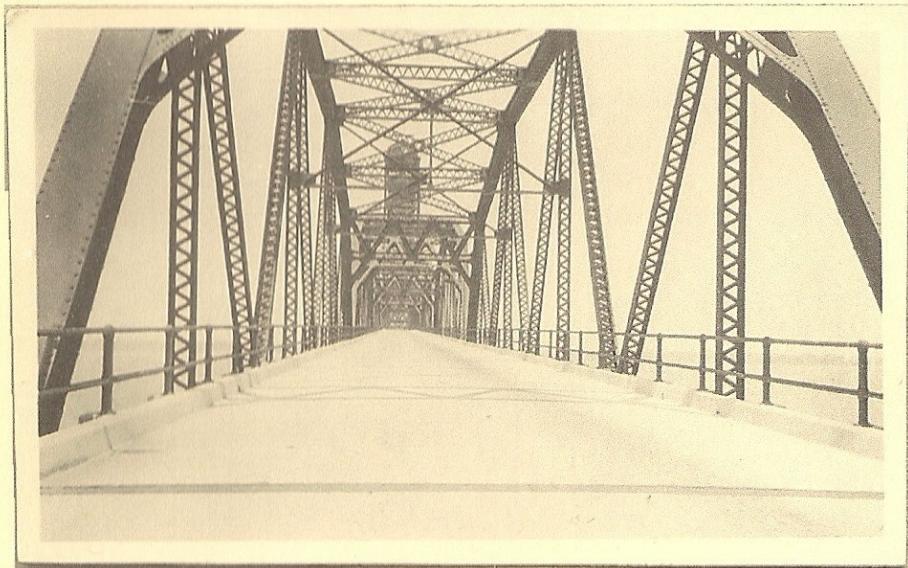


BETA DECAY



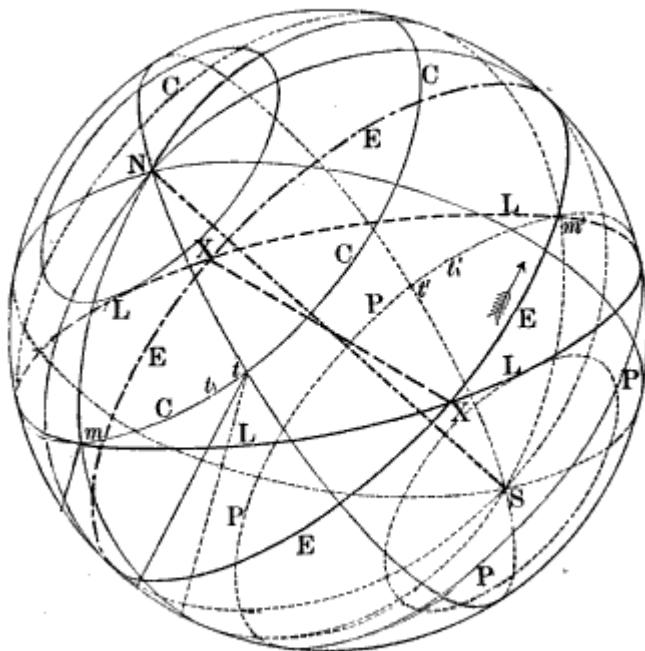
NUMBER FOUR

BETA DECAY
#4

by ANDREW JACKSON KING

THE ORIGIN OF PLANETARY DECAY;
or,

Revivification of Planetary Capacity



THE HUMAN STANDARD OF HABITABILITY IS NOT ABSOLUTE

Hibernal Fever

Frances closed her eyes.

Her mind pulled out from the building, out from the town, out from the metropolitan agglomeration, out from the continents and sea and hemisphere, out of the earth completely. Against the deep black, she saw the planet as a red, pulsing dot, emitting a see of radio waves, microwaves, gamma rays, a nearly infinite spectrum.

Against this hollow near-nothing, she could see other bodies, gray blobs floating listlessly forever, perhaps a slight coloring from radioactive rocks embedded on the surface, but nothing substantial. She flung her vision plane, sliding it through and across as thousands of planets flicked by. She stopped it in her head, the vision flickering as it bounded into place.

She centered on an ochre globe, hanging in a close orbit around a large red sun. She pulled in closer, closer, through grey clouds that hung heavy in the dense atmosphere. Closer, down to the surface.

Frances opened her eyes.

Night had fallen, or, perhaps, as it was sometimes, it was always night. The flashlights cut across the barren landscape, their halogen bulbs washing the grey planet in a harsh blue. Dust lifted up off the ground, small eddies forming as they walked past mounds of worn rocks. There was a dead river to their left, the slow lapping of the water, such an irregular pattern, forcing them into an unnatural rhythm. Step, swing, stop. Step, step. Swing, stop. Step, cautiously.

A canopy of ancient trees, hardy descendants of once majestic stands, captured what they could from the depleted ground and dim sky as they arched over the water, gnarled limbs almost touching the ground, dry leaves crackling in the wind. Frances was struck by how exhausted everything was here. Layers

of carbon fiber and glass separated her from the universe, but she knew the planet must be cold.

Beneath them, the soil gave way to soft sand, their feet pulling slowly out of every step. Frances turned her flashlight to a small bank running down to the river. She noticed markings in the sand, concentric circles radiating out from the water, with straight lines running between them every thirty degrees. Some structure trapped underground, continually subducting and pulling the deposited sand with it.

It had been like Earth once. They all were. They were always the same. Water, continents, plants, traces of ruins, if they were lucky. The planets were always the same.

She wondered if Earth would end up this way. If all planets that were blessed to sustain were so improbably cursed as to promote and end life in always the same way. If all civilizations hit the same technological walls. If planets were always doomed to repeat their end-run failures, whatever they were. The team that brought Frances along could never give an exact reason for the planet deaths.

Frances wondered often if there was another like her, but instead of retracting into space and moving to another point could instead slide along the fickle line of time. Picking up from now and slipping into the wild, electric, red-hot past or forward into the cold, steel, effete terminus of all life, all atoms, removed from the constraints of strict geodesics. A linking of space and time. That person, if there was one, could tell her the future of Earth, the future of all the people, all mankind, their probable death. How painful.

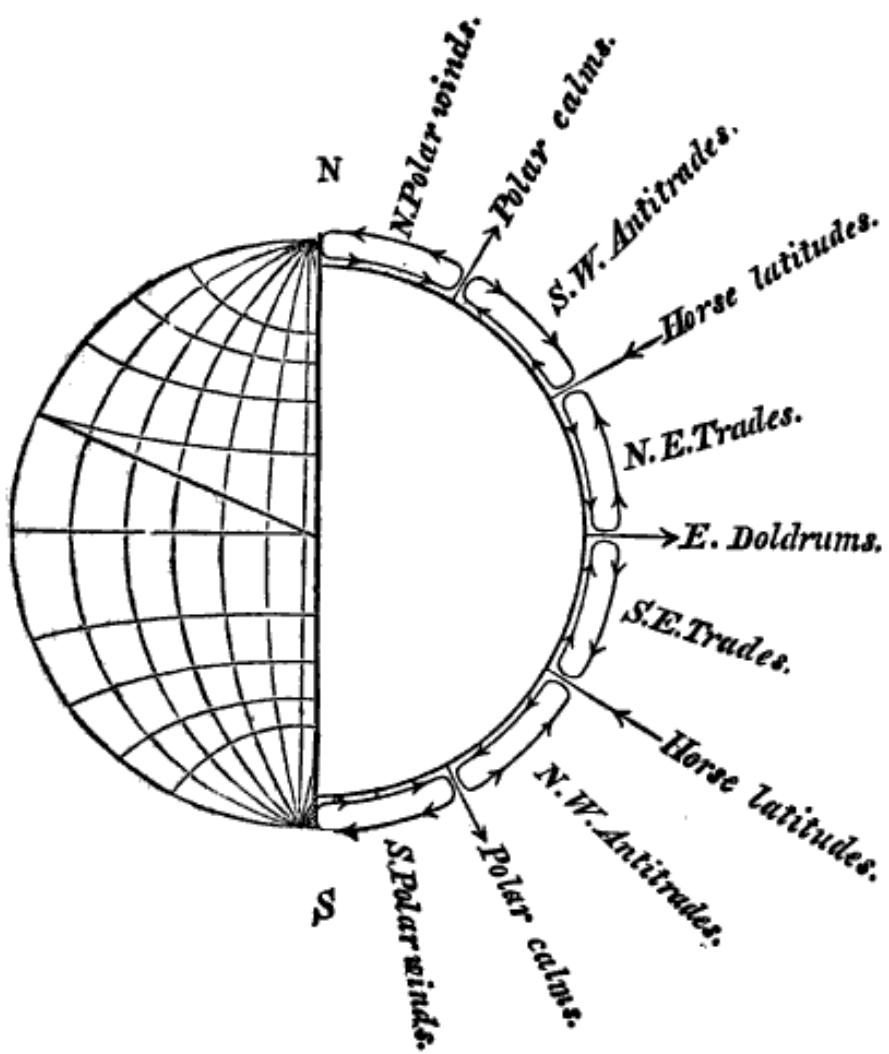
Was it hierarchical? It had seemed at one point that perhaps the civilizations had been separated in their ending points from the others' beginning points. That was when they had only examined a few. After a while, though, some of the ruins they found were too new to have ended before mankind had started planting wheat and taming the ox. There had been overlap.

Each planet must get its proverbial moment in the sun after the one ahead of it fell, all starting and falling in a shingled lineage, waiting for the small window of collapse of those ahead

of it. But, then, where was the next civilization after Earth? Why hadn't they found any nomadic grassland civilizations, any just starting to break stone into tools? All the planets they found were dead. Was Earth the end of the line?

It was unimaginable to her that she was alone in the universe, after all the manifold planets they had been to. She wondered if her power could save Earth from the fates that befell all the other perfectly suitable spheres. Probably not. We, too, would slowly extinguish, our children and grandchildren building massive monuments to societal necropsy like all the others did before the planet slowly ran down. She wondered if she could do anything to signal her knowing, her understanding. If there was a way to leave a warning for someone like her from a far-off planet that might find Earth eons down the line.

The leader of the team signaled to her. Frances closed her eyes and swung through the limitless depths of the universe back to her home, the warm red beacon floating alone.



Salted

Jeremiah fell backwards into the water, not exactly forcing himself, but rather letting the weight of the oxygen tank pull him down. Hitting the water, he relaxed as the gear became weightless, spinning himself around and scanning the area. The water was blissfully cool on his flesh; they weren't supposed to skin-dive, but it was so hot during the summer that putting on the wetsuits had become a great pain. The canopies spread out over the coral, but the regulators feared the divers coming up outside a covered area by accident. The rules were bent a little when the regulators weren't on the island.

Spread out before Jeremiah was a monolith of coral, splashes of orange and red and yellow. Jeremiah always thought someday he would be able to make out patterns, that after a while, he'd be able to understand the exact way that the organisms grew and deviated from geometrical perfection, but this information had eluded him ever since he was a boy pouring over the dusty picturebooks on his mother's shelf.

Holding steady, the strange spires reached upward towards him, yet never got close enough to the surface to break through. Moving nearer to one of the growths, he could feel the small, silky tendrils graze his skin, searching for plankton.

He pulled himself through the blue water to an interior maze of coral, flipping on the light attached to his head and pulling out his trapper. The tangerine tentacles of the huge colonies swayed in his wake, always alert, but never actually in control. He slid through the narrow gaps that alternately opened into huge rooms or shrunk into ever smaller corridors.

It had taken months to get over the claustrophobia of the coral's reaches. He knew it was simple to get lost if he stopped paying attention, easy to run out of oxygen and fruitlessly scramble to find an exit in the panic. These kinds of thoughts

would creep into his head and he knew they could fulfill themselves if he wasn't careful to heed the gauge on his oxygen tank.

Jeremiah's thoughts drifted to the skull he had found one day deep within the labyrinthine colony. He had glanced over and caught the strange imperfect shape of a smooth human cranium within the rough skin of the coral. The ribcage stood up, covered in quickly growing colonies. Jeremiah assumed it had been a poacher and kept the discovery to himself to prevent the locals from becoming scared of the dhiban. They needed the locals to take care of the coral, not fear it because of the new breed.

Dropping lower and lower into the structure, Jeremiah could see the last speckled rays of sunlight able to filter through from the surface. As he came around an underwater corner, he saw in his flashlight's beam the bright yellow of the dhiban fish. It faced away from him, its wide fins, dappled with black, spread out around it. Long feelers arced up from its face, always moving, always searching.

Pulling himself gently along the coral to the hand-sized fish, Jeremiah pointed the trapper in its direction. He waited until there was enough room around the dhiban to use it. Pressing the release halfway, two dozen points of light sprung out from the tip, creating a dome-shaped net, a half-globe, luminescent web.

Easing himself nearer the fish, Jeremiah paused and watched. And waited. Slowly, he moved the edges of the trapper's lights to the fish. Slightly, almost imperceptibly to a greenhand, he saw the fish's head move and pressed the release fully. The beads of light completed their arcs, culminating in a globe of light with its antipodes opposite the end of the trapper. The lines of longitude existed only for a second before contracting in a flash.

As the beads of light pulled together towards a common center, the fish was obliterated into a mass of biological detritus that blew outward from the core of the globe. Jeremiah tried to make out different colors, the different constituents of the pillager, but the fragments were so fine that it almost seemed like dust. Dust of life.

Checking his oxygen level, Jeremiah realized he needed to

make his way back to the surface. The core of light retracted itself into the trapper and he tucked it into a slot next to the oxygen tank and swam back through the coral maze to the boat, reversing the trek in: left, right, up, left, right, up, dip, right, up.

Breaking the surface, he saw Marco already on the boat, stripped of his gear and drinking straight from a bottle of dark rum. The water dripped from his long black hair onto the gunwale of the boat.

“How many?” he called over to Jeremiah.

“Just one.”

“Just one? Hah!”

Jeremiah paddled to stay afloat. “Well, what about you? How many did you catch?”

“Four!” Marco yelled over, holding up three fingers and the thumb of his free hand. He had lost the extra digit between a boat and a pier as a child.

“So five altogether. Let’s just put it as five total,” Jeremiah said, unstrapping his gear.

Marco laughed, making his way over to the water. He reached down and pulled up his friend’s gear as Jeremiah handed it to him, before pulling himself out of the water.

Marco slapped him on the back, handing him the bottle. “Five, brother!”

Even with the canopy over the coral and the ship’s smaller cover, the heat from the sun’s relentless rays beat down upon the two men from all other directions, quickly evaporating the water on their skin.

“Come on, let’s get back to the shore and get something to eat,” Jeremiah said as he started the engine and spun it back towards land.

A cool breeze blew off the water of the lagoon and across the beach. The fire pits blazed and lit the underside of the canopy, even as they emitted their own dull glow in the inky night, using some of the natural light they had accumulated during the day, the rest being stored underground for the other needs of the island.

Marco and Jeremiah were sitting at a table, passing a new bottle of rum over a plate of cucumber and grilled coconut. Tall

glasses of clean, clear water sweat onto the tables, their wood salvaged from ancient shipwrecks littering the ocean floor.

Marco raised his glass. “One year, my friend!”

“One year since what?” Jeremiah asked, tapping glasses with Marco and swallowing the spirit.

“You blacked out, brother! I rescued you!”

Jeremiah’s chest grew tight even though he couldn’t remember any details of the event. Marco had just been lucky to turn a corner and find him floating, pressed upwards unnaturally against a jut of coral, lifeless. Jeremiah had only blacked out a few times in his early training and that was from breath-holding. He had never had it happen with the oxygen that they wore when hunting.

He wished he could remember what happened, but there was nothing there. Marco had cut off Jeremiah’s gear to more easily get him out, so all the evidence was lost to the currents. He’d had nearly exhausted himself lugging Jeremiah to the surface.

When Jeremiah awoke, there was Marco, gleaming in the refracted sun of the canopy. Jeremiah was bruised, but got over it quickly.

At the table, he nodded. “You’re right, Marco. Damn. Unbelievable. Thank you, forever.”

They each downed another glass before Jeremiah caught Marco’s eyes tracking something behind his head. Jeremiah turned, seeing an older man, his skin worn from years in the sun, approaching the table in the dim light. At his side was a young woman, her skin peeling and cracked, rings around her eyes from where her sunglasses had been. They recognized her instantly as a mainlander, her uneasiness on the island, a place set so far back in time, apparent in her face.

Marco stood up. “Fernando!” he said, hugging the older man. “You’ve been well? Who is this?”

“I’m good,” he answered. “This is Frida, your new crewmember.” Jeremiah stood up, extending his hand. “She’s from back home-”

“Home, hah!” Marco interrupted.

“-and she’s top of the class this year. Show her the ropes and we’ll have some more recruits sent over soon.” Fernando patted both men on the arms, turning to leave.

“You can’t stay?” Jeremiah asked.

Fernando started to shake his head. “Come on!” Marco yelled, trying his best to wrap his arms around the entire group. The older man relented, a smile cross his face. Letting go, Marco raised the bottle of rum. “To the dhiban!”

Fernando’s eyes were glazed. It had been many months since he had been to the island and lived that life. The cities were so rigid, ordered, grey. But the divers here exerted so much energy, ate and drank so much, laughed constantly. Their skin, their smiles, it was truly a different time. Jeremiah waved over to one of the hall’s employees and pointed to the old man. The employee helped him up. There would be a nice room for him overlooking the beach.

Marco had also begun to drift off after the hours spent talking with Frida. Jeremiah watched him, envied his exuberance for life, wished he could be like that. Marco slowly slid out of his chair onto the floor.

“Whoa, whoa. Come on, Marco,” Jeremiah said, picking up his tanked friend on his shoulder. Frida slid under the other slack side and the trio made their way to the exit. Marco’s eyes lit up as he thought about his bed and he quickly shuffled himself down the road, back to the small cluster of attached rooms a few hundred feet from the hall.

Frida and Jeremiah watched him as the canopy slowly began to let the regulated light in, duplicating the natural levels the island would have normally received a few generations ago.

“I didn’t realize it was almost day yet,” Frida said, staring down the street to the shopowners busy readying their stores.

“It’s a long day here. It’s only 5 a.m. right now.” Jeremiah rubbed his eyes. “You’ll get used to it. Get a few hours of sleep and we’ll go out on the water.”

“What time do the dhiban usually come out?”

“Noon about.”

“Really? That late? It’s a shame we can’t get after them when it’s cooler.”

“They have a perfect sense of evasion. They’re devils. The locals believe them to be *atua*, a sort of ghosts, I guess, the spirits of bad people from the island. But, I don’t know, they have a strange relationship with them. They see the dhiban as destroyer and savior, because them coming brought us.”

“That’s an interesting mythology.”

“Sometimes you’ll hear the locals call us *aitu*, gods of worship, but don’t let it go to your head.”

“Because you kill the dhiban?”

“Because we saved the island from development.”

Frida thought of the asphalt and the concrete, her window onto the sprawling megalopolis, the crush of hungry people sinking the old cities into the crust of the Earth. “I can see why you all are treated so well.”

“After the dhiban was introduced, they created all kinds of stories that it had existed for all time. It had been born at the creation of the world and had plagued mankind for eternity. Kind of neat, in a quaint sort of way.”

The two stepped out onto the sand, letting its cool surface fill the space between their toes. Their rooms were up ahead, propped up above the ground to prevent flooding. They could see the unfiltered sun just beginning to hit the water in the east as they crossed the beach.

Aitu, atua. The words repeated in Frida’s head as she stared out across the ocean.

Waking up the next day, Jeremiah received a call from Marco telling him that he’d be with Fernando for the day and to take Frida around the island.

“You don’t want me to take her out into the water?”

“Not if you don’t need to, brother. Wait for the sensors or a report.”

“All right. Try and get us a raise while you’re out.”

“Haha. I’ll try, brother!”

Jeremiah hung up the phone and climbed out of bed. He

looked out the window at the ocean, far off into the distance past the canopy. There was an entire planet across the ocean, yet it was a world away in lifestyle. Jeremiah enjoyed the seclusion and the freedom of the island. He got dressed and made his way to meet Frida for breakfast.

“Should we take the dragline?” Frida asked, finishing her pineapple juice and eggs.

“Nah, they don’t go to the islands, they just connect points on the mainland. We can take the ahpey.”

“I can’t believe you get to eat like this all the time.”

“Enjoy it before you have to go back someday.”

She took a bite of dough that had been fried in coconut oil.
“I will!”

Stepping onto the street, Jeremiah picked out one of the three-wheeled ahpeys, a red one with an attached canopy. They hopped in with Frida driving and left the slow, sleepy village and flitted across the landscape, through the fruit groves and family famrs, past the small fields of sugar, nuts, taro. Green leaves hung down and grazed the ahpey’s roof as the two sped through the dense and lush sections of the island. There were smells and sights and sensations that Frida had only read about or heard through hushed rumors in crowded cafeterias.

As they neared the coast, she could see that the canopy ended at land’s edge. She stopped the car and looked out over the sand of the beach to a concrete bridge connecting the mainland to a smaller island a quarter mile away. “Are we going over there?” she asked, incredulous.

“Yeah, the cover on the ahpey is fine.” Jeremiah was carefree.

Frida looked nervously across the concrete bridge, scrutinizing the ahpey’s roof and the blazing levels of the sun.

“We’ll be fine,” Jeremiah said, assuring her. “You’ll see.”

Frida nodded, pressing the gas and sending them out onto the narrow sliver of road running between the scorched beach and the island in the distance. “Why is there no canopy here?”

“Nobody over there. It’s a dead island.”

Frida could feel the heat radiating off the sinopia-tinged

sand. She hit the junction of the bridge on the beach, the springs absorbing most of the hit, but still lifting the pair off their seats for a second. The wind grazed their faces as Frida opened up the throttle, sailing across the bridge.

Jeremiah looked out across the water, the canopies on the north side of the mainland just barely visible as specks of grey on the deep cerulean. The rest of the ocean was an endless expanse of blue and white, ready to swallow them whole. He felt comfortable near the shore, near a boat, near anything that he could get to if something happened, but the murky depths of open ocean still filled him with a terror he couldn't shake.

"Wow," Frida said as they crested the highest point of the bridge and began to angle down to the smaller island. At the end of the bridge grew a great black mass of land, all hard angles and deep surfaces. Pillars and rifts jutted across the landscape before slowly sinking into the sea. It felt strange without canopies above, like she'd fly off into the sky. Just existing on pure, exposed land.

"Basalt," Jeremiah said, still in awe even after visiting the island so many times. As Frida took the ahpey down to the island's level, the tail of the vehicle scrapped against the bridge as they departed it, a flurry of sparks skittering across the black rock. She could feel the excessive heat now, seemingly pumped directly from the stone surface to her skin.

"I know," Jeremiah said, pointing up ahead to a mound in the distance. "Just keep going."

They passed crags of the deepest midnight rocks, dark and eternal bluffs, harsh angles of fathomless onyx slag. They crested a hill and appeared before an opening in the island. Frida looked into the rift. She could make out rough steps leading down, perforations in the rock letting slivers of light into the passageway.

"Get as close as you can to it," Jeremiah said.

Frida angled the vehicle right against the lip of the entrance. Jeremiah leapt off, hitting the ground and running several steps into the shade of the passageway. "Whew! Come on!" he yelled to her.

Frida followed, the sun abrading her skin before she made it under an ebony overhang. There was a dampness in the air

coming up from the deep recesses of the cave. She was barely given a choice in the exploration before Jeremiah surged forward into the depths.

The light that made it through the cracks and crevices in the rock ceiling cast a dancing glow across the surface of the ancient basalt. Frida reached out and dragged her fingers across it, expecting it to be coarse and porous and finding only a smooth, polished wall, worn down by generations of pilgrims.

As they made a turn, trekking their way underneath where the ahpey was now parked, the tunnel opened up into a sparsely-lit cave and underground pool. The surface of the water slowly rippled as a soft wind from above blew across it. Frida thought the light that made its way down below gave the water a strange, blue tint.

“The islanders thought this cave water was magical. They used to canoe over to this island and bring it back for ceremonies.”

Frida reached over, dipped her hand into the cool water, a respite from the burning sun outside. “They just drive over now?”

“Oh, no. There’s a pipe the government put in a decades ago for them. A trade-off for the canopies. Most of the islanders refuse to use any technology.”

“So where’s it go?”

“Pumped up into a temple in town.”

Frida walked around the cave, inspecting the smooth slabs of stone that had once served as seating for the inhabitants from the mainland. The light reflecting off the pool illuminated ancient grooves in the wall, hieroglyphs from an earlier era. They completely covered the grotto, eons of history inscribed in the rock. She fingered the deep grooves, studied the curves and swoops. There was a language she couldn’t decipher, but also pictograms, images of island life, hunting, fishing, warring. *Aitu, atua.*

“Why did you come here?” she asked. “To the island, I mean.”

“There were no interesting jobs back home. No chance of getting one, at least. I didn’t really care all that much, either. Just took a shot at this. I mean, I couldn’t even swim when I walked

into that office.”

“Wow, really?”

Jeremiah laughed. “I wouldn’t say that I can swim all that great even now. What about you?”

“Wanderlust, I suppose.”

“There are easier ways to see the world than going through all that training.”

“Not from the middle of Nebraska.”

Jeremiah laughed as he walked over to the water. He dipped his hand in, felt the cool liquid scatter between his fingers.

Frida pulled away from the heiroglyphs. “What do you think-.” She was cut off by the sound of a man yelling from outside.

Jeremiah turned his head quickly. If someone was out there unprotected, they would be getting cooked alive in the heat. Almost reflexively, he sprung up and out onto the stairwell, Frida in tow. They hopped from the opening of the cave to the ahpey and studied the landscape.

“There he is!” Frida yelled, pointing to the north side of the island.

Jeremiah squinted through his dark sunglasses at the lone figure moving across the landscape. The man dragged himself, somehow, across the raging inferno of land. Frida jumped in and Jeremiah put the ahpey into gear and drove out onto the outcropping the man had ascended. Frida watched as the man’s skin was burnt by the sun, blistering in the heat. As they got closer, she could see his ragged and bloody feet.

Jeremiah swung the ahpey around as they neared the man and Frida pulled him inside the vehicle. His skin felt like it was about to slide off into her hands. He struggled to breath, drawing in deep, wheezing gulps of air.

The wheels, not designed for the raw surface of the island, exploded as the heat bore its way through the rubber. The ahpey tilted as Jeremiah and Frida grabbed the canopy supports to steady themselves. Jeremiah tried to drive on only the rims, but as he approached the cave entrance, the whole vehicle collapsed into the ground. They sat for a moment, mentally weighing their options.

“We’ve gotta run for it,” Jeremiah said, staring the thirty yards to the opening.

“What? We can’t.”

“This thing is not going to move.”

Frida looked back at the man. They needed to get him to the cave’s water to try and cool him down. She wasn’t even sure that would do all that much. Looking at Jeremiah, she nodded. They slung the man over their shoulders and made a run for the cave. Frida felt the soles of her shoes melting, the sun blistering her neck and shoulders.

They made it through the threshold and down the stone stairs. Together, they lowered the man into the water, his skin sizzling. Jeremiah and Frida followed. The cool water bit into her, taking over her skin in waves, her mind reeling from the two extremes.

“Let’s get him out,” she said. “He needs to lay down.”

Together, they pulled the man out of the water and lay him on the slick ground of the cave. His skin had peeled and cracked into open wounds covering his body. He gasped and began motioning with his hands. He drew a long box with his hands and the moved them in an up and down motion.

“His boat was smashed up,” Jeremiah said. “He must have been poaching.”

He again drew the box and held one hand in the space that the ship had occupied and wiggled the other behind it. He managed to speak the word “dhiban” and moved his hand to signal multiples of the fish. Growing weaker, the man stared off into the distance, his lips slowly moving, together and apart.

“I think he’s trying to say something,” Frida said as she moved towards him. “Bloom. I think he’s saying bloom.”

“Dammit.”

“What is it?”

“Bloom is one of the few words they know. A bloom of purple algae usually means there’ll be more dhiban fish, which means a reward for them. He must have seen it out there.”

“What should we do?” Frida asked, kneeling next to the man and holding his hand. She knew that he didn’t have long to

live.

“I’m guessing it’s to the north of the island, where he came from, but we don’t have any way to get there or let anybody know. They’ll destroy the coral.”

Frida stood up. The man’s eyes closed and he stopped breathing. The two had barely even registered that the ahpey was ruined. Nobody knew they were out here and there was no way to get in contact with the village.

“The sensors should pick up the algae, right?” Frida asked.

“Maybe. They’re never perfect, though.”

Frida clicked her fingernails together.

“I really screwed this one up,” Jeremiah said.

“Somebody’ll come for us.”

“Not for a while. Nobody actually knows we’re here. And we can’t wait until night to leave, the rock still won’t cool.”

“What about the pipe?”

“What about it?”

“We can use it to get back to the island,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“You mean go through it?”

“Yeah, why not?”

Jeremiah looked over at the opening. The top of the hole just peaked out above the surface of the pool. A metal wheel was positioned a few feet away, attached to a housing that went below the water.

Frida walked over. “This must control a gate or something.”

Jeremiah made his way around and they both struggled to turn the ancient mechanics. With a rusty whine, the wheel slowly turned. After a half-turn, Frida could see a metal hatch slowly rising towards the surface. They kept turning until the hatch had risen two-thirds of the way up the opening. The water continued to pour in, but the volume would be reduced enough for them to walk through.

“What’s at the end?” she asked.

“They must have some kind of pump. I don’t know, honestly.”

“We won’t have flashlights or anything.”

“This is crazy.”

“Well, I’m going,” Frida said, as she grabbed the lip of the opening and swung her legs over the cover. Back home, she had always followed the rules. Being on the island had allowed her to become who she had always wanted to be.

She hit the several inches of water with a splash. There was only a slight force to the flow, the designers putting in only a slight angle to get the water to the village.

A wedge of light cut twenty feet down from the cave opening before the pipe opened into deep black. Frida turned back and saw Jeremiah following her. She turned back to him before they were overtaken by complete darkness. “Stay close.”

The pipe seemed to be a straight shot into the village, yet the two kept a slow and steady pace in the dark. Frida let her fingers drag across the cool metal of the pipe. Why don’t we live underground? she thought to herself. The icy steel and the flowing water rose in sensory prominence as her eyes became useless.

She kept note of Jeremiah’s position with her ears, time dragging in the subterranean passage with only the splash of the pair’s feet to keep themselves firm. “It’s had to have been half a mile at least,” Jeremiah said.

“Maybe. I’ve completely lost my bearings, to be honest.”

Frida’s fingers fell into a set of grooves on the previously smooth pipe wall. She paused and touched them, tracing out the curves. They felt like the ones from the cave. Deliberate hieroglyphs. It wasn’t strange to imagine the islanders coming down here. If this exited into their temple, perhaps it was an extension of the sacred area, a place far out of the way of the watchful eyes of the newcomers, nearer the depths of the ocean.

Aitu, atua.

Frida felt a cool breeze on her ankles and froze. A second later, she felt the water whip by her toes, a trickle at first, until it quickly began to rise. Up her legs, to her waist, her breasts. Something must have happened to the hatch, a faulty mechanism or a broken tooth on the gear.

They had begun running, but it was too late. The water

rose up to Jeremiah's mouth. Behind Frida, he took the brunt of the water's force as it pulled his legs out from beneath him. Frida felt her feet give way as Jeremiah slid into her. She groped around in the unending blackness for him, found his body, searched for a hand. Jeremiah had already passed out.

Frida held on to him, pulled herself up to the pocket of air at the top of the pipe and tried to keep the water out of her nose and mouth. She took deep gulps in the visionless tunnel, tried to push Jeremiah up to the surface. The two were battered against the walls and forced down below the surface, moving through the pipe for what seemed a puzzling amount of time compared to the distance Frida had kept in her head during the drive. But, again, the sensory void stretched time.

Frida let out an underwater cry as she smashed knee and elbow first into a hard metal grate. Jeremiah hadn't mentioned a grate. There was no way to get out, no way to swim against the current. Her hands struggled against the steel, trying to find a way through. A lock, a joint, a hinge, anything. She reached up and realized the pipe was open above her, some kind of access point. Her hand swung around and found a metal rung extending out.

Pulling herself above the rush of water, she held Jeremiah by his collar and was able to get his head above the water. Resting there, her head against another higher rung, she looped her free arm through and held onto Jeremiah. He sputtered and coughed before turning his head up to see her. Groggily, he reached up with an arm and grabbed a rung beside Frida and nodded.

They ascended in degrees and toppled out into a small room. Frida stared up at the soft, stone walls and noticed the markings, the same heiroglyphs she had seen in the cave and felt in the tunnel. The carvings were of the dhiban fish. *Aitu, atua*. The worlds tumbled over in her head. *Aitu, atua*.

Frida tried to regain her balance, but her head sloshed from the chaos in the pipe. As she slid towards the ground, she noticed Jeremiah was already passed out on the floor. She bent near him and turned him on his side in case there was still water in his lungs. She tried to keep her eyes open, to crawl towards the iron door set on the opposite side of the room, but couldn't make

it.

Aitu, atua. There is something I'm missing. Her eyes closed.

Jeremiah woke first. Hours had passed, the sun had set. Pushing himself up on his hands, he realized he was on the beach, the canopy having retracted for the night.

“This isn’t where we were,” Frida said, stepping up, a painful headache surging through her brain as she surveyed her body for scrapes and bruises.

“I know. They must have moved us.”

“Where was that place? Do you know?”

Jeremiah shook his head. “It didn’t look like the temple. At least the temple that I’ve been to.” He paused, looked up at the stars. “We have to get Marco.”

The two made their way to the road and hitched a ride a few minutes to the center of town. Pulling in front of Marco’s room, Jeremiah called out for him.

A neighbor peeked her head out from behind her door. “He’s at the hospital. Sick.”

“Damnit, damnit. They won’t let him go under sick.”

“Then we’ll go ourselves.”

“Are you sure?” Jeremiah asked. “You just got here.” She nodded. “Okay, I’ll have to make some calls.”

As they made their way to the marina, Jeremiah stopped one of the employees leaving from a late night shift and told him that they needed the canopy above the Claire Jackson coral outcrop turned on and to contact any off-duty catchers on the island. The employee nodded and caught an ahpey to the building, while Jeremiah and Frida ran down the road.

They got to the dock and into their boat as the full moon slid out from behind the night clouds. As Jeremiah swung the boat into the sea, Frida could see the canopy in the distance, just a fuzzy white dot, slowly replenishing the light it had captured during the day onto the surface of the water below it. It beckoned them through the darkened water like a beacon.

As they cut through the brisk night surf, Jeremiah knew he

had to tell Frida about the dhiban. She had to know why this was so important, why he had been so callous with the dying man in the cave. So he spoke to her of the fish. Not the common understanding that they attacked the coral for nutrients, their destruction weakening the colonies and causing them to float to the surface and bleach. Rather, he told her of the stories he had gotten from the scientists, after rounds and rounds of local rum when the expeditions were stopped on the island for rest. The stories of the dhiban cutting pieces of the coral, moving them thousands of miles to deep trenches in the center of the ocean, far from other life and land. Vast networks of interlocking dead coral, dizzying arrays of patterns stretching hundreds of miles in an attempt to communicate something. Regular, perfect, considerable, but unintelligible, occult. There were smaller formations in the North Sea, one near the Prince Edward Islands in the South Indian Ocean, hushed rumors of one being guarded in the South China Sea, even beginnings of a mysterious arrangement in the landlocked Caspian.

The boat slid under the slowly-brightening canopy. Frida looked into the deep water and saw thousands of the dhiban, their bodies twirling and breaking in the surf, a tumult against the ancient and omniscient water. Frida thought she could divine a pattern somewhere, a regularity to the movement of them. *Aitu. Atua. There is something I'm missing.*

Jeremiah was marking something on a notebook, but Frida thought she could see a glow coming from the bodies of the dhiban, a bioluminescence like a hum moving between two voltages. There were cascades of light, movements so close to a design she thought she could just almost intuit them before they would change, the difficult conversation fleeting with the toss of the waves.

Before Jeremiah could look up, they were out. Frida wondered if any other outsider had ever seen that occurrence.

Aitu, atua.

She would need more time to figure it all out. But Frida knew their effect on the local ecology was disastrous. There were so few natural zones left, so few unspoiled wards without hulking

machinery and mountains of concrete. And the ripple effect of colony destruction reached around the world. There was no choice but to save the coral even if it intensified the vast gulf between the dhiban and mankind. She understood the fix they were in as Jeremiah stopped the boat and the light under the canopy rose to daylight levels.

Picking up her tank and trapper, Frida slid them on over her wetsuit and dove in.

Tensioning and Retensioning

The sun set on the motel on the main street, itself located within a fairly nondescript, but certainly genuine post-war town, buildings close to the road, diner, hardware store, gas station with stainless-steel overhang, even the gleaming bus terminal signaling both the entrance and exit to the dusty map point. With a crackle, the green light from the neon began to leak out of the motel's sign, proclaiming to all The Prescott's cleanliness, efficiency, and air conditioning. A small block of red could not keep up with the green in the spirited quest into space, but nonetheless indicated to all passersby the vacancy of the building.

The woman awoke precisely at 8:02. She had arrived the night before, Friday, and had slept the entire day. She got out of bed, the sheets still fairly crisp, never a tosser and turner, showered, dressed, and pulled the shades over to the left side of the room and stared at the darkened stretch of boulevard in front of the building. A car passed, another, a third. The air conditioner was positioned underneath the window and it sent a cool blast up her body as she wiped a smudge from the glass with her sleeve.

She sat down at the edge of the bed and waited. Two golden dots appeared around the corner. The grill came into focus in the neon light of the motel's sign. *1963 Buick Riviera. First production year.* As she looked out the window, she split her vision and saw simultaneously both the car on the road and also saw the old man driving it, bald with bushy, white sideburns and black, thick-frame glasses.

She felt around the car, noticed the black bag and bottle of whiskey. She felt the notches in the passenger seat, so little wear on any but that which it was in now. Nobody ever rode in this car but him and his wife and she must be at home. As he turned around the bend, she slid the seat backwards, tilted the back a bit, just enough. His wife would be in for a rude surprise, wondering

who sat in her seat. Cheap kicks, she thought.

There was a knock on the door. The woman stood up, back straight, smoothing her wool skirt, straightening her pearl necklace, and floated over to the portal. Opening it, she saw the delivery boy holding a plastic bag. There would be crab rangoon, sesame chicken, egg drop soup, pork lo mein, and five fortune cookies.

“Same thing, every week,” the delivery boy said, laughing.

The woman smiled and handed him two twenty dollar bills. He knew he could keep the change for himself. “Thanks.”

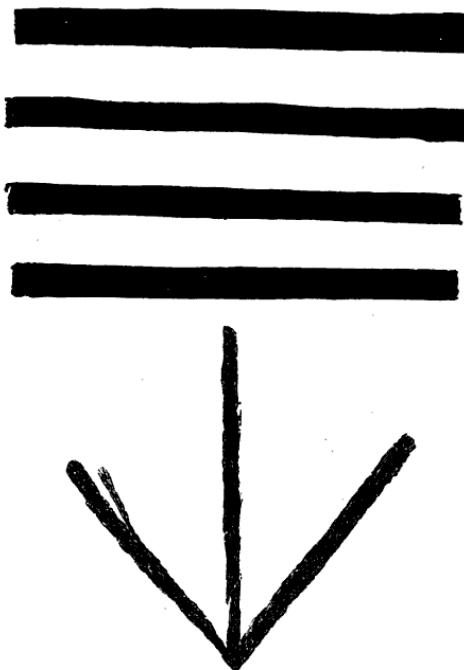
She spread the food out on the bedspread, twirling her chopsticks around to the different dishes, spooning the soup. She watched as a red station wagon passed by the motel. It was too dark to see inside normally, but she focused, examined it, felt around inside the vehicle. She pulled the lighter out of its socket, throwing it on the floor of the car. A slight affront, she thought. She didn’t even know why. Give me something real, she thought.

She finished the food, turned back to face the window directly. A young couple walked by eating ice cream cones, their lean arms and tight skin glowing in the night as they laughed. The woman smiled. Engaging had become more difficult as the compulsion grew to sift through acquaintances pockets and purses.

Hours passed as the woman watched car after car, sometimes opening the glovebox, sometimes downshifting gears on particularly rude drivers. She opened a trunk once. Around three in the morning, rounding the corner to the east was a sports car, an imported one from Italy, cruising far above the speed limit. The driver slid over the lane dividing line, oblivious to the surrounding town. The woman reached inside his car, felt his briefcase, his gold watch.

She contemplated tearing the whole transmission out of the car, shearing it from the undercarriage, sending the car hurtling uncontrollably down the road to scare the driver. It would draw far too much attention, she thought. And what if the car hit something, caught fire, and injured a bystander? She pulled the emergency brake, the tires squealing as the driver clutched the steering wheel. She pushed into the floor of the car, wrenched

ORIGINAL DRAWING.



REPRODUCTION.
No contact



forward some of the surrounding metal to prevent the gas pedal from ever being depressed fully again. The driver undid the parking brake, fixed his sports jacket, and sluggishly finished his trek through the town, slightly dazed and unsure of what had happened.

She couldn't do too much, make too ostentatious of a show. She couldn't give herself away. She would figure out a way to make use of it someday. But there would always be more cars.

The occupant in the room next door relaxed in bed, exhausted. It had taken years to find the woman, waiting in public, by chance probing the motel on a slow Saturday night and noticing her talents, itself a skill that had taken years to master. The occupant wanted to see how the woman would use it, how she would develop on her own, but hated the nighttime, the long hours, hated sleeping all day just to watch her move things. Soon, the occupant would make a decision.

The dusty sun rose to the north of the motel. A tractor trailer roared by, sending a cascade of dirt and pebbles into the parking lot. With a crackling flutter, the neon sign was switched off.

Organisms//Citrus Memorial

Teresa walked across the parking lot, the black asphalt of the shopping center radiating the dying summer heat. She saw the top of a human skull underneath a pile of rotting clothing, frozen forever face down. Between the abandoned and destroyed cars, dozens of light poles reached up desperately into the sky. A body hung out of the window of a truck wrapped around a column that had once supported an overhang on the strip. The facade itself was collapsed, spilling concrete and window shards onto the street. Still, there was an order to this parking lot that Teresa felt she might never see again from blocks of metal and glass.

She saw Radika sitting in a small sliver of grass surrounded by the concrete sidewalks of the plaza. The setting sun cast a shadow over the splash of verdancy, a small reprieve from the rays that had burnt them for weeks now. Behind her was a liquor store, a laundromat, and a Chinese take-out. Most of the old businesses had become useless, not even worth exploring.

Standing there, immobile, Teresa realized how much her joints ached after traveling all day. She could use a drink for when they decided to rest.

“Let’s go!” Radika called out to her.

“Hey, you’re not the one trumping through that grocery store looking for anything. I’m beat. Just give me a minute.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Nah.”

“Hah! Told you! That’s why I didn’t go in.”

Teresa scratched her hair, greasy, but somehow dry at the same time. “Yeah. Worth a try, though. Here.” Teresa extended her good arm to Radika, helping her off the ground. “Do you want to go back to the camp or what?”

“Not tonight. Let’s head to that house on the river.”

Teresa nodded, slinging her bag into the basket attached to

the back of her scooter. “Shouldn’t take long. Hold on a second, though.” Grabbing an expandable neoprene bag, she opened the door to the liquor store. The smell of decay hit her in the face, a sensation she had never fully gotten used to, however much she tried.

The manager lay spread across the glass counter full of the expensive bottles, the blood still soaked into the carpet. The rain couldn’t wash it away like outside. She stepped over another body and grabbed a few fancy bottles of scotch and bourbon, some nicer gin, and a few bottles each of concentrated lemon and lime juice.

As she left the store, she noticed a cluster of clothes and bones around the corner of the covered sidewalk. She saw the children’s shoes and the stroller and took a breath. She looked down at her forearm, at the scar. It was barely noticeable now after all these months.

She turned away. “All right, I’m ready,” she called over to Radika. She helped her friend onto her scooter and hopped onto hers. The wind blew hard. There had been storms every night for a week and both women knew there would probably be another tonight.

Pushing their scooters by foot at first, they slid off the curb of the slowly-decaying shopping center, down the main street jammed with crashed cars, and onto the turnpike. A grouping of deer, grazing on a nearby baseball field, raised their heads in unison before returning to the ground.

Teresa was sticky from the sweat and grime of the day and couldn’t wait to get to the river near the house and clean up. As the sun sank and twilight took hold, they reached the entrance, sending pebbles flying onto the asphalt as they turned their scooters onto the path.

The house was off the major road network, located back in a park of several dozen acres that fronted the river. Radika reached the house first and slowly climbed off her scooter. The branches of the pin oak trees surrounding the haven grazed the wooden clapboard siding, letting off a soft scraping as the wind

blew through the forest.

“Looks safe!” she called back to Teresa. The lock on the door was still in place, the windows unbroken. Teresa pulled the key out from around her neck and unlocked the door. A dry, cedar smell rushed out of the main room.

The government wasn’t able to force anyone to stay in the camps, so the two women regularly left to explore a world that had vanished all too quickly. They had set up half a dozen safehouses across the area, refuges that most people probably wouldn’t be able to find even if they took the initiative to look.

There had been the red colonial in a dense suburban community to the south they had used for weeks before it was broken into. It was situated within hundreds of houses, a labyrinthine network of roads leading to it. A failure of then-modern planning, but it hid well. When it was hit with the other houses in the neighborhood, they knew they couldn’t go back. The house was reinforced, stocked, supplied; whoever broke in knew the women would be coming back.

There had also been a ranch house closer to the city, a four-square in an older town down the highway, a cape cod on the bay. But there was a certain comfort Radika felt in this house. It was different than the others. The soft, worn wood furniture, the stacks of quilts and blankets, the angle that the morning sun took through the side windows. She usually chose coming back here when given the option.

She had stumbled across the riverside bungalow in a pamphlet they had found during a house sweep. The family in the house had rented it out for some future weekend, a nice spring excursion, but judging by the dried pools of blood they had found in the family’s house, probably hadn’t made it.

Teresa grabbed a chair and brought it over to Radika, easing her into it. Teresa unlatched and opened the windows, letting the dusk air swoop in. “Hold on, let me get this started,” she said, walking towards the other end of the room. There was a chimney at the end of the house, which split into two openings in the room, one for a hearth and one for a wood burner. She started a fire in the hearth side with wood they had left there the last time.

“Storm’ll probably be bad tonight,” Radika said, rubbing her side.

There were times when they acted as if the world had never changed, laughing and telling stories, but often the two got by in silence. There simply wasn’t that much to talk about anymore, besides survival and the past. Not many wanted to discuss the past.

“You think the farms are going to work?” Radika asked as Teresa walked back from the fire. There was a table in the center of the room that she had put her things on. Teresa picked up a water bottle.

“I don’t know. A lot of us lived on farms a hundred years ago, but it’ll be hard without any semblance of community. Why would people work together?”

Radika shrugged her shoulders. “To live, I guess.”

“That’s flimsy. You’ve seen how the people are in camp. And look at how much there is to take.” Teresa stuck her arms out to the side, palms up.

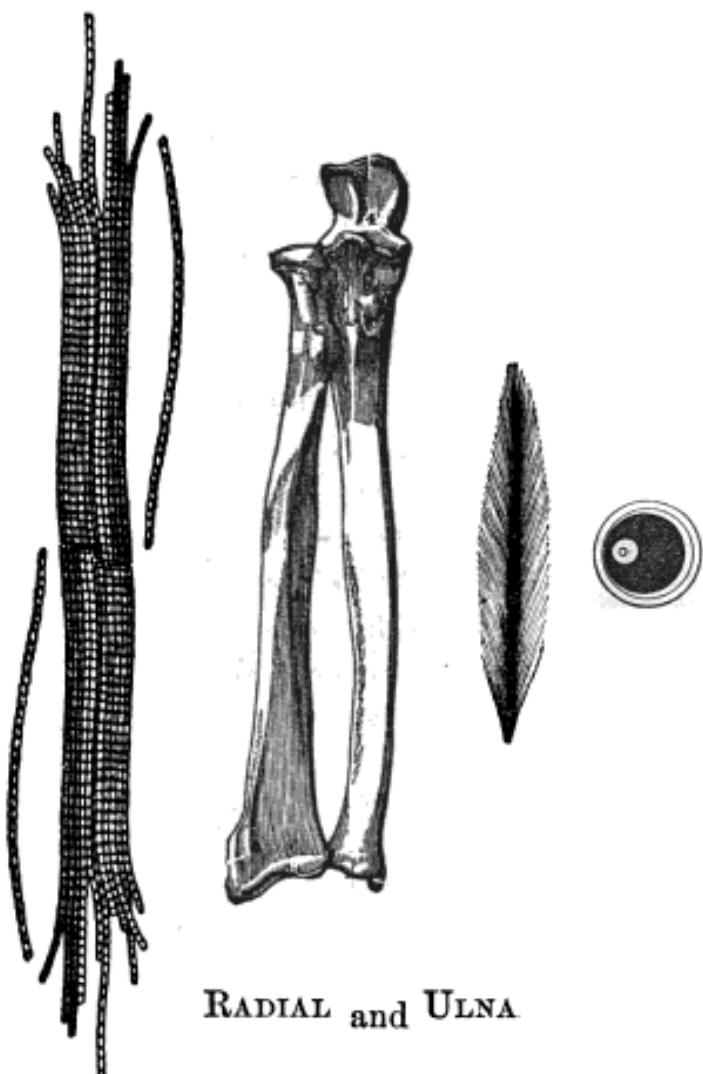
“People will make new bonds to work together.”

Teresa shrugged and handed the water to Radika. “Do you want to go down to the river tonight? We can use the lantern.”

“No, let’s stay here. I’m exhausted.” She leaned back against the table and wiped the sweat from her brow. “It’ll get better, Tess.”

The wind came in undulating waves through the open windows, pressing and retracting against their skin. It smelled of moss, clean and fragrant. The air had been rejuvenated with the rapid drop in pollution.

Radika was able to unroll the sleeping bags and blankets as Teresa cooked two cans of soup. A roll of crackers was perched on the table. Radika eased herself from the bench at the table onto the blankets, sitting up. She slid off her shirt as Teresa stirred in the hearth. The light from the fire grazed her skin, catching the surface, crackling the void. A concavity bit into her side, just above her right hip. She rubbed the wound, the scars healed, but the skin never again smooth.



RADIAL and Ulna

new growth, unknown function.

Teresa turned, saw the half-moon cut out of Radika's side. She didn't know if Radika could see her. Radika knew Teresa watched her, watched the wound, watched the trying acceptance of it all. She slid her shirt on and lay back on the blanket.

The water dripped from Teresa's hair onto her naked back, the sun quickly drying her skin before she dipped back in. Cicadas wailed in the distance, their rising and falling chirps a gauge for sensing the day's passage, perfect timekeeping having become a distant memory for her.

Radika sat on a rock, staring up and down the lazy reaches of the river, north up to the fork split on her left, south down to widening and then curving section to her right. She saw a crane slip from an alcove on the shore up into the air, its feet dragging across the surface of the water until it lifted away above the trees. The paper birches and mosquitoes were unaffected by the catastrophe that had whirled around them.

Radika could still taste on her lips the coffee they had made that morning. Non-existent in the camps, her and Teresa had put together quite a stash of it in recent weeks. It would be so far down on the government's supply list that they might as well enjoy it now before it got any weaker.

Certain experiences like that took her quickly back to the old world. She inevitably thought about her father, imagined him suturing her side as she lay unconscious. He had been a wonderful surgeon, a wonderful father, but there hadn't been enough time to save both Radika and himself.

Radika froze as she heard pebbles tumbling down the hill behind them.

"The water is fantastic!" Teresa yelled, somewhat to Radika, but mostly to nobody in particular.

Radika tried to get her attention to warn her about the possibility of someone coming, stiffly calling her name to no avail. Radika spun herself around and saw the young boy stick his head out from behind the tree.

"Henry!" a voice called out from the woods above Radika.
"Henry, stop!"

Teresa turned and saw the boy, his short, black hair wrapped in a red bandana as he bounded down the clay gully to the water. A woman stood at the top, lean and hard from travel. Her hair was pulled in a ponytail behind her head. “I’m so sorry,” she called down.

Teresa slowly walked over through the water, cautious, moving her eyes between Radika and the woman. They looked harmless enough, but it could always be a trap. The government tried to keep order, but there were only so many soldiers, and brigandage wasn’t uncommon.

“Grace,” the woman called out, waving. “So sorry. To scare you, I mean. This is my son, Henry.” The boy had already made his way to Radika. Radika eyed him with awe. There weren’t many children in the camps.

“Henry,” the boy said, sticking out his small hand. Radika clutched it, felt his energy as the child’s eyes scanned her. “Where’s your scar?”

“Henry!” Grace yelled down at the boy, as she herself made her descent to the river’s edge. She grabbed his arm and pulled him towards her. “You can’t ask people that. Do you hear me?”

The boy bit his lip. “Yeah, sorry. Sorry, miss.”

“Again, I’m so sorry,” his mother said.

“It’s fine,” Radika said. “Come here, Henry.”

The boy walked over reluctantly, looking back at his mother.

Radika pulled her shirt up on her right side, showing the recess in her side. She could see his eyes moving along the surface of her skin, trying to imagine the correct way her hips and ribs should fit together.

Teresa had made her way back to the water’s edge as the boy stared. She slipped into her clothes. “Here’s mine,” she said, turning the inside of her forearm to the boy. “I cut it out myself.” The children in the camps usually offered up their scars readily, the adults examining them unbiasedly to make them feel safe, welcome.

“He never got one,” Grace called over. “Or we never

found it, I don't know."

Radika nodded. "So, you don't want to go to the camps, do you?"

"We were at one, in Richmond. They were jerks to anyone without a scar. Anyone that didn't go through what they did. Wasn't doing any good sitting there, anyway. There's a whole world out here."

"You feel safe?" Teresa asked, sitting down on the rock beside Radika.

"We have a gun, but most people have exaggerated the dangers of being out of the camps. There's not much to worry about. You see people, sure, but most of them are just looking for food and clothes. If there wasn't anything to live off of, there'd be a problem, but there's more than enough to go around for a long while. Sometimes I think about how much clothing I owned or how many cans of food or tools were in my house, multiplied by however many millions of people..." She trailed off.

Henry had jumped in the river as Grace stared off across the water. "Come on, mom!"

"You don't mind if we go in, do you? We came up through the valley and haven't seen moving water in a while."

"Oh, no, go ahead. By all means," Teresa answered.

The wind whipped up small dust devils outside the cabin door. Teresa's scar itched as the pressure dropped. "Let's get this stuff inside before the storm hits," she said, taking down the clothes they had drying outside.

The fire in the hearth cracked in the dark night as a cool breeze blew off the river up to the house. Henry lay curled up in a wool blanket, his head nestled on top of a blue sweater Teresa had found in an upstairs closet.

"You're welcome to stay the night. Don't worry," Radika said, smiling.

Grace laughed. "It's just so nice being with other people. Friendly people."

Teresa walked over with a pot of soup and ladled it out into a set of speckled blue bowls.

“Is this what it’s like in the camps now?” Grace asked, digging a spoon into the bowl.

“Oh, no, there’s real food,” Teresa answered. “Nothing exotic anymore, though, like oranges. But apples, lots of vegetables, bread, eggs. Colonial Williamsburg things. The soup is just what we’ve grabbed from houses. There’s a hundred times more cans of foods on abandoned shelves than there are people to eat it. The government has done a pretty good job getting some of the farms set up, but there’s only so many slots available at a time for training, fuel allocation, tools. It’s a slow process and...”

“And I can’t do much work on a farm,” Radika interjected, having long understood why she couldn’t move up the list. She knew that Teresa had purposely dragged her own feet to be with her.

“Not everybody has to work on the farms,” Teresa said, sitting next to Radika on the bench.

“Sure, but they’d like everybody to.”

“Who cares?” Teresa asked. “There’s more than enough to sustain us for a long time. We’ll drop in after everything’s restarted and, I don’t know, print a newspaper or something.”

Radika let out a laugh. “Very productive.”

Grace spoke. “You know, I always wanted a house before all this. Could never afford it. Now they’re everywhere, for free. More houses than we could ever fill again.”

“All I wanted to do was to spend my time reading and biking,” Radika said, taking a spoonful of soup. “I guess we both lucked out.” She handed Grace a box of crackers.

There was a rumble of thunder in the distance, north of the river.

“Before, about it not being so bad outside the camps. That wasn’t exactly true,” Grace said. “It’s just hard to face reality with Henry. He’s so young, you know? I’m always trying to shield him from all this.”

“What do you mean?” Teresa asked.

“We’ve seen some pretty terrible things. Hard to imagine things. Whole groups of people who had survived this long gutted on the side of the road. Children wandering alone. People

harassed for their scars and wounds, beaten, berated. You two are from the city. There was some semblance of leadership and planning and order there. I've seen whole towns burning to the west and south of here. Entire towns ablaze. The ravages of shootouts with no survivors. Pure havoc. But I try to act like a lot of it didn't happen or that it happened differently when he asks about it. Maybe it will change his memory and he won't have to think about all of this. Maybe it will just all be fixed soon."

Radika and Teresa turned to watch Henry sleeping, his back slowly rising and falling as he took in deep breaths of clean air.

Grace spoke in a softer voice. "I don't know if I've seen him sleep that well since it happened."

The rain started to hit the roof in hard, deliberate drops. The window in the main room had an overhang, so they could leave it open during the storm for air movement. Teresa got up to close the other ones and seal the house for the night.

Standing in front of the fire, she grabbed three glasses from the mantle, their sides clinking together in her hand. "Let's have a round of that scotch and get some rest," she said.

Teresa was on the couch watching television as the storm picked up in intensity. She felt a charge in the air, the hair on her arms standing on end as the wind squealed against the metal siding of the house, the windows hard and brittle from the recent temperature drop. Wisps of steam rose from a cup of chamomile tea as she watched an old movie, something with John Garfield. She wasn't sure of the title. Her roommates were gone and it was nice to simply relax by herself. Her eyes were almost closed before she felt a slight itch in her forearm.

Reaching down, she scratched it, but to no avail. "Ugh," she said aloud, looking down at her arm and noticing the bump. She assumed it was a bug bite, again scratching it. As she looked at her arm, she saw the bump begin to bulge, grow in size, slowly at first, until the skin was stretched thin across the golf ball-sized mass. Pain shot from the swelling through Teresa's arm, up to her head and down to her toes. She felt the hard, unnatural mass with

her other hand, could feel it pulsing and innately understood that it would continue to grow. Throwing the blanket off, her cup flew in the air as scalding tea splashed across the oak floor.

The skin was almost at the tearing point as she reached the kitchen, throwing open one of the cabinet drawers. She began to see stars as she fumbled for one of the pairing knives. Small fissures began to appear on the surface of the skin, the roiling mass underneath about to tear through in a chaos of blood and fluid. Teresa led the tip of the knife into her arm and twisted around the bizarre growth and pulled.

The rain fell on the tin roof in a steady patter. Teresa searched for some kind of musical pattern to it, but gave up, instead finding a certain safety in being able to stay dry even without all the other things she had come to know in her previous life.

She propped herself up on one arm and watched Radika's chest rise and fall in the waning orange glow of the fire. Slowly, she eased herself up to put another log on the fire. Moving towards the basket of wood, she looked out through the open window and into the forest. A crack of lightning illuminated the desolate stands.

Stopping, she thought she saw a figure moving towards the house. It had only been a solitary flash of light and now the trees were locked in darkness. Teresa grappled in her head with the reality of what she had seen as the thunder of the bolt rippled through the night. She couldn't decide if there had actually been somebody outside, but there was no use in taking chances.

She walked over to Radika, grabbing her arm. "Radika. Radika, wake up."

Her friend dazily opened her eyes. "What's going on?"

"Shh. I think there might be somebody outside. Wake up Grace and Henry."

Grabbing her glasses off the fireplace, Radika woke the mother and son as Teresa watched the door. The three of them swung their bodies against the wall, pressing Henry back into the corner of the room.

Grace pulled the gun out from the holster around her waist. Teresa peaked out over the bottom of the window frame, begging for a sliver of light to see something, anything, in the dark. She grabbed the chair from the table and angled it against the door to prevent somebody opening it from the outside.

There was a gunshot somewhere far off, farther than where the person Teresa had seen had been standing. The sound was dull as it tried to cut through the heavy rain. The group in the cabin jumped, then crouched even closer to the ground. There were two more gunshots in rapid succession, closer now. Another. Another.

Radika looked at Teresa and moved her eyes to Grace's gun. Teresa nodded and moved around to the far wall, trying to hide from the fire's feeble light. There was the sound of a hand fumbling with the door handle. Before Grace had time to aim, the intruder kicked in the door, breaking the lock and sending the bracing chair skittering across the floor towards Teresa.

Grace fired into the shadow, the doorframe splintering behind the attacker as the wind and rain poured in from outside. She fired again, but as she did, the attacker pointed a gun back at her, hitting Grace in the face. Radika grabbed the boy and shielded him from the chaos by turning him into the corner and pressing her body against his small frame.

The attacker, wounded from Grace's second shot, lurched forward into the house. Teresa attempted to run for the back room before the assailant's gun fired again, sending her into the far wall. Radika screamed out and attempted to run through the melee with Henry to get to the stairs and the safety of the second level when she realized the attacker was dead, crumpled in a pile on the floor from Grace's final shot. She ran towards Teresa.

“Come on, come on,” she said, picking up Teresa's head. The bullet had entered her chest and a pool of blood slowly started to form underneath her shirt. “Come on, come on.” Radika pushed her hands against the wound, tried to staunch the flow of blood. Teresa never said a word, her eyes staring off in the distance.

Radika let out a sob as she turned and saw Henry standing over his mother. He was continually hardened by the new world, losing feelings, but gaining an avidity for survival. She got up and

hugged him, pulled him close to her. Grabbing a flashlight, she went to lock the door and stopped, standing over the attacker.

Bending down, she smoothed the intruder's brown hair to better see the face of the killer. She let out a gasp as she stared at the woman on the ground.

"That looks like your friend," Henry said, standing over the body and holding his mother's gun.

Radika knew he was right. It looked like Theresa. A few years older, but it was her. She stared, wondering. Her flashlight fell to the woman's body, searching for information. Radika noticed this other Theresa's shirt had pulled up during the gunfight and thought she could make out some writing on the woman's abdomen. She bent down to pull up the shirt, hoping to find a clue. On the woman's skin, written in marker, were the words "DON'T DO WHAT I DID."

Radika fumbled with the words in her head. She stared at the dead Theresa, her friend, and at the dead other-Theresa. The attacker had died too soon to answer any questions. Was that part of the plan? she thought. To kill her earlier self and her own self at the same time? Had this attack been perfectly constructed to stop Theresa from doing whatever brought the other Theresa here? Was the bringing back itself the act that had to be prevented? She wondered if there was a link between the second Theresa and the growths. Were they related? Was she the cause?

Ultimately, Radika realized, it was unknowable. The future Theresa had prevented ever knowing, ever taking the same steps that led to her return.

Radika knew there must be other people outside from the earlier gunshots. People that had been tracking the other Theresa. She hoped they were dead.

The rain fell steadily, in thick sheets, blowing in through the shattered door.

"Henry, come here." She shut what she could of the fractured door and pulled the boy close to her as they waited for the safety of dawn.

Radika felt a charge in the air and the hair on her arms stood on end.

The Cold, the Wind, and the Stars

The artificial lake had been on the edge of town as long as I, or anyone else I knew in town, could remember. Since the days of my childhood, I would sneak out there and sit on one of the mammoth rocks that overlooked the dark, unbroken water. It was obvious that it had once been a quarry, with the predictable geometric fissures and cuts where slabs were removed from the walls overlooking the surface. But it was such a large constructed body of water that my young mind had trouble grappling with it. It wasn't that wide, maybe two or three football fields, but it was so long that I couldn't even remember walking around to the other side.

Most people in town had little interest in the lake. There were no fish to catch, no beautiful aquatic flora to see, and most of the town feared getting some kind of lead or arsenic poisoning, although nobody was exactly sure what had come out of the mine during its production years. It was easy to see the lure of it to my young mind, as I was able to ride my bike, and later my car, to the edge and get away.

What most gripped me, however, was the abandoned building standing right in the center.

I could never tell how deep the gorge had been, how tall it would have allowed the building to be and nobody in town seemed to know much, either. But the ruins of it rose one and half stories above the surface of the water, the upper level being only a portion of a wall with the bottom of a window frame, itself suggesting something more extant than presently existed. The main room above the water was fairly enclosed, although there had been some damage that allowed the elements in. A busier town would have covered the building in graffiti years ago, but it had sat untouched during my childhood.

Sitting there, I would watch the water lap against the

frame's thick concrete and brick walls, layers of red and blue and cream paint chipping away into the lake, the wind here and there catching a destroyed window frame and twisting the corroded steel. I could stare at the ruins for hours, wondering what kind of operations took place there, how many of the town worked day in and day out, how new and industrial and fantastic it must have all seemed, taking the raw materials scraped from the pit's walls and producing something shipped around the world.

But like the rest of the town, I feared breaking the surface of the still water. True, there were chemicals to be afraid of, whatever elements could have been leeched out of the surrounding rock or the waste of the factory, but there was a more unnerving element. The color of the water was black. Maybe the darkened walls of the deep wound were transmitted through the water, I couldn't be sure, but it had a sickeningly deep and unending pitch to it. I never saw a person wade into it in my entire life. I never even heard of a person venturing out into the water.

That changed one day as I stood in line at the local grocery store. A few days before, a well-respected businessman had eaten his shotgun in the church and the town was noticeably on edge. I happened to overhear a woman telling another how she had chastised her young son for swimming out to the ruins when so much was going on in town. Shocked, I casually intruded into the conversation only to find out that the boy was up ahead at the front of the store. Putting aside my groceries, I happened to pull him away from the candy machines and speak with him for a few moments before deducing that he was afraid of something within the structure of the ruins; the act of getting there was merely a cursory experience to him, although he had conquered a mental mountain that had blocked me for years.

At the lake in my younger days, I had always entertained the idea of swimming down into the depths of the abandoned building and finding any number of things: gold, guns, skeletons. Stuff of childhood fantasy. But the boy was clear about the interior of the derelict structure, if he wavered on what exactly he had seen. The fact was that the inside of the building was dry, not submerged. All these years had passed and the building was still

somehow dry. No swimming down into it was necessary.

To say I was compelled to enter the structure at this point would be a mild statement. I was drawn, lured, enraptured by the idea of what lie within the building's catacombs. Scrambling to pay for the groceries, my mind fired as I raced back home. It was in the early afternoon and as I arrived, a friend of mine was just leaving my doorstep, obviously having been there only a minute beforehand expecting me.

Ella was a good friend since our elementary school days and she was much more extroverted and excitable than myself. However, she could tell by my changed demeanor that something was amiss. Certainly one for adventure, I let her in on the young child's discovery. She balked at the idea of it; how could water not seep in through cracks and crevices over the years? There were windows up top, were there none below? No building is waterproof, she asserted. I relented and agreed with her that it was most likely a tall tale on the boy's part, but still I got her to agree to ride out there with me. We were able to make it to the lake before the sun set.

I've always found twilight to be a magical time for the world, when objects are caught between the full-blown burning and all-illuminating light of the sun and the night's darkness which covers their true nature. As the orange summer sun set at the edge of the lake, dying rays of light caught the tops of small crests of water as they moved across the surface. Again, Ella brought up the absurdity of the building having a watertight seal, yet I couldn't shake the feeling that the boy had believed his words. He had been scared, at least. That was for sure.

At this point, I had imagined that I might find some kind of dead animal within the building, perhaps a pile of them that had formed into a grotesque sculpture. This was what would have scared the boy, I was sure of it. To be honest, I had no real fear of the building. I was just interested in the dry interior in a way I simply cannot explain. It fascinated me even to contemplate.

Removing two flashlights from my trunk, I handed one to Ella and began to strip down to my underwear. I walked to the water's edge and scooped up a handful of water, letting it fall

through my fingers as I shown the flashlight upon it. It looked clear. And the boy had seemed fine. Perhaps there was nothing wrong with the water yet. Looking towards the structure, I judged it perhaps eighty yards off. I could simply keep my head above water that long, I rationalized to myself.

Looking back, it was absurd to attempt the attack on the ruins at twilight, but I must reiterate the compulsion I felt to enter its walls. It is a compulsion I have thankfully never felt again, but the idea that I could spend a night without knowing, a night where I could die in my sleep of an aneurysm or any number of other maladies, a night where the police force could mobilize itself after being persuaded by the young boy's mother to destroy the innocuous structure, was too much to handle. With all this in mind, I eased myself out into the water to make it to the decaying, crenelated form.

As I said before, Ella was always an adventurous sort. The lead and arsenic legends must have hung heavy in her mind, yet at this point, she must have just thought it would be a fun swim out to some old ruins on a warm, summer night. We would make our way there, say we did it, and swim back. Grab a beer afterwards. With this naivete, she stripped down and followed me in.

It didn't take long to doggy-paddle our way out to building. The water, however, did feel different than other lakes we had been in. There was a stillness, a deadness to the particles, that I've never felt since. The molecules clung to you with a weight that seemed to want to pull you under.

Reaching the extant room of the structure, we pulled ourselves up to its floor, the lake's surface meeting it almost at exactly the same level, so as to put a slick of liquid across the entire irregular landing. We shucked the water off of our bodies and flipped on the flashlights. Despite the full moon that night, I wanted to clearly see our victory. For years I had wanted to stand on that dying building and it had taken only a moment to do it. The level we were standing on — I still have no clue what story it could have been in the original structure — was of a flaking concrete that had been weathering away for decades.

Using solely the moonlight, I was able to make my way

around to the area behind the walls, the actual interior of the story that had been hidden from me all those years, but exposed to the elements due to the fragmentary level above it. Due to a unique combination of a solitary post running up through the floor, a remaining fracture of an old ceiling, a grade that slightly amped up towards the opening, and pure luck, I was able to find that there was indeed an opening in the floor leading to the inside. Calling Ella over, we both stood in amazement at the rusted metal hatches covering the navel into the heart of the old building. Grabbing both handles, she swung them open and exposed the hidden world of the ruins.

With an abundance of abandoned industrial structures across the United States, I can forgo the descriptions of much of the minutiae of the structure. Concrete, steel, glass, wires, all were there. Pointing my flashlight into the abyss, I could see there were stairs leading down to the next level. Full of adrenaline from the swim, I took a first cautious step down, then another. I angled my head and could see that the room was not very large, although it was dry. The boy had been truthful, after all.

The summer heat and insulative nature of the surrounding water lent a certain warmth to the room. I momentarily forgot my lack of clothing even, though as I stepped onto one of the treaded metal risers leading into the depths, I would have traded everything for a pair of shoes. Regardless, pure curiosity continued to drive me deeper into the structure as I swung my flashlight around to survey.

Silhouettes were burned on the walls where machinery must have once stood, proud engines of industry that were dismantled and removed as years of decline passed. I judged the room to be roughly thirty feet on each side, although the ceiling must have been irregularly shaped as only a small portion existed at the water's level for us to swim out to. Again, I must state that the room was remarkably clean and dry.

Dry. Throughout the whole ordeal, I could never grasp the dryness of the building. The fact that this centenary structure was watertight, sealed from the outside except for the hatch, was almost beyond believability for me. It was difficult to accept, to

put faith in, and I always felt the water would come rushing in at any second, trapping us like the lower chambers in a sinking oceanliner.

I must have been exploring the room for several minutes before Ella ventured in after me. However, she too was taken by the sheer absurdity of it all. A keen explorer, she quickly found the second door, the simple wooden portal that led further into the structure.

The top half of this new doorway was one large panel of glass, still intact. Shining my flashlight across it, I could see that at the bottom of the glass a small hand had cleared away layers of dust and grim. A grease spot belied the young child's face pressed against it. Passing the flashlight across the top, I could only make out a faint name on the door, A. P. FREEMAN & SON, with what looked to be a drawing of a cube, one vertex facing the viewer, with lines extending outward, like the rays of a sun, etched into the smooth surface.

As it was locked from the other side, I had no choice but to land a forceful foot against the center, obliterating the dry wood into splinters and fragments. We laughed to counter the nervousness, but our eyes were in agreement about pursuing the depths of the building. Pushing open this second door, we realized it led into a narrow hallway.

As the space became larger in its physical footprint, I quickly began working a three-dimensional model of the building's layout in relation to the lake. While the room we initially had dropped into was nearly three times as high as this second door and at the water's surface level for us to swim to, the ceiling height of the hallway must have been some twenty feet below the water.

Looking back towards the hatchway, we could still see glimpses of the old world illuminated by the light of the full moon. Nodding, we probed our flashlights deeper into the corridor. A silent agreement had begun to form between the two of us as pure curiosity took over all rational attempts at how best to attack the structure. We began to move quickly through the building now after breaking the threshold of that first door.

Six rooms flared out from the hallway, three on each side and all the same size. These rooms were meticulously clean, each having a sealed door that, while not locked, was a tight enough fit to prevent the intrusion of dust and other particulate. Looking back, I wish more time had been spent exploring each of these, but on cursory inspections there was nothing to be found in the twelve-foot square chambers.

Continuing on to the end of the hall, we found a spiral staircase that led further down into the structure and, conceivably, deeper into the lake. Still, my mind reeled at the prospect of this building having been closed up for so long, untouched. Yet, I thought back to the boy, his face pressed against the hallway door, wondering what he could have seen. Perhaps it was just the darkness that had so scared him.

Eschewing any fears, Ella had made her way down the rickety spiral and together we descended into an even larger level than the one above. I figured we must have then been some thirty or forty feet below the surface of the lake. This level consisted mainly of one large room, what we believed to be some kind of assembly area, or perhaps just the main room of the building for public and employee access during its heyday, although we were unable to find any great doors leading outside. We gazed, astonished at the sheer size and, again, the cleanliness and orderliness of the room.

We traversed the room centrally, swinging our flashlights and placing our bare feet onto the dry and black marble floor. It was at this point that we began to feel cold. While the other rooms had preserved some of the summer heat, at this lower level, the temperature dropped at least ten to fifteen degrees. We contemplated returning to the surface until we approached the open door at the far end of the room and stumbled across the objects on the ground.

Piled on the floor was a mangled coil of yellow rope, which we judged to be roughly one hundred feet in length. One end of the rope was attached to a eyelet on a metal plate bolted to the floor. The other end was attached to a harness. Ella picked it up and held it over her body, showing that it was meant to be

worn by a human.

Dropping it, she walked forward to an open door, opposite the one we had entered the room from. A stream of water, evidently sourcing from somewhere far up above, seeped from the top of the door frame, forming a thin pane of water where the door, if closed, would have stood. I looked for any sort of exit for the water, as there was no pool on the floor, but could not find one. Piercing the liquid membrane with her flashlight, Ella peered into the corridor and decided it was safe. Safe enough, at least.

The hallway we then stepped into was much older than the rest of the structure had been. What was once a more modern building of iron and concrete gave way to a narrow tunnel of glazed red brick, smooth from years of friction throughout the passageway. Our flashlights were able to fully illuminate the confines as we walked perhaps forty to fifty feet into it.

At that point, I had become somewhat disoriented by the trek and its travails, although I desperately tried to piece together the angles and turns of the building into a coherent whole. I felt then that we were no longer underneath the water, but within the ground, having pushed through the walls of the mine at some point, most likely the threshold into the older section.

While the previous room had introduced a chill, this new tunnel became outright cold. Goosebumps covered our nearly-naked flesh, yet we continued on, especially for the fact that as we continued on deeper into the structure, we began to feel as if we were beginning to ascend, only slightly at first, to be certain, but angled walkways and sloping corridors soon gave way to concrete stairs that led back up into the world we had left. I knew we were far from where we had gone down and wondered where we might possibly come up. My mental calculations put us within the earth surrounding the lake, so I wondered if we would find some kind of underground bunker, hidden for decades.

There continued to be rooms that we passed, abandoned halls that we could only glimpse with our flashlights, catching scraps of old machinery and broken sheets of glass. We climbed up a stairway, nearly identical to the one we had climbed down originally, but this one rusted, dry as bones. The pieces creaked

and groaned as the once-perfect fittings slid against and between each other.

Stepping up through this new hatchway, we looked out across the landscape in the dying sunlight. What had once been a lake with forests on all sides now dropped away perhaps twenty feet below us to another body of water, this with a mercurial tinge to its still surface. A slight breeze grazed our skin as we stood atop the ruins.

It was still twilight here and we could make out the land at the water's edge. Gone were the cedar trees, replaced by a barren landscape of sand or salt, or perhaps something else entirely, flecks of which sparkled in the expiring rays of the sun. We moved around the top of the building to survey, there seemingly being no way down from our perch. Each angle looked the same, there was no escaping it. We clasped together as the sun fell off in the distance, unsure of where or when we were.

For the two of us there, time seemed to slow and quicken simultaneously. Our brains and mouths turned over any number of ideas in rapid fire, yet minutes continued to pass quickly as judged by the dying sunlight. As it became completely dark, only a sliver of a crescent moon remained, not the full one we had left behind.

Only a few souls in history have faced the true unknown and lived to carry on. Eriksson, Magellan, Armstrong. Looking back, I believe that Ella and I can certainly be added to that short list. As we stood on the darkened perch, our flashlights cutting swaths against the remaining wall of the building in an effort to keep the darkness at bay, the night of this harsh and mysterious world came to life.

Surrounding the perch, each of us seeing the vista behind the other's head, thousands and thousands of points of light began igniting and extinguishing with the regularity of a pendulum. It is difficult to give an accurate description of their size without knowing how far or near they were from us, but the light was a golden luminescence, similar to fireflies, with each piece of light in perfect relational distance to the ones around it. There was such a mathematical regularity to it that it seemed a trick at first. And not just laterally did the points extend, but also in a depth

around us, deeper and deeper away until the points became difficult to distinguish as they flicked on and off.

We watched in awe for an inestimable amount of time, the points of light giving off so much luminosity that it was easy to overlook the turn towards night. It seems easy to wonder now how we could have stood their for so long, cold, nearly naked, in a dangerous environment, but I must reiterate the simple awe at what we witnessed. Awe, however, only lasts for so long.

As we watched, Ella and I both became aware of a rustling, for lack of a better word, in the air. A subtle movement in it combined with a vibrational aspect that seemed to be coming from below us, sending shocks up the dilapidated building. There was the sound of air being sucked in and blown out.

It became clear that the disturbance was located somewhere behind Ella, but beneath her station on the building. We backed up to the opposite side and watched as the sounds and movement climaxed before us. The points of light, frozen in space beforehand, were exploded outward as a giant presence invaded their orbits. They were extinguished, eaten perhaps, as they entered the boundaries of the specter, yet their embering was apparent for some time through the translucent covering of the being.

The entity twisted and twirled about the top of he ruins, around and above us, but never getting near enough to harm us. As it moved, we could vaguely discern its size, perhaps fifty to sixty feet long and roughly ten feet in diameter. However, the movements and translucent nature of the creature made it all difficult to comprehend and register clearly.

At this, the awe of the experience could hold us no more. As the being twisted away, continuing to blot out the points of light, we saw a chance to escape to the hatch. Throwing it open, Ella slipped in as I followed. As we made it back down the corridors, I realized I had forgotten to shut the hatch, but there was no time to return. In my head, I traded my safety then for any possible future excursions the new world could make into my own.

We sped back through the maze, our hearts pounding, our nerves oblivious to the lack of shoes and clothing. We barely

slowed despite the low level of light, hardly showing reserve for the sanctity of keeping our skulls intact against low ceilings and narrow doorways. I can't say for sure how many times we slipped and fell in the dark labyrinth. It was a blur, only a momentary blast of memory sandwiched between all the points leading up to that terrible moment and the life I've lived after exiting the building.

At some point, however, I dropped my flashlight. Down to only Ella's, we continued to cover as much ground as quickly as possible. We made it to the pane of water again, bursting through it as I glanced sidelong at the harness attached to the floor. As we covered the remaining ground of the factory, I pleaded with the furies of the universe to not take Ella's flashlight from us and as we glimpsed the stairway we had first descended into the chambers, I touched my face to assure myself I was still alive.

Ella led the way up the stairs, taking three or four at a time, both our soles a ragged mess of flesh, the sticky blood mixing with whatever substances we had trekked through on our journey. As I neared the lip of the surface, I thought that I heard a sound back in the catacombs, an unearthly sound which I can never forget, but can never truly replicate. It took all the will inside me not to turn around, all my will to leave that world and section it off in my brain completely, forever.

We clambered to the top, shivering, shaking, covered in the sweat. The air on the top of the building was warm and comforting. We threw the hatch over, back into its original position. Scanning around with our sole flashlight for an object to thrust through the handles, Ella was able to wrench free a portion of the frame that had previously been flapping in the window. We slid it through the hole and collapsed. Panting, we said not a word, just stared out into the darkness across to the dry land and then back at the hatch.

Easing ourselves off the floor, Ella pointed the flashlight across the water to the trees. Getting our bearings, we both dove in together and swam for land, not doggie paddling, but swimming full force, our heads dipping above and below the surface. Light from the full moon caught the ripples ahead of us as

the distance grew shorter. Arriving back on the shore, we dried off with some old clothes in my car. The silence was deafening.

We quickly sketched out a rough plan and returned the next day with a borrowed canoe and a sledgehammer. As Ella kept the craft moored to one edge of the building, I swung the hammer with all my force, managing only to chip a small corner of concrete. Slowly, though, the walls began to wear away, water slowly lapping itself over the edge and into the room below.

As I could feel the integrity of the building begin to falter, I called Ella over with the canoe. A final blow sent a muted crack down one side of the building. Diving into the boat, we watched as all four walls of the decrepit structure fell into itself, water rushing in by the ton. The corner with the one and a half story, the corner capped by the bottom half of a window, was the last to fall, but it too worked its way down into the depths along with the rest of the infernal factory. We paddled quickly back to shore, a silent stare the only agreement we have ever made not to discuss that night.

The small boy grew up, no doubt exchanging in his mind whatever he saw that day with the grown-up idea that it was all a simple daydream. Maybe he doesn't even remember it at all. Ella herself left town a few years later, happy, content. For all I know, she never thought about that night again.

No, I'm sure she must, because I myself could never shake what we had seen. My dreams became monopolized by the world on the other side of the ruins. My waking life, too. If only I had documented it in some way. Some way to remember the fleeting brilliance of that realm. But there was no way to go back, at least no simple way.

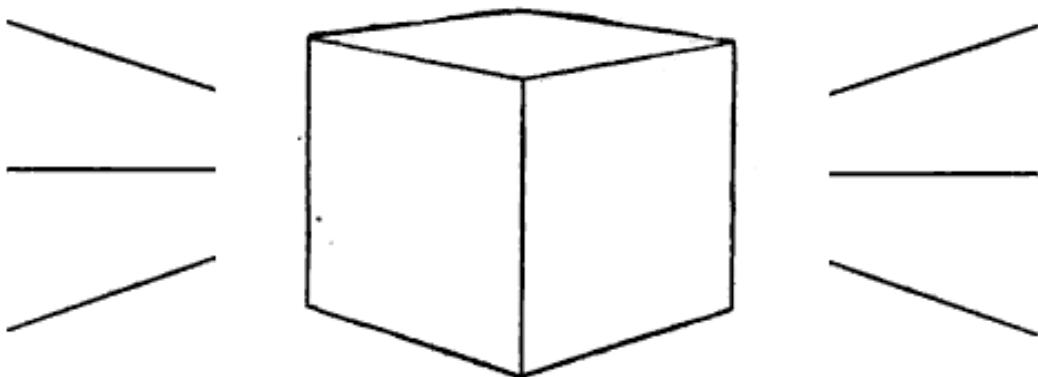
I often toyed with the idea of swimming down or hiring divers to examine the building at the bottom of the lake, but the thought of disturbing the ruins even more, and anything that may have been released in its destruction, was too much to bear. Likewise, another fantasy involved digging straight down through the ground into the tunnel I believed traversed underneath the rockface. This was completely impractical. Often, I contemplated the fact that the tunnel might not even be there, the threshold

having shifted our position in time and space somehow. I'll never know.

There was only one direct way towards understanding the factory. Searching through archives, I could only find a few scant mentions of the A.P. Freeman Company. Electrical patents, radio devices, refrigeration. Ads here and there for "whole-field" studies. But no records could be found on the family or what became of them. I did find an obituary from some years back for a former employee whose relatives could never be located, but the information on the company was scant in his brief biography. Calculating his age, he must have been only a boy when he started there. I wondered at what he had seen at such a young age.

A final advertisement during the Great Depression simply showed the gleaming cube I had seen on the window. The company's name was emblazoned beneath it. So simple and pure. There was some kind of esoteric knowledge there that was cut off from my attempts to ever access it. At that point, the trail went cold. A dead end. The company only a fleeting imprint on the world's memory.

I often drive past the lake, tricking myself into thinking I can stop. That I'm able to park at the edge and look at where the building was. Look at what we did that day, Ella and I. But I can't stop. I keep driving.



A Strange and Humble Labor

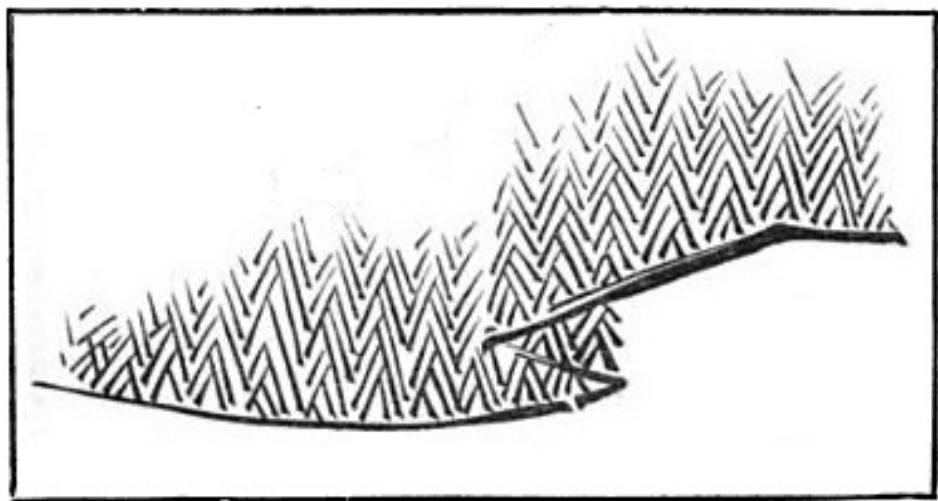
It was before the moving picture cameras came that the woman lived on the island and lived with the people and the people were unchanged for they never saw a living representation of themselves, only the static images of etchings and watercolors and, later, photographic plates.

The woman, however, saw many possible futures and many possible lives for the inhabitants of the small village. One of the farmers was, instead, a baker; one of the launderers a fisherman. They passed through various lines and points, some similar, some vastly different.

There was a deep pool in a bay on the far side of the island that the woman would go to on the full moon. She would cross the bridge over the deep hollow and descend to the lapping edge. She would wash her hands and face and reach deep inside the pool. Various lines would emerge, reaching up off the contours of the land, alive with energy and all the different futures for each possible choice from the direction of a honeybee's flight and the forward or backward movement of a turtle to pitched battles and betrayals of the human heart.

She saw that it was a convergence, a confluence created by some future makers or ancient diviners that reached through to her there on the island by accident. They could not fix it, despite her seeing their best intentions. But she could never grasp the nature of it, derived from sciences that were beyond her limited understanding of the hard ways of the world.

She could see the outsiders in the dim haze of the far-off visions, coming in and studying the land, studying the water. For this reason, she took to cataloging everything on the island as it was. Every blade of grass, every grain of pollen on every stamen. The beating of a crane's wings, the soft pebbles at the water's edge, the children's smiles and how their hair blew in the wind.



Line after line she wrote in her books, steadying her writing hand with her free hand as she wrote in the dim light of a candle.

“Grandmother!” the children would shout as she peeked out from behind the window on her small cottage. She had gone blind years ago, but the children would sit on her lap as she stroked their hair. She had taken to rolling three hand-carved dice that had passed through many hands, seventeen since their creation to be exact, waiting for triple threes, but sometimes settling for a two, a three, and a four, or even a one, a two, and a six.

She would sometimes walk to her kitchen, pull a cluster of a bitter root from a jar and shave a fresh end. She could imagine the children's faces as they scrunched their noses and laughed. It had never been difficult to accept the role of caretaker of the island, to know that she would be the one to enshrine the peculiarities of lives not too unlike those lived anywhere else, but which meant so much because she knew that they could have been different. She saw many possible futures for the children, but could live only one.

With this dedication, the books continued to grow year after year, taking up more and more space until eventually a special building was constructed just to house them. Later, vaults were built, subterranean chambers, end on end under the island. They went unexplored as the woman continued her work. The residents never asked many questions about them, simply accepting the work as it had been going on since before many were born and longer than the older ones could remember.

Far off she could hear the sound of empire, the charm of the village waning, eventually crushed. Her final volume, bound in leather and written as clear as the first, documented various destructions that could befall the world. It was placed in the library with its siblings, forgotten, like the island itself, as the bakers and the fishermen took to their day's work.

In Sera

“Goddamn, it’s cold,” Ledia said, unbuttoning the top of her coat and stepping into the small office as a few heavy flakes of snow fell on the steps. Standing there warming her arms, she could smell garlic and paprika and frying pork. The sound of oil sputtering clattered off the frozen walls of the wood building.

She looked around at the shelves lining the wall, overflowing with various instrument gauges, wires, door seals, and other miscellaneous car parts. A small industrial lamp provided the only light save the windows as she searched for the owner and followed the sounds of clanging metal.

Peering behind the counter, she could see a small man crouching over a cast iron skillet, rolling sausages and onions over in a pan. She watched as he placed it on top of the wood burner in the back of the room, the oil again beginning to sizzle.

“Hi, I’m Ledia,” she said, taking off her gloves and sticking out a hand. “I was hoping you could help me with some parts.”

The small man, shorter than Ledia, turned and looked up at her with gleaming blue eyes, his black hair sticking out from beneath his knit cap. He wore several layers. Ledia could make out navy blue long underwear at some level and a red flannel shirt, all covered with a thick, grey, wool sweater. A beard struggled to gain ground, the grey hairs clustering around his chin and under his nose.

He stuck out his hand, blackened from oil and other fluids. “Gaspar,” his voice rasped. He smiled. Ledia glanced at his teeth, pure white, stark against the grime of the junkyard.

“What is that? Smells good.”

“Linguiça.”

The wind scraped a metal sign against the building, clanging and clanging as the building shook.

“Much snow?” the man asked.

She looked out the window and saw the growing drifts. “Not when I came in, but now.” Ledia pointed. Sheets of thick, heavy, white snow fell, clumping together in the corners of the windows.

“Here, hold on.”

The man turned back in the confines behind the counter and moved the pan to a metal plate on the floor. Using a fork, he scooped the sausages and onions out onto a dish, and, reaching into a small cupboard, pulled out a loaf of bread and a bright red Thermos.

“Come, sit.”

Ledia sat at the table, a slab of maple, worn to a smooth finish by years of carburetors and transmissions and fan blades being laid upon and dragged across it. She could feel the heat radiating out from the wood burner.

Gaspar placed the plate in the middle of the table and grabbed a sheet of newspaper for the bread, a ceramic pitcher of water, and two glasses. “It’s cold, eat.”

“Thank you so much. This smells great.” Ledia looked out the window, trying to find her car amongst the snowdrifts. “I had no idea it was going to come down like this, but I was almost here when it started and I didn’t want to turn back.”

“You came to a junkyard, I know about junkyards. It’s warm. Not so bad, eh? So what brings you here?”

“Looking for some fuel injection parts for an old Volkswagen.”

“Ah, one of my favorites. We have a few out in the field. Not many people coming around much anymore. But you’ll have to come back with all this snow. Another day and we’ll get what you need. You have the car at home?”

“Yeah, my father left it to me. He died a few months ago. Waking sickness.”

Gaspar’s eyes fell. Ledia understood.

He moved the food around on his plate. “Agrupneo. Terrible.” He pointed to a photograph on the wall behind the counter. “Jul.” A couple stood in front of a low stone wall, a blue

sky and rolling hills in the distance. A young Gaspar stood with his shirt unbuttoned, summer skin and all, holding a woman with long curls of black hair, smiling, barefoot.

“Sorry, Gaspar. Everybody seems to have lost somebody to the disease.”

“God took her from me.”

“God didn’t take her, Gaspar. It’s an illness.”

“He put it everywhere. In the earth, the air. We’ll all get it. God punished her for working so hard. She worked so hard he made her work to death.”

Ledia stared at the man. He was angry, frustrated. The waking sickness had taken wantonly, plucking victims out of the rabble of humanity. Ledia thought of her father, exercising constantly, running, anything to force a sleep that wouldn’t come.

“It’s slowing down. Dying out.” She paused. “They think.”

“If it’s going away, why the explorations? It’s in the earth. It’s punishment. *And when you shall flee into the cities, I will send the pestilence in the midst of you.*”

“The explorations would have happened, anyway. They were already planning for it.” Ledia tore off a piece of bread. “My father was a hard worker, too. But not when he got sick. He had already retired then. There’s no plan to the disease, no reason certain people came down with it. But it happens quick and they don’t suffer long. I guess that’s one good thing about it.”

Gaspar exhaled. She realized her misstep.

“I lived with him after my mom died, but sold the house when he passed. Didn’t want to stay there anymore and they said the water in the suburban rings was dirty. I don’t even know if that was true. But I was taking the car to a mechanic when a neighbor called and told me the house had burned down. Just like that.”

Gaspar shook his head.

“I had written my dad a check for some jewelry before he got sick and the bank sent me the returned check the next week. So that was all I had. The car and a check with his signature on it.”

The old man looked at Ledia, her resonant chestnut hair pulled tight behind her head and down her neck. “I’m sorry.”

Outside, nature railed against the frame of the shop. Ledia

turned and saw the wind slamming against the door of the small building, pushing in the bottom corner. Wisps of snow slid in.

Gaspar got up. "Jesus," he said, pushing a box of random metal parts in front of it. He slid a lock at the top of the door into place to keep the corner closed. Ledia heard slats of wood slapping against the building. "Put another log on," he told her.

Ledia got up, grabbed a rag to open the handle. Sliding the log in, she watched the white coals in the fire, humming with heat. She sat back at the table, cut into the sausage and used the bread to soak up the blood-red oil.

Gaspar walked to the window and picked up a small transistor radio. Its yellow shell was sun-bleached on the sides, a few cracks working their way up from the bottom from years of being slung around. He turned the volume dial, a double for on/off, and a slight crackle filled the room. A monotone announcer rattled off numbers and odds before giving the last race's winning horse, Pascal's Wager. Ledia wondered where that race had been given the driving snowstorm.

Gaspar crossed to a shelf behind the counter and grabbed a notebook and a folded up newspaper. He grunted as he moved, exhaling through his nose, his leather shoes dragging on the floor. He stood at the counter as the announcer began to cover the day's baseball games, an endless stream of names, numbers, abbreviations, statistics. His pencil swung across the notebook, lines connecting various characters, moving between the page and the newspaper, the sheet giving some as he circled particularly noteworthy players. The dwindling number of teams and athletes made every game an event.

Ledia wondered how his mind could shift so quickly, but it must help him deal with his pain. She ate quietly as another announcer cut into the sports recap.

"Goddamnit," Gaspar said under his breath, looking up from his notebook, frustrated to lose contact with the world of flowing numbers.

The reporter spoke in a clear, pensive voice. The hemaranauts, reaching into the space inside of Earth's orbit, had been out of contact for three days. The government had declared

them dead. Ledia felt sick to her stomach as she listened to the broadcast, the reporter rattling the names of the fallen explorers, young women and men needed on the slipping earth.

The sky grew dark from the heavy snowfall. Gaspar stared out the window. "They were supposed to find something. Somewhere safe."

Ledia never believed in the mission to the interior of the system, the calls for escape from the infected earth. She wasn't even sure if she believed the earth was diseased. Regardless, the trojans and moons and other asteroids inside their orbit would simply be too hot to do anything. Plans to track across the dark sides were for dreamers, and Ledia hadn't dreamt much as the population declined. What a waste, losing those people, she thought to herself. The broadcast went on, various scientists and commentators discussing the impact of the loss. Gaspar turned the volume down.

Ledia's hand shook from holding her fork. She had held it still since the radio began broadcasting the news. Catching her breath, she poured a glass of water, sipped on it slowly as she looked at how the grease had filled the crevices in her fingerprints, how immune it was to soap and water.

Gaspar's right hand gripped the window frame, dug into the heartwood that refused to give. Jul hung heavy around him.

"I was in the Navy many years ago. Not too good, I guess. Hit a sandbar off China. The only way to get out was to fly over the Himalayas." He paused, thinking, reminiscing. "We lost a lot of soldiers doing that."

Ledia watched as the old man focused his sight through the snow, off into the distance, piercing the darkened horizon. He knew loss.

"One flight the snow came down like this and we stuck right into the side of a mountain. Took what we could from the airplane and headed into the valley. Made it, barely alive, into a small village. They took us to Lhasa to arrange our rescue. I can still see the prayer flags lining the trail on the cliff's edge, whipping in the wind as we hiked. All the colors of the rainbow."

Gaspar sat back at the table. He picked up his fork, but

didn't eat.

"The buildings in the district, they were cut right into the mountain. It was so quiet there, the air so thin, our minds grew foggy. One night, I snuck into one of the temples. I'm not a religious man, but I was drawn to the shrine, lured by the pink stone used in the ancient designs of its walls. A slit let a current of wind into the chamber that blew a series of chimes." He mimicked their movement with his hands.

"It was cold, damn cold. But not like here. A dryer, more tolerable cold. There was a trench of water that bubbled through the temple floor, east to west. The walls of the building were opened at the ends to allow the stream in. And inside those walls, the incense burned all night and day, a deep and hard herbal scent."

The old man was there and not there. Ledia's left foot began to tap on the wood floor.

"I saw God then. That night. The face of God. And I understood God and he told me the soil would be blighted. That we would do things, terrible and irreversible things. I couldn't have known it would turn out like this. Not then. But he told me and I knew all of it was true. I met Jul a few years later, after the war ended. It was never in my mind then. And I forgot." He stared off through the walls of the building, through time.

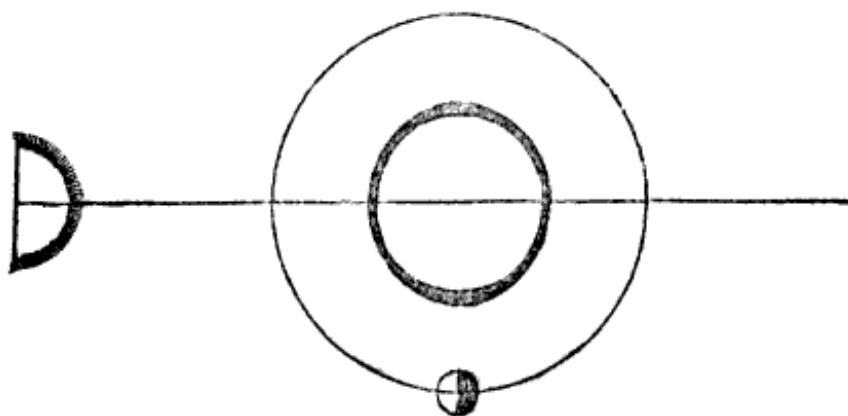
Ledia touched his arm. They listened together as the broadcast went on. She wasn't sure if Gaspar heard the rest. The reporter related that the koionauts, explorers on a mission moving in the opposite direction of their fallen compatriots, had been informed of the loss of their twin expedition the day before, some eighteen hours before the public was told. Earlier in the morning, there had been a garbled transmission from their own craft, as it probed new space. They had been floating, locked in place, unable to continue any farther, any deeper. The radio played the message in full.

[We were approaching...hanging low towards the fifth...what we think it is. There is heavy...craft of all...glorious, shining beacon...blocked like a field...blinding, rippling, but only at certain angles. Sullivan has gone...and Simms, too...of a purity

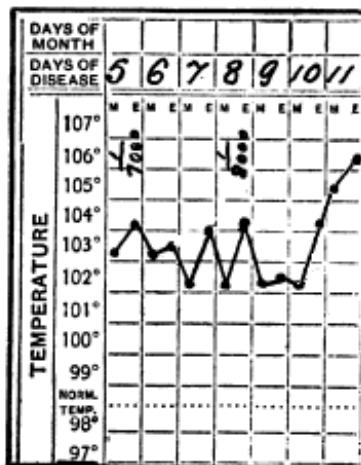
unlike...redemption, redemption...]

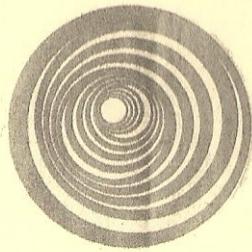
The transmission ended. The lunar base had lost contact with the craft. Ledia stood up and turned off the radio. There was nothing else out there. Gaspar sat still, catatonic.

The snow continued to fall through the grey sky. She was stuck there until it let up. And she knew then that they, too, as humans, were stuck on the tired Earth. In some way, the universe conspired against them. She didn't believe the old man's words, his stories of divine apparitions, but she felt the final truth in her being. There was no escape.



Of boundaries and local relations





BETA DECAY HOUSE