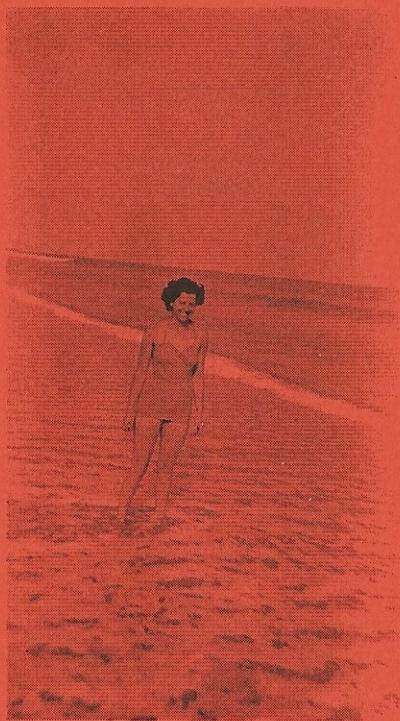


# BETA DECAY



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NUMBER FIVE

BETA DECAY  
#5

by ANDREW JACKSON KING

The  
rapidly  
dying  
art  
of  
the  
surfboard



I thought that week after week  
must be spent in the surf.

# You, You're the Death That I've Dreamt About

The sand stretched out in all directions in the morning sun, slowly crumbling as the moisture from the night's dew and the receding ocean evaporated into the young day. Staring off into the horizon as the rays warmed her bare skin, Jean could hear only a few cars moving about in the downtown behind her. She pictured them slowly rumbling into the repurposed streetcar diner, a late start even for this dustiest of sleepy towns.

The grains of sand warmed the soles of her feet as she brushed past the golden grasses at the beach's edge, the shorebirds before her scattering to other sections of the ever-changing dunes. She enjoyed this malleability of the coast, a blank page reborn after every wave. Moving towards the water, she eyed a turtle crawling out from the shelter of beached boat that lay upside-down thirty yards from her, its stern crushed in, the wooden carcass upturned like a finned out whale. The rotting ketch glacially succumbed to the pull of the water as did everything along the soft boundary.

Sliding the plywood board under her arm, she stopped before the water's lapping edge, feeling the sand spread between her toes. The smooth finish of the wood was warm against her skin. It felt natural, an extension of her at times. She stared out across the water, to the distant gleaming horizon, wondering if there would be any ships today as there were last week, chugging along up the coast to hidden northern ports and artificial keys that crept further into the western water.

Jean looked to the far edge of the horizon at the black sliver of rugged rock perched there, a small island she knew as the Edge of the World, the last outpost of the continent before the open ocean and, beyond that, the volcanic wilderness. The town's

inhabitants spoke reverently of it, but, as far as she knew, had never ventured out to the small outcropping. A concise town history on a gas station bulletin board she had once read mentioned the dozens of early settlers that had died in quests trying to reach the islet then, and perhaps still officially, known as Santa Oria.

Looking off into that great distance, the weight of those lost adventurous souls magnified Jean's own failures in life. They stood before her not the small, clean line of land in her sight, but rather the massive Rock of Gibraltar in her mind, weighing her every step even as she tried to escape the land for the cleansing of the water. She could see her early, promising years at university followed by the slowing down in life, her own rejection of the work she had done. She had been at sharp odds with her sponsors' applications of her theories and that was that. She left.

Discarding these weights, she walked out into the sea.

The crisp water hit her with a start. She let her body acclimate while she put the board on the surface. It floated under her hands, bobbing with the small undulations of the seaface. She could feel the grain, the deep marks of a well-worn piece of wood. There were dings on it where she had hit rocks or banged it leaving the house. These battlescars could be tended to later. She felt the knot near the end where she instinctively slid her back foot to help line up her body.

Pushing forward, Jean felt the water move past her, regular and heavy, aggressive in its recession. Her body rose and fell with the small breakers, the humble kin of greater waves in the deep ocean. The vastness of the sea swarmed around her and she knew its power. She felt its symmetry on a grand scale, but knew there was chaos and randomness when examined up close.

Treading in the surf, Jean watched how the board floated, how it seemingly repulsed the water, how they were separated. There is something here, she thought. She tucked the thought into her head as she climbed atop the slab and pushed herself forward through the water. North, she could see the pier, the few old fishermen reduced to specks amidst the oak columns. South was the Altar, a point of land that jutted out into the sea, an emerald

patch with a copse of chestnut trees and an ancient lighthouse.

Paddling, she swung her arm in a figure eight, letting the liquid cleanse her limbs. Over and over she traced the shape, stretching it out into the symbol of infinity. She imagined a rotating disc moving inside the tunnel of the shape, visceral forces at play between the two, working against and with each other. She could see the power amplifying in stages, cascading upward, the fields surrounding the bodies expanding in size.

She tucked that thought away as she realized she was far out into the sea. Too far. A small tremor of a wave was moving towards her, gaining speed and height. She pulled her legs up on the board underneath her body and stood, getting her balance slowly, surely. The ends of her hair dripped water onto her shoulders as she gained speed, the small wave accruing tidal force as it headed towards the rising sun. She advanced on the shore, saw it looming atop her before the wave crushed into itself and she moved off the board into the water.

She spent an hour in the surf, letting the waves alternately destroy and rebuild her. Her body was sore as she paddled back to shore, her arms almost giving out before her toes joyfully dug into the *llysh'a xay*, the wet sand. Out on the surf, she often forgot how much she needed the actuality of hard earth beneath her. The high sun had created hard shadows on the soft grains and as she crossed the beach, she felt that the bright sphere was harsher than during her morning excursion.

As the small wooden houses crested before her, she began to wonder how long she'd be able to live at Gentian Beach before her money ran out, but found her thoughts instead drifting back to the infinity symbol she had drawn in the water. The symbol and the spinning disc inside it. Layers of repulsion acting together. How could I exploit this? she thought.

The newly-asphalted street tore at her bare feet as she made her way to the concrete sidewalk, the smooth surfboard under her arm. Up ahead were the hardware store, the tiny post office, the diner, the grocery, everything she needed to lead a quiet, removed life. The weight of the board grew as she passed each storefront. I need to make some kind of strap to put this on

my back, she thought.

With a rattle of bells, the shining steel trolley passed her, only a few residents on-board, staring out the window to the nearby shore of the continent. The driver looked out, squinting from the sun's reflection in his mirror, but otherwise appeared emotionless in his trim blue suit. He must be new, Jean thought, his face yet unblemished.

The rotating cloth banner above him listed Ducet and Franklin Streets as the next stop. The Church of the Wild God, Jean thought. A west coast religion. A new world philosophy for facing the untamed nation far off the coast, that looming threat to Manifest Destiny.

Her small bungalow appeared before her, awash in a mustard yellow with a beaming maroon door. The window on the second story dormer was open, letting in the sea air that helped her sleep. She ascended the steps, opened the heavy oak door.

“Anybody here?”

No voice answered her call. Friends often stayed with her when passing along the coast. Sometimes they let themselves in, unannounced. She laid the board in the entryway. A stack of letters slid out from behind the door as she closed it. She flipped through them, their corners bent and burnished. Her family, the lab, the bank. She laid them on the table next to the phone before moving to the kitchen.

She sat down at the table and grabbed a ledger from the pie safe. She drew the loop, the elongated figure eight. She sketched the interior disc.

*It has to be some kind of alloy.*

She drew the surfboard and the water, both repelling the other. She paused, then drew the loop and the disc inside the board and replaced the water with the asphalt street.

She grabbed a red pencil, sharpened it, and drew a large circle around it before walking out into the backyard to read. In her hand was a slim edition of some new book about a beautiful sailor and the rights of man. Her mind could walk freely now.

The hours ticked off on the clockface next to the bed, the

clicks of the second hand tunneling through the empty night. *Ck, cc, ck, cc, ck.* Jean's mind tried to put in variation to the sounds, but each note was the same and she could do nothing to change them. *Ck, ck, ck, ck, ck.*

In the distance she could hear the chanting to the Wild God, a guttural moaning that flooded the streets at night. A fire burial. She climbed out of bed and looked northward over the town to the church. She could only see flashes of orange and yellow between the houses and buildings, but the smell of burning redwood hung heavy over the streets.

Climbing back in bed, she faced away from the window, trying to escape other people. The beam from the Altar lighthouse swung around into the room, sweeping across her far wall every eighty-three seconds. She counted the cycles over and over into the night. One minute, twenty-three seconds. The light shown in the room as the clock passed 1:23, and Jean felt elated at the synchronicity.

Yet still, time dragged as she lay awake in bed, thinking about her inability to produce anything lasting. She thought of her old classmates proposing au courant fuel sources, unstable elements, industrial strengtheners, defiant lubricants. She had nothing to show that was her own anymore. Towards the end of her studies, the haunt of death had loomed large above her and she'd been unable to focus on anything but attempts on how to stop it from overtaking her.

*How useless. Only creation was the path towards longevity. The product of imagination, invention. Rare skills. That was lasting.*

Her chest grew tight. This was the problem, always her problem. The cause of her death visions and the response to the anxiety. She was caught in a loop, always returning to the same place. Her mind raced as she tried to hold back the panic.

Focusing on her breathing, Jean felt the blood pumping, rushing, spilling out from her heart. Slight undulations in her neck, her armpits, her fingertips, her eyelids. Her breaths grew shallower. In the back of her mind, she watched herself surfing across the glassy sea, so calm, bending down to let her fingertips

drag as she sped by.

She counted the pulses of her heart relative to the revolutions of the lighthouse, feeling better as the ratio went lower until, finally, she was asleep.

Jean stood on the beach. Across the sea, past the horizon, was the mighty eruption of land that split the top of the ocean down the middle. Volcanoes had ejected island after island of onyx slag into the sea until they agglomerated into thousands of miles of narrow land. She stood with her board pointing straight into the heart of the ridge, a point thousands of miles away, wondering what would become of it in coming generations.

The rogue nation had resisted all attempts at penetration since the early explorers. Jagged barrier islands and deadly reefs played their own part in holding secrets. She wondered how long before the land's strategic importance would necessitate a military push, exposing the land to the fearful eyes of the world.

Now, though, the morning was quiet. Jean didn't feel like taking to the battering surf, her belly full of bacon and toast and black coffee. Reluctant to move, she laid the board on the ground and climbed on top, staring up at the blue sky. Birdsong rattled in the distance, clicking across the silver water from the Altar to the south.

The salty air skipped over her as she slipped in and out of sleep. She dreamt of a giant factory, all grey and steel and hard edges except for a giant vat set into the floor in the far corner of the room. She made her way to it and looked down at the gaping maw, saw that it was filled with some kind of unknown fluid. To her left was a ladder built into the wall. She moved towards it, looking up to where it might go, but the distance dragged on until the top of the room, or what she assumed could be the top if there indeed was one, was just a small black dot.

To her right, she heard a noise and looked over, terror gripping her as she saw a giant lurching towards her. Its arms moved unnaturally, the legs taking on a strange gait. The monster's clothes were deceptively simple, all clean lines of dark blue. Her eyes followed its elongated body until she found his

face, long like a horse. She gasped in the dream as she saw he had no mouth, only a smooth expanse of flesh where the opening should be. Her heart raced as the creature advanced.

Backed against the wall, she feared climbing the ladder to nowhere. As the colossus inched closer, she slid under its legs to escape, but moved too far towards the lip of the vat. As her feet fell over the edge, she spun around, trying to grab onto anything to prevent her fall, but the floor was a flawless metal slab without edges or imperfections for her fingers to slip into. Pure and deep revulsion gripped her during her freefall into the foreign substance.

Cocking her head, she saw out of the corner of her eye the flat, grey liquid at the bottom before she landed in it. The thick fluid covered her, pulling her down. She went under, but was able to push against the thickness of it to rise to the surface. As she stared up at the lights on the factory floor, she realized she couldn't breath.

In the single moment at the peak of her rise, she touched her face with her right hand. Her mouth was gone, a smooth patch of skin covering the opening where the liquid had transformed her. Oh God! she thought. Her body racked as she tried to extract every ounce of oxygen from the air caught inside of her lungs.

Swinging her head, she saw the smoothness of the vat's walls, vast sheets of polished stainless steel. There was no ladder here. She tried to push back off the viscous fluid, but could feel her feet sinking further in. Before she went under completely, she looked back up towards the factory floor. The giant peered over the edge, the bottom of his face smooth, his eyes pleading with her that he had only been trying to help.

An eternity passed as the fluid moved up her neck to her jaw, her earlobes, her cheeks, her eyes. All went black.

“Jean!”

She shook as the yell cut through the mid-morning. Beads of sweat covered her face as she opened her eyes to the crushing blue sky above her. She slipped the nightmare into the back of her head. Turning, she saw Jim, lean and tall, clamoring down the wooden stairs to the beach. He had been at university with her, more of a drinker than a student, but had always been the one to

see a problem from a new angle, a valuable skill for hemeranautics.

She smiled, shielding the sun from her eyes as she turned east to see him. He carried a surfboard under his arm, a sleek carbon fiber affair. "What are you doing here?" she asked, suppressing her excitement at a person from her old life. A regular person.

"Starting a job at Ida Electric, one of the new platinum bird suit factories up the coast. I remembered your place was always open. Wasn't hard to find out where you were from the people in town, but I didn't expect to find you sleeping out here."

"I do my best thinking right before I doze off."

"Oh, now I remember," he said, laughing. "Professor McGillicuddy could never get used to your sleep schedule coinciding with his lectures."

They talked on the beach about the old city, old bars, old friends that were young but already set on their old ways. She saw them dying at their desks, gripping equations that only later generations would be able to grapple with. Craning for solutions to multi-faceted objects in higher planes and particles that moved in directions they hadn't found yet.

As the sun rose, they carried their boards out into the sea, paddling far out past the Altar before catching waves back in. Jim watched how graceful Jean took to the board, how her body had changed since leaving the lab. She was more mechanical now, a frame moving in perfect relation to its constituent parts, a reflection of how her mind had worked back home. Intricate, methodical, causatory. The sun was high overhead when they headed in, back to the bungalow over the new sidewalks and quiet streets.

"It's slow here," Jim said.

"There's an underground, an underbelly. I'm pretty sure."

"Definitely a strange-looking group."

They relaxed in the sun, sleeping into the early afternoon. Jean relished it because she knew how hard her old acquaintances would be working at that time, cramming everything in before leaving for the 5 o'clock streetcar.

With twilight setting in, the pair walked back downtown and ate at the diner for dinner. Meatloaf sandwiches, french fries, hot black coffee brewed with chicory to cut against the shortage. Always rationing, she thought.

Jim spent the night and she could feel his lean body generating enough heat for the both of them under the thin quilt as the crisp sea air blew in through the window. Jean strained to hear any sounds from the church, but it was quiet for the night, empty. She knew Jim would leave in the morning and she would return to her old ways, he to his. Always caught in a loop. She wished she could just go to sleep.

The lamp on the lighthouse swung into the darkened room. This was her only constant. She counted the eighty-three seconds. Over and over, eighty-three seconds. On quiet nights when the wind caught the air rushing towards the beach, Jean could hear the power plant on the other side of town. *Vruum vruum, rum rum, vruum vruum, rum rum.* Unlike the clock, the plant had a distinct sound to each change, different qualities for each part of its cycle.

The sounds of the plant mixed with the ticking on the clock. *Vruum vruum, ck ck ck ck, rum rum, ck ck ck ck.* A mechanical symphony that played only for her. Her mind had always imagined the disc moving inside the loop without sound, without friction, perfect in its objective, but now the sounds and the image moved together, humming in defiance. They all worked together to create something new.

Before Jim left, she wanted to tell him of the device, of the reversal of nature, of her fears of never making anything lasting. But she couldn't. They ate breakfast and hugged and he slid his board into the back of his panel truck and left. She waved, tracing the symbol in the air.

“Reject order!” he had yelled out to her as he turned onto the road, smiling. She knew the phrase to be from the *Swell Line*, the book of the Wild God. *Reject order and be born again unto the hard earth.*

What kind of religion rejects the sea? she wondered. Had there been any that so faithfully turned against the rejuvenation of the world’s oceans? A religion solely for new world farmers and

cattlehands, forgetting the past for the shadows over the horizon. She wondered how an engineer could embrace such absurd lines of thought. The most ordered segment of society rejecting order along with the masses. Only in such easy words.

“What an idiot,” she muttered under her breath. She felt bad for him, knew that his fleeting belief in a footnote religion would infect his work. She felt like taking to the sea to clear her mind, but her body was tired. She turned away from the town and climbed her front steps.

*They're all idiots, the whole lot.*

Jean had slowly come to realize during her stay that Gentian Beach lived in silences and drawn curtains, fighting off even the slightest of social changes that occurred in society at large. They watched her in her swimsuit, atop the board, and shuddered. These were people at the almost-edge of the world, all escaping for their own reasons to the reviled coast, compounding their group fears. Fears of mechanization and progress, fears of industry and phonographs, photographs, x-rays, radios, and televisions.

Only the car made any headway.

Jean studied the faces of lonely people adrift. That was what haunted her. Strange, misshapen faces. She wondered if they came to Gentian Beach because they were outcasts or if the town itself made them so odd.

These were the faces of people that had fled a society simply not made for them. As the Wild God spread, outsiders agglomerated in the seaside town. She wondered what it would have been like if, instead, surfers had flooded the gridded streets and ample plazas of the somnambular town. A missed opportunity.

Thinking of her board, she felt like taking to the beach, but didn't exactly feel like surfing. She thought of the lighthouse, of the perfect sweep it made every eighty-three seconds. Eschewing her sliver of wood for a bottle of brandy, she stepped out into the late morning and reached the Altar before lunch.

She knocked on the heavy chestnut door.

A head peeked out from a window two stories up. “Yes?”

the man called down.

“You’re the keeper?” she asked.

“Yes,” the man yelled.

“Only you?”

“Only me.”

“I’d like to speak with you. I’m new in town.” She wasn’t sure what she wanted, why she wanted to meet him. But the lighthouse was just too perfect. Perhaps it could help her focus.

“You’re not new here. You’ve been to Gentian Beach many times before. I’ve seen you, ah, surfing, they call it.” The old man had deeper knowledge from his perch than Jean had anticipated.

“Why did you take this job? Aren’t you lonely?” She projected her own thoughts onto the man. Since she had run to the beach to escape the crushing weight of expectations, shouldn’t everybody act as she had?

“We are only what we make of ourselves,” the man yelled down, busy and bothered with her taking his time. “I save ships, what have you done today?”

Jean let his words sink in. There was a grinding noise from inside the building. He turned to look at it. She nodded back up at him, letting him go, and placed the bottle on the stoop of the door as a goodwill gesture.

Around the base of the building was a thick margin of white rock to help it drain away water during storms. Picking up one of the stones, Jean traced the looping symbol on the door in a chalky white outline and turned, throwing the stone into the sea as she left.

The garage door opened with a sharp grinding of metal as Jean threw the handle above her head. She was struck by the smell of sawdust, wood stain, various resins. The switch on the nearby wall turned on the lights, great metal parabolas that illuminated the worktable underneath.

Laying the board upon it, Jean crossed over to one of the cabinets in the back and slid out a small radio from one of the drawers. She crossed back to the front of the garage and glanced up and down the empty alley behind her garage. She contemplated

shutting the door to protect herself, but it was too hot that night, the sea air exceedingly necessary to keep the workspace cool.

Satisfied with her privacy, she plugged the small radio in, turning the volume down as she brought wood planes and sanding blocks over to the table. The board's dents and imperfections were slowly reshaped and refinished over the next few hours, Jean pausing occasionally to listen to a boxing match and stock reports, popular songs and war coverage, even baseball highlights. This chain kept her connected to the old world, kept her sharp and relevant, even if she felt disconnected to it all.

As she finished the board, Jean grabbed a metal pipe from the corner that she had rescued from the trash a few weeks earlier. She had no use for it then, but as she stared at it, she began to imagine it as the three-dimensional projection of the symbol, bent and shaped into a figure eight inside her head. She expanded the hollow core and imagined the rotating disc inside. Grabbing a pencil, she jotted several equations, working out the math on the table's raw surface. Her mind worked through all this as the piece of cold, grey steel lay on the workbench. This kind of visualization is what she had been good at in her old life. Seeing how small changes, small improvements, could lead to the rare shift in collective thought.

Ten, twenty, forty minutes passed in a whirlwind of mathematical symbols and computations. Critical stretches of time were spent simply staring at the pole, its power growing in her mind even as it lay immobile, dead to the world on a wooden table in an old garage on a quiet street in a reclusive town. She knew it would work.

As the night grew on, she could see across the street to the O'Connors house, the light in the son's room still aglow, his ear pressed to the window as he tried to catch samples of the electronic communication that Jean had all but pushed from her head as she worked. She paused and watched as the boy, exhausted, slid down the window, hitting the ground with a start. She saw his head rise again above the sill as he rubbed it with his hand. His mother entered, shut the window, and put the boy to bed before switching off the light.

Jean, too, figured it was time for sleep and shut off the radio as the announcer droned on about the Atlantic casualties. “Every atom counts!” she heard him say as she switched the power off.

Grabbing the surfboard, she cut the lights and pulled down the garage door before climbing the steps of the porch and heading inside.

Jean took to the water, her surfboard cutting through the surface, her sylphic figure cleaving the air as she cruised towards the coast. It had become rote, her mind becoming free as she surfed, no longer needing to think about balance and form. In this relaxed state, she could contemplate the shape and the disc.

*It would work. There would be just enough repulsion between the fields. But what would be its applications? Long-term. I can't simply think of the first attempts. A century from now – what of it?*

The results of dynamite loomed large in her mind.

In the distance, south towards the Altar in a small cove, she thought she could see a small child huddled under the protection of a rock. She squinted, trying to make out anything in the bright sun. It was early in the day and she didn't see anybody standing around that could be watching him. Catching a wave, Jean made her way down the coast some before falling to her board and paddling. She neared the cove, straining to see the small figure. A wave tossed her from the board. As she climbed back atop it, wiping the wet hair from her face, she saw that the beach was empty.

She walked the shore for an hour, trying to find any evidence of the boy. Only a few soft marks in the sand remained, but the water had eroded them and made them indistinguishable from random impressions upon the beach. Perhaps she had imagined it. Perhaps it was a bird, or a floater in her eye as she faced the sun. She wasn't sure anymore. Gathering her board and clothes, she made her way to the diner for a late breakfast of toast and coffee.

Walking in, Jean noticed a commotion among the usually

placid townspeople. Grace, the waitress working every time Jean entered, stood at the counter filling up cups of coffee. Jean liked her. She was simple and friendly, not like the others. There was never the impression that she followed the Wild God.

One of the patrons, an old man, hunched over and seated at a table, spoke. "All I'm saying is that no kid from around here is missing. And this one wasn't from around here from the sound of it."

"Let's not jump to any conclusions, Mike," Grace said.

Another spoke. "Hell with that. If it's one of them, we need to find out if there's more."

"That was one of them. They're trying to figure out how strong we are."

"That doesn't make any sense. Probably was just a kid from the next town skipping school."

The bells attached to the door jingled as Jean shut the door and kicked the bottom of it to fit the wood into the distorted frame. The diners turned and stared at her, a bolting calm besetting the haven of coffee cups and white dishes. She studied them quickly, saw their mangled hands and the growths on their faces and arms.

"I saw him, too." The words tumbled out of her mouth and she had wished she could put them back in. Their small-mindedness towards the phantom child was palpable. But their eyes had looked at her with such distrust, she couldn't help but spill it out, hoping for some sort of acceptance.

*But why? Why do I need that?*

She felt instantly disgusted with herself.

She caught the air before anybody else could speak. "He was from the Valley, a migrant, said his older brother had left home last year to be a surfer. I guess this was the only place he knew of with a beach. I told him I hadn't seen anybody surfing here, but that I'd ask around." She felt her blood race as she lied. "I went to get my stuff to take him to the police station, but he was gone when I turned around. Just a scared kid, but he seemed smart enough to get by. He's probably halfway back to his family by now."

She scanned the room, staring into the eyes of the patrons, hoping the story would stick. Some looked placated, others still had that blood-vision in their eyes. They would never trust her here. They could never learn to accept anybody different.

Grace broke the silence. "Well, we oughta get Charles out here to look for him, anyway. At least, let him know what's going on."

Some of the men at the counter held their gaze on Jean for a few seconds longer, eyeing her body and constitution, before a slight murmur of agreement arose among them. She returned their looks, trying to focus on their eyes and not the strange growths covering their bodies. As they turned back to their plates and failures, Jean pulled the door open to leave.

"Aren't you gonna eat anything?" Grace asked, looking after her the way a mother would.

"Not today."

Jean left, grabbing her board as it leaned against the front of the building, wood on chrome. She pointed it back towards the beach, away from the townsfolk, and reflected on the exchange. The growths on most of their faces had always disturbed her. She wondered what they were from.

The house rose on the town like a bird on a wire as Jean returned home. She had scoured the beach for hours, her usual surfing a fitting cover for the exercise, but turned up nothing. She wondered if she had actually seen a boy, but kept reminding herself that somebody at the diner had seen a child, too. She knew he must be real. And their anger and fear made not finding him all the worse. She didn't know what they would do if they came upon him, but the sun had set, there was nothing more she could do.

Sitting on her porch, Jean stared west across the water to help clear her mind. The shape, the device, if she built it, that was her way back in. That was her key to longevity, her key to immortality.

*Nobody is working on anything close that to this, and it is truly novel. How easy life could become for travelers, for transport, for shipping, for construction.*

Other ideas, all positive, unraveled in her head.

Waking out of her daze, she realized that an hour had passed. In the hazy moonlight, she saw that her hand had stained the dry wood grain of the porch floor. She made herself a sandwich in the kitchen and ate hurriedly before locking the house and making her way upstairs. Like always, the lighthouse spun in, every eighty-three seconds. That was immortality, she thought. That kind of perfection.

As she crawled into bed, she could hear the chanting. It was different this night. More visceral, more guttural. The voices seemed possessed, not the placid townies she had come to understand as she passed them on the street. This night, the mob was violent.

She knew it had to do with the boy that may or may not even be on the coast any longer. May or may not have been from the far volcanic lands. She wished him all the safety in the world if he was around, wherever he had come from, but she knew the heavy bloodlust would continue, the boy no longer necessary.

Her mind started a separate but related track and she thought about the lighthouse. Without a need for warning, if crafts could just repel the surface around them, the lighthouse would become useless. If the crafts could be made to resist collision, they could move quickly, easily. They would be impervious. There would be surprise attacks. Devastating attacks. That was the end result. War.

The chanting was hypnotic now. Jean got up and stared out the window, the salt air washing over her. I have to see this.

Stepping through the chill darkness, Jean buttoned her jacket tightly to her body. She passed house after house, darkened and shuttered. The whole town must be here, she thought. She hoped Grace wasn't.

As she neared the church, the chanting paused. Jean stopped in the street, slid her body against the clapboard siding of a house, waiting to see if she had been found out. Her heart raced. She could see the lighthouse lamp illuminating the strange angled steeple as it swept by. Once, twice, three times. The chanting

began again and Jean let out a sigh.

Crossing the town plaza, she sidled up to the ancient brick warehouse parallel to the church. It had been a sea salt refinery decades ago, but now served as a storage facility for the town. Moving around to the back of it, Jean knew she'd be lined up with the transept wings of the church and could look west into the apse. She'd be able to see all of the worshippers through the great side windows.

As she moved east around the warehouse, she faced a single row of houses along Worth Street. A lone light shone from a top window and Jean could see a young girl staring out into the night. She wondered if the girl knew where her parents were. As the moon shone through the window, she could see the girl's eyes follow her. Please don't make a sound. Jean put her finger up to her lips, but nothing changed in the girl's face. She moved on.

Approaching the northeast corner of the dilapidated building, she peeked around the corner. The windows of the church to the west were above her view. Stepping around the corner, she saw an old ladder attached to the wall of the building used for moving goods up into the clerestory that crested the warehouse. Checking the strength, she climbed inside the rusted skeleton and shimmied up to the top slowly to prevent any sounds emanating from this otherwise empty quarter of town.

Surmounting the marble cornice capping the building, she stepped out onto a small metal balcony attached to the rear of the roof. From here she could see directly into the candle-lit sanctum. Orange faces flickered in the dark, moving and chanting. Jean shivered and felt it travel from the base of spine up the back of her head before spreading around to her ears, down to her arms, and out her fingertips. She craned to see who was leading the orgy, what townmember orchestrated all this, but could see nothing. It seemed communal, a democratic madness of character.

More candles lit up in the darkened sanctuary. She could see some of the faces, the mangled growths on their noses and chins catching the fractured amber light. She recognized some, not all. She thought she could almost make out the words of the chants, the long syllables distorting their regular shapes, but lost

her hold on them. In the swelling candle glow, she saw a soft shape appear near the altar, dragged into view as somebody held it from behind.

*The child.*

The glow grew closer to the body as the crowd pressed in. From behind in the dark of the altar, Jean could see a knife plunge into the body. She gasped as the knife was twisted, pulled out, and thrust again. The chanting stopped. The candlelight moved closer to the violence and she could see now that it was a dummy, a stuffed figurine on the altar. A voice spoke.

*What language are they speaking?*

The chanting began again. Abruptly, it stopped. The candles went out. Jean ducked down beneath the railing on the balcony, peering out through the metal bars. She stared into the darkness, waiting. A blue dot appeared on the altar. It glowed, warm like a thousand summer afternoons. Jean became entranced by it. It pulsated, but was perfectly focused. She knew it. Nobody in town would.

*Photons passing through a decaying medium. Cesium? They must have found it in a machine. It doesn't matter. It must seem like magic to them. The radiation...*

In the darkness, her foot hit a pile of metal scraps stacked on the balcony. They clattered to the ground, crashing in a cacophony that echoed through the empty streets. A few candles came alight. Her heart instantly began to race as she saw some of the faces in the darkened room turn towards the east to see the commotion. Some of the bodies stood up.

Jean clambered to the ground. As her feet crashed forcefully on each rung, the rusted metal bolts holding the steel frame to the ancient brick wall scraped and rattled. The top of the ladder began to peel off the building as she struggled to reach the hard earth. With a rasping metallic groan, the entire structure tore off the facade.

For a second, caught in the cool night air, she felt weightless. The infinity shape appeared in her mind for a moment before the ladder and its cage crashed into the street. The semi-circle of steel protected her body as she held onto the rungs, but

her legs and back were smashed and cut.

Dazed, she pulled herself out of the metal tube and surveyed the block. Voices were yelling from inside the building as she ran. She heard the great oak doors open up and the bodies pouring out into the street. The mob was in a frenzy. She could feel the heat from the day's sun still radiating off the asphalt as she escaped through the narrow streets.

Without having to turn, she knew there were dozens of bodies behind her, angry and deranged at the defiling of their bizarre ceremony. She turned the corner towards her house, saw the worn tread on the steps, the front door that never closed exactly right, the porch swing that creaked too much to be used. She thought about trying to get her surfboard, but knew there would be no way to carry it out. She didn't know how long she'd have to run.

With a sense of longing, she passed her house. In one final look back at the protective bungalow, she saw the lighthouse lamp, her constant companion, solitary and purposeful, swing into the upper level. She'd left the window open.

In the deep night of a waning gibbous moon, she ran, ran until her feet were sore, blood from her cut arms and legs staining the soft amber dust on the shoulder of the road a deep magenta. When headlights shown in the far distance behind her, she'd crawl into the tall grass of the long acre until they passed.

With a forgotten and deep resolve, Jean kept running. Kept running for the night was long and expansive in the open country and she hoped that while she was still protected by the cloak of darkness, she would be able to make it to the next town, away from the church and away from the Wild God and away from the curse of decaying elements and decaying hamlets, decaying people and decaying relationships.

She ran to reach the other coast and her old life.

# Dry Harbour

“Thanks for the info,” Carmen said, closing her bag. “Take it easy.” She handed the taxi driver her money and stepped out of the yellow cab onto the hot asphalt, sand sprinkling its surface from the wind coming off the sea.

The driver nodded back at her. “No problem. I don’t get out too far from the city anymore. It’s pretty nice, despite what they say.” He sped off, hurrying back to the city for more fares, more passengers, more of the long cycle.

The clapboard building in front of Carmen stood like a beach sentry, separating the dirty far fringe of the metropolitan edge from the wild and golden beach. There were small havens of the old world all over, grandfathered into planning codes that protected them from being removed and their land sequestered into the regular borders of the region.

Yet, even here, so far out, Carmen could faintly see the inverted pyramid shape of the city as it continually grew up and out in spires and cantilevered additions far from the rocky surface below. That was how her problems had grown. Up and out. The repo men, her sister’s sickness, cancer for both parents. Up and out, always worse. She’d saved up a few dozen hours of out-time and had decided to spend it on the hard ground, not up in the sky. She knew that it would be difficult to return to work after seeing the ocean.

But those concerns were all on the far side of the city, separated by a million tons of glass and steel and shielded from her direct gaze. Something to drink would help to shield it all from her mind’s eye.

She turned to the water. The setting sun cast a lusty ripple on the seaface, the darkness growing from the east as she stared up at the neon sign perched on the building’s roof – *Al Rose’s* – all alight in neon. She figured that would cause some trouble for

newcomers to the coast town, if any even bothered to come. Tavern, bar, joint. Couldn't they put something up there to specify its purpose? Yet the trapped gas kept humming in red and blue and yellow, unwavering in its message out into the night, inviting all within despite any reservations they might have.

Grabbing the door, Carmen pulled it and was met with a gust of cool air from the great units in the back. There was the smell of sage on the draft as she surveyed the room: tables to her left with a few patrons scattered between them; a jukebox in the back aglow with zydeco; and, to her right, a full-length bar with a polished chrome top. Patrons sat along the edge of it as two bartenders, a man and woman, served from the taps and bottles fronting the mirrored wall.

She pulled up a stool and placed her hands on the smooth bar surface. The woman behind it looked at her and tilted her head upwards, inviting an order. "Sidecar," Carmen said, pulling her money out of a pocket on the front of her jacket.

The woman spun around, grabbing bottles and ice, before turning to hand Carmen the glass. "What brings you out this way?"

She lied. "Looking to get out of the city, away from the grind." She didn't want to talk about her problems with anybody. Not yet.

"Good place to do it. Not too busy out here."

"What do people do here?"

"Surf, sleep on the beach, start up failed relationships."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Three so far for me this year," the bartender said, holding up her fingers.

Carmen laughed and stuck out her hand, introducing herself.

"Irene, nice to meet you," the woman said, shaking it before heading down the bar to help out the other bartender.

Carmen listened in as two men were having an argument a few stools down.

"It wasn't even addressed to you. Maybe it's all a joke for the guy that lived there before."

"It's no joke," the man said, pulling out a slim catalog.

“Look at this – polychronic reducer. What the hell is that? Customizable intellator, parabolic distillation refractor, chromotine disruptor. And on like this. I’ve never heard of any of this stuff. And the prices!”

“Maybe it’s for governments. Not for us regular joes. I might have to call the cops on you for even holding that.”

“You jerk.”

Carmen leaned over and brazenly asked to take a look at it at the thin book the men were discussing.

“Sure, go ahead. Let me know if you recognize anything. This idiot here doesn’t know his ass from his elbow.”

Carmen laughed, reaching for the magazine. The paper was thick and coarse, much nicer than the catalogs for camping equipment and expensive outerwear that the postman normally shoved into her mailbox. The cover was dimpled and heavy, dyed a deep magenta. A box at the top proclaimed the title, *The Pacificium*, with a simple illustration of a small gleaming cube beneath it. At the bottom, printed in ink nearly the same shade as the cover were the words “Caelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt” and a number 7, for what she assumed was the issue or volume number.

Opening the cover, Carmen ran her fingers along the inky line drawings of various contraptions and gadgets. There were pieces of metal with odd dials and double-handed cranks. Glass and bulbs and boxes, covered in all sorts of antennae. She had never seen anything like it.

“Beats me,” Carmen said.

“I’m still going with a joke,” the second man said. “Somebody’s just trying to fool you.”

“Lot of work for a joke,” his friend replied.

By now, some of the other patrons had begun to gather around the three, arching and craning to get a look at the catalog. Carmen turned to the first man. He nodded and she passed it around to some of the others, each in turn looking at the esoteric etchings and descriptions. As a couple from one of the tables got up and took their turn, a siren off in the distance began to call into the night.

“What’s that?” Carmen asked.

“Shore patrol. Could be a few different things,” the male bartender said. “Bad waves, incoming ships, storms. Wanna go take a look?”

Carmen grabbed her glass and went out the back door with the man, a few of the other patrons following behind them. Some of the moon’s early rays reflected off the water as the man stared out into the ocean. “I don’t see anything.”

A woman from the bar followed through the door and took a step closer to the shore, her eyes squinting in the night. She pointed into the distance. “See that? What’s over there?” she asked.

Carmen watched. To the north-northwest she could make out a yellow and orange dot. As she watched, they grew larger. From the pair’s far point on the horizon, a green and red dot sprung into view, all four growing in size. Finally, a blue and violet dot appeared. The siren continued.

“Yeah, I see ‘em, too,” a man from the bar whispered.

“Irene!” the bartender yelled. The woman stepped out from the doorway.

“Yeah, Mark?”

“Look at that, kind of over there towards Engratia Point.”

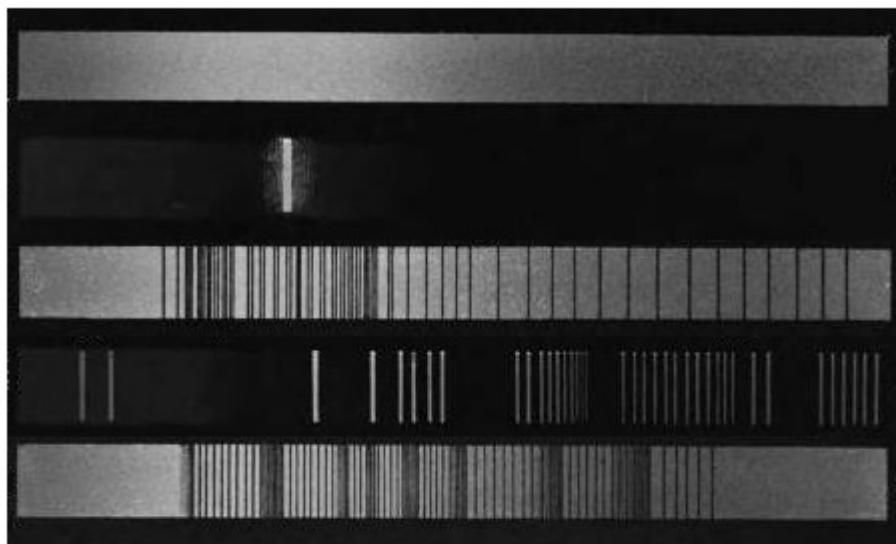
Irene looked at the color spots, their shapes quickly approaching the shore. “Hell if I know.” The spots began to grow in intensity, bearing down on the small outpost of humanity, the bar at the end of the road. “Let’s get inside,” she said, ushering the group back within the thin wooden walls.

Walking back to the chrome bar, the group noticed a woman sitting at a table in the corner, casually flipping through the pages of the catalog, savoring each image, fawning over each word. Carmen had noticed her when she came in, but the woman hadn’t followed the group outside.

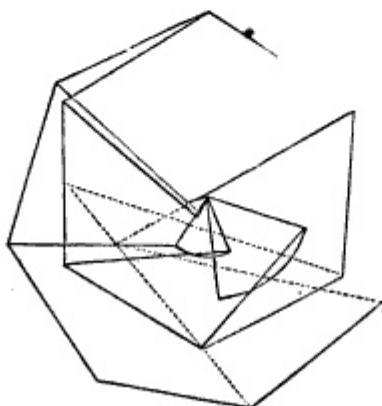
“It’s not a joke, I’m afraid. Certainly not for you, however,” she said to the man from the bar, tipping the catalog in his direction.

The patrons refilled to their seats and faced the strange woman. The magazine-receiver sat down next to her. “What is it then?”

FATE



*ON TERRESTRIAL APPLICATIONS*



The woman smiled, sipping the gin she had poured for herself while the rest had been outside. “It’s a catalog for a specific group of people. People that clean up all kinds of messes. I presume you recently moved into your house, Mr.?”

“Catherwaught. And yes. My wife and I moved in a few months ago.”

“Definitely not for you then, Mr Catherwaught,” the woman said, her eyes moving up and down the body of the man. “Definitely not for you.”

“Well, what is this all-.” The man was cut off mid-sentence as another siren began blaring between the silences of the original horn. Almost every beat was now filled with the ringing from the dual horns. One of the couples reached across their table and held each other’s hands.

At the bar, Carmen noticed her glass rattling on the counter as a great gust of air passed by outside the tavern and rattled the windows. She was just turning her head as a broad bead of yellow, pure magnificent yellow, split the corner of the building, a rush of color spilling through and obliterating the wall. Planks of wood flew across the open room. Thrown from her seat by the force, she skidded across the floor before slamming into the door frame she had used to enter earlier.

Carmen watched as the blotch of yellow cut a hole two feet across through the wall then bored a hole into the sternum of one of the men seated at the bar. Before she could even react, the orange dot from the sea appeared to the left of the yellow, tearing another two feet of destruction through the building. Irene yelled from behind the bar as Mark dove for the back door. The red stream followed, sending glass from the liquor bottles exploding through the room as Carmen tried to stand and cover her face. She turned as the green tore through the walls and windows closest to her.

Scrambling on her hands towards the door, she made it out into the night and onto the uneven wood of the walkway, a nail catching on her palm and tearing the soft skin. As she turned back to the bar, the blue and violet streams bit into the building, sending a final shower of the wooden carcass’s walls flying into

the night. Moving farther back and reaching the safety of the street, she stood and watched the chaos in its totality.

Six distinct voices of color originated from somewhere far off in the ocean, horizontal beams of pigment cruising across the water and into the bar. The massive holes went straight through the building, fording off into the distance, yet the walls continued to stand as if held aloft by the outward force of the streams. As Carmen watched, she could see that they weren't perfect in their constitution, but rather rough and ragged at the edges, like the torrent of a waterfall. Bits of each color rippled off and fell to the ground as the courses rushed powerfully over the sea and land.

In the moonlight, she noticed a splotch of the yellow had landed on her leg as she was blown from her seat. Despite the chaos, she became entranced by the stain. She rubbed it between her fingers, noticing its purity. This was the most beautiful yellow she had ever seen. She looked back up at the streams, still moving through the night and realized each was the most perfect hue, the mind's fleeting paragon for each color's shade. She marveled at the vibrancy and life of each stream, even as the roar of the destruction continued.

Looking back at the yellow on her fingers, she watched it dissolve into her skin. She thought of her family back in the city. It was wrong to have left. She loved them. Each of them was perfect even if they fought and argued and wondered who would be paying for the next meal. Everybody was perfect. Euphoria passed over Carmen as she sat on the hot asphalt edge, staring at the rippling color.

The sound of a cry brought her out of her daze.

Pushing herself up off the ground, she heard Mark's voice cutting through the night. He was wailing in pain. To get to him, Carmen realized she had to make her way past the color streams to the beach. All six continued to rumble, tearing little pieces of the building away as it languidly fell in upon itself, the structure beginning to lose its integrity. Looking up and down the beach, she saw that there was slightly more room underneath them to the north and began to run up the road to cut across.

As she ran, she thought about where the streams were

going, what towns and cities they could destroy, but hoped the downward angle would run them into the ground. She wondered if they'd go through the earth, eventually darting off into space, a great welcome and goodbye for any outer travelers.

The jonquil light of the moon glinted off the windshield of a car winding down the road towards her from the north and she thought of the yellow in the stream, that majestic and flawless gold. It dominated her mind. She thought of dandelions and canaries, lemons and butterflies and sand and bumblebees. Her mind exploded in thoughts of yellow. She longed to see the hidden sun in all its aurulent glory, but the howling in the night brought her back.

Up towards where the highway curved along the coast, Carmen found a spot deep enough for her to crawl under. She took caution, knowing she would be obliterated if she chanced touching the colors. Taking a deep breath, she lay on the ground, dragging herself towards the water. She realized this brought her elbows up too high and spun around onto her back, pushing herself forward with the heels of her feet. As she got near the yellow, she could feel flecks of it falling off, splattering on her face and neck.

She continued on into the rushing flux, the orange and green and red cascading above her, the pressure pushing into her eardrums. Staring up into the colors, she realized she hadn't moved in several minutes, lost in the torrent. Only the dull, faraway sound of Mark's yells snapped her back.

She felt like she was beginning to glimpse the beautiful understanding within the streams, but Mark was in such pain. She continued on. Finally past the blue and violet, she saw her body was covered in the various pigments, her frame a kaleidoscope of chromaticity. Scrambling to her feet, she ran down the beach, parallel to the sea on her right and the colors on her left.

The ruins of the bar were scattered before her, pieces of torn metal, shattered glass, wrenched cedar. The colors continued unabated. Carmen surveyed the wreckage in the glow of the moonlight. The colors were so pure.

She turned herself away as Mark called out.

Running across the beach, Carmen found the bartender and, kneeling down, realized his leg had been severed. As she leaned in, holding his head with one hand, she could see that the green had torn the limb free, the verdant shade scattered across the severed flesh. Mark feebly looked at the wound and they both realized it was not bleeding. There was no open tear. The green had closed the detachment. He shook and passed out.

Carmen stood up to search for other survivors. She heard no more cries, saw no movement. As she moved back to Mark, the woman from the corner table appeared from behind her.

“It’s out,” she said, casually staring across the ocean.

“What’s out? What is going on?” Carmen asked as the woman moved closer to the water, forcing her to turn her head away from the colors and the ruins.

“Someone far away is taking back the world that was. Or, rather, the world that could be.”

Carmen looked up, puzzled. She wiped the sweat from Mark’s forehead.

The woman took out a cigarette. “Don’t you find this all so...drab? This is a somebody’s way of taking back the world from the greys out there, the accountants, the elevator music, the small talk. Most of the public stays in the city, content, two meals a day, zero-point-seven kids, three-and-a-half minute commute. Placated. They had a lid on it for a while, but, ah. I suppose it’s out. Glad I don’t work there anymore. Hell of a mess.”

She lit the cigarette in her hand, held onto the chrome lighter in her other. “Whoever it is, they’ll have to learn to control it, temper it for creation and not destruction.”

The woman took a long, sanguine drag of her cigarette, the sweet smell of tobacco lingering in the salty air. “But that won’t be the last one, I’m afraid.”

Carmen stared out across the inky water and then back to Al Rose’s, destroyed. So many people killed and she couldn’t exactly understand for what. But the colors began to taper off, thinning out into the deep night. These streams would soon end.

She imagined her world, all bland and grey and concrete, being transformed, infused with emotion. All of it. Rushes of

color populating the landscape, suffusing a cold building, emblazoning a forgotten roadway, dappling an energy depot. The color had made her feel things that she only dimly remembered from a long-ago childhood. She thought about trade-offs, but her mind wandered.

She thought of the yellow, of the dynamism it held, and realized that she longed to return to her family in the city. She couldn't remember their problems, couldn't remember her own. None of it mattered. They were all as beautiful as that perfect yellow.

# The Hogback

Across the city, an ancient klaxon pealed through the night, a forgotten alarm set off by a useless trigger in an empty, ruined district. Simone looked up at the dark sky, noted the slowed moon's position and ran through the lunar orbit in her head. She knew there'd be a few more of the old days before the sun peaked out from across the ocean.

Crouching down in an alley, she caught her breath and could feel the synovial fluid moving in her damaged knee, the scar tissue swelling the longer she was down. It had been useful to hide at the beginning, but lately the city seemed almost devoid of internal threats. Now she simply had to pause and rest and crouch because her body grew sluggish and weak.

As she'd become exhausted and spent over the last few weeks, the strange black lichen that had spread throughout the city took the inverse path, continuing to grow profusely, drawing nutrients up from the urban decay. It covered the crumbling walls of the buildings around her, climbing towards their tops to await the sunlight that must surely come soon.

Simone reflected on the full moon as it hung delicately in the northwestern sky. Judging by the slender 17-jewel Bucherer watch she wore on her wrist, there had been seventeen days to this night so far. For months, she had tried to guess the length of days and nights until she had met a traveler in an abandoned hotel who taught her the path and occultations of the lunar orbit. His chest was crushed under a collapsing I-beam during a bombardment a few hours later, but the valuable knowledge lived on in her.

Moving down the darkened alley to find shelter, she saw her path blocked by a giant truck, a rusted hulk with black soot along the engine lid where it had caught fire. Simone climbed atop the fender, glancing sidelong at the two charred skeletons inside, and spotted the fire escape above her. Removing the collapsible

hook ladder from her pack, she flipped out the rungs on each side and angled the rounded edge at the top onto the rusted metal platform attached to the building beside her.

She climbed up, waiting on each step as the pole swung freely without a bracket at the bottom to brace itself, the loose grating of the platform above her scratching against the brick building. Pulling herself up onto the damp landing, she slipped as she attempted to stand and the crunch of something breaking in her pocket clattered off the walls of the narrow alley. Wincing, she folded the ladder and ascended the metal steps, assured that the lower rooms were most likely sacked already.

Reaching the top of the building fourteen levels up, she looked out across the western expanse of the city. The moon was full and in the golden light she could just see the top of the old downtown buildings, some destroyed, some not. Near the water, there was a fire burning, its flames flying wantonly through the night. She struggled to see any moving bodies, any semblance of humanity left, but the place had grown increasingly empty.

*Could just be some old gas tank that went up randomly. Maybe.*

In the distance, there was the sound of crushing metal, the squeal of steel being torn apart. Simone knew it was the beast. Craning around to the edge of the overhang, she could see towards the southeast and spotted the edge of the glowing green depression in the financial district. There was a burst of automatic gunfire before she tugged at the reluctant apartment window and let herself in.

*Nice place.*

Simone exhaled and tried to relax as the golden moonlight skipped through the glass panes on the wall. She smiled to herself, thinking about the machine gun she had heard, a sign that life continued to exist on the devastated island. It still amazed her that people clung to the city like she had, refusing to give up, refusing to run. She liked that about the city. The rivers that cut the island off from the mainland might be choked with tens of thousands of rotting bodies, but there was still a handful of wild maniacs that enjoyed the chaos and revelled in taunting the beast.

A calm fell over her as she undid the laces on her boots, sliding them off onto the wood floor of the apartment. Relaxing into one of the previous tenant's soft leather chairs, Simone's eyes grew heavy. In the distance, to the east, she could just see the top of the Anatarch Building, gleaming, undestroyed. Before the beast had attacked, she had wondered what it would have been like to live there. Even to enter the building would have been a rush. The exodus had given her a perfect opportunity to fulfill her dreams, but the creature was always too close to the building's position. So she watched from afar, pondering how to attack the steel and concrete structure that loomed so high above her mental landscape.

*How can I slip past the monster?*

As she dropped into sleep, she dreamt of the Anatarch. It grew larger in her mind, consuming her entire vision plane. It grew and grew, the last bastion of civilization and order on the narrow sliver of land. She dreamt of the old way, of attending some luminary's private gala. She could see the women in furs and the men in suits leaving their chauffeured cars, laughing and free. As she ascended the steps, she saw her date step out from behind a column, offering a hand to lead her up the steps. She smiled and extended her own, her eyes aglow, her mind free to dally on the niceties of life.

An explosion somewhere in the city jolted Simone awake. She rubbed her eyes, looked out the window. A cluster of antennae peeked out from above the Dew Drop District, the crystal rays of the sun's reflection upon the lunar surface just grazing the buildings' steel projections. Their receivers lay dead and silent, overloaded by powerful signals from the depression. Staring out at the extinguishing metropolis, her stomach clenched in pain. She had put off eating to rest, but now realized how hungry she had become.

The kitchen, like the rest of the apartment, was completely intact, having escaped being ransacked during the initial chaos, but also surviving the later hunkering down period. There had been millions of people, tens of thousands apartments, so it wasn't rare for her and others to find a good place to live for a few days, yet it was getting more difficult to find ones this well-provisioned.

Throwing open the cabinets, Simone found cans of tuna, boxes of crackers, cereal, dried fruit. She wagered she could stay in the city for a short while longer, just skating by before having to figure out a way to remove herself to the mainland, but admitted that her separation with the island would probably be sooner rather than later.

Attacking these edible stores, she slid down onto the floor between the granite island and the rest of the kitchen, the windows onto the city situated behind her. She thought if she could close off her vision to the cityscape, she could push everything out of her mind and relax. Yet, as she ate, several explosions lit up the night sky, the orange and red and green reflections on the stainless steel refrigerator doors signaling the madness outside.

The naval ships she had seen a few days before were certainly shelling the creature, lobbing mortars and other explosives into the city's streets and plazas, and Simone grew frightened because she was never able to find a pattern to their attacks. The crews simply struck wildly and randomly, without a plan. She pictured being trapped in a shelled building, rubble raining down upon her. Her heart raced.

She thought then, too, of the hogback. Of the first time she saw it, or, rather, glanced it. The sun was out then. The gang had emerged from the alley, grabbing her backpack and flinging her to the ground. As she ran to chase them, they had all heard it and froze. The slow gallop of the beast, the sound of concrete and asphalt being crushed, the sound of breathing, not through a nose or mouth, but rather the rattle of giant lungs, or their analogues, expanding to the size of a city bus.

There had been no time to turn back so she had run into a department store beside her, through the destroyed racks of clothes, the untouched cash registers, the static escalators. The entire facade was glass and she could just barely see portions of the beast from the far back of the level as she peeked out over the slatted dressing room door.

It was mid-morning and in the raking light she could make out a hint of brown to the beast, a thick hide, maybe fur, she wasn't sure. The great dorsal hump brought down rows of power

lines as it lumbered through the street. When she heard the first screams from one of the gang, she moved away from her line of sight in the store and deeper into the dressing rooms. The windows of the store shattered, the clinking of the glass echoing through the empty city. The bucking of the beast continued for what felt like hours before it galloped off. She never saw anyone from the gang again.

As she thought of the story, her chest grew tight. She gulped in deep breaths, but not enough air came into her lungs. She reached around in her pocket, remembered that it was her inhaler that had been crushed in her slip on the fire escape. As this dawned on her, her breathing grew increasingly shallower. She tried to calm herself, tried to slow her breathing and pulse, but was unable to slack the growing panic.

Running to the bathroom of the apartment, she searched the cabinet with her flashlight. Only orange bottles of pills remained. She exited out into the shadowed hallway of the building. At the far end, she could see the outside world, a massive hole where a rocket had torn through the structure. She ran through the apartments nearer to her, always aware of her labored breaths, but there was simply no time to slow down.

In the sixth apartment, she could see a child's bedroom illuminated by moonlight streaming in through the window. As she reached the hall bath, she threw open the cabinet and saw the matte red and white plastic of the albuterol inhaler in the blue glow of her flashlight. She grabbed it, depressed the button into her mouth, and inhaled deeply, fully.

She climbed into the clawfoot bathtub and tried to relax. She could feel her lungs beginning to take in larger amounts of air. The oxygenated blood flowed to her brain, her eyes, her fingertips. In, out, in, out. The wheezing stopped, the weight lifted.

Simone awoke hours later, hungry again, but rested. She searched through the new apartment, finding nothing of use except for additional inhalers, before returning to the first flat. As she ate from a can of tuna, she stared out across the city to the Anatarch Building. Much of the surrounding city was rubble, but not a window on the far baroque skyscraper was broken. The

yellow moonlight sparkled across the panes as an astute reminder of man's ability to create, to dominate and subdue a landscape.

*I will ascend you.*

Standing there fixated on the building through the glass, Simone heard an argument out on the street. A woman and two men stood the fourteen stories down, yelling and shoving.

“You left the rockets! And now they’re gone!”

“We can get more. Or use something else.”

“That was it for the island, unless there’s another drop.”

“Yeah, there could be another drop soon.”

“But it’s been weeks, Mark.” One of the men paused, staring at the damaged truck. “Al was right, that was probably it.”

“Look, we’ll just have to go back and get them.”

“It’s been hanging around that area for a while now. It might leave, but it’s risky.”

Simone watched the argument, wondered how she could benefit from it.

“Are you idiots trying to get killed?” she yelled down. She was amazed at how far her voice carried in the empty city.

The three looked up as one of them drew a rifle.

“I’m not the dangerous one here,” she yelled, insinuating that their shouting match would invite trouble. “Watch out!” She threw the hook ladder down to the ground and watched as they clambered up to the room.

Simone eyed them in the moonlight. The gears in her mind were spinning over, pieces falling into place. Everyone introduced themselves. The woman, Althea. The men, Mark and Nestor.

Simone quickly moved to the heart of the conversation. “You all need explosives?” she asked.

Althea and Nestor turned to the other man, Mark, who Simone surmised had lost the group’s previous cache. He spoke. “Yes.”

“For an attack on the beast? Why now?”

“I – we – believe that it’s growing weaker.”

“Why?”

“Its circle is getting smaller. It used to roam all over, from river to river, now it’s mostly in the southeast, near downtown.”

Simone admitted this to herself. She had noticed that it was safer on the fringes now, but the realization had put itself directly at odds with her dream to enter the Anatarch. If the path of the creature narrowed, it would be even more difficult to reach the building's heights. But if this grouped attacked the creature, it could serve as a distraction and allow her to ascend the marble stairs. The beast was known to quickly deviate from its course and this randomness is what prevented her from ever planning anything. Perhaps this could clear some of the confusion away.

“I have a store of weapons. A lot of weapons,” she said.

The group’s eyes light up with revenge and bloodlust.

“What do you want for them?” Althea asked, again looking over Simone in the dark light, sizing her up, trying to understand her motives. There were always contingencies.

“You attack when I want you to. You can do it however you want, but it’s on my order. That’s all.”

The three turned towards each other, discussed it with their eyes as Simone watched on. Nester answered. “That works for us.”

They discussed where to do it. The new group suggested Ternham Square.

“It’s been going in fairly regular loops lately.”

“That’s fine.” Ternham Square fronted the Anatarch Building. This would allow Simone to enter the doors of the skyscraper and keep an eye on the beast as well.

“Do any of you have a watch?” Simone asked. Mark nodded. “59th and Buckeye. That’s where the weapons are,” she told them. “Nineteen hours from now.”

The three nodded, shook hands, and understood that Simone wanted them to leave despite the abundance of food visible on the countertops. She watched as they dropped down the fire escape and back into the city.

In case of another bombardment, she put her shoes back on before returning to the kitchen, and, finally, the bedroom. She lay on top of a quilted down comforter as saffron moonlight streamed through the window, the radiance occasionally studded by the red and blue of a far-off explosion.

Simone quietly slid through the city on foot. She hadn't been to this area in weeks. As she stepped onto a cross street, she could see all the way to the water, to the destroyed Sennesequetta Bridge, a once mighty span of steel and cable, shredded now down the middle, its towers collapsed in upon itself. Past that stood the mighty containment wall built on the mainland, a more brutal conquest of land than the delicate structures that had once graced the island.

The river reflected the moonlight into a jagged line of white in the distance and she thought of the beach towards the south, the beach she had gone to so often as a child. She'd been back once since the depopulation of the city. The sand had all turned to glass and she'd refused to ever return. These kinds of changes were everywhere. She had to fight with the island every day to keep her memories.

The air in the streets was still, the city quiet. Simone was taken aback by how the lichen had spread throughout this neighborhood, how it covered the ground, the walls, had even formed vast nets as it grew across power lines. A bizarre insomnolent jungle, its dark digits dangling in the air above her head, preparing for the coming sunlight.

Peering around a corner, she froze as she saw a trio of missiles tear into a building several blocks down. She hadn't even heard them. As she watched, she could see the moonlight glinting off of more of the rockets headed towards her. Her mind spun as a blanket of destruction spread over the district.

She felt the shockwave and heat from an explosion around the corner ahead of her and realized she had to hide. As the rockets fell, she stared at the underground entrance to her right. She hadn't entered the ekkejo tunnels since the beginning, never knew what kind of dangers lurked down below, but there was no choice.

Spinning on her heels, she ran down the stairs, her soles slapping the wet concrete as she took two stairs at a time. Pulling out a flashlight, she descended further into the concrete labyrinth, soon realizing that beneath her feet was a thin carpet of the black lichen. She reached into her bag and pulled out a shirt to wrap

around her face and protect her lungs.

The flashlight cut narrow beams into the passageways of the subterranean transportation hub. As she ran, Simone passed posters plastered to the walls showcasing new theater shows and restaurants that used to exist on the surface. Another rocket hit and collapsed some of the opening. She realized she was still too close to the surface.

Descending another flight of stairs, she noticed the lichen began to subside. She swung her flashlight around and realized she was on the plaza level of the ekkejo station, still several escalator rides up from the actual transport tunnels. Looking around at the stalls in the blue of her flashlight, she saw newspaper and magazine stands, cafes, barbers – all left open in the quickness of the attack. She walked closer to the convenience stores, saw the shelves picked clean.

Stepping back into the main plaza, Simone walked towards the escalators that lead deeper into the Earth. In her mind she saw a cross-section of the landscape, the Anatarch building rising high into the clouds, while the subway carved itself deep underneath the earth, the orogenic monoliths balanced against the man-made subductions on the spatial point of the city street.

The fear of the depths gripped her and she felt her heart racing, not from the physical burden of escaping the bombs, but the psychological weight of the unknown down below those twin escalators. She reached for her inhaler, fumbling with it as she pulled it out of her pocket. It fell and clicked on the ground, tumbling towards the great maw of black in front of her flashlight arc and was gone.

Her body shook as she stood there contemplating the trek down. Muffled voices bounced off the walls of the mezzanine. Simone froze, her heart beginning to race as she panicked. The middle finger of her left hand began to tap her thigh. As the voices got closer, she stepped backwards into the frozen stairway and turned off her flashlight.

The disembodied voices floated in the darkness. “If we go down to the Strand, we can get off. There are tugs and everything else down there.”

“That’s where Carter went a week ago.”

“And what?”

“And he never came back. He’s dead.”

“Maybe he got off.”

Simone felt her foot slipping into something moist and soft. She thought of the black lichen, extending miles below the city, an entire underground network of the growth. She imagined it taking on sentience, reaching up to grab her leg and suck her into the abyss. With a dull sucking, she pulled her foot out of the mire and balanced on her other foot, positioned on the fairly dry step above it.

“Screw him, anyway, then. We’re not supposed to leave. We need every single body we can get.”

“Then why’d you kill that guy back there?”

“He didn’t want to tell his what he was doing. Looked suspicious. That should let the other two know we’re on top here.”

There was a steady clicking, like somebody dragging a stick across a sidewalk. The voices died down as she heard one of the metal grates of the stalls slide up and then clatter down. The voices tapered off.

Simone drew a mental map of the level as she waited, knowing she would have to traverse it without her flashlight and hoping an efficient exit would protect her. A door slammed and she steeled herself, waiting one minute longer before stepping out into the darkness. Without a light, she crossed the tenebrous plaza and up the two flights of stairs before climbing past the rubble at the entrance and exiting onto the street. The bombardment had ended. She opened her bag, scrambling to find a new inhaler.

Simone paused at the corner of Prentice and Lee Streets. There was an old park located inside the block with several sunken vaults that had long ago been used for hot baths. She slept for six hours in one before continuing on to her destination, the weapon cache. She noticed that the destruction grew less organic as she moved away from the downtown, more angular and human.

She came upon her old building in the dusty wheat light of the moon. The rush came over her as she stood at its steps in the

darkness. Mother, sister, brother, her. Father, once. They had all lived here, laughing and crying and talking. "Enough for us, right?" her mother had always stated more than asked.

Simone wondered where she was now. She had buried her sister and brother with her own hands after the ship was damaged, but her mother had made it onto a different ship, the *Agiocochook*. As Simone's own rescue vessel, the *Thomas Worth*, was sinking, she had stood on the bow and watched the crimson beacon of her mother's ship as it had continued on to safe haven in the darkness.

The city had swallowed Simone whole that night and she refused to leave.

Ascending the masonry steps of her childhood home, she grabbed the loose cast iron railing, hearing it scrape against the sandstone of the building. She could see the red paint of the entryway peeling and flaking onto the sidewalk. It was dark, but there was no need for a flashlight, she knew the curves and turns of the building by heart. She slid her hand onto the banister, moved up the stairs, swung back and down the hall.

From her neck she pulled a necklace over her head, the brass key catching a glint of the moon's golden rays through the window at the end of the hallway. She slid it into the lock, turned, and kicked the bottom of the door. It always jammed on the frame as the bones of the old building settled into the earth.

Inside the sanctity of her family's homestead, she flipped on her flashlight. The pictures on the mantle showed them at the beach, in the woods, climbing mountains. In one of them, her mother and father stood at her grandmother's house, posing in front of a rack of knickknacks. By how large the smiles on the pair were, Simone had always imagined it was right after her father had proposed.

Opening the door to her bedroom, she swung the flashlight across the weapons scattered across the floor. Rockets, mortars, grenades, land mines. They represented dozens of botched attempts by others to take back the island.

Seeing the spread of the cache, Simone knew it was time to leave, time to let go of the apartment. She went back to the living room, removed some of the photographs from the frames

and slid them into her back pocket. She went out into the hallway and down to the first level, exiting out the back door.

In the moonglow, she could see a body up against the dumpsters. She flipped on her flashlight. She knew his face from the building. Fred, Ed, Ted. She wasn't sure. He must have come back to find some piece of his old world. But that was all gone, there was nothing left for him to recover. The black lichen had begun to move up his torso. Simone flipped off her flashlight and waited.

A few hours passed before Althea and Mark turned the corner. She yelled towards them, understood that Nestor was gone and didn't ask. She wondered if the group in the station had killed him, but kept it to herself.

As the moonlight skittered down through the hills and valleys of the neighborhood's buildings, she told them of the cache, told them when she wanted the attack to happen. Althea thought about the creature's route, suggested a slight difference. Simone agreed. The three set their watches for seven hours. As she left, she could see the pair heading up the marble front steps she had crossed thousands of times. She knew she'd never see home again.

Sliding through the city, Simone headed southeast towards Ternham Square and the Anatarch. As she crossed Pellehin Street, she could hear the rumbling far off towards the water. The hogback was near. She ran down the street, noting as she passed that there was no lichen on any of the buildings. She got closer to the beast, coasting through the blocks. The world felt so open.

Kicking open the door of a conapt unit, she ran to the fourth floor and stared east across Ternham Square to the Anatarch. The moonlight scaled down the scalloped concrete sides of the mighty spire, exploding on the base as the lower levels flared out in an architectural flourish to meet the ground. The tripartite windows, hundreds of them, glittered unbroken, imposing the building's bulk on the surrounding island as every other structure succumbed to destruction. This was it. This was the only piece of human dominance left.

Pulling out a sleeve of crackers, Simone watched and

waited. Faintly, to the south, she could see the green glow of the hogback's landing point. Or home. Or colony. She was never exactly sure what it was. She hoped the coming strike would at least allow her to enter the Anatarch, but wondered if the weapons would even have a noticeable effect upon the beast.

An hour and a half passed before she saw Althea and Mark move into the square, pulling a makeshift dolly full of the weapons. She watched in the pale light as they talked, taking note of their hand gestures. Althea pointed and Mark turned to see where she wanted something done. The woman grabbed a rocket launcher and several rockets to put into a nearby shopping cart, before the two hugged and walked off in separate directions.

Mark walked the square, carefully placing explosives and mines for the attack. Simone watched Althea moving across to a building on the southern end of the plaza. She had told Simone that the beast would appear from the north on its circuit. Grabbing her things, Simone left the building to move to the south of Althea's position and bypass the park almost entirely.

Creeping through an alley, she heard the whistle of a flare as the pair attempted to draw the beast directly into their trap. The rumbling grew louder. As she crossed Bartlett Street, she looked north into the square and saw a grenade explode in the grass, sending chunks of earth flying through the night. Simone felt the rumbling now, felt the buildings shaking. The beast was close. As automatic gunfire tore through the night, she paused, her heart racing even faster.

She hadn't given any guns to the group.

Running up a street that ran perpendicular to the park, she stopped just before the edge of the building fronting onto the plaza. She watched as multiple diamonds of white machine gun fire lit up the roof of a building to the north. She counted at least nine separate bursts. The thunder of the barrage echoed through the neighborhood, dominating the atmosphere. This wasn't Mark or Althea.

Turning, Simone ran east, watching the new force out of the corners of her eyes. As she looked back, she could see the edges of the beast just beginning to enter the park from the

northwest. The gunfire was trained on the it, rippling across its impenetrable surface. The rumbling had become a crushing weight in the attack zone.

Simone sprinted now, running east towards the Anatarch, leaping over relics of the old world to cover the distance between her and her dream. Her lungs were on fire, struggling for air. She paused and realized that the rumbling was two distinct noises. As she looked up, she could see the sterile blue lights of military helicopters as they swarmed over the buildings.

*This is going all wrong.*

Above her, Althea fired a rocket into the melee.

*I'm so close to the Anatarch. So close to ascending its steps.*

Cement cascaded off the building beside Simone as the creature moved. The entire block was in chaos. Bursts of rifle fire, the sharp tear of grenades, buildings collapsing into the street. She coughed as clouds of smoke and dust wafted across the park.

There was a large explosion to the north that sent Simone into the building behind her. She grabbed her head. Her lungs felt almost closed. Reaching into her pocket, she found her inhaler and used it quickly.

As the ground shook, she knew the hogback was moving. Through the smoke and darkness, she felt that it was closer to her, had positioned itself between her and the Anatarch. She tried to overcome the compulsion she felt to reach the building, clenching her fists in frustration and anger. A rocket tore past her and she could hear the gunfire moving closer.

Retreating to the stoop of a turn-of-the-century brownstone rowhouse, Simone heard the sound of gnashing metal. She looked up and faintly saw one of the helicopters being dragged through the air, its blades whipping into the dry, spent treetops of the park. She watched as the hogback flung it sideways into a row of stores on the west side of the park, a great explosion rising up from the frontage. A quilt of orange and yellow illuminated the darkness of the surrounding blocks.

The gunfire continued as the rumbling grew louder. She felt a cloudiness in her head, her eyes becoming unfocused. The

beast grew near. Stumbling, her legs became sluggish and heavy. The steps of the building beside her grew to gargantuan peaks.

*Down. I must go down.*

Staring in the golden moonlight, she could just make out the green panel on the sidewalk that covered the city's underground utilities. The plastic lid was slitted on its edge, damaged at some point during its trivial life. Letting the heaviness pull her down, Simone fell to her knees and jerked up on the slab of plastic. She slid her legs in, pushing them past the massive bundles of wire and metal brackets and other detritus of modern life. She slid her entire body into the space and moved the panel back to seal the opening, trying to relax in the darkness even as her mind grew fogtier.

In the darkness, calm was elusive. She felt like the rumbling of the beast was being transmitted directly from the ground into her brain. Her breathing became rapid, outpacing the movements of the beast on the earth above her. She heard the guns and explosions stop. She knew it was almost upon her. Her heart thudded in her chest. Sliding her fingers down the narrow passage, she tried to remove her inhaler from her pocket, but her knuckles caught on the sides of the tunnel. Her breath grew quicker.

Turning on her side, Simone was able to move her elbow in a way that allowed her to toss her inhaler up near her face. Straining, she forced her arm through the allowable space, slicing open her wrist on a bracket. The blood ran down her forearm onto her neck as she slid her arm up to grab her medicine. Depressing the canister, she inhaled. Again. And again. A rush of oxygenated blood filled her brain. Her chest opened, the wheezing stopped. She gulped in deep breaths in the tight access hatch before vomiting, her body wracking against the exposed screws and metal spurs of hidden mechanical components.

The beast was directly above her. She knew the others were dead. There was no chance of ascending the Anatarch. She closed her eyes, her mind as crushed as the concrete and asphalt in the street above her.

Lying in the darkness, feeling every breath fill her body, Simone felt pure hate. Pure hate at the creature that took her

mother, her family, her life. She banged against the walls of tunnel, her body consumed by anger. She yelled, gnashing her teeth, slamming her shoulders against the unyielding steel sides. Her throat grew sore as the blood from her broken nose sputtered against the arm she had brought to her face.

The rumbling grew louder, her mind fuzzier. The sounds stopped. She felt her thoughts slip away. A feeling of weightlessness came over her. Images of a distant beach blazed into her mind, a broad expanse of barren sand and colossal paths that cut through from the shore, leading towards a bleak metallic sea. She knew this place was dead. Her mind shifted into a vision of a freezing, rocky terrain. Heavy mist abraded the stone surface, acidifying thick veins of elements within the wallface. There was no life. She saw underwater ruins, great iron blocks in ordered patterns of exotic abodes, emptied of their vitality. Dozens of worlds and existences flashed before her, all desolate and fallow. She felt the beast's ecstasy in destruction and knew her home would end the same way as the others.

Her mind slowly forced itself back and again she felt the hate. Hated herself. Hated her helplessness. Hated that she might be the last person on this dead island.

She felt her hate push into the beast, felt it's unknowing at this change of events. Her mind alternated between the confused storm and a newfound crisp lucidity. She heard the sound of its breathing becoming staggered. Simone thought of everything that had been lost in the city. The people, the buildings, the libraries, the bridges and monuments. Hate. The beast became disoriented from the mental attack, Simone's rage constant and unremitting in its pummeling.

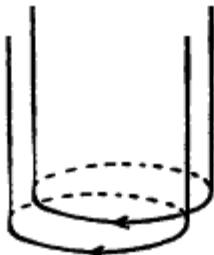
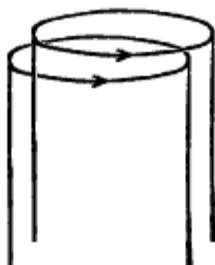
There was a pause, a moment when the world stopped and all was silent and calm. The beast's legs gave out beneath it and it tumbled to the ground, the impact reverberating through the earth. There was a wheezing and a great outrush of air. The hogback was dead.

Simone took a deep breath, a free, uncrushed breath like she hadn't felt in months. She didn't know what had happened, couldn't know, but relaxed her head back and saw the old city.

She saw the markets and the marquees, the diners and the dancehalls. She saw her father, her brother, her sister. She saw her mother standing on the deck of the ship as it carried her to safety.

In the world above her subterranean haven, the moon began to drop behind the western horizon as the first rays of sunshine crested the water to the east, just clipping the corners of the gleaming Anatarch Building. It had survived another day.

Pushing aside the panel separating her from the world, the morning light shimmered on the ground before Simone. She felt calm. She was the city.



## 18-51-20

Sara pushed the lawnmower through the thick grass as the sun grazed against her skin. It clumped into piles, sticking to her shoes as she glided across the yard. It was either too wet or too long or both, she wasn't sure.

She pushed and strained across the shady hill, hoping for the chore to be over quick. She closed her eyes, felt the softness of her bed, felt her eyes relax, time stretch, and she was done. She opened her eyes and looked at the emerald patch, neat diagonal lines delineating where she had been. The yard was cut, her clothes were washed, and she had showered. Perfect, she thought.

She got older, met a man. I love him, she thought, and closed her eyes. Opening them, she saw her children gathered around her on their porch, her husband smiling back to her as he mowed the yard. Perfect, she thought.

As the years passed, she would often close her eyes, allowing time to stretch and envelope some difficult task or pressing issue. And it would be done. No memories of exertion weighed her down.

She closed her eyes as technology shifted and evolved. Cars and planes and computers become obsolete. The earth become obsolete. Her eyes become more often closed than open.

She opened, grandchildren. She opened, the chemotherapy was over. She opened, they buried her husband.

Sara opened her eyes one final time and there she was, in bed for the last time, labored breaths, and she couldn't remember how it all happened. Nobody was there with her. She didn't know how the various pieces had fit together. She closed her eyes.



# Western Planting

The offices were emptying out for the weekend as Hope stood at the threshold of the Longcamp Group building, pausing to think whether she should keep all of the belongings from her desk that she had dutifully packed into the box presently under her arm. The crush of the crowd on the sidewalk just beyond the doorway threatened to knock her over, and as she stared at the dismal collection of coffee mugs and novelty pens, she lightened her load and forced the trash fee onto the ungrateful media conglomerate.

As she tried to make her way to the bank, she was swept up in the undulating mass of people covering the sidewalk and decided to let the flow carry her for a few blocks, letting her cares slip away as she realized she would be free from work, even if only for a day or two.

At the narrow bank compartment, she pressed a few buttons at the automated teller, checked her balances, and cancelled her apartment and other utilities. There simply wouldn't be enough money to cover the daily rent.

She slid back through the streets and spent the last few hours she was allotted for her unit in the art of packing up her belongings. Her entire life fit snugly into her suitcase – an oversized leather briefcase, really – and as she snapped the two brass locks she surveyed what had been her home for the last seventeen months.

The slim space reached back two and a half yards, quite large for the new districts, and she was somewhat sad to see it go. It had been on the seventh level, the highest by law in the city, and even though there was the usual rumbling associated with the top floors, it wasn't as bad as the populace had always made it seem. And it seemed to have only been during the period from late

spring to early fall, a period of the year when she was up and out of the door early, anyway.

As she sat at a diner near her old home a few minutes later, she realized how crowded the eating space always was, how it was regularly packed to capacity. This was a place to disappear for a day. Fortunately, this anonymity allowed her just enough room to raise a dense novel where a plate should be and she was able to read the night away.

Around three in the morning, she came to, her head jerking upwards. She realized she had been asleep. Nobody had attempted to kick her out, nobody had even noticed or cared. And she realized that the tight fit in between the other patrons assured her that she wouldn't fall over, either. If she kept her suitcase between her legs, maybe crafted some kind of tether for it, she would have little to worry about while drifting away into dreams.

With a system set up, Hope spent the next few days and nights in the diner, reading, eating, sleeping. She had been initially shocked after her firing, wondering how she would get by, but without paying two-thirds of her income on rent, she realized she had quite a bit of money set away and that it could last some time. She thought back on her apartment, what a waste it had been, only serving to separate her from the world. Here, she could see all kinds of people, all kinds of lives.

On the fifth day, as she sat reading, one of the patrons next to her sneezed, a great sneeze that shook the tables and rattled the porcelain saucers. The diner cleared out, everyone afraid of catching the germ. Hope returned a few hours later, but realized she couldn't live there, couldn't risk being so near to so many people so often.

“Seen any places for rent recently?” she asked two older women that sat beside her the next day. “I’m looking for something cheap.”

“Have you been to the new districts yet?” one of them responded.

“I think I’d like something closer in than any of those. Something in the core.”

The other woman spoke. “The trains get faster every year.

Every ten miles the city moves out, the trains get twice as fast.” She turned back to her friend. “Isn’t that a law? Vermin’s Law? Vernon’s Law?”

“Venin,” Hope answered. The women laughed at their inability to remember the scientist. “Well, thanks. I’ll keep looking for now,” she said, noticing that the pair had already resumed their conversation.

Around noon every day, the crush in the diner would become unbearable and Hope would slip out to scan help wanted ads and employment offers. Nothing fit and the ones she did apply to scrutinized her application within the first minute before printing out a slim rejection receipt.

She became discouraged after the seventh day, sinking deeper and deeper into a kind of lethargy from looking for work, knowing that only rejection lie around the corner. It wasn’t that she needed the money, not yet, at least, but rather the fact that society perceived the talents that she had cultivated for so long as completely and utterly worthless.

In this malaise, she dove deeper into the books she was able to procure from the library. One night, as she finished the last novel in her queue, and without a municipal replacement, she remembered the package she had stowed away during the move-out. In the few seconds at the diner from when the former patron got up and the one standing in line waiting for a seat sat down, she quickly undid the latches on her briefcase, slid out a manila envelope, and closed the lid, snapping the latches as she straightened herself. The new patron merely grunted as he almost sat on the hand she had used it to stable herself while bending under the tabletop.

The envelope had already been opened, but she eyed the handwriting of her father with a certain longing for home and safety that she could never revisit after leaving childhood. She knew that the letter from her mother had already been safely tucked away into one of the pockets of the talented briefcase and she tore the address in her father’s hand from the front of the envelope to use as a bookmark.

To her right, one of the diners was getting up to leave, wrappers and boxes cluttering her tray, and Hope threw the envelope onto the pile, hoping to sidestep the trash fee. This woman grunted much like the man beside her had, but made no effort to remove the extra detritus, the effort in motion costing more than the few cents in added garbage weight.

Alone in her thoughts now, Hope held the book in her hands, felt the weight of the tome. She slid her fingers over the green leather cover, felt the depressions of the gold letters. The book held such power that she mouthed the words to herself – *Swept Adrift* – and thought about the stories inside. Her father had scrawled within the flyleaf that it told various tales of shipwrecks, disappearances, and other mysterious tales of the great seas, although Hope had gathered as much from the name alone. As the automated scanners beeped and the patrons around her noisily ate, her mind sailed free.

She imagined great islands of space, the warm sand under her feet, the cool wind – real, honest wind – blowing through her hair. It had been so long since she had heard anything about the islands. Supposedly, they were protected now, vast conservation areas continually fending off the crush of development. She hoped that were true.

Page after page fell by in the first hour. As she sipped from a dark cup of chicory coffee, she heard a man's voice from the table in front of and to the right of her.

“Where'd you get that old book?” he asked.

Hope looked up, startled to hear a voice so plainly over the din. She leaned in. “My father got it from an auction, sent it post a few weeks ago.”

“You like auctions?” he yelled, hoping to make any sort of connection with another aficionado of the timeless things.

“I suppose I did when I was a kid. Who has the room for much anymore?”

He nodded, finishing the last bite of his sandwich. Grabbing his coat, he motioned with his thumb behind him, questioning whether she wanted to leave with him. Hope reflected on the days and nights she had spent in the diner and the cramps

she had been experiencing in her legs. Her mind had often been drifting to thoughts of the blood clots she might get from immobility.

With a snap, she slid out her suitcase, stood up, and slipped into the magenta anorak she kept on her legs.

Hope met the man out on the street as they huddled into a small alcove where the diner's cellar door opened for morning deliveries. The light wires ringed the entablature above their heads, delineating the commercial levels below and the residential ones above. She saw across the street where a building had caught fire, the reinforced burnplates at the adjoining walls protecting the surrounding buildings until the automatic extinguishers had put the flames out. The structure would probably be replaced within the next twelve hours.

“Arnold,” the man said, tipping his hat.

She took his hand. “Hope.”

“We’re going to an auction,” he said, smiling.

Hope twirled around inside the auction house, moving her arms freely. “Free space, huh?” Arnold asked her. “Government keeps it all for itself. But they’re here working around the clock, so what can you say, right? Twenty-four hours, no rest for the wicked.”

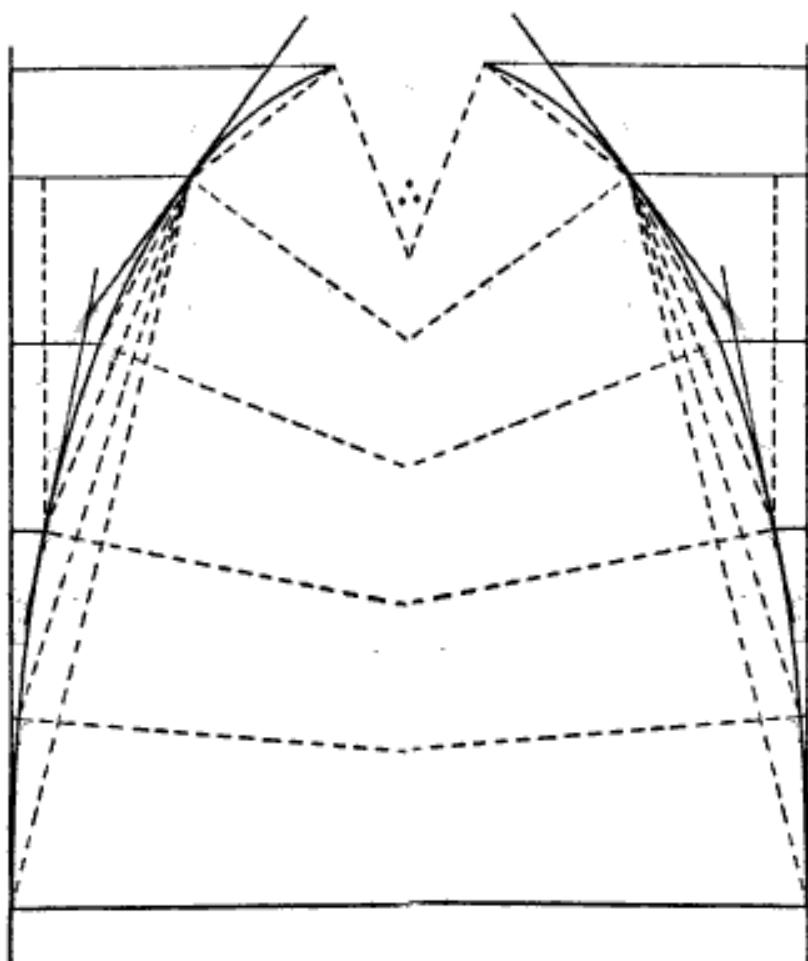
She watched as the men and women in grey suits moved through the building, trampling the carpet as they moved from office to office, preoccupied with various tax codes and estimated returns documents. She noticed a lone small man seated to the right of the center aisle, patiently awaiting his chance to bid on whatever was up for auction. The chairs were arranged in a grid, four by six, three columns to the left of the auctioneer, three to the right.

With a crack of a gavel, Hope realized it was time for the auction to begin. Arnold took her hand and they sat at the back of the empty seats.

“What are we bidding on?” she asked.

Arnold held a finger up to his lips.

The auctioneer began. “Lot A. Renday Street, 0.00017



## FIELD PROBLEMS.

square acres.” He looked at the small man in the front. The small man in the front turned toward Arnold. Arnold nodded and held up two fingers. The auctioneer slammed the gavel.

“Lot B. Wright Street, 0.00003 square acres.”

“Oh my, near the old wharf,” Arnold said, his eyes sparkling as he scanned a large fold-out map he’d grabbed upon entering. Again, the auctioneer turned to the small man, the small man turned to Arnold, and Arnold held up two fingers and nodded.

Hope watched as it went on like this for the next half-hour, forty-five lots in all. The auctioneer closed the sale, shook hands with the small man and left. Picking up a briefcase, the small man grabbed his hat from the seat next to him, tipped it towards Arnold and Hope, and left. Arnold grabbed his things.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“Come on. I’ll show you.”

They walked quickly through the night, the rain drizzling past the neon-tinted light wires slung across the building fronts. It was still crowded, but less so when the weather was bad. Hope looked through the tiny window slits on the small houses as they passed, the residents in their beds watching television. She missed having a bed.

“Here we are,” Arnold said, stopping at an alleyway used to funnel trash onto the main street. He pulled the map out of his pocket, stooped over it to protect it from the rain. “Yep, exactly, this is it. Lot R2.” He was beaming.

“This alley, this is what you bought?” Hope asked, unsure of his meaning. “Or this house?”

“This!” Arnold said, bending down to where the corner of the building met the alley. He took out a piece of chalk and placed it at the corner of the building. He walked forward, drawing a line from that point straight back to a cross street behind the building. Hope could see now that the building’s wall slanted out from the alley as it moved away from the main road, a thin triangle forming between the straight chalk line and the angled wall.

“You bought this sliver of land?” she asked, wiping her wet hair from her face.

“This and forty-four others tonight. And another eight hundred and twelve before that. These trashcuts are everywhere, just some zoning or building error. The city can’t actually own them or they’d have to maintain them like all municipal property, so they’re forced to sell them. They post the auctions in the paper, but they’re not allowed to contact the adjacent property owners directly.”

“So who was that man?”

“He works for a quasi-governmental body, the Silvanus Group. Some kind of conservation group. They buy all kinds of property, but their funding dried up years ago. I don’t know what they ever wanted with them, though. He can do fine if I’m not there, but anything over a bit and he’s out. They don’t give him any money to bid. I don’t know why.”

“Okay, I follow. But what’s the point? Why buy all these? You can’t build anything, can you?” Hope asked, the rain slowly dissolving the chalk outline from the asphalt and concrete. Milky-white tendrils worked their way down to the gutter and into the sewer, to be lost in a byzantine network of automated water purification before returning to the tap.

Arnold held up the piece of chalk, pausing at the threshold of what he wanted to say, and instead grabbed her hand and lead her back through the city streets.

The rain stopped before the sun rose. Arnold opened the narrow door of his apartment, pulling the brass knob quickly to overcome the pressure on the out-of-square frame caused by the weight of the old building. The two stepped in and Arnold flipped on the overhead light and shut the portal. A slim bed with a tartan coverlet stood at the far well. The shelves above it held two groupings of books, a tea kettle, and his extra set of clothes.

“This took some real wheeling and dealing. I had to know a lot of people to pull this off, all over a bunch of different city departments.”

Hope watched as Arnold grabbed the wall to the right of the closed door, a small divot in the edge nearest it. In one quick motion, he pulled and the wall collapsed in on itself, each two foot

piece sinking into the one behind it.

Hope studied the opening. On the left were two large metal drums, some kind of regulator system for the building. This took up nearly two-thirds of the space that ran parallel to Arnold's apartment. She turned and scanned the rest of the opening. Here she saw the secret. In the space behind the drums was a roughly four foot square hollow, a haven for Arnold that must have been worth calling in a hell of a lot of favors from old friends. A landlord could charge someone a fortune for that much extra space, if a renter could even get the license for it.

Against the far wall, she saw that he had attached several maps of the city, all colored in various patterns, marked in esoteric codes, prodded with pins and thumbtacks. Stacked halfway up the wall were dozens of books. Cartography primers, city codes, photographic histories, land use master plans. Torn slips of paper hung out of the tops and bottoms, hundreds of markers for important pieces of information Arnold was afraid to lose.

“These are the pieces of land,” she whispered to herself, swinging her hands across the maps, just barely grazing their surfaces. The city was vast, almost incomprehensible, but she could see the spread and expanse of Arnold’s property. It covered every district, every neighborhood.

“I’ve bought it all, but I need somebody to do the real work. Research everything, get clean and updated deeds, exact coordinates, photographs. The pay is good, good enough to get you out of that diner.”

Hope quickly moved into a quiet second-level apartment, her first post-rent check devoted exclusively to a high-end coverlet. She would often sit on the bed, simply feeling the quality feathering on the fabric.

The next month, Arnold came by the flat to store a portable borer, roughly the size of a chair, against the far wall of the apartment. “Just for a week or two,” he said.

She would then call up various work teams, the laborers stopping by at all hours of the night and day to grab the device. She would give them maps of the various trashcut parcels and the

crews would go out, drilling holes six inches in diameter and three feet down, per Arnold's instructions. The extensive and unceasing capital improvement projects in the city prevented anybody from noticing.

After all the holes were finally drilled, Arnold came by the apartment to pick up the borer. He sat on her bed and explained that the next phase of the project would be more difficult. They would have to order eight hundred and fifty-seven carbon fiber poles to be inserted into each of the holes.

"How long are they?" Hope asked.

"Eighty feet."

"Eighty feet?" she asked, incredulous. "Where are we going to keep that many poles that long?"

"Underwater." He smiled. "In the bay. There's an old bridge under there. We'll line it with a polypropylene sleeve, lower the pipes on – which aren't that heavy, I might add – then pull them up with a crane when we have them all. That's the problem, getting space on a train to carry that many. It'll take a while."

Hope looked out her window slit across to the water. "What is this all about?" she asked. "I thought you were making a statement, something about the overcrowding of the city and the absurdity of extra land."

"It will be a statement. But maybe more about the human ability to persevere." He paused. "It's about our desire to wait indefinitely for the fantastic, whether that's a heavenly afterlife or, say, simply the violation of causality." He pulled out the specifications for the pipes, handed them to her.

She grabbed the roll of paper. "Have you ever seen a bird?" she asked, looking at Arnold as he was pressing the latches closed on his briefcase.

"I think, yes. But I was very young. My grandfather took me to the end of the northern trunk line. That was when they had ends. I think they just go in circles now." He laughed softly to himself.

"But he was getting to be very old and so we sat in the rear car, watching the buildings pass by and it...opened up. Real,

magnificent space. And there was just this expanse of raw earth for miles until the horizon fell away. I remember my grandfather trying to catch his breath as he saw the sky, not as the narrow rectangle we see staring up through the buildings now, but this transcendent vista exploding into view. Then it was gone.” Arnold paused. “As the train moved through the turnaround, I saw three birds lift off the ground, just hanging there, perfect.”

Hope looked at the man. He had stopped closing his case.

“Their bellies were such a magnificent yellow, with just a bit of grey dusting on their black tops.” Arnold stared through the wall before him and saw the birds again. “I found them in a book one time. I could never shake their image. Kirtland’s warbler. Damn beautiful creature.” He tipped his hat to her and let himself out.

Still at the window, Hope unfurled the plans, saw the rungs extending from the sides of the poles. How curious, she thought to herself.

Winter passed with the pipes protected in their watery concealment. The pair convened in Arnold’s apartment during the spring, the last pieces of the operation falling into place. The crane had been reserved, the work crews had been hired, the cement trucks were in place. It was all set up for the night before Anchor Day, when most of the population would be inside celebrating. All the workers had cost double for it.

Hope sat on her bed, the feathering on the coverlet beginning to pull. “You still can’t tell me?”

“What’s twelve hours?”

“Well, what comes after this, then? Where do we go from here? Do I still have a job?”

“This will last for a while, I hope. Then...other projects. What about mapping non-visible pollution? Using the human body as a battery? Gamma photography?”

Hope’s telephone rang. It was the crane operator. He was ready.

Anchor Day broke with the kind of clean, clear, heatless

sun that the early spring invites. The crews had worked all night and, in the light of the early morning, Hope and Arnold strolled the streets. She could now see the project in full.

From each of the small, discarded parcels of land rose the pipes. The strength of the carbon fiber kept them perfectly straight in the air, reaching up above the cornices capping the ancient buildings. The pair paused behind a corner as one of the workmen, finishing from the long night, peered up the carbon fiber spire. He tested the weight of the rungs, felt the strength in every step.

The pair couldn't make out their words, but watched as the workers egged on their friend, urging him up, persuading him to go above the buildings to rooftops that the populace believed were off limits, unseen in generations. He climbed slowly, each footfall sure. As he rose above the street, he kept himself from looking down. Near the tops of the buildings, Hope thought he looked like a miniature in comparison to the massive corbels holding up the flared edge of the building.

With a final step, the man's head lifted above the top. He looked out and paused, then slowly spun around, taking in the new world. His friends yelled at him, but the man only pointed to the other poles. One of the friends clambered up behind him on the same spire.

Heads popped out of windows, figures out of doors. Arnold smiled as more and more of the citizens ascended the shafts. They began shouting as larger groups began to gather on the streets, the news spreading through the telephone lines.

Hope couldn't wait any longer. As they turned an alleyway, she saw Lot R2, the first parcel Arnold had brought her to. Letting her bag slide off her shoulder onto the ground, she put her hands onto the rungs. Seven flights was a long way up. Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, she moved swiftly up the mast before pausing near the top. She craned her neck, looking down at Arnold. He simply waved her on.

As she crested the hard concrete edge of the building beside her, she saw the golden vista spread out before her. Her breathing stopped as her mind tried to process it all. Tall wisps of

golden grains blew gently in the wind, the gusts of soft air flowing up through her shirt sleeves. Tufts of lush, verdant grass scattered themselves on the edges of the plots. The deep cerulean of the sky spread out above her, the firmament dotted with braids of white clouds.

Leaning over, she grabbed the edge of the building's unchanging facade and forced all of her fears from her mind. In one quick movement, she pulled her entire body up onto the top of the building. She felt the warmth of the vegetation.

As an automated thresher slowly worked its way across the top of the megablocks, she wondered if anybody had been here since it was built. She wondered where the end was. Where the beginning was. She wondered if there were animals. Moving forward, she let her hand graze the bounty of the meadow. The swaying blades were light and dry. She broke a top section off of one, smelled the earthiness of it in the morning air.

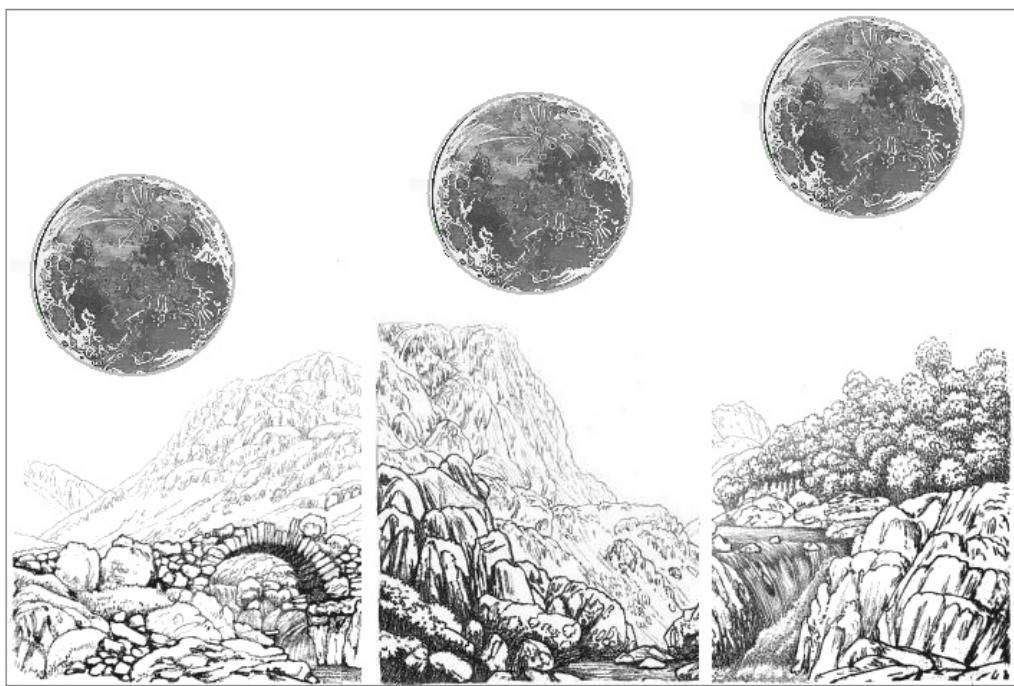
There was a whole world here, she thought. A whole world that we only had to look up to see.

# Mythical Abyss

*I recently wrote the description for electronic artist M. Akers' work entitled Mythical Abyss. While the themes or the entire story may be expanded upon later, in the interest of completeness, the original is presented here:*

Mythical Abyss opens with a swirling, street-crawling battle hymn to pace your nocturnal footsteps through the blaggard-lined alleyways of a neglected cityedge before Shanghaiing you into manning a hulking prison ship to the dead of the ocean. The driving wind of the electrical storm, a pealing foghorn, and the oscillating tones of casimir engines become your only constants on the brutal, rain-swept crossing before a chance encounter with an unmanned deuterium rig signals the next leg of the journey.

Crewmembers slowly disappear as exploration of the lifeless mechanical shell, humming with vast banks of dials and switches, leads you into a solemn labyrinth of howling underground caverns deep below the water. Desperate for light as your torch dies down, you break through a sealed wall to a hidden nerve center that triggers a rush of dopamine into your panicking mind. You watch the esoteric vision plane set into the ancient wall, hoping for safe passage from the delirium, until a blinding, rapturous light takes over and all is calm.



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BETA DECAY HOUSE