of her high character, and she identified as a Pisces. I watched her watch Kurt, thinking her reaction could inform my own developing opinion of the man.

"You are the kind of man who has been appearing to me in my dreams," she said.

Now we all looked at her with grave excitement. Kurt did not seem surprised.

"I studied with a charlatan in the Amazon when I was in my early twenties," he said.

Nancy took him by the arm. I caught the eye of my wife through an opening in the assemblage of bodies in the apartment.

"Come," Nancy said. "Let's dine on mushrooms together."

Kurt agreed and Mark and I smiled at each other. I mingled absently, looking over at Nancy and Kurt from time to time, feeling as though I were both president and member of a secret society. At some point my wife began setting candles in nondescript locations throughout the apartment. I analyzed the way a fire decays for a friend. Mark nudged me and pointed at the couch, the corner of his mouth lifted. Nancy and Kurt were sitting side by side, legs stretched out in front of them, eyes closed. I held my ribs and

laughed. Mark slapped me on the shoulder. My wife stood on the kitchen counter and tried to use a hula hoop, slipping and being caught by Zackary, a musclebound member of the firehouse. I showed everybody who would watch the suction cups my wife had gotten me last Christmas, using them to clamber across the ceiling.

By this point Nancy and Kurt were awake, but they ignored me as I moved above them. They were having a conversation of a certain brand of meaning. It was not unpleasant but it was not leisurely or guarded. Thus it was the kind of conversation that garners attention from people who have attention to give. I was on my feet again, watching them converse from a distance. I felt my wife appear beside me, a full head shorter. Suddenly Kurt's voice rose indecipherably and he stood up. Before I blinked he was out the door. Nancy looked at me with eyes like two bagels. I wasn't sure what to do. Nancy came over to me. She was graying around the temples. She began talking but I wasn't listening. I made out a few remarks, listing virtues. My wife nodded. She took me by the shoulder and said something into my ear, quietly. I didn't hear her but I knew what I needed to do. The party continued into the early morning, and I continued to play the part of facilitator, moving around the room, making sure certain people were satisfied, not pressing Nancy on the matter or for that matter acknowledging the event had ever occurred.

It was clear to me there was nothing to do but wait. Days passed and life resumed, aquatically. Three weeks later I was returning from a night of drinking with the firehouse. It was particularly late, a wise time of the night. I stepped off the elevator as Kurt was exiting his room. He looked at me and I looked at him. He was wearing a

raccoon mask over his face, and a long green cape. He had long slick black boots on, glimmering in the eco-friendly light. A sheathed dagger hung from a black belt.

“Kurt,” I said.

He smiled at me, stopping to shake my hand.

“What are you doing, Kurt?” I said.

“Can you keep a secret, Jake?”

“I am often trusted with secrets.”

“I’ve become a vigilante. Or rather, a kind of new age superhero. Last night I slayed a homeless man and an abusive father and burned them under a tree at Zilker. Tonight I think I may simply stroll and meditate on the language of the sewers. And I have you and your party to thank. What was that woman’s name?”

When he realized I didn’t have the wherewithal to answer, he winked at me, nudged me playfully with a shoulder as he passed, and vanished down the elevator. I walked into my apartment and readied myself for bed. My wife rolled over toward me as I slid under the sheets, putting her hand on my chest. I fell asleep easily.

“Chapter 18: The Pelicans”

The village was made in monochrome, practically, children chasing one another with an empty laughter. Tobias walked by a small house with old people out front playing a board game. A man who looked like Custard had noticed him, mouth ceasing to chew. Tobias returned his stare. Slimdogs drank at the fountain.

“Hey son,” the old man said. “Have you seen my grandkids? They’re the ones with no middle names.”

“I haven’t Pops. Say, do you know where Ernest Bastard lives?”

“Bastard?” said the old man’s opponent, a thin man with no facial hair. “That’s my cousin’s son. He lives up the road, by the K-Mart.”

Tobias thanked the players and walked up the road. He was not hungry or thirsty, surprising, since he had traveled a notable distance to get here. The air in the town smelled like his fourth love. Bastard was a man who had been rumored throughout networks to be the owner of a pod of pelicans. He’d brought them back from the coast some fifteen years ago, after going on a scuba diving trip. Tobias was a reporter for a small newspaper in the city.

He walked by a pair of gray fire hydrants, several yards apart. He knew it was Bastard’s house by the address: 182 Northland. He knocked and waited. He stepped back and saw a painting through the window of thousands of multicolored candy canes.

A youth opened the door. His front teeth jugged from his mouth, and he took Tobias' hand with a clever grip.

"How's it going, sir? You've come to see the pelicans, have you?"

"Yes. I'd like to speak to Mr. Bastard, too, if that's alright."

"Certainly, sir," the kid said.

He was impressed with the cleanliness of the house. He'd been expecting chaos. There was a low coffee table with tomes recording abstract baseball statistics. A beautiful television sparkled above the fireplace.

The boy and a man entered the room in congruent positions, arms akimbo.

"Mr. Bastard," Tobias said. "May I sit?"

"Don't think twice about it, friend," Bastard said.

"I want to know a little bit about the pelicans. Why pelicans? Why now?"

"Pelicans were an obsession of mine when I was a child. I tracked them, I dreamt of them. My mother took me to a psychiatrist. He told her I was very special."

The kid was standing behind Covington, smiling and nodding, arms crossed. Bastard himself looked as one might expect a man obsessed with pelicans to look. He had sandy hair that fell to his shoulders, eyes that welcomed being wronged.

Tobias smiled and nodded. Talk turned to sports. The football players were on strike. Civil unrest was fomenting. Tom Brady desperately wanted to win his fourteenth superbowl. Finally Bastard brought his hands down softly onto his knees.

"Shall we adjourn to the backyard?"

Tobias followed him through the hallway. Pictures of family surrounded them. The back door opened with a gentle pause. The birds there sat with their magnanimous

expressions, children of a foreign time. Bastard and Tobias stood there in the zoological silence. A measure of ambiguity was in the framing of the birds' physicalities.

"Are their wings clipped?"

"No. They fly away when they're hungry. They only rest here a couple hours a day."

"Where do they go?" Tobias said.

"I don't know. Perhaps the beach, although the coast is 200 miles away."

Tobias grinned and shook his head, crouching to a knee to come eye level with the birds. He realized they meant something to Bastard, emotionally, a tribute to his past. Tobias wondered if he should bring up this idea with the gracefully aging man. He looked at Bastard, standing there, a pride that bordered on severe, and decided to save the question for when he was on his way out.

“Chapter 19: The Silk Horizon”

The missing boy’s name is Jack Rogers. Evidently the plan was for him attend university when he turned 17. Normal enough for a home schooled. According to those in his orbit, until a few weeks prior to his scheduled departure he always expressed excitement at the opportunity to enter a world of peers—he was raised by a wealthy father, a tutor and a trainer, with limited contact with the outside world. However, in his final days of global virginity he sank into a deep depression. His morning actions with the trainer became listless and he was withdrawn during classes with the tutor. His appetite diminished and he began practicing yoga in the courtyard for extreme lengths of time. Several dismembered frogs were found beneath his bedroom window, a practice he had not engaged in for many years. Three days before his departure date he vanished.

As mentioned there are three legitimate parties with heavy involvement on the boy. Let’s begin with the trainer. She was found 8 years ago on the side of the road with the faint beginnings of a mustache. His father was on a trip into OV when he saw her with a sign that was written in a language that was unintelligible. He was surprised when she spoke English perfectly, asking where she was. It was a mystery as to how she arrived. The most interesting speculation at the time, according to the father, was that she had been abducted by aliens—this was back when Evnesian aliens were still spotted in the area dissecting the ruins of California.

Her origins have never been fully discerned, as she claimed amnesia. Whether she and the father have engaged or do engage in relations of a sexual nature we couldn’t gather. She’s a quiet character, not withdrawn but not much of a conversationalist. Spends

a lot of time in her cottage making sculptures of most things that can be sculpted. Lot of time in the cottage sculpting. Her work with the boy mostly consisted of ambulations through the extensive forest on the Mr. Roger's property that involved philosophical discourse, as well as commentary on the boy's artistic pursuits, which were mostly paintings of an abstract bent. It's worth noting their relationship was considered each of their favorite things in the world. Oh yeah, the sign she was holding was in Singaporean.

The boy also had a trainer, who had been brought on in a more traditional sense 6 years ago, a former special forces officer who had had several professional bouts as a mixed martial artist. He worked the son every single morning on archery, striking, wrestling, tree-climbing, snake-charming and sailing from the time the boy was 9 years old, neither ever missing a day for sickness or personal reasons. Their relationship, it seems, was purely judicial. The trainer was decidedly less interesting than the tutor. His primary hobby was gardening. He spent most of his conversations with us wearing a bath robe.

Last but not least we have the father. He's a tall man with big shoulders, deep voice. Very fatherly. Seemed to consider the boy's absence the way a politician might a failed campaign, or something like that. He's in the import/export business. No specific product, just the transportation. Highly eccentric, individualistic character. Likely hasn't had anything close to a friend in 30 years. Seems well-liked and generally forgettable by the employees of his estate.

It's difficult to conjure theories here. All we have are the characters and the boy's actions leading up to his disappearance. No cellular or web data to mine. No verbal indication to any of the parties of a desire to not be on earth. I suppose suicide is a

possibility but you'd think we'd find a body. The question is who's hiding something, and if nobody's hiding anything, what are we missing that's there.

She read this report on Thursday. Friday she was on a helicopter with her partner Valesso. The standard response unit, which had a success rate of 98%, had hit a rare wall. Valesso and Stone had a success rate of less than 8%, due to the fact that their assignments were almost by definition unsolvable.

The property came into view with a vague self-awareness. Stone was surprised by the diversity of treetops and flowers, given it was in the middle of the desert. She expressed this to Valesso and he didn't respond.

A very tall man was there to greet them. He had a pale bald head and a small face, with a nose that seemed to have been broken multiple times. He held a small plate with two glasses of blue juice. Stone took hers.

"The estate welcomes you."

"That's fine," Valesso said. "I don't like drinks."

"I'll try it for both of us." She took a careful sip, meeting the tall man's eye, smacking her lips. "Why do I taste mango?"

They walked along the trail, following the tall man. Birds and rodents circulated, making interesting sounds. The large house came into view, accompanied by a hoarse barking. Five strange dogs ran toward them. They had large ears and caramel-black skin. The tall man shushed them.

"It's blue," Stone said to the tall man. "Not orange. Mangos are orange." "African wild dogs," Valesso said. "Not so wild anymore."

The tall man remained silent. He showed them to their rooms on the bottom floor. It was the nicest room they had ever seen, reminding Stone of an old James Bond movie. There was a small eye-level panel that connected her room to Valessò's. She knocked on it.

“What’s up?”

“What do you think?”

“It reminds me of a James Bond movie,” he said.

“Me too.”

“I like the tall guy. Maybe we should start with him. Nothing about him on the report.”

“You glazed over the notes at the bottom again, didn’t you.”

She scratched her chin. Valessò looked at her beneath his faint unibrow.

“I’m going to take a nap,” she said. “Let’s reconvene for afternoon coffee at 15:30.”

Straw falls timidly from the rafters. The horses stand. The long flat heads produce a secret energy that carries her view toward them. The heads are above the trough. The straw makes a tiny noise in the background. A red soccer ball rolls across the earth, coming to rest beneath the last horse’s trough.

They took their coffee by a grand window overlooking the enormous crags of granite that sprouted from the desert. This view was on the other side of the house from where they’d arrived. The tall man came by and asked if they needed anything. He explained that Mr. Rogers was away for the day on business. The tutor and the trainer were going about their business and could be summoned at their leisure. She said thank you and

sipped the coffee he produced. They had decided that the case was likely a suicide. Their most realistic task was to collect the body. She proceeded to tell Valesso about her dream.

“What do you think it means?”

“I’m not sure. Red soccer ball. Blood. Childhood.”

“The horses?”

He looked at her with great seriousness.

“That one’s obvious. Femininity.”

There was no cell service, but the tall man had given her a pager to call the tutor. She seemed like the closest thing to a lead suspect—either that or the responding investigator had a hunch for her. The notes suggested she could have sprung the boy to Eastern Europe, where he would live out his days as an androgenous gypsy. Of course the only evidence collected to support this was her remarkable indifference to the boy, when she was reputed as being closer to him than anyone. Suicides had become so rare that the topic was mentioned only as an afterthought, but Valesso and Stone had come across a handful in their time together. One of the primary causes was situations in which the victim was not socialized by the systems that had been put into place in order to eradicate the illusion of loneliness.

Stone used the pager to ask the trainer where they should meet. The trainer suggested the stables. Valesso raised an eyebrow when she told him this, before deciding herself to have a conversation with the tall man. Stone walked slowly across the lawn toward a setting sun. There was an eerie control to her movements that simulated a kind of grace. The stables, the trainer had said, were down a path through a small patch of woods, over a hill. There was a man by the path wearing a mask around the lower part of

his face, holding a rake. The mask portrayed the lower part of a skeleton's face. He watched Stone approach and seemed angry.

“What's with the mask?”

“What's with the mask,” he said. “Who are you? Another detective? I told them the boy isn't here anymore. He's gone forever, as they say.”

She nodded insouciantly.

“You're a handyman I take it?”

“My father was a handyman, so I'm a handyman. Any more questions?”

He wasn't that old. There was a deeply rudimentary awareness in his eyes, anorganic fear. She grinned sideways at him.

“Are you some kind of idiot?”

He shrunk back. “Leave me alone. The mask is for protection from spiders. They're harmless but I don't like the taste of their webs in my mouth.”

She kept nodding and walked along the path. As she moved over the hill she tried to ignore the vast remoteness of their location, pausing only briefly to stare at the green expanse. The stables were unlike the stables in her dream. She saw the tutor visible over a small gate, pouring oats into a trough. She was tall and her yellow hair fell to her midback. They shook hands.

“Good evening.”

“Evening,” Stone said. “I'm Detective Stone. This is quite the setup.”

“My name is Alberta. I'm very lucky.”

“Do you mind if we walk? I'm not one for standing still like this.”

This was the pasture where the horses grazed. They exchanged formalities, discussing her arrival all those years ago, as well as her current duties. Her voice was high and she had a vibrant manner, as well as a strong chin. Stone used her skeptical, forgiving face. Alberta ebbed into silence.

“I am thankful to be here,” she said. “If I wasn’t, I don’t know what would become of me.”

“Right, that’s very nice. Tell me, what do you think of young Mr. Rogers’ disappearance.”

The question seemed to wrap itself around Alberta, as though she were immune.

“Well, like I told the other detectives. I don’t know. I think any number of things are possible. I think he might turn up tomorrow and tell us he’s been camping.”

“Camping?”

“Jack was not unpredictable, but he’s always had a rebellious streak. Who doesn’t?”

“Well it’s getting late and I don’t want to keep you too long,” Stone said. “Do you care to join me on a walk back to the estate?”

Alberta laughed. “I live in the other direction. There’s a small cottage that Mr. Rogers restored for me two years ago. If you don’t mind, I think I’ll return there.”

“Not at all,” Stone smiled.

She bade her goodnight and Stone returned to the house. Valesso was waiting for her on the porch, smoking a cigar with the very tall man.

“Gentlemen,” Stone said. “A well of relief is rising through me. Are we friends?”

“Kai here was just telling me a little bit about the property,” Valesso said.

Kai looked down at Stone with a quiet respect as she sat at the top of the stairs. His teeth were small and cracked.

“Kai told me that Mr. Rogers created the topography himself. Twenty-odd years ago it was a just a desert. Mr. Rogers, apparently, has a vision of transforming the whole of this desert into a green oasis.”

“A green oasis, eh? Right. How long have you been with Mr. Rogers, Kai?”

“Eighteen years.”

“Am I correct in assuming you’re his longest tenured employee?”

“I am.”

“And what about that fellow with the skeleton mask?”

“Yes,” Kai said. “He’s an idiot.”

“Right. What can you tell me about him?”

Kai’s hands became prominent on his knees, knuckles arching, small eyes receding.

“Well, mam. I don’t know. I don’t know him very well.”

“You know something, I’m sure,” she told him.

“How did he come to work for Mr. Rogers?” Valesso said.

“Hey Kai,” Stone said. “You got any more of that mango juice?”

“Mango juice?”

“You know,” she said. “The blue mango juice.”

Kai hesitated and Valesso laughed to himself. Stone laughed too. Kai joined.

“I can get you some.”

“Let’s talk first. Then mango juice.”

“Okay,” he said.

“You were telling us about the idiot.”

“Well, Mr. Rogers brought him back from one of his journeys. I believe this one was to Panama. The man is schizophrenic, from what I can tell. He—Mr. Rogers—said that the man claimed to be from the past. I think Mr. Orlington found this intriguing. He is prone to pitying people like this, especially the ones who intrigue him.”

“So,” Stone said. “This Mr. Rogers. Is he some kind of sexual deviant?” She laughed with Valesso.

Kai’s uncertainty dissolved into a lame grin.

“I don’t know.”

He was beginning to look like he wanted to be somewhere else. Stone groaned and looked out toward the static landscape. The mood needed to be light, she thought. Valesso started whistling a tune she couldn’t quite place. Kai stood up. He was huge. “What size shoe do you wear anyway?”

Kai laughed nervously and excused himself. Valesso and Stone were alone again. Like all good partnerships, they were of one mind. He asked her about the tutor.

“I’m not sure,” she said, stretching back over the porch. “She was interesting in a boring way. She thinks she must have sustained an injury to her head from an accident with a horse at some point, which caused her to black out for a period of time before she ended up here. I’m sure she’s painting mountains with watercolors as we speak. Is she capable of something nefarious? Theoretically. She struck me as the kind of person whose ideas of right and wrong are independent of the modern social machine. Was the boy in love with her? Probably. Aren’t we all? Did she have something to do with the

disappearance? It's not impossible, but I wouldn't bet on it. She doesn't seem to have enough invested in the world to make that kind of commitment. But there may be an element to her I can't see. You ought to talk to her."

Finally there was the yelping of the wild dogs. It came from the opposite direction of the forest, to the center-right, where gardens multiplied into the silk horizon.

"If someone committed a crime relating to the boy," Valesso said, "I'd wager on the father. Men like that don't think the world revolves around them. They think they are the world and everything in and around it. They're self-panteists."

Stone listened for the dogs.

"Well said old boy. No one here seems to be hiding anything, anyways."

They sat in the dusk. A pack of rodents she had never seen before scurried across the grass. Valesso and her exchanged confused looks. The smell of sausage came from inside the house. A drop of sweat lingered across Valesso's cheek. Stone wondered how proficient Kai was at cooking.

After dinner she walked into the gardens. The trainer lived at the end of the repetitions, Kai said. Valesso was going to visit the tutor. She had the sense that this would be one of the many cases with no conclusion. Based on the report, it appeared the trainer would be about as useful as a pinball.

The wild dogs greeted her with red grins. She began petting them and couldn't stop.

There were so many of them and they seemed to be enjoying it so much.

"Howdy."

She looked up and waved at the trainer. He was a slight man, average height, bald like Kai but more determinedly so. He wore cargo pants, boots and a white tank top. He seemed friendly.

“You must be the crackpot detective. Come on in. We’ll have some tea and talk deep into the night,” he laughed.

She shook his hand and admired his cabin. Wrestling trophies were ordered along shelves above the fireplace. There were large books that seemed to be encyclopedias of certain natural phenomenon: animals, bodies of water, astral formations.

“So you’re the trainer,” she said, standing at the counter. “I’m the trainer. What’s on your mind Detective...?”

“Stone,” she said.

“Detective Stone. What kind of tea do you want?”

“I didn’t know there were different kinds of tea.”

“There are literally thousands,” he said. “You seem like a peppermint gal to me.”

She sat on the couch and leafed through an encyclopedia about diseases. The beauty of the images was startling. A white house cat strolled across the top of the leather couch. It looked at her with lime eyes and then it leapt into her lap. She stroked it and waited for the trainer. He turned around with two cups in his hands and a massive corporate smile on his face.

“That’s Aaron. I’m Terrence, by the way.”

He placed her cup on the table and sat across from her, blowing on his. “This is all very interesting,” she said. “Not exactly what I was expecting.”

“It never is, is it?”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” she said, taking the cup in her hands.

“I mean that your expectations about other people—their private selves, the way they live on the inside—is normally a facsimile of your own projections.”

The cat played with Stone’s elbow. Terrence rose and flipped a switch on the wall. The fireplace came to life with computer flair. Stone frowned.

“On the contrary, dear sir. I am almost always right about the inner lives of strangers. I can guess a person’s birthday within two months just by looking at them with 75% accuracy. For a brief period of time, I could even guess the first letter of a person’s name with 20% accuracy. If I ever have a child, I will name him or her Accuracy.”

The trainer looked intent. When she finished he hummed in agreement, stood up, and walked quickly into his room. When he returned he was wearing a purple bath rope. He sat down and crossed his legs. “Do go on, madam.”

“To be honest,” Stone said. “I don’t know why I said that. It’s not even true. It could be true, on certain days, I suppose.”

“What a beautiful idea.”

Stone sat there, trying to decide why she’d said that. Was it something about the trainer?

“In any case,” she said. “I’m much better than most at ascertaining a person’s selfhood with a small amount of background information.”

“You’re a detective, Ms. Stone.”

She looked at him, child-like.

“Did you put something in the tea?”

The trainer looked hurt.

“Me? No, of course not, don’t be silly. There is certainly something about this place, Ms. Stone, that makes a mind lose its grounding efficiency. We’re so very cut off, you know. And the artificial nature of the earth. It’s scientifically proven that close communion with the natural environment promotes healthy brain functions. The more removed we are, the more anxious, etcetera. So let’s get back to the basics. Tell me why you’re here.”

She zoomed in on his affable face.

“I’m here to ask you some questions.”

He nestled into his chair. “I’m an open book, Ms. Stone.”

She squeezed her rectum and sat up. The cat was surprised at first, but once again became comfortable as she sank back against the chair.

“Who are you, Terrence?”

“I trained the boy in a variety of martial and natural arts. Before that I had a brief career as a low-level professional mixed martial artist, and a longer, more decent career as a green beret.

“How did you come to work here?”

“Mr. Rogers saw one of my fights. Or rather, my final fight. He’s involved in world of professional combat in a mysterious way that’s unimportant to your reason for being here. In any case I Mr. Rogers liked the way I took my beating with my chest sticking out and a smile on my face. He asked if I was interested in the opportunity of a lifetime. I can’t say I’d ever imagined doing this prior, and if you would have suggested it as a potential lifestyle I would’ve been indifferent, but he convinced me to try it and I must say I’ve really taken to it. There’s something about the solitude that’s really allowed me to become who I’ve always been, deep down.”

“Fascinating,” Stone murmured. She was drawing Terrence’s bald head in her notes. “Well Terrence I have to say I’m feeling rather strange and the only thing I can attribute it to is that cup of tea, so I’m going to go ahead and leave and suggest that you stay close to your littlefortress of solitude here while Valesso and I consider more intently your motives.”

“Wonderful,” Terrence said. “I’ll be seeing you soon then.”

Stone walked to the door, impressed that she was walking straight. As she opened the door she felt Terrence’s hand on her shoulder. He took her hand and kissed it asexually.

“It’s something I’ve always wanted to try,” he said. “You’re the first woman I’ve seen in a very long time.”

She walked back to the house, the fingers of night curled around her. Valesso was there on the porch. He wore a special grin on his face that left when he saw Stone.

“You look like you did that time we found the mutilated babies.” She sat on stairs beneath him.

“Valesso, have you ever thought that the stars are like the jizz of God?”

“What a crass thing to say, Stone. What are you talking about? What happened to you?”

“The jizz of God. An amazing thing, when you think about it. The most amazing thing.”

“Alberta and I really hit it off,” Valesso said. She seems to have a thing for men with dark hearts.”

She looked at Valesso. He was sitting there, immensely pleased with himself, seeming as though he could sit there for the rest of time.

Kai appeared at the door, wearing a purple nightgown and small eyeglasses, looking like a quaint zombie overlord.

“I’m going to retire for the evening. Can I get you anything beforehand?”

Stone took a step toward him. “Is there something I need to know about Terrence?”

“Terrence. He’s a bit quirky. It comes and goes with that man. He’s really the most gentle person I’ve ever met.”

“Of course he is, Kai, of course he is. Rest well.”

Stone told Valesso of her experience in the trainer’s abode. She spared no detail, from the artisanal carpets to the sense of touching Aaron’s fur. She found herself in a state of pure lucidity, rambling, not in control of what she was saying, but rather, unintentionally aware. Valesso’s mouth hung open while he listened, as it always did. When she finished he licked his lips.

“Seems like the trainer merits revisiting.”

“The report didn’t seem interested in him at all. It doesn’t make sense.”

“It rarely makes much sense when we arrive at the answer.” “Well said, Valesso. You’re really on the ball today.”

She retrieved her handgun from her room. She touched up her makeup and studied herself carefully in the mirror. She returned to the porch to find Valesso bearing a shotgun.

“You brought the shotgun.”

“I did. Do you think it’s inappropriate?”

“Yes.”

The half-moon had emerged from behind the clouds. Valesso began whistling the tune from earlier that day. It was a cheery bit, simple and anachronistic. Valesso was in

such a good mood he did a cartwheel. Stone shoved him in the back and he howled with laughter. She wondered if the madness was a part of him too. The trainer's house was lit up like the 4th of July when they arrived. Shrieks of delight came through the walls, the rumbling of oriental furniture. Valesso and Stone exchanged wary glances and Valesso knocked on the door with the butt of his shotgun. The trainer answered the door immediately, red face like a disembodied circle. It was clear he was naked. A woman sighed in the background.

“Did we interrupt you?” Stone said.

“Not at all,” Terrence said, swinging the door open. “Come in. We were hoping you guys would show up.”

Alberta was strewn across the couch, holding her hand across her forehead like the late Cleopatra. She too was naked. The cat was on the shelf, pacing through the wrestling trophies.

“We were just having a little party,” Terrence said, catching his breath.

“Yes,” Alberta said. “A little party. Always a little party. But now you're here and it can be less little, obviously.” She was speaking sensually and looking at Valesso.

“Now now malady, don't intimidate the guests.” Terrence played with Alberta's fingers. “That's a beautiful Remington 870 Detective.”

“Thanks,” Valesso said.

“We're sorry for not telling you about us,” Alberta said. “Terrence is ashamed of me.”

“Terrence, why are you ashamed of Alberta?” Stone said.

“It’s not true!” Terrence held his arms up in the shape of a Y. “She’s being dramatic again.” He glared playfully at Alberta, and she smiled at him and then Valesso.

“What else aren’t you kids telling us?” Valesso said, leaning against the shotgun.

“Detective Valesso looks like he needs a drink,” Alberta said.

“I don’t drink.”

“I suppose we have to show them,” Terrence said to Alberta. “They are, after all, the crackpots.”

“Show us what?” Stone said.

“A surprise, of course,” Alberta said. “Although, truthfully, it’s not a surprise.”

Terrence helped Alberta into a purple nightgown and threw on a pair of cargo pants. Stone and Valesso followed Terrence and Alberta in the half moon light. There was an absentwind that carried the sound of the night, a pale chiming that seemed forever. Terrence and Alberta held hands. Valesso and Stone exchanged looks. There was a sudden gust of wind that seemed almost meaningful. Stone had a sense that she didn’t need to ask any questions, that questions might distract from the inevitable event toward which they were being led. Valesso carried the shotgun on his shoulder. Alberta detached from Terrence and came toward Valesso, holding him as they walked. Stone frowned and then saw that Terrence was looking at her in that similar way.

They were moving away from the trainer’s house, away from the big house, away from the tutor’s house.

“I had a strange dream last night,” Valesso said, arm around Alberta.

“Go on,” Stone said.

“Well, in the dream my shotgun has anthropomorphic features, or rather, cartoonish eyeballs placed at the muzzle. And it was trying to say something, but I couldn’t understand the language it was using.”

“Interesting. Did it sound Asiatic? Romantic? African? Alien?”

“It’s hard to say. It had that certain dream quality of being none of the above. Like it was simply a model of where language begins.”

“How did it sound?”

“How did it sound? It sounded like it was trying to tell me something useful but also easily replaceable by the future.”

“Replaceable by the future,” Stone said.

Terrence stopped before a cluster of monochrome trees. He turned around and Albert gestured toward the blackness.

“The surprise is in there.”

Valesso cocked the shotgun and Stone drew her handgun. They moved past Terrence and felt their way through the trees. This went on for some time before a voice was heard, sobbing.

“OVPD,” Valesso said.

The voice stopped for a moment and then continued sobbing. Stone considered firing a shot in the air but thought against it. She turned on her flashlight. A small pool of water was somewhat visible. Branches crawled overhead, and her breath caught as she saw Kai and the man with the skeleton mask perched there, looking back and forth from the detectives to the water like hypnotized monkeys. The sobbing continued. She looked at Valesso, who was looking at the figures in the trees, and she moved toward the water.

“We are here to help,” she said. “Jack?”

The sobbing stopped.

“Go away,” the voice abruptly roared.

“We are here to help,” she said.

“Kai,” Valesso said. “What’s going on?”

Kai dropped to the earth, followed by the handyman holding a weed eater.

“He’s mourning.”

“Mourning?” Stone said, lowering her weapon. “It’s really none of your business,” Kai said.

“It’s the business of the state of Nevada,” Valesso said. “Kai. I thought we were friends? Don’t be like this.”

“We are friends, Valesso. I’m sorry.”

The sobbing had begun again. Stone moved closer in toward the sound and a man became visible, long golden hair streaming down his back. He tried to ignore the light but she came up right behind him and he was forced to stare up into her eyes. She was looking into the eyes of a young man, no older than 17, fully formed in the immature way.

“I’m here to die,” he said with an ounce of pride.

“We know,” she whispered with her sad voice. “I’m so sorry it has to be like this.”

The man opened his mouth and the shotgun blast ended things. She looked over at Valesso, casually holding the gun against his side.

“Valesso,” she said. “It’s better if it ends during the last words,” he said.

“You and I both know this.”

“Chapter 20: At the Door”

The winter was like any other winter, cold and grim. I was sitting upstairs beneath my chimes when I noticed the breeze outside my window. It was the first time I'd noticed the breeze in awhile. I was reading a book about Catholic imagery in the 14th century. My six dogs walked in slow circles around me, tongues hanging out of their mouths. The breeze came again. I sat in my chair.

A faint scattering was coming from inside the walls. This happened from time to time. I didn't pay attention to it. The loose leaves of books lay across my room. Usually my dogs picked them up for me. Ulbert, the tallest dog, was the head dog. He had been quiet recently. I couldn't help but wonder if there was something going on between them, in their unique dog language. The breeze came again and with it a chanting. There was something elegant about the chanting. It sounded archaic, shaped by the wits of many minds, aware of itself on a multiplicity of levels. I walked to the window. There was a group of people walking along the street, humming their chant. One of the dogs joined me at the window and I patted his head.

I smiled to myself and sat back in my chair. The dog from the window joined me in my lap and I stroked his head, not even bothering to pick up my book, just sitting there like some kind of exotic plant, fingers waving in oblivion.

A knock came at the door, unfortunately, extracting me from my reverie. I tossed the dog across the room and waited for a few seconds. I brushed the space residue off my arms.

“Come in,” I said.

A young man entered the room. He was an impressive figure, with a plain haircut and broad shoulders. I thought maybe he reminded me of somebody. I wasn't sure. He seemed to have just recovered from a bout that involved high-octane energy. I wasn't sure.

“I'm sorry to stumble in here like this, old woman,” he said. I looked at him carefully.

“What is it, sonny?”

“I was with the protestors. The ones outside your window.”

“You were with them,” I said.

“Yes.”

He walked over to the fireplace with a pained expression. I tried to think of who he was. He'd framed himself in front of a portrait of my mother's mother.

“What can I do for you, then?”

Suddenly, I thought he was going to collapse before me. His face became agitated, and he clutched at his throat. Within seconds this state of affairs passed, and he became normal again. I wondered if he was making a fool of me. I didn't trust protestors. They seemed to want something from me. I didn't know what this meant, but I thought it.

And then I recognized him. This man reminded me of my brother, who died when I was a young girl. He was killed in a fire the year I graduated from middle school.

“So that's it,” I said. “You're a ghost.”

He paused in midair.

“Well, what do you want, Harley.”

He looked at me. I saw in him a certain blankness. The last thing I wanted to think of was my dead brother. And here he was, dead, in front of me.

“I don’t know, Sarah. I just arrived, out of nowhere. I’ve never been a ghost before. It just happened.” The chanting sounded quietly. The slow words went round and round.

“It took me long enough to recognize you,” I said, holding back tears.

He came forward and put his hands on my shoulders, looking into my eyes. It was a lovely moment. The chanting grew louder.

“I didn’t recognize you at first, either. I’ve been dead for so long.” We touched foreheads. I couldn’t feel him.

“How’s death?” I said.

He looked away and walked to the window. The protestors must have been moving out of sight. He was wearing an old-fashioned suit, and one of those fancy hats.

“Wow,” he said. “So this is what it’s like.”

I looked at him, looking out through the window. I didn’t know what to say to that.

This moment passed for several seconds. It was not uncomfortable, but it was not pleasant. My brother was silent. After some time he turned around, sighed, kissed me on the cheek, tipped his cap, and left out the door.

“Chapter 21: Camp”

We were in a military jeep, bouncing down the graveled path like extras in a movie. The driver had a square jaw and seemed braced for impact at all times. The camp slowly came into sight. Desert air rose around us, one day lengthening into the next.

I leaned forward over the dash. We were headed to a government compound, rumored for the eccentricities of its patients who were molested by a variety of addictions. There was one in particular I'd been brought in to investigate. They said it would make a good cover story for the autumn edition.

“Hungry?” said the driver. He was holding out his hand, offering a piece of fruit I didn't recognize.

“It's a papaya,” he said, registering my confused expression. “Tropical.”

I took it and studied it in my hand.

The director greeted me at the front of the compound.

“We're so glad you could come,” he said. “It's time our good citizens know what's going on here.”

I nodded and did not thank him. He led me into a hallway. Plastic emerald chairs spilled out onto either side of us. The walls were made of glass. The rooms were mostly empty, save a handful of figures in lemon coats, studying clipboards. I followed the director into a courtyard. An array of red and green houses dotted the scene. People milled about. I noticed the presence of an old-fashioned marketplace, vendors, children,

dogs, smoke. I felt the director appraising my reaction. I wasn't sure what he wanted me to see.

There was a small throng of bodies, with a regular distribution of height, weight, age and gender. It was with a certain elegant horror I saw what marked the members of the camp. They were all wearing sunglasses. Even the children wore sunglasses. I didn't know how to react. I felt my mouth ajar in the shape of an O. I watched the sunglasses fall of a small child, bumped from behind as he walked besides his mother, and his face twitched with an agony so pure I was deeply moved.

I reached into my breast pocket for my sunglasses, only to realize I had forgotten them at home.

"How many of them are there?" I whispered.

The director seemed to pause.

"Originally there were 25."

Two dingos yelped.

"What's wrong with them?"

The director lifted back his right foot and peered down, as though examining his toes through his shoes.

"We think they're addicted to wearing sunglasses. More importantly, we think it maybe the first incurable addiction in the history of mankind. We brought them here so that their strange ailment could have room to grow, uninterrupted."

I was humbled. There were emotions inside of me, and yet I felt like I was floating, like the lowest form of life conceivable.

A small child was tugging at my pantsuit. He had yellow curls sprouting from his head. He looked up at me. It was clear he knew I was different, a stranger, averse to what she was spectating. He looked up at me, wordless, a boyish grin curling across his mouth. I managed to ask him if he was okay. His expression did not change. He held a measure of strength I had never noted in a child. I was afraid to look at the director. The boy made to hold my hand and I felt the cool sensation of a pair of sunglasses. I put them on, not caring what I looked like, and followed the boy into the marketplace.

“Chapter 22: Bodyguards”

They stood outside the Chief’s tent, arms crossed, with faces they intended to keep straight. Cory and Ashton had been one of three combinations of bodyguards for the Chief when he came of age. They were each three years his elder. Ashton, the sturdier of the two, spat on the forest bed. This was a habit she engaged in. The Chief performed a variety of activities in this tent: painting, sleeping, strategizing, lovemaking, nail-clipping, etcetera. He was a quiet man, well-liked, not as intimidating as his father but more intelligent. He was currently tripping on *amanita muscaria* with a handful of his most trusted advisors. The elk were on the move sooner than usual this year. The tent was secluded, at the end of the village.

Cory sighed deeply and sat down. Ashton looked over at him briefly, shaking her head with a smugness.

“When do Greg and Lisa get here?”

“After first dinner,” Ashton said. “Then we have the night.”

Cory grimaced. “Don’t say that out loud. Say nothing out loud of that nature.”

Ashton could hear the sounds of first dinner, the arranging of energies, the slow and sudden food craze. They had been dipping into their stock of chickens. She looked down at him. He bent over his left knee, staring into the camouflaged forest with a thoughtful expression.

What was he thinking about, she wondered, in a disinterested way. He was her most complex lover, the one with the most ideas, and she was the one he was slightly afraid of.

Before first dinner there was a collective moment of silence. This was his favorite moment when they had this cycle of duty, the spread of silence, felt in the nectar of their bones. Ashton's shoulders were held back, her hair fell to her waist. She was on her high horse again. He felt she had some motive to become discovered, a crime punishable by death, that she wanted to die as a fugitive.

In the middle distance a figure appeared, with hair as long as Ashton's and loose-fitting khaki blue pants. Greg was tall, but he moved with a short stride. There was something unusual about the way he was moving that day, something unpracticed, they were thinking, directly correlating to the fact that Lisa was not with him. The two of them, like all combos of guards, moved together almost exclusively. Greg did not seem nonplussed.

"Howdy, Greg," Cory said.

Greg looked at him and smiled patiently. He was reaching for Cory's right arm, quietly. There was something in this motion that intensified the situation. Out of the corner of an eye Cory saw the hint of an unnatural event. He shouted Ashton's name as Lisa was coming around her throat with a knife. Before anything else happened he was pushing Greg's arm downward, as it was thrusting toward him. There was no sound other than that of their bodies in contest, skin without thought. As Cory struggled on the earth with Greg he shouted the Chief's name, as though the Chief were his brother, relaying his news. Ashton was on top of Lisa's body, throwing down hard strikes which Greg and

Cory noticed, shifting the tension. There was a remoteness within Greg Cory could feel. Cory was surprised that the chief had not manifested. He and Greg rolled together on the earth, biting and scratching. There was a moment of clarity, and Cory allowed Greg on top of him, grabbing at his wrists, and Ashton kicked him across the side of his head, dropping him, before plopping to the ground where she and Cory sat, panting at each other. After a brief silence the chief and his advisors emerged from the tent. The chief seemed displeased. He ushered his advisors back into the tent. He looked over the scene. There was a knowing in his movements, a testing. Their role was to wait for him to speak.

“Chapter 23: Scene 1”

The emperor’s child rolled the ball across the grass. His wife stood beneath the pavilion. His fool was in the above tree, clutching it lackadaisically, looking down at the girl, watching her in her small person’s outfit. The wife was flanked by two bearded statesmen. She was the emperor’s chief advisor. The sky was drizzled with an aged yellow color, the first sign of evening. The fool didn’t know what the wife and her friends were talking about. He watched the child with the interest of a flower. The child moved toward the ball. There was a studious galloping in the distance. The day resists change in the form of breaking color, the fool thought. The wife stroked her chin. The child fell softly onto the earth, catching the eye of the fool. The fool laughed quietly, animalistically. The ball was large and round. The child had taken the ball to herself.

“The ball is almost as big as you are,” the fool said.

He landed besides the child. The beetles that moved around them made an innocent noise. The wife moved her hands patiently. The galloping came again, equidistant.

There was a tear in the fool’s pants, starting at the knee, a stylistic imprint ending at the ankle. The fool walked slowly besides the child, holding her hand. They moved along the earth. The wife watched them move away with a pleased inner smile. Horses came into view from the south valley.

“Chapter 24: The City”

We sat around the table, theme music dreaming in the foreground. We kept it light inside with a lamp designed by Tillman’s wife on the floor. This was the control room, an anonymous apartment where we met to discuss operations. Vincent was the leader, the mad genius. Tillman handled practicalities, ground control, elemental strategies. Orange did what he was told and provided moral support. A cockroach ran along the naked baseboard, almost beautiful. I pointed it out to Orange with a grin as Tillman discussed the position of security guards at the refinery in south Texas we were preparing to attack. I was Vincent’s right hand man, a member of the CIA. Orange and I snickered together.

“Orange. What did I just say?”

“You want the bodies of the CEO and the mayor locked in embrace, via elastic inflammable bands, alive and well as the place burns.

“You win again, Orange.”

Vincent was a man with a dark beard. This was how he was described at headquarters. He was heavyset. I liked Vincent: I liked his style, I appreciated his savantcharisma. Orange nudged me and gestured toward the cockroach, upside-down on the baseboard.

I laughed. The evening seemed to be winding to a close. Orange suggested pizza. He was called Orange because he had a miscellaneous orange scar on his left temple. It looked like something you would see on a catholic saint. It was cold

outside. We moved into the night, walking to Patricio's. The waitress seated us. I admired the memorabilia, stretching my arm across the booth behind Orange. I was the only one in the group with blonde hair.

Tillman and Orange began arguing about a law that had been passed, recently, on how late restaurants could serve liquor. It seemed to be a matter of ethics. The waitress served us our drinks. She enjoyed their argument, telling us we were funny. She asked us how we knew each other.

A marginal silence passed. It was not awkward, but it was uncertain, vaguely curious. Her face held a look of plastic expectation.

"We're eco-terrorists."

Everyone looked at me. A glass dropped from a table, randomly.

"You're joking," she smiled.

"No," I said, "I'm not. In fact, we've just finished hatching a plan, in a plain room, a few blocks away.

"You're joking," she smiled.

"It's quite an elaborate joke," Orange said.

I pointed at Vincent. "This guy is the boss. A real mad genius. He beats his children with a wooden spoon."

"What can I get you guys to eat?" she said.

"I work for the CIA."

"Let's get two pepperonis," Tillman said. "With black olives. Everyone likes black olives, right?"

"Everyone likes black olives," Orange said.

“Chapter 25: Natural Natural”

She was in the bathroom, not looking at the inscriptions on the walls. The summer heat came through the half-cracked windows, and she tore off a piece of toilet paper. His words rolled through her mind like thistles in a cool Western.

It is neither outside nor inside.

She thought, Dr. Prokarov is inside the classroom, I am outside the classroom. She stood at the mirror and wondered whether she was inside or outside the mirror. She tried to think in hyphens. Another person entered the bathroom, a distinct phenomenon altogether.

Dr. Prokarov posed in the center of the classroom, chairs circling him with skinny undergrads. She took her seat by her friend Derrick. Prokarov never sat at his desk. This contributed to the meaning of his name.

Derrick's knee twitched. This was something that occurred, the manboy's twitching knee. Across the classroom a girl with green hair stared into space.

“It is what it is because it is not what it is not.”

A few students followed Prokarov's gaze to the ceiling. She looked down at her notebook, filled with a jungle of patterns. It was not Prokarov's business to make eye contact with the students.

After class she walked with Derrick down the stairs into the colored dusk. Tie-die bikes glided past, an old man wearing a silver du-rag. Derrick did not walk on cracks in the sidewalk.

“The color of the ceiling in Prokarov’s room: nondescript,” Derrick said.

This was an example of Derrick’s living counter to Prokarov. Prokarov’s metaphysics, Derrick’s typology of the ordinary.

“Does he sleep?” she said.

“He only dreams. A man who thinks that much closes his eyes and falls into a lucid state of paranoid shamanic proportions. He monologues to himself, dreaming in language alone. When he was young he loved film. He saw himself most clearly in the narrative of images.”

“I don’t think he’s watched a movie in decades,” she said. “Only Tarkovsky.”

They walked down more stairs and went toward the apartment complex where they each lived. Derrick took his plants for walks. Sometimes he lectured to her on plant ethics. A breathy silence came over them, implying limited affiliation, the nearing of the end of daily socialization.

She was learning to play the flute. The old man down the hall was teaching her, his wife mumbling in the kitchen. She sat on her bed and played. The weeks of the summer passed and the sounds evolved and then she stopped playing. She told herself she lacked the constitution of an artist.

She took walks with Derrick. Her friends were shepherding children at camps, locked over desks at computer internships, and draped at home, waiting for omens. She walked across campus, she walked through parks. She needed a biochemistry class for the pre-med track that was offered during the summer and she figured she’d take care of a literature requirement. Derrick convinced her to take New Rhetoric with him. He believed it would have an impact on his ability to write code.

They were reading together, a name that sounded like the christening of an alien schooner.

“The one and the many are no longer mutually exclusive,”

She didn’t look up. Summer rain danced on the park grass.

“That sounds like something you would say,” she said.

“I am saying it.”

She looked at him. He was clenching and unclenching his jaw.

“Prokarov is American,” he said.

“Canadian-American/”

“My new favorite word.”

“Slav.”

“I listen to local sports radio. It’s a side project of mine that is deeply anthropological. Abreadth of data. Whole lives channeled into phone calls with strangers about men on screens. He called last night. Who called last night? Prokarov, that’s who. Wanted to know if the host could answer a bit of trivia he’d invented. And the host, let me tell you, is intrigued by any man who can stump him.”

“The riddle.”

“I forgot the riddle. What matters here is that the reality of the man involves sports. You should’ve heard the simple passion in his voice, invoking the spin rate of a curveball. He yapped. He calls once a week apparently with a question to tantalize everyone listening.”

He fell across the bench, chest heaving.

“Joe Host always claims to know the answer, but he can never move it to the front of his mind. It’s part of their schtick. He accuses the caller of casting a spell on him. It’s the way he asks the question, Talia, that’s what matters.”

She was bored. She had a feeling her neighbors would invite her over for dinner and mahjong. This pleased her. The wife would make a pineapple upside-down cake. The fourth player would be one of the wife’s friends from church. The husband would smile and shrug.

Derrick looked at her from across the stone table with text laid out in front of him. She met his gaze until he looked over her shoulder at the traffic, rambling about hidden cameras and wiretapping.

There was a small downtown with a wiped-out aura, post-apocalyptic, that became rationalized during the emptiness of summer. Men wore clothes six sizes too big for them and pushed shopping carts with wall-eyed puppies. Technicolor invitations to indie movies no one liked more than a little. A cop-to-civilian car ratio that seemed unhealthy.

They’d redone the art museum. The framework was brighter now, like one of the arcades in her dreams. She noticed it now and then and wanted to be interested in entering.

She had a dream in which a grizzled old woman ushered her gently and roughly into the museum. Derrick told her the old woman was her future incarnation. She went inside on a mid-morning Tuesday. The desk clerk took her money. She wondered what Derrick thought of art.

She wasn’t sure, exactly, if she liked art. She was instinctively annoyed by the guards who were not invisible.

She sat in the modern furniture with a sick smile on her face.

The art museum wanted to be a tourist trap. She liked the way the rooms held silence, or was it the other way around, was it the silence holding the rooms? She stood in front of a painting of Jesus surrounded by men with expressions. There was a woman at the bottom of the photo, wraith-white, and the woman was readily discernible as the focal point of both Jesus and the painting, even though Jesus seemed to be dialoguing with the men, disciples and Pharisees, out of endless social obligation. She considered the possibility that the painting was more holy than the Bible a boyfriend had given her for her birthday in high school. There had been a time when she felt primed to let go and allow herself to become a cell in the body of history.

She stood in front of the painting.

Her eyes counted upward. She tucked her hand into a pocket.

“This is what the Renaissance sees,” a man’s voice said.

She didn’t turn around.

“People were dream creatures. Matter existed, barely, for the sake of evoking a fleeting sense of beauty. How does this make one feel? It’s not about what I feel, obviously. It’s about the image, the language it implements to disassociate itself from the rules I want to place on it.”

The voice carried an air of monologue.

“It’s the language of the image that invented us. You and me, now.”

This was an invitation. She remained still. He was by her side now, and she wondered whether she was hearing his breathing or imagining it. Derrick would insist the two were identical, that he had learned this from Derrida after reading 30 pages.

“Where are your eyes drawn?”

“To the servant boy with the olive skin. He looks like an angel.”

“An angel in disguise. Have you ever considered?”

Had she ever considered what? Had he moved closer? He smelled of coffee and well-ironed clothing.

She was not interested in his appearance. She couldn't tell what he was, age-wise, something about the deception of a gangly frame.

“I'm a graduate student. Theology.”

He was stating a fact.

“The question is one of intentionality,” he said.

“I think I disagree.”

“The question is always one of intentionality. If you learn anything from the stranger in the art museum it is this.”

“I'm sorry I have to go.”

She was still, looking at the servant boy.

“I can't help but believe the painter did not know who the boy was,” she said.

“How aesthetic of you. Scholars leave aesthetics to politicians. Perhaps that is our mistake.

“I'm leaving.”

She saw him, briefly. She thought it might fit the scene if a pair of middle-aged women passed through her view in the adjacent section with the Matisse. She began to walk away and his hand, slightly extending, expressing something. She turned around and looked at the painting and said something nice.

They were sitting on stools.

“My friends tell me I’m excitable.” He used air quotes around the word friends and then pretended to stir his coffee. She thought she might be moved by this. When she didn’t respond he seemed to take it in stride. They talked about hometowns, weather, habits they believed existed innately.

“Did I tell you I’m studying theology?”

“Yes.”

“I’m supposed to ask you’re doing here during the summer. You seem like a young woman who divides her time between whimsical desires.”

“Have you taken any classes with Prokarov? He’s philosophy, I think. Or literature.”

“My advisor and him might be racquetball buddies.”

“I have no coffee left,” she said.

He smiled at her.

She was sitting by Derrick in their usual seats. The young man from the art museum was there, typing into his computer. Prokarov hadn’t introduce him. They were inside the classroom. Inside the classroom he was undoubtedly older than her, maybe by a dozen years, his posture conveying the fact that he had never having left the university. The older she got, the more she realized that the things she didn’t know, didn’t exist.

Derrick passed her notes while Prokarov discoursed on the tragedy of science. Derrick claimed to be understanding the process by which Prokarov spoke.

The note said, “I’ll compare and contrast the process of Prokarov the philosopher’s language with Prokarov the sports fan. Through this process I’ll be able to understand the nature of his soul.”

The note ended there the way some of Derrick's spoken sentences did. She knew he did this to gauge her reaction. He needed to know in order to better know how he should adjust his self-styling.

"Science functions in the way a spiral functions. They create worlds with their own concept of dimensionality, in the linguistic sense. The worlds are never there, besides the way we allow them to affect our psychic perceptions."

Prokarov paused when he used the word allow. This felt important.

"Science is religion, but religion created science. Both of these statements are true. Is one truer than the other? It might be impossible to know."

The theologian was typing. The class sat like extras in a sitcom.

"Sound-maker," Prokarov said, hands death-gripping the sides of a desk.
"Sound-receiver."

She thought it might be interesting to make Prokarov the subject of a song on her flute.

How would his face sound? What quality would his gait convey?

"The summer is the true source of time, and thus, timelessness. But a sonogram of summer reveals its death-drive, squirming within. This is what it's like, seeing yourself in someone else. It is always a deep pleasure experiencing this with you."

She found the message stuffed beneath her door. She expected another note, a followup, but after a couple weeks she began to forget the incident took place.

Derrick officially invited her to his apartment for the first time. The fact that it was the weekend amused her. She wondered if he'd have a bottle of wine that cost more than \$7.

The old woman she lived by recommended she take it slow. She hadn't seen her husband's face, the flautist, but she imagined his expression, the way his eyes might roll up into his forehead, like he was mocking pain.

Derrick answered the door.

"Why are you glowing? You don't glow. Your aura is gray."

"I am in a good mood, I guess."

"Moods, pendulums," he said. "Listen. Prokarov's house is surrounded by a wall. A solid fence. It's not quite a wall but for the sake of the story I'll tell you it's a wall."

"You want me to ask you what you're planning?"

"Photographic evidence. Prokarov, publisher of tomes heralded by the webbed vertices of the Interweb. Is this actually true? More important is the question of what it might imply. Did I tell you I corralled that surly graduate student in class the other day? Tell me what I asked him."

Her eyes passed over a baseball glove tossed beneath a coffee table.

Was she attracted to this boy? She had thought he would make her dinner. Instead he was already at his desk, peering into a camera. She wasn't ashamed of the condoms in her wallet.

"What did you ask him?"

"I wanted to know if there was evidence of him being a sports lover you nitwit."

"I didn't know you had a camera."

“I bought it special for this occasion. I haven’t eaten lunch in a week. You didn’t ask if he did. Well he didn’t. Don’t let it disappoint you, Talia. A man like him doesn’t need decoration, adornment, ornamentation. He is interested only in the significant.”

“You bought the camera special for this occasion. To photograph Dr. Angelson in his home calling a sports radio station.” “I found out where he lives. Don’t ask me how. It was easier than figuring out how to disconnect my fire alarm.”

“Why am I here?”

“You’re always here,” Derrick said.

She was on the couch facing the puny television. Whatever Derrick was doing to the camera didn’t make a sound. She wouldn’t be surprised if it was all for show.

“I will need a boost.”

“I thought.”

“Tonight is the night, old friend,” he said, holding the camera.

They took the bus to an out-of-the-way part of town, treetops arching over the streets, Spanish vines placating the stone walls that surrounded the houses. She hadn’t thought he would live in so nice a neighborhood. They rode in the silence of the urban sheen, women and children huddled in far corners with grocery bags.

She watched two people have a conversation, and she began to imagine that the woman, Russian or former Yugoslavian, was Prokarov’s wife. She had four bags of groceries at her feet, a small child clutching her bosom, a turquoise scarf around her forehead in the dead of summer.

The woman was speaking with a young man whom newspapers would call a black youth.

“I tell you this weather.”

“It’s unbelievable.”

“It’s nonstop.”

“How what?”

“Don’t mind me.”

“Say that again?”

“Only I can say that,” she said.

She exited with Derrick and followed him, walking two steps behind. This pace came holistically, he the crazed amateur, she the witty onlooker, and she was startled by this description of herself, how it arrived in her mind with a sly monkey grin. He began pacing in front of a house, hands clasped behind at the waist, and she stood there watching. Think of the man in his study. Was he perusing softly or devouring manically, was it Lucretius or Dickens or Kierkegaard or Aquinas? She knew on some airborne level that Derrick had invented the meaning of the anonymous caller. And when he whispered to her to lend him her hand, she did so, for a boost, and when she did so, it came through her, lapis lazuli lizard eye, servant in the home of the Pharisee, glimmering faintly in the background.

“Chapter 26: Plane of Animals”

The cockpit opens into a mute sky. It's the kind of day where nothing quite feels like itself, where things are exceptionally normal. I lean back in my seat, arms behind my head. My co-pilot, an orangutan, looks relaxed at his chair, giant hands hanging off his knees. I admire his arms. Their length astounds me. They seem a gross advantage in the sphere of evolution, one I can't fathom.

“Monkey. Would you rather have long monkey arms or a big human brain?”

He sits there and says nothing. I cluck to myself and take a sip of coffee, which I instantly spit out. The coffee is astoundingly bad. Monkey looks at me and starts laughing. I place the cup down and yell for Giraffe, the stewardess. Her head meanders innocuously into the cockpit. I display the coffee cup to her with a pained expression. She shows me her teeth, which has always been her way of saying sorry, and retreats. I sigh and look at Monkey.

“I tell you what Monkey. You'd think with all that oil we'd be able to get some decent coffee.”

“Coffee is what you think it is,” Monkey says.

“Monkey.”

We are flying over volcanoes. I inform the passengers I will be bringing us closer to the lovely formations. I pat Monkey on the shoulder, a pilot's smile on my face.

“I was once a crawdad,” Monkey says.

“That’s fantastic!”

A blue light blinks on the dashboard. This frightens me at first, but Monkey clicks it, and Giraffe’s voice comes frantically through the system.

“I’m having difficulty with some passengers, and Panda’s asleep. Can one of you help?”

Monkey says, “Everything is everything.”

“Take the reins, Monkey,” I say, standing up and shrugging.

The family of koalas clumps together. I smile and nod to the parents, who look at me with button eyes. The coyote father reaches out to shake my hand. He is an old friend. The penguin child nearly has a fan conniption when he sees me. Penguins love a symbol of authority. I see the fracas from as we enter economy class. There’s a fight going on in the rear seats. I see now that Giraffe was sweating all down her neck. She pauses and I squeeze around her. The octopus and the crocodile are in a kind of standoff. The octopus is large and blue, one of the eldest passengers, with glowing scarlet eyes. Crocodiles, like rocks, all look alike. She too is one of the eldest passengers.

“It’s the seventh time you’ve asked me,” Octopus says.

“And the answer is still no.”

“But you’re not even using it,” Crocodile says. “I don’t understand. You’re not even using it.”

I look at them, back and forth. They pay no attention to me.

“It doesn’t matter if I’m not using it. It belongs to me. It is mine.”

I hold up my finger to speak but Crocodile beats me to it.

“I just don’t understand. It’s not fair. Why wouldn’t you want to help a fellow creature?”

“Excuse me friends,” I say. “But could someone please explain to me what the problem is?”

“You are out of line, Crocodile,” Octopus said. “You have no right to even ask.”

Crocodile’s tail thrashes the side of the plane. Now I perk up. Poor crocodile doesn’t even realize that she is doing it. She is worked up and I am inclined to take her side. Nobody really likes Octopus, including me. Crocodile’s tail thrashes again.

“Be careful Crocodile,” I say, but it’s too late. Octopus’s arms extend to take hold of Crocodile’s tail, and Crocodile thrashes again even harder, pulling Octopus on top of her. They begin to skirmish. I pull out my ray gun and eviscerate them both. The passengers clap. I make my way to the cockpit, passing a relieved Giraffe, clapping seals. Even the koalas seem more at ease. I enter the cockpit and take gentle Monkey by the shoulder as I lean over the controls to catch a glimpse of the slowly vanishing volcano.

“Chapter 27: Elder’s Cave”

The corpus dictates that an initiate has the option to commit suicide following their seventh year at the commune. It is not clear what the function of such a rule is. The commune is based on maximizing quality of life through hedonism and togetherness, and so very few people, maybe one or two, would want to end their lives before their natural assignment. It is thus wondered at why the suicide rate is as high as it is. Men in the first bloom of fatherhood who spend their days fishing and lying upside down under oak trees disappear into Elder’s Cave and never return, leaving their children in their brothers’ care. Girls in their late teens who were born in the commune and spend their days talking with their girlfriends on beautiful porches participate in the ritual. Every type chooses this path at a frequency of around 60%, even though there is no public determination to shame those who decline. The elders themselves seem to never choose to participate in the ritual.

Ever since it became widespread knowledge that a community of 150 people was ideal for facilitating individual life fulfillment, communes such as this have become quite popular in the southwest region of the country. I have spent some years touring the communes, and settled here, in large part, I realized, because of this sacred appreciation of self-denial. Even then, the ones who choose to artificially end their lives are not sainted for their actions. Their bodies are collected and burned at the pyre beneath the new moon with the natural dead.

“Chapter 28: The Headless Man”

He was a short man, with a whole visage that slowly confronted you, a black hat that was hardly perceptible in the night. I didn't know what to make of him, but I was drawn to him. He seemed like a man with a carefully organized secret. There was no one else at the bus stop.

I had nowhere in particular to be, being a creature of the night. I roamed from sanctuary to sanctuary, smiling at the homeless. I was born in Boston, home of the brave. My friends always told me I had a penchant for infuriating the elderly.

“Old man,” I said. “What are you waiting for? There's no bus at this point in the night, is there?”

“I'm waiting for the headless man,” he said.

“You're waiting for the headless man, is it?”

“That's right sonny.” He had a polite smile on his face.

At this juncture, and for a long time after that, I didn't know what to make of the man. Was he a prophet or a demon? I myself am a humble man, ready to admit my vast ignorance. I gave him a terrific grin, counting to four in my head.

“Sonny,” he said. “Do you want me to tell you about the headless man?”

That night in the streets there were no sirens, no screams, no bodies, and yet a raw sense of panic. A purple halo encircled the moon.

“Sure,” I said. “But first I think we ought to pray to the Moon. When is her birthday again?”

“It’s coming up,” the old man said.

“Holy mother Moon. Don’t let us be afraid of the darkness. For we know now that people find wondrous things, like lamps and memories and one another, in the darkness.”

I was going to go on when I noticed a presence moving toward us, tawny and choreographed. It was a big yellow bus.

“Old man, I’m confused. I could have sworn they were shutting down the bus system past midnight these days.”

“They’re shutting down a lot of things these days, sonny, if you know what I mean.”

We watched as the bus cruised to a halt in front of us. The headless man was driving the bus. The old man moved into the bus, and I saw the headless man turning to face us, and I could feel his love. I wanted to move toward him and hug him, but before I could physically react the doors were closed and the bus was moving on, receding into the urban gloom.

I didn’t know how I felt. I was neither anxious nor calm, for example, neither happy nor sad. I sat down in the soft uncertainty, trying to collect some witty retort to keep myself company. None came to me. I sat awhile longer, surrendering to the passage of time. I looked up to the sky, and as I was opening my mouth to speak I thought I saw the moon tremble. This had never happened before.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Wait a minute!”

The moon stayed there.

I locked eyes on it, but I didn’t speak, and I’ll tell you why: Those days you had to be careful of what you said when you were alone. If you spoke too much with no one

around you, you could get in big trouble. Therefore, I said nothing to the moon, recognizing that to continue saying words to the moon, as if it were a person, was to sentence myself to death. This was my lot in this life, my burden to bear, and probably will be in the next life, my lot and that of my friends, whom I still break bread with on the weekend.

“Chapter 29: The Beach”

In the evenings he ran on the beach. He ran from his home to the end of the beach, positioned beneath a long bridge that stretched into the adjacent town. The sunset did not interest him. The sound of the ocean was likewise lost on him. The last of the day's tourists would sidestep with self-dramatized brows. He ran on the beach because it was close to home, and because he did not like cars.

On Wednesday no one was there. He noticed the beach's emptiness and then forgot, only to notice again. There was never a dearth in population quite like this. He checked his phone as he ran, not sure what he was looking for, some spectrum of harvested data that explained his newfound solitude.

The local news reported the results of the high school volleyball team's triumph. Twitter discussed the shape of the president's head. The weather app continued to impress him with its incompetence.

Then he heard something, like an erotic meow. He glanced around and his pace slowed. He saw little distinction in the faint twilight.

His wife would be setting the table for dinner, the children playing in the backyard with their cap guns, two boys and a girl, not two years between the three of them.

He heard the meow. It sounded affected, somehow, as though designed to lure his attention. It had personality. He looked toward the row of houses parallel to the beach and saw a horde of green cats moving together like a sci-fi cloud. For the first time in eight

years of running on the beach he stopped running. It was a true spectacle, one dozen house cats, grass green, mewing to the rose sky as they trotted among the dunes.

He told himself not to be afraid. They were cats, moving in a pack. Who wouldn't be suspicious? His mind went to the paint factory on the southern edge of town. This idea was a copout, he realized. It seemed unnatural for cats to have traveled that far. Anyways, it had been raining for the past three days. Cats hate rain.

He decided to follow the cats at a safe distance. He realized the pace he was using to follow the cats was the same one he had always used.

There seemed to be no leader among them. Their contour was mobile, discontinuous.

They moved in and out of the dunes, climbing stray pieces of wood, mews coagulating into sweet alien music.

His house appeared in the distance. It was a modest abode with a tin roof. It was with a certain Malthusian fascination that he watched the cats in the foreground of his home. He wanted to cry out to them, to wish them well.

He watched as they approached his home, a new pattern emerging in their movements. They had formed a single arrow, like a caterpillar, and were winding up the stairs and onto the patio, only now breaking formation once again to swarm the house, glowing at day's end, and he ran toward his home shouting at his family to come and see what could only be seen.

“Chapter 30: Scene 2”

There were two of them seated on the bench. The river ran out in front of them, enclosed by a small fence on each side. They looked like a small image, hung neatly over the fireplace, early winter coming through the perimeter.

“When I was in Tuscany, I ate boar. I never knew what it felt like, before then, to eat boar.”

The speaker had a thoughtful impression on his face. His hair was graying, and he was growing it out. His friend was looking the other way, as if studying something.

“That always stuck with me,” the first man said.

A couple walked behind them, with a dog.

“Listen to me,” said the second man, quickly turning around. “I stole the woman’s jewelry.”

The first man groaned. “Why did you do that?”

“I couldn’t help myself. It’s been so long, Fred. I sit and I think about it. The act, the passion.”

Fred listened.

“I have money now, enough to where I can afford to stay home and sit idly, looking around. I play raquetball, I watch TV, I paint still lifes, I’m retired. But am I retired, Fred? I don’t know.

There was a lady buy on the second man’s shoulder.

“When I was in Indigo,” Fred said, “there was a man who went to the restaurant my friends and I frequented. He was homeless, without home. He was rather annoying, the

man, like a large child. One day, the sandy sun bearing down on that shack of a town, the homeless man reached out and grabbed the arm of a small child. The child's mother shrieked and pulled the boy away. Everyone was shocked, even the homeless man. Well we had just about had it with the old man. We found him around back as we left. Johnny cut him down. I remember feeling how it was more painful putting down dogs that had been injured in a firefight."

The two men stared over the river. It was so still there was almost a vision of a tiny sailboat, floating downstream, slightly embarrassing. The second man sat hunched over his knee. He looked at Fred and frowned.

“Chapter 31: Cult of The Day Moon”

Ezri had a hand-rolled cigarette in his mouth and the knife he used to gut the boar in his hand. He was studying the knife with an expression of comic concern, forehead stretched, smoke idling toward the ceiling, when Maria stomped through the door to the back of the desk.

“What’s wrong, Maria?” I said.

“Nothing.”

She busied herself with forms.

“Is it because I haven’t proposed?”

She ignored this. Two men entered through the open door. One of them asked whether they could schedule a trip for tomorrow morning. The answer was yes. Business was slower than usual this season. Maria ushered them toward her. Ezri looked at his knife, and I greeted the men. It was almost dinner time, and I was hungry. The more reserved of the men looked at me and walked over, carefully, a wiry man with thinning hair and a pensive makeup.

“You gentlemen are the guides?”

“We are,” I said.

“I’m Art Rothschild.”

“I’m Camp. This is Ezri. Where y’all from?”

“Just over the pond,” he said. “Can you call the Pacific Ocean a pond?”

“I don’t know. Ask Ezri. He would know. He knows everything.”

“That seems good to me,” Ezri said. Ezri had a great smile. We all laughed. Maria was telling the louder man that everything was provided. He thanked her and joined his friend, introducing himself as Todd Lawrence. He had brown hair and the kind of friendly eyes you never see into.

“Well my friends, I assume we’re in the best of hands.”

“The governor of Arizona himself said he had the best of times killing these wild boar with us,” Ezri laughed.

Art and the Lawrence laughed too. Ezri grinned at me, and I could tell he didn’t quite trust Lawrence.

“So we’ll meet you here at 7 in the morning? Boys, our wives are with us.”

“How many?” Ezri said.

We laughed and shook hands, and then they left. Maria turned on the radio. It was jazz with local Hawaiiin flavor. I started dancing toward her, and she smiled at her forms, the music filling the room. I moved around the counter toward her and she tried to ignore me. Ezri was looking at his knife.

“You cannot do this anymore.”

A tennis ball flew past the door. The kids were playing baseball. I stopped dancing and rested against the desk besides her.

“I know,” I said.

She seemed to want to be more disappointed than she was. The music played and I walked to the door, where I watched the kids play. I asked Ezri if he was hungry. He was.

It was a thriving business, at times, the culling of boar with bow and arrow or semi- automatic rifle. The weapon you chose depended on your taste. It was great sport for the wealthy and the eco-conscious. Wild boar ravaged the land, unchecked for many years. There were six of us in the van, coasting along the thin mountain road that overlooked a fire-greenearth.

It was a silent ride, tourists and professionals paying homage to the magic of dawn. Lawrence's wife was small. She moved with class. She had an air of intellectual superiority that was somehow erotic. She was intrigued by the fact that Ezri was from Israel. She and Lawrence were based out of Santa Barbara, where Lawrence sold real estate and she wrote for a small nature magazine. Art's wife, Claudia, was hefty and blonde and spoke sporadically if not nonsensically. At first I had trouble deciding whether she was okay.

We came across a clearing that faced away from town. There was forest, another small mountain range, ocean, sky, color. We stopped to stretch our legs.

"Where are we?" said Art.

"This is called Axis Waypoint," Ezri said.

"Axis Waypoint," Claudia muttered.

Behind the road was jagged black rock. I leaned against the van and rolled a cigarette. Ezri was describing the geological formation of the rock for the men and Lawrence's wife. There was no wildlife in sight. Claudia walked out to the viewing point. She looked misplaced out there, like a character in a children's TV show.

"What's so funny?"

It was Lawrence's wife. I smiled at her politely and told her it was nothing, and that I hadn't caught her name. This seemed to please her.

"Liza."

"Have you ever killed anything?"

"Plenty of times," she said.

"Excellent."

She smiled a nice smile. There was something about her I couldn't place, an awareness or sensation. She reminded me of a gritty dream creature, not totally unpleasant. She asked me what I knew about the land where we were headed. I told her it depended on which aspect of the land she wanted to know.

"There's historical," I said. "Botanical, zoological, geological, eschatological."

"Whatever comes to your mind. I want to write a book about Hawaii. About the peculiar customs here that bond men and nature."

Ezri, Art and Lawrence joined us. Ezri suggested fruit. We watched Claudia walking toward us as Ezri busied himself at the back of the van, emerging with a pineapple.

A man on a motorcycle passed by. The two couples watched with a certain magazine lust.

"Ezri," I said. "Tell us a story about the military."

"Does that question not offend you?" Liza said.

Ezri grinned and shook his head, chewing pineapple.

"Only in theory do people get offended by such questions, in my opinion," said Art.

Lawrence and Liza nodded thoughtfully. I asked Ezri if we should break out the hard-boiled eggs. It was a beautiful morning and there was no rush to the campgrounds. They were staying for five days.

“You’re suggesting Ezri won’t be offended because he is not a totem in an argument?” Liza said.

“I think it’s a strong possibility.”

“I was in West Africa, on a routine mission to silence a rebellion. We infiltrated the leader’s compound. While they were interrogating the leader, I was at a post out front. The wind has a distinct rhythm in the trees, amplified by the steady hooting of chimpanzees. I sensed someone approaching from my left.”

He moved suddenly, recreating his instincts, a natural thespian. I was watching Claudia. She had become fixated on the rock formation behind the road and was moving slowly toward it. I felt my arms being lifted above my head by the wrists.

“A child had a belt made of grenades around his waist,” Ezri said. “He was no older than 9. They were the kind activated by hand. I lunged for him before he knew what was happening and grabbed him tight, like how I have Camp here.”

I mimed resistance as Claudia disappeared from my line of sight behind the van.

“Now the point of the story is this, to address your question. The boy looked up at me, solemn and without fear, with even a remarkable trace of awe. I asked him if he wanted to die and he shook his head. He must have spoken English. Someone from my team came to remove the belt, and the boy ran into the night. We learned from leader that this was his son, instructed to blow the compound if such an event were to occur. I believe the leader is spending the rest of his life in prison/.”

I'd heard the story dozens of times. It was interesting to see how our clients reacted. Often people were gratified. Justice has a kind of therapeutic effect, stabilizing the mood. Art and Lawrence did in fact possess airs of newfound serenity, as though just returned from the spa.

"But what does that have to do with original question," Liza said.

"It's just his default story when asked about the war," I said.

Ezri asked her to repeat the question.

"Where's my wife?" Art said.

"And what about you Camp," said Lawrence. "How'd you end up here?"

"The truth is Todd I was dishonorably discharged for using my location to help facilitate a sizeable marijuana business. The feds let me off easy for squealing. Little did they know everything I told them was a plant."

Everyone laughed. Todd nodded his head, teeth bared slightly. Liza told me she didn't believe me and I told her it was only partly true.

"Where's my wife?" Art said.

Liza called her name. We looked around, craning our necks, and then we looked at one another. I suggested we look through the rocks behind the road.

Ezri had us fan out along the rock. The rocks had dark holes, winding up and down like the back of a moving snake. It was simple to navigate, textured for simple gripping.

It was a day without clouds, the sky an ironic blue. The day moon hung in the middle distance like an illusion. I slid down a rock onto the earth. The faint shouts of the others licked the air. I passed myself from rock to rock with my hands, humming a song I didn't know. They said this is where indigenous tribes performed rituals to

consecrate their desires and horrors, twelve warriors and six twelve-year-olds, one shaman standing on another's shoulders.

We searched for several minutes, our cries turning inside-out. I was getting bored. Discovery felt inevitable. A wave of introspection washed over me. Liza came over a rock. She walked toward me. I couldn't tell if she was pretending not to.

"What if she's gone?" she said.

"They say the earth here is full of ancient or supernatural traps. Tourists report sidling boulders that seem to grin when they're taking pictures."

"Be serious."

"Fine, fine."

We walked through the rocks, and I was reminded of the way I walked with girls growing up.

"What would Art do?" I said.

"He'd remarry by the end of the year."

A falcon landed on a stump to watch us. We had been looking for half an hour, and our confidence was tilting, sensuously. Desperation began to bubble. I couldn't remember what Claudia looked like.

Another half hour later we were at the van analyzing the situation. Lawrence leaned against the bumper and looked sorry for himself. Art and Ezri walked quietly to the side, as though they were going off-screen. A pair of sedans drove by slowly. I hoisted myself to the top of the van. The rocks on the hill were low enough to the ground so that I had a clean view of the land. It was lovely. I felt like a green astronaut, locked into the moment's beauty. Liza was roaming the edge of the formation, calling her friend's name with an innocent sense of performativity.

There was a monastic quality to the gestures of Art and Ezri. They foregrounded the expanse, pointedly, modern men in shorts.

“What did you expect?” Lawrence said.

I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me. There were small animals creeping through the rocks, rodents wet by morning dew.

“I’ll tell you what I expected. I expected things to go according to plan. That’s what I do best. That’s all a man can do, anyhow. But who am I? I’m a man who isn’t going hunting, a man with clients back home and a sizeable boat. I should have been an actor, like my mother said. If I were an actor life would be a constant shimmering experience.”

Technically Claudia was not missing. A full rotation of the earth needed to occur for this to become true.

It was clear Lawrence was talking to himself. My phone was ringing. Lawrence continued. I began to understand he knew I was there, overhearing.

“Hello.”

“Yes we have the woman.”

“Thank God, where are you.”

“We are with her.”

“Where are you?”

“Where am I? Why would you ask?”

I beckoned to Ezri and Art, pointing to my phone. They jogged over.

“Where are you?” I said.

“You listen, I tell you what to do.”

“Great. I’m listening.”

Lawrence called to Liza, who came bounding over.

“I call later when things are clearer, okay?”

The man hung up. The four of them were looking up at me like small children. A pair of motorcycles passed by.

“He said he’d call me back.”

Claudia had been kidnapped.

We spent the rest of the morning in deep thought, and then we had lunch. There was a moment, Ezri bowed over himself in sobriety, Art facing the rocks, Lawrence looking at Art, Liza standing off to the side, where I was tempted to take a picture on my phone and send it to the New York Times.

“I have an idea,” Art said. “We should go ahead with the trip. I have the utmost confidence we will hear from the kidnappers and be able to compensate them. Don’t worry about what you can’t control, isn’t that what they say?”

I watched Art and felt Ezri looking at me, intently, and Lawrence clapped a hand against his friend’s shoulder.

“You’re a real man, Art.” “Wait,” I said.

Art held up his hand. He looked wrongfully accused, New Testament martyr, as Liza came entered the scene with a dazed expression on her face.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Art’s deciding the right thing to do is go ahead with the trip,” her husband said. “There’s no use commiserating. We’ll just give them what they want when they call and pick her up.”

Liza looked around, her uncertainty palpable. I wanted to tell her not to worry, there was nothing we could do, no instruction manual. Ezri came stomping toward the men, heat flowing off his body. He got close to Art's face. I noticed I was moving toward them, soundlessly.

I was ready to see Art smacked in the face like a child.

They spoke to each other in a range of tones.. Art had a way with words, it was clear, and I was mildly shocked to see Ezri's sense of things being eased, that Lawrence had Ezri by the shoulder, talking calm and frank, as though he were soothsaying, emotions fading to black.

Through the window of the van the earth seemed to be in motion, a trick that begins when you are young and never ends. I was in the front passenger seat. The men were snoring. Ezri was in one of his stoic moods, a shadow of melancholy.

"Aren't we doing something wrong?"

I didn't answer. Liza was in the seat behind me.

"You don't think so?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "Almost certainly."

I did not look at Ezri. I felt her leaning toward me, by the windows.

"I have the most terrible feeling," she said. "The worst pain I have ever felt."

She paused.

"It's wonderful, though, this feeling. I feel so alive, like the world is a single being."

We rode in silence for a few miles.

"When I was a child," Liza said, "I dreamed of living alone in Antarctica. The penguins would be my confidants. I would go weeks without eating, warm in my seal-

skin coat, meditating on the origin of love from my hut. Of course, one day the dream disappeared. It was replaced by something else, something that might be called an attachment to myself.”

“I ate penguin in South Africa once,” Ezri said.

“How was it?” I asked.

“I think it was fine,” Ezri said. “I think it was fine.”

We rode in silence. I looked back at Liza and she was looking out the window.

I carried a jug of water to the fire pit. The afternoon sun was softened by the canopy, and we were comfortable in the shade. The three clients had gone for a walk. I told them to pay attention to their surroundings.

Ezri looked at his knife.

“It’s moments like this where I think we need a dog,” I said.

“You do? Why?”

“I don’t know. A reminder of ignorance.”

“I love dogs,” he said.

I realized my gaze was lingering on his face. It was a classic moment. I wanted to see my friend’s resentments, secrets, the elements of chaos beneath his smooth persona.

There was a rustling in the brush behind the man. He met my gaze, quietly.

“I don’t like this,” he said.

“It’s unlikeable, by definition.”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Me neither.”

It was almost time for dinner. I took my bow and moved into the forest. It was custom to eat rabbit on the first night of the journey. For ten minutes I moved through the forest, half-cautiously, twigs snapping, birds calling, mind a rose red void.

I changed directions to circle back toward camp. I heard voices. They were agitated, clearly, and there was an aspect of self-protection to them. I moved toward them. Heads and bodies appeared. Art was hissing. Lawrence and Liza were nodding. I took a knee and watched, cradling my bow.

“It’s okay to feel guilty,” Art said.

“It’s natural.”

“I hate this.”

“I’m having fun.”

“We could tell them,” Liza said. “We could give them some of the money. It’s so much. Everything would be so much easier.”

“Let’s sleep on it.”

Art had a presence now, a firm energy I hadn’t noticed. His word was a figure of authority. I did not move.

“Listen to me. The important thing is that we stick to the plan. If we stick to the plan, the plan will work, and we want the plan to work, because if the plan doesn’t work, then we are fucked, and we’ll have to make some very difficult decisions. Decisions that could put us in jail forever.”

I thought that Liza looked like a young boy.

“At the end of the day, they won’t find out unless we let them. By the time the cops know the thing will have decayed beyond recognition.”

Lawrence said, “We aren’t worried.”

They began moving back toward camp.

After a while I headed back to camp. I shot a handful of squirrels, and then looped around some old land to study an opening where we often found boar. I sat down and watched as the sun dropped behind the hills. A small conglomerate of them trekked over the land. My phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Yes.”

“Hello asshole.”

“You will wait. We are experiencing some difficulty. Technical. Please do not worry.”

“Who are you? Where is she?”

“Please,” said the voice. “Be patient and do not do anything until we call. Wait. When we call we talk.”

“Listen to me. Tell me what this is about. I’ll kill you, you know. I’ll gut you. Tell me what you want.”

The voice laughed. “You are good. Do not worry friend. This is the easiest thing you’ve ever done.” He hung up.

I stood there, somewhat satisfied. The boar had disappeared. I moved back to camp. When I arrived the four of them were laughing. Ezri was telling a story. They were thankful for the squirrels. We ate and laughed, looking at one another.

“It’s good to get away from the city,” Art said after dinner. “My body needed this.”

Lawrence and Ezri engaged in a back and forth about a topic neither had anything invested in, a show of their wit and humor. I realized Liza was looking at me. I

looked at her and stood up and walked behind my tent to piss. The sounds of night were coming together.

“Camp.”

Liza was behind me, that same look on her face, intensified.

“What’s up.”

“I need to tell you something.

Quickly.” “Okay.”

“Claudia isn’t missing. We made it up. Oh, I don’t know what to do.”

She looked at me strangely.

“Todd has a knife,” she said. “I think he wants to kill you and Ezri.”

“Has he met Ezri? Seems like an unsound plan.” I came into a deep squat, peering up at her.

“Why aren’t you surprised?”

“I’m never surprised. I lack the capacity. It’s my greatest strength and my greatest weakness.”

“I wish you were surprised.”

I saw Lawrence enter the vicinity with a measure of caution. He moved well for a big man. I imagined he played offensive line at a small D1 school in Illinois. My mind was working. Liza looked over her shoulder at her husband, and her hands, clutched before her chest, dropped coolly to her waist.

“Todd,” I said.

He grinned. “What are you kids up to?”

I realized Todd was the kind of man who did not care about what his wife did when he wasn’t around. I respected this.

“We were just looking at the moon,” Liza said. She seemed poised and uninterested.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s some beautiful moon. Completely different from the one back home, you know, Camp? Our American moon is like a stillborn child compared to this guy.”

“The moon is not a guy, Todd.”

We studied each other. A few seconds passed and it was clear there was nothing left.

“I might actually go to sleep,” Liza said.

“I’ll join you.”

“We have an early morning tomorrow,” I said.

We all said good night. I returned to the fire. Ezri was listening to Art’s analysis of something business-related, being a good sport. Art smiled at me as I sat down and told me I reminded him of a friend he had when he was my age.

“I heard a rumor actually that he went to prison for embezzlement.”

“How interesting. I don’t know if I would have the patience for something like that.”

“Really?” Art said. “You seem like a very patient man to me. Is he messing with me, Ezri?”

“He is patient on the outside in particular, I’d say. But I do think he’d make a good thief.”

“Art,” I said. “The way you’re handling this situation with Claudia is the most patient thing I’ve ever seen.”

I wanted to move across the fire and take him by the shoulders, stick his face in the flames and feel a deep pleasure as he screamed.

“Ah, yes, well as I’ve aged I’ve learned that if you become detached, things will take their natural course. I’m a practicing Buddhist, you know. I should be getting to bed. Until tomorrow morning, gentlemen.”

He shook our hands. I looked at him and he seemed kind. For a while the night was still, lightly, and I looked into the fire. I started to tremble. Ezri put his hand on my shoulder and I began to cry. He asked me what was wrong and I sucked it in and shook my head. He asked me if I was in love with the woman. I said no and he said he was going to bed. I sat there, yawning and feeling terrible, trying not to fall asleep, trying to think of something useful to do. The flashlight in the couple’s tent, and then Claudia appeared in the brush, coming toward me, lit vaguely by the dying flames. She looked completely dilapidated, wearing a frightened expression, and as soon as she sat down we began to fade away like forgotten secrets.