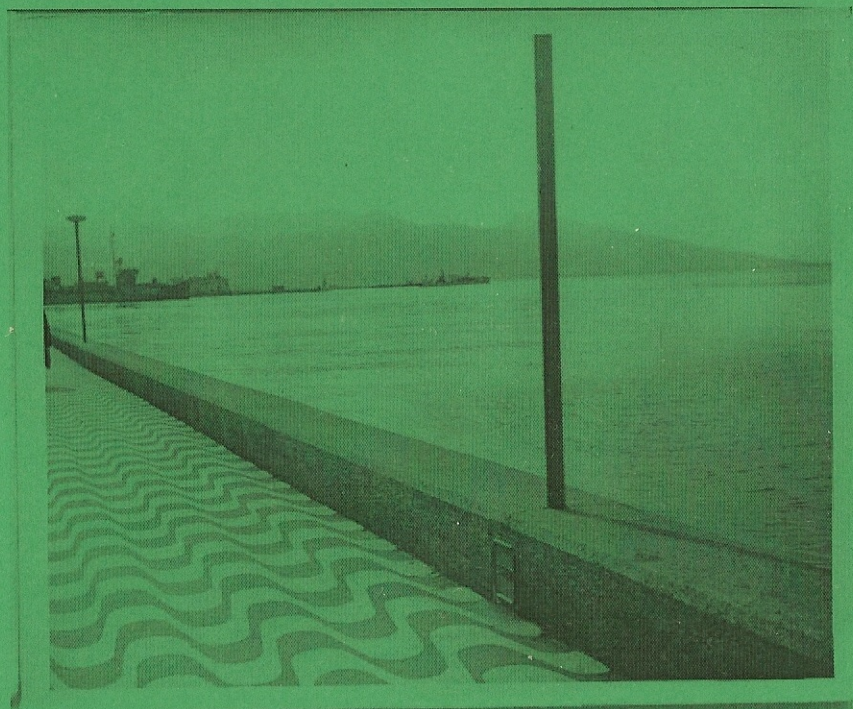


BETA DECAY



NUMBER SIX

BETA DECAY
#6

by ANDREW JACKSON KING



SALTS @ EXTRACTS

Cuba Libre, with Variation

The man shut the engine off, stepped out of the car. In the cutting afternoon sun, he stared east at the house before him, an ancient bungalow painted white now, though it surely was once red and at some point blue and maybe yellow before that, the layers of paint on the oak boards a sedimentary clue to the building's history. They were strong stock, these old homes, but most of them on the block were abandoned, nearly impossible to sell. Without care, their lots became overgrown and weed-ridden, home to snakes, raccoons, opossums, armadillos. There were rusted-out remains of cars on the last bits of pavement that hadn't succumbed to the tall yellow grasses encroaching from all around.

It put him on edge to be so far from his comfort zone of the downtown. Not to mention the heat. He could feel the sweat staining the armpits and collar of his starched button-up shirt, but felt some relief because this was the last house to visit for the day. He wiped his forehead.

The front door of the old home lay some thirty feet in front of the car. He gently opened the gate of the chain link fence, though there was nowhere for the latch to engage. It just hung there, limply, coolly. The cement paving stones that had once been laid flat into the grassless front yard were now cracked and angled. On top of this dry, dusty surface were discarded pieces of engine blocks, shattered glass, broken toys. The house stood sentry over it all, like an eagle over its canyon eyrie, its shutters slipping off their mounts, the odd slate shingle on the roof missing like a rotten tooth.

The screen door of the tired building opened before he even reached the stoop. In the sliver between the maple slab and the frame surrounding it, the man could see the face of the woman, chiselled and hard from years of struggle.

He forced a smile.

“Hi, ma’am, I’m with the Department of Real Estate Assessments for the county-”

She cut him off. “Don’t want nothing to do with it.”

“Ma’am, I’m just here to verify the information we have on record in the system. Do you have a minute to answer a few questions about your property?”

She stepped out onto the porch, the sun catching above the overhanging roof and keeping her face in the shade. She eased her way across the cracked concrete slab, sat down in a chair, began to rock it back and forth. “Get on with it.”

“Like I said, just need to verify some of the information on your property. Nobody’s been out here in about ... oh, fifteen years.” He looked up at her, trying to gauge if the number he threw out was right. The notes on the form were sloppy and undated and it may have been even longer since an appraiser had been there. Sometimes, the dilapidated properties in the blighted cut slipped through the cracks, other times people just simply didn’t want to be out there.

He thought he heard her mumble fifteen years. She laughed. “Time is a hard goddamn thing,” she said, staring through him to the house across the street. Its walls had succumbed to the vines and moss, its broken windows silent chambers calling out for assistance. She watched the man as he placed one foot on the porch, leaning onto his raised knee to take some of the weight off of his feet.

She craned her head, trying to find some new bit of information about the tumble-down home she’d stared at for six decades from her front porch. “The older you get, the more hard life gets. Look at you, look at your shoes, your young body. It seems like it’ll last forever, doesn’t it? But your friends will die, your kids will die. We take it and live with it. Sure. But there ain’t nothing good here, ain’t no point in striving to make it better. Look at this place,” she said, rubbing her hands on the cracked paint of the clapboard siding. “You wake up one day after pissing in your bed and you can’t even bend your knuckles anymore. Ain’t nobody could have told me to expect this.”

The man nodded, unsure how to proceed. Homeowners

were often irritable when he arrived, but some were more difficult than others. He wiped more sweat from his face. He was far younger than the woman. He had a wife, a young daughter. His problems weren't her problems, but, then again, she could say the same to him.

"This house is all I got left and you want to raise my taxes, hmm? Take the nickels from the my disability. Take it before I even have to see it go because I'll never write you a check."

"Ma'am, I'm just here to verify the records. I honestly can't say whether your taxes will go up or down. But I see we have a negative influence deduction on your land because of the river, so there's that."

She laughed. "See that tree over there? I got married right there, in this front yard. First son was already born, didn't matter. Nobody cared about that back then. He was bit by one of the tadpoles before anybody knew too much."

"I'm sorry to hear that, ma'am. Does the fence keep them out now? I can have someone from the environmental services department come out and check on it."

"Keeps out some. Not all." The woman pointed with her foot at the concrete floor of the porch. The desiccated remains of a small amphibian lay crushed on the surface. Its skin was a greenish-yellow with straggling black spots dotting all along the dorsal side. The man had never actually seen one in person. "Every once in awhile, you'll get a young one that can fly already."

He was slow to process this information. The woman looked at him, pleased by her age and experience. "Come sit down, have a drink."

The man hesitated, working the numbers in his head. It was almost the end of the workday. Another forty-five minutes back to the office to return the car. There wouldn't be anybody left when he got back, not on a Friday. He stepped forward. She turned towards the window behind her, the sash held open by a crumbling red brick. There was no screen. She reached through and pulled out a bottle.

It had no label, no cork even, but an anchor was formed

into the shoulder of the glass. Sailor strength. She grabbed the bottle by the thick of its body, swirled it back and took a swig. She handed it to him, watching if he'd wipe the mouth of the glass. He didn't, but kept his lips from touching the surface.

"Don't blame you, really," she said, laughing. "But I saw it, don't think you can get anything by me."

The man laughed sheepishly as he leaned against the front of the house, the warm heat of the sun-baked wood cutting through his shirt. He slapped a mosquito from the back of his neck.

"Why are you even here?" she asked him. "Go to the coasts, get away from all this."

"I could tell you the same thing."

"I made a life here. You'd be right to say that most of it's gone," she said, spreading her hands out around her. "But everything's still here," she finished, tapping her temple with her weathered hand. It was easy for him to picture the house, the neighborhood, the town as it once had been. Bustling, tight-knit, happy. The decay had already happened by the time he had come to the town.

The man drank from the bottle again. A crane took off from the riverbank behind the house, warbling as it lifted into the air.

"Start a new life," he told her, unbuttoning the top of his shirt, loosening his tie. "Lethelation."

"So they give me a couple extra years, take away my wrinkles, take away my shattered hip and bum knee. Robert don't come back. Dorothy and Harry don't come back. They tidy up my brain and I lose all my memories just to have a clean slate. Seventy, eighty years I had. They were good." She stared off up the block as a pickup truck made a turn onto a side street. "I don't need another life."

Suddenly, he remembered the clipboard in his hand, the job he'd come to do. The woman had eased up and he thought to ask her a few questions while she was talkative. Looking down at the paperwork, he tried to find the year of construction. Maybe her older memories would help him finish the report. At the bottom of the page, he found a note from one of the previous

appraisers. Sometimes they'd leave each other tips on how to deal with certain homeowners, how to appease the difficult ones, what language to speak, what issues to look at, but not bring up.

He read the note left for him again and again, quickly as it was only a fragment of a sentence. He realized the woman was blind. The previous agent probably hadn't pried, but now he'd seen her do so much, see so many things.

She was changed. The river had allowed her to see the outlines of much of the world, just not in the way everybody else saw it. Of the benefits, he knew little, but had heard rumors. "You're afraid of losing your vision if you move. It tells you something about the creatures doesn't it, about the young ones?"

A thin smirk, not quite a smile, tugged at the corners of her mouth. "There are things that I couldn't explain to you. You think the other side is beautiful or magical, but there're ugly parts, brutal things about those creatures. There's something there, a spark bigger than us, a change coming, but there's no use trying to figure it out, no use trying to tell people."

The man extended his arm and she lifted the bottle from his hand, took a final swig. It was empty now. The sound of the tadpoles hitting the barrier became louder as the sun set and the noise of the day died away. He checked his watch. It was time to drive back to the office.

"Don't worry about this," he said, pushing himself off of the house and crumpling up the paperwork for the property. He'd enter in that there was no change on the lot, try to find another reduction in the system somewhere that she could apply for. He felt sorry for her, out in the world, all alone. "Is there anything you need?" he asked. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Get out of this place," she said, rocking in the chair and rubbing the head of a nail that stuck out from the windowsill beside her. "You don't want to be around when that fence don't work anymore."

He nodded towards her, smiled. He knew she could see it. Crossing the parched yard, he thought he could see small tunnels under the surface of the ground, slight indentations where subterranean paths had collapsed. It was getting worse. For a

moment, he thought of taking the woman away, that it was unsafe, but realized she knew more than he ever would.

The gate opened and closed under his hands. He started the car, the wheels scattering pebbles into the ditch on the side of the road. Spinning it around, he took a final look at the woman. She smiled and as he turned his head back, just on the far edge of his vision, he caught the woman twist sideways, crushing one of the tadpoles with the brick from the window.

The sun was setting across the river, orange and purple ripples spreading out across the horizon, catching on the tops of the trees along the west bank. The man drove back to the downtown and thought of his future.

Fill up the glass with fine ice;
2 oz. of St. Croix rum;
 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. of Old Tom Gin;
2 dashes of Bitters;
 $\frac{1}{2}$ of a Lime;
 & chilled cola

The Limits of the Ocean

The husband and wife sat watching the television. They'd worked together in the yard all day, him supervising, her working, catching sun and drinking lemonade that they'd made together. His mind was sharp and fit, always searching and twisting, her body still strong, fit enough to walk miles and carry the laundry from the basement to the upper level of the house.

The news dragged on as it often did in the middle of the summer. Murders, droughts, all many of such-and-such plagues. Far off, across the field behind the house that still held a volleyball net from the neighbors' party earlier in the week, there was an explosion. The couple felt it rumble through the ground, a chain reaction of sizzles breaking the air. The television flicked off, the room went dark, barely lit by the late afternoon sun, an orange and purple streaking that slanted through the sky.

"God damnit," the husband said, no longer bothering to speak such things under his breath in his old age. It was a full-bodied, deep-down curse to the gods. They hadn't made dinner yet and it was beginning to get dark.

"Honey," she said, trying to calm him, but still somewhat taken aback by his outbursts, even after all these years.

"Let's make some sandwiches while there's still light." He used his cane to push himself off the couch, too prideful to take help, and they walked to the kitchen. He leaned against the countertop, asking her to find the bread, the lunchmeat, the mayonnaise. She forgot the list, he started over, she missed the things in front of her. Eventually, both exhausted, they ate.

The summer night was quiet except for the frogs in the neighbor's pond. They carried on from twilight until dawn. Standing at the back door waiting for the cats to come in, the husband thought of how he could get rid of the amphibians and sleep peacefully. Another day.

The wife got a glass of water and made her way upstairs, the dog at her heels. Locking the house, the husband followed. It would be hot that night, no air conditioning, no fans. Easing into their separate beds in separate rooms, each lay back, feeling the sweat begin to bead on their foreheads and necks.

But sleep came easy after a hard day of work in the sun.

The wife was awakened by the scratching of metal on glass. She got up, looked out her window at the front of the house, couldn't see anything. Still, the sounds continued. A window pane shattered. She ran down the hall to her husband, shook his shoulder. The words wouldn't come to her.

"What?" he asked, angry at her confusion.

"There's, um, oh," she fumbled. "I can't think of the words." Her voice was quavering. "Somebody's outside," she was finally able to stammer.

The husband instinctively looked for the clock, hoping to see whether it was eleven at night and a neighbor at the door, or three in the morning and a break-in, but found only darkness. Through his window overlooking the backyard, he heard the footsteps on the broken glass.

Reaching for the telephone on his nightstand, he picked it up and heard a dead vacuum. The power outage must have been great for even the phone lines to lose power. The crunching of glass continued.

The dog had followed the wife into the room. "Shut the door, lock it," the husband said. In the moonlight, he reached deep into the bottom drawer of his nightstand, pulled out the pistol. The wife climbed onto the bed with the dog. The canine was old, thirteen they thought, and was quite uninterested in protecting the house from intruders.

The husband checked the revolver.

He leaned over the window, saw one of the intruders. He pondered yelling, but thought it might cause the burglar to fire up at the window, or break in and use the darkness against him. Fear gripped him in a way it hadn't since leaving the city. He thought he could make the shot at the intruder, hit the person in the back. Pulling back the hammer, he angled it downward, fired.

The blast reverberated through the field and forest behind the house, an echo chamber without the noise of modern life to drown it out. The husband looked down at the deck, couldn't see the body of the attacker. He pushed himself off of the frame and sat on the edge of the bed.

The wife was crying softly, panic wracking her body. They'd moved to the suburbs to get away from all of this. She remembered the first house they bought, not far from the city. It was an older neighborhood, run-down. It was all they could afford. She'd rode the bus home from work one day and found the front door open, but his car wasn't there. She'd called the police from a neighbor's house and even after they'd swept the property and found only some coins and a few pieces of jewelry missing, the young couple never felt safe again.

This house had been different. The kids had been born in it, there had been birthday parties and new used cars, their pets had come and gone. There'd been great joy there. Old age had taken its toll on them both, but still, the photographs on the refrigerator and the portraits lining the hall kept everything alive in their memory. These deficiencies they had now were only bodily, temporary. The fights were about their bodies, things beyond their control. Deep down, there was still that love that had never tempered. They could have both left if it was bad. They could keep to themselves in the house, but they chose not to. They aggravated each other, but still, they could be found together at night, eating, remembering, saying 'I love you' as one or the other went to bed.

There was a bang on the front window of the room. The master bedroom ran the whole width of the upper level of the house, looking out on the backyard and forward onto the front street. "Is there another?" the wife asked.

The man ran through the scenarios. Perhaps he hadn't hit the intruder and the person was trying a different point of entry now. Perhaps he had hit the intruder, but there was a group of them. They'd be angrier now. Perhaps there were only two, brothers, willing to die for each other. His mind spiraled. None of the options were good.

“Move back into this corner,” the husband said, taking his wife’s hand as he hadn’t in years. He moved her into the farthest corner from the front window as he crossed the room towards the front of the house. The roof of the porch was below the opening. The invader must have climbed up there to get in. The husband could see the criminal’s silhouette in the glass, illuminated by the moonlight. The arms moved, tugged at the sill. With the pop of a vacuum breaking inside the seal, the window began to slide. The husband focused, pulled back the hammer and fired again.

The figure dissipated. It was dark and the explosion temporarily took his vision. He grappled to regain his senses. Using the furniture in the room as a crutch, he moved across the space, one hand moving from dresser to cabinet to make-up table, the other pointing the gun straight ahead. He had to see the body for himself.

As he stood at the window’s opening, he could see onto the porch roof, a dull glow of moonlight illuminating the asphalt shingles. There was no body. He scanned up and down the house, nothing.

He began to shuffle back across the room to his wife, his love, as the sound of the frame surrounding the front door splintered and echoed through the hallway up to the room. She let out a cry, covered her mouth.

He stared at the flimsy lock on the bedroom door. These were made for teenage girls to write privately in their diaries without their little brothers barging in, not for stopping grown adults ransack a house. In the dark, he placed his hand against the dresser to the right of the door. The intruders knew they were in the master bedroom. There was no use in hiding. He pushed. With a great crash, the dresser fell sidelong in front of the door, a heavy thud shuddering through the frame of the house.

The sound of the shattering glass in the picture frames crackled through the room. The moonlight from the back window caught on a particularly large shard. The husband called his wife over. He grabbed a shirt from the back of a chair, had her pick up the piece of glass, wrapping it in the cloth for a makeshift weapon. She held it unsurely with both hands and sat back on the bed. He

followed her, sitting at the edge. The dog sat behind them, his ears perked, his head cocked as he took in the strange sounds.

It was a gamble.

Footsteps hit the wood floor of the entryway. The couple held their breath, listening for voices. There was a chattering on the lower level. It stopped. Heavy footsteps pounded on the carpeted steps leading to the upper level. The master bedroom was at the top of the stairs. The knob of the door turned, left, right, back again, over and over. The wife grabbed her husband's arm.

A few seconds passed in silence. A shoulder hit the door. Again. The hollow door bent on its frame. The dresser held the bottom of it in place, but the top became elastic, bending forward into the room with each attack. The thin wood that formed the front and back began to crack.

The shape of a hand pushed forward through the hole where the top of the door met the frame. It reached in, slithering across the wall, the wrist trapped as the door pinched it against the frame. The fingers slammed against the wallpapered drywall, trying to gain leverage and pry the door open. With an impulsive lunge, the wife jumped forward to the door, slammed the glass shard into the writhing hand. There was a chattering, a clicking from the hall, teeth rolling over themselves. She twisted the glass, imagined the thin, fragile bones of a hand rending and snapping apart.

It retracted. The door snapped into the frame. She climbed onto the bed and their bodies were next to each other, both having protected the house, each other.

The husband kept the revolver on the door. Minutes passed. They thought they heard the voices again. With a crush, the door was hit again from the outside and the husband fired twice, deep into the center of the door, the wood tearing and flying across the room.

In his mind, he saw the six chambers of the revolver. The four empty ones, the one in line in the barrel, the final slug waiting in the wing. He held her hand, wondered how many more could be out there, thought what they might want to do to them, to her. He tried to push the thoughts out of his head, but they kept

coming back to him, how to use the last two bullets.

The kids would understand. Their parents had led full lives, taught them so many things, passed down their greatest traits. He thought of stories that the both of them still had never told the kids. There was just never enough time. But they would understand. It was the best way.

Their breaths came and went slowly in their chests. If only dawn would come.

Footsteps moved down the stairs, there was a burst of sounds, wood was heard being kicked.

They waited. Two bullets left.

The moon hung heavy, unmoving. Time was slow without a clock. Their arms began to shake from keeping their weapons at attention.

“God damn, my arm is getting tired,” the husband said, laughing nervously to himself. She didn’t know why, but she began to laugh, too, the both of them searching for a release.

“They have to be gone,” the wife said. They both lay back on the bed, still with their weapons at the ready, but trying to take the stress off of their bodies. The dresser still protected them if need be. With their free hands, they locked fingers. Neither could remember the last time they’d held hands.

In the dark void of the night, across the field behind the house, they heard a gunshot. And another. Minutes passed. Twenty, forty, an hour. Adrenaline kept them both awake, silent, but holding each other softly, not the way young people held each other, but the understanding embrace of decades spent together, paying bills and pulling weeds.

From the hole in the front window, they heard another gunshot from across the street. Another two in rapid succession. More.

It was over. For them, at least.

And eventually, exhausted, they fell asleep, together, two warm bodies. Despite the terror of the night, they dreamt of the future and no longer the past. They’d try to be better.

Before dawn, after hours of work, a crew came and tested the conduit box. There was a hum and a surge and, across the

neighborhood, porch lights and microwave clocks flashed on in a brilliant explosion of light.

As they opened their doors and windows and found their homes free of intruders, free of bodies and blood and torn cloth, all of the neighbors deflected the blame of who had been firing guns during night. Even the guilty parties scratched their heads and said it must have been someone on the next block over.

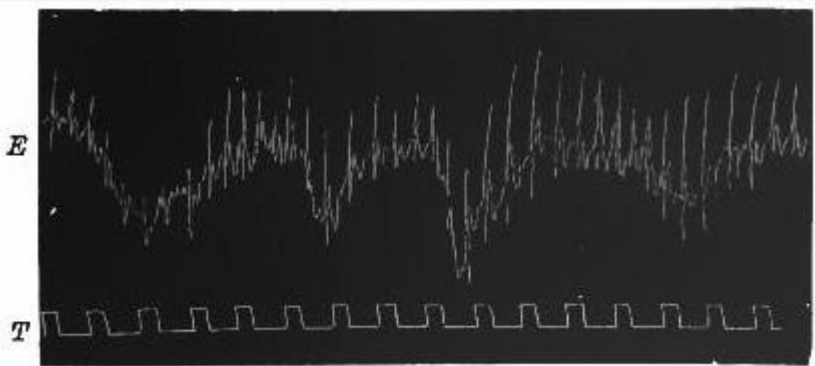


FIG. 6. — FEAR, LOVE, AND THE UNSURE FUTURE

Naked Lights

Dawn. Annie felt the morning sun on her skin, small droplets of moisture forming on her arms as she stepped from the chilled tunnel exit. The world seemed to be shaped differently at daybreak, clean and desolate, expansive and absorbing. She paused in the great stone portal, watching the lightwires along the deserted street ahead of her slowly dimming down as the sun broke through the horizon.

She'd been up all night riding between the different ekkejo terminals, their low-slung frames asleep without the usual night passengers. Fingering the slim aluminum key in her hand – its septagonal head indicating it was for one of the lockers available for free to riders – she thought about her solitary pursuit of the man, this dead man who had become a game.

She pictured his face as it had been in the crime scene photographs, serene and calm. His grey khakis frayed at the ends, his red flannel shirt unbuttoned a few notches down, wisps of chest hair spilling out. She had studied the finer details: the worn leather sole on his left shoe; the fading tattoo of a wave on his bicep; the chipped front tooth; the cracked crystal on his watch. Her eyes had finally fallen on the clenched fist that held the key.

There was a klaxon pealing somewhere on the other side of the city that forced her mind back to the present, back to the riots. They had started earlier in the year and she couldn't expect there to be extra hands to help her with the case. The file had been on her desk when she got into the office the week before and, despite the oppressive heat of the high summer, she'd quickly taken the opportunity to get out from the claustrophobic walls and frosted glass.

She wondered if anybody besides her even cared about the man. There had been hundreds, thousands, that had died in the last few weeks as the government transitioned hands. He was just

another mark, just another manilla folder until the second body turned up in the Ojàwashkwà River. It was an exact double of the man, stripped of everything except the same fading wave tattoo on his bicep.

And so two dozen terminals scattered across the city lay behind Annie, their industrial locker bank alcoves safe from the taint of the mystery. Her fingers had grown sore from turning the key into resistant locks, yet still she tried to find the match.

Stepping into the current station – a horizontal glass building with a canted aluminum roof – a great gust of cooled air covered her body, sliding up her sleeves. Even at dawn, the city was already becoming stiflingly hot and though the conditioned air was welcome, the temperature switch made her sneeze.

She paused on the threshold. The teal-tinted glass of the windows played games with her mind. She felt a headache beginning to form in the front of her skull and talked softly to herself as she straightened her sleeves, remembering that autumn would arrive in a few months and she would be free from the heat crush.

The headache passed.

As she scanned the morning's activity, she stared at the riders that shuffled in, waiting for their jetties, the long and worn chestnut benches becoming makeshift bunks, people taking to them as they moved from city to town, megalopolis to coast, wherever the work took them.

The alarms simply aren't working, Annie thought as she watched the people. Even the guard had his eyes closed as he leaned against the anodized door frame. *They try to stay up at night and don't bother to stay awake during the day.*

The smile of the worker at the front desk returned her mind to the task. She navigated easily through the prefabricated structure of the terminal, same as the others in the city, moving to the left and down a long corridor before ending at the storage bay in the east wing. A janitor arrived and she smiled at him as she began testing the key. Starting at the top of the banks and moving her way down and across the flight of lockers, she caught her breath as the small tumbler inside the orange steel box of number

63 clicked and the door popped open. She noticed her left hand that had held the key was shaking, the thin piece of metal rattling against her wedding band. Quickly, she slid the talisman into her pocket and bent down to stare into the opening.

Aquamarine light from the window bay raked across the mouth of the small box. She reached in and pulled out a small instant photograph of an alleyway. Brick buildings rose up on either side of the image, their red walls looming over the dumpsters cluttering the narrow alley, spindly fire escapes capping the tattered exposure. Underneath the photograph was a thick sheet of orange vellum, inscribed with a rough map of several blocks and dotted with red triangles. There was a receipt that was too faded to read except for a block of random numbers, two small editions of *A Year Aboard the Hulk* and *The Draining of Kopais*, and a small red whistle, its body cavity crushed, the pea inside silenced forever.

She reached in farther, slapping her hand against the walls, searching for any other information. Deep in the back, slipped under the partition with the next locker, she felt a slip of paper caught between the folds of metal. She tugged at it, pulled it into the light and read the phrase on the slip: "Recycle the friction brake."

Closing the locker, Annie left the key with the attendant and went out to catch a jetty to go back to the office. As she grabbed the heavy door of the ekkejo station, the circadian alarms began to sound out in the street. They were meant to regulate the body's sleep cycle against the creatures inside, to strengthen it through regular rhythms and force them out. That was all anybody had been able to come up with. And so they wailed, several times all through the day, each blast beginning as a subtle hum deep in the back of the ears that grew into a pulsing dread. If you were open to it and your body wasn't under undue schedule strain, the harmonics would hopefully guide you into sleep at night and keep you awake during the day.

Annie just winced. She'd stayed up all night riding the jetties and the dull draw of sleep had just begun to tug at the edges of her mind before it was ripped away by the sirens. She took

three deep breaths and rubbed the bridge of her nose as she was taught, trying to slow her racing heart and override the system.

Time slowed. A weight was lifted. She felt a rush as the alarm was banished into the back of her mind.

The failures of fitting the world into fixed blocks of sleep and wake were widespread. A large-scale purging required that the world, together, turn off every night and awake every morning. Everybody in sync with light and dark. In theory.

Annie watched as the passengers on the benches jolted awake from the alarm, rubbing their eyes, only to lay their heads back down, trying to squeeze more sleep in before the next siren, oblivious to the greater good. It would be like this every hour until nightfall, eighteen hours away. Delinquency was high and it allowed the infection to temper and spread. As a minor archon, Annie was allowed traversal through the city at all hours, out of sync with the crowds and the mass, but she wondered when it would all end, since so few chose to follow the schedule.

She could hear the jetty coming to a stop in the tunnel below. *Long day ahead*, she thought, watching as the flower and herb vendors moved their carts into the street.

Against the sparkling orange of the morning sun and the deep cerulean of the sky, she realized the flowers had no color. Sleep was so far away.

Talembo stood at the end of Annie's desk, took a long sip of coffee. "Coroner's report," he said, tossing a dark brown packet onto the table.

"No leads on either one?" she asked.

"Nothing. We'll send the photograph around, see if it turns up anything."

"Keep me updated."

Annie rubbed the piece of paper from the locker against her fingers. It wasn't worn, wasn't used. Just a note for the man to himself. *Recycle the friction brake*.

The alarm sounded again as Talembo was leaving. He was nearly acclimated to the fixed schedule and barely noticed it. His body took in the alarm and processed it, calm with its own cycle.

Without sleep, Annie hunched over, her body racked with pain. She grabbed the wastebasket beside her desk and vomited.

“You gotta get to bed,” he said, closing the door as Annie wiped her mouth.

The streets were heavy and gritty as the summers grew longer every year, yet Annie moved through them effortlessly, coolly, always alert. She grabbed the slim handle of the small shop tucked in a bare row between the high rises, a vestigial nook of the early city.

“Anything new, Ezra?” she asked, taking in the smell of old newsprint and tung oil, woven fabrics and forgotten plastics.

“Ah, Annie. Yes, a few. Come look,” the old man said, coming alive at the prospect of sharing a rapidly-dwindling stock of ephemera. He did not have long to live and she knew this. They both did.

Moving towards the back of the small shop, Annie stopped at the stack of porcelain-coated metal signs. She flipped through the advertisements. There were small ones for baking powder, large ones for tire dealerships, the odd restroom indicator. She pictured in her mind the sign of her dreams, a great slab of shimmering steel pried from the top of a diner proclaiming the sale of hamburgers and coffee, the two titans of internecine national consumption. It was rare; she had never even seen one. Perhaps it only existed in her mind.

“I’ll take this ice cream one,” she said, pulling out a thin sheet of metal and wiping it with her sleeve. The line drawing of a cone against a light blue background was simple enough to intrigue her. The orange letters for the company name, Freeman’s, were attractive in a freehand way and she recognized the brand from an old line of refrigerators. She missed such peerless examples of advertising, their slim metal castings coated in brilliant colors with simple names calling out to passersby. Now a new product simply exploded inside their heads and they knew it intimately. There was no mystery, no allure.

“Seventy,” the old man said. Annie slid the money out of her pocket and slipped the sign under her arm. No point in

haggling anymore.

She walked several blocks in the opposite direction of her home to a storage facility near the spice factory. She unlocked the latch on her unit and flung the door open, looking onto a sea of similar signs and other discarded pieces of industrial life. She realized there simply wasn't enough time to enjoy it all. *I'm saving it from destruction*, she told herself, but realized there was a void inside of her that might never be sated.

Taking one last look at the new acquisition, she slid it upright between two others and closed the door.

This is it, she thought. She flicked between the alley and the photograph, comparing the shapes of the fire escapes and the angles of the walls. She turned in the space of the narrow street, looking at the crumbling bricks and rusted dumpsters. *Why did he need to remember this place?*

Walking up and down the thin channel, Annie scratched her foot along the junction of the buildings and the asphalt to try and kick up anything besides the litter cluttering the alley. Unsuccessful, she walked back down to the entrance on Taylor Street.

She thought of the map she had found. It had taken three days to break. She had been studying it at home when Christopher noticed the shapes. "Yeltro Square?" he had asked. She was startled, realizing the half-moon at the end of the hand-drawn map was the fountain downtown, named after some forgotten soldier. Standing at the site a day latter, the pattern of the red triangles became clear. They were unguarded electrical outlets. It was a map of free power, a catalogue of the city's overlooked secrets. *This man was resourceful*, she had thought.

She looked at the alley, taking in the whole system. *If I had to hide something, where?*

As a jackhammer started in the distance, Annie noticed the small ledge above the first level of the building. It was only an inch or two, a quarter of each brick's length extending into the ether, but safe from being seen at street level. She pulled herself on top of a dumpster, allowing her to see along the top surface of

the ledge. She spotted a small outlet box midway along the alley, the receptacle turned lengthwise to keep it hidden from below and knew in her gut that it was the man's work.

Standing on her toes atop a closer dumpster, she used a dime to unscrew the bolts holding the plate in. The insides were fake, a sham. Behind the false plate covering the hollow of space in the wall, she saw a small circle of red plastic. Annie grabbed it, realizing as she pulled on the object that it was a screwdriver. She studied the strange driver head extending from the handle. She'd never seen such a shape before. Beside it was a bottle opener for a city brewery that had closed a dozen years ago and an inkpen, engraved with a woodpecker on its rosewood barrel.

Reattaching the plate, she hopped off of the dumpster and slid down to the ground. Christopher had a presentation on astatine generation downtown and she had to get ready. Her body was sore, she still hadn't slept much. As the sun beat down on her shoulders, she realized she was thirsty. The thought took her over and she became overwhelmed with a desire to reach water, to feel it covering her, to push her body deep into a great pool of it. Her head ached as the alarms began to drone through the city.

Water. Sleep.

Stepping out of the shower, the telephone rang. Talembo's voice clicked on the line. "Anne. Another body. Same guy, looks just like him. I don't know." She could tell he was shaken, disturbed by the finding of another body. Two is explainable, twins. Three, the odds become less likely.

Annie told him she would be in later that night. Talembo told her he wouldn't be there, reminded her of the alarm. He was almost cleared and couldn't miss a night's sleep so late in his curing cycle. She smashed her hand into her leg, frustrated at the attempts to control their bodies. An alarm would ring soon and she desperately wanted to sleep. The shower had been so calming, so fulfilling. She felt a slight tingling of euphoria running up her back, across her scalp. She needed to sleep tonight.

Leaving the apartment, she stopped into Ezra's store for a quick scan. He handed her a small tin placard. It was bright

yellow with a fading black script that read “Louise County Electric” above a stylized lightning bolt. He knew her so well at this point. After paying him, she slid out the screwdriver.

“Oh, my, haven’t seen one of these in a long time. I think only the city governments use this kind anymore. It’s a...Perzo? Pirezzo?” He turned the tool over in his hands. “Piretzi! Some kind of strange driver from across the ocean. The jetties are from there, you know? They always led us in public transportation, that’s why the city still has to use it. I’ll give you twenty for it. Can’t hardly find these things out in the wild.”

“Sorry, Ezra, not for sale. But good eye on this,” she said, holding up the sign before slipping it into her purse. The alarm sounded. Again she winced before forcing the pain back. She would sleep that night after the presentation, she had to. Her eyes fell to Ezra’s orange lapel pin, the symbol of all-clear. He barely noticed the sound, but saw her eyeing his badge.

“Ah, the bug, Annie. You must get some sleep.”

“I will, I will.” She paused, thought a minute about her thirst. “Do you think it did anything when it was in you? Changed you? Your personality?”

“I’m not sure. I acted differently, ate strangely. What was its goal? I couldn’t tell you. I’m a little fuzzy looking back. I wish you would sleep and just get it out of the way.”

Annie nodded, thanking him as she slid out the door. The storage locker was on the way to the terminal and she quickly stashed it inside before heading on.

It was another metal slab, a good one, no doubt, but no closer to the one she truly wanted.

The jetty leaving the symposium was crowded, stifling in the night air even as the city cooled down. It had pulled out of the tunnels and as the engineer opened up the throttle, Annie watched the multitudes around her with their orange buttons, their faces beaming with the pride from doing something forced upon them. She felt her eyelids grow heavy and wished she was with them. Christopher slid an arm under her own. They were both tired as the jetty tumbled softly through the city.

The first of the night alarms sounded and most in the car, Christopher included, felt the draw of scheduled sleep beginning to pull on them. Annie's body was in flux, she cringed. Rubbing her eyes after the half-second nap, she realized the car smelled terrible, a mix of burning hair and wet dog. She looked around at the passengers, most having covered their noses. An employee of the transit authority pushed his way from the front of the car through to the back. He opened a control panel on the side of the car, moved a few handles before grabbing his two-way. Annie picked up a snippet of his conversation with the other employees over the open communications channel. "Check the doors and recycle all the friction brakes," a tinny voice squawked over the device.

She snapped to attention with more force than the alarm had been able to elicit. She watched the man hurrying around with a great ring of keys. She could see him through the crowd at the back of the car as he fumbled with several small metal doors built into the paneling. He opened one, then another, and another. There was a hiss and a hard metallic click as he finished and the train pulled away. *The panels...* She grabbed a schedule of the ekkejo network from a holder on the wall.

As the jetty pulled into their station, Annie grabbed her husband's hand, his tired mind slowing all of his movements.

"Come on, honey," she said, lifting her husband onto her shoulders. "Let's get you upstairs before the final alarm. You'll be in bed, warm and safe." She felt the comforting dig of expectant sleep at the front of her brain, just between her forehead and eyeline – a response to being home and the sun having set – but knew she couldn't rest.

"What about you?" he asked.

"I'll be fine. I have to go to the office for a minute."

Too tired to argue, Christopher climbed the stairs to the apartment, turning and waving once at her. She thought he looked different, taller or shorter. *Something to do with the void of the building's porch and his outline.* Annie wondered if it was the lack of sleep or the possible ravages of the unknown inside of her.

She ducked back through the empty, darkened streets to

her office. It felt more comforting here than any other place she knew. The wire racks and oak cabinets. She grabbed a glass of water and looked at the annotated map of the city on the wall. She filled the glass from the pitcher, drank it in one draught, filled it again. Flipping through the file Talembo had left, she marked where the most recent body had been found. She compared it to the location of first body, the terminal station locker, the alley, the location of the second body. Two of the city's transit lines – yellow and green – ran through the overlapping orbits of the sites. She would have to get the jetties pulled and inspected.

Finishing the full carafe of water, Annie looked up from her desk. The light wires gave off a dull golden glow in the night, creeping in through the open window at far end of the office. She got up and poured herself a slim glass of rum. She threw it back, her taste buds jumping quickly past the alcohol and landing on the sugar. She could feel the grains of molasses as they'd been before they were fermented.

Grabbing her coat, she ran home to try and get as much sleep as she could. *I can make something be better than nothing.* It had begun to rain. The heavy drops of water felt beautiful to her as they hit her skin. She pulled off her jacket, letting the droplets cover and cleanse her, fill her pores and soul. As she moved through the dead streets, she realized that the moon was full and apexing for the second time that month. *Blue rain.*

“Can you get them to keep jackhammering?” Annie asked one of the foreman in the maintenance yard. The crews had stopped their work when they saw the investigation and were standing idly by, waiting for the teams to leave. The foreman looked puzzled, but went to the workers and told them to continue the din. Annie needed the sound, needed the void of the day to be filled in her ears. She knew this wasn't normal.

Staring at the block of jetty cars pulled out of the daily routine, she was amazed at the sheer number of dented green and yellow hulks that moved through the city. They were all being searched to turn up their secrets.

A worker approached her. “This?” he asked, holding up a

slim glassine envelope of photographs. Annie took them, thanked the man. Talembo approached her and told her nothing else was found.

Leaving the maintenance yard, she slid the photographs out onto her hand. One showed a young man in front of a small house, smiling at the camera. It was out of focus somewhat, but she studied his eyes, felt that it was the dead man in his youth. One of the dead men, at least. The other was of a woman, bending down at the water's edge, the fringe of her skirt skating across the surface, her hair tumbling over her face. The final photo was of a bridge, the hard surfaces glimmering in the morning light.

These fragments were the man's life. Him, young, open, ready for the world. Her, a friend? A lover? The water opened up for them. What of the bridge? A connection, a tether between points. City and country. Past and future. Together and apart.

Annie chased the two phantoms.

A citizen telephoned in the fourth body of the man. There were no clues except for his own fingerprints all over the abandoned utility room. But Annie had begun to expect that. The clues were going to be hidden, just as he'd lived his life.

She left the office.

The lights in the apartment were dimmed for the late hour. Walking in, she put her things on the blue chair near the window. Christopher lay in bed, following the schedule. Standing in the bathroom, she watched him through the mirror as she filled the small sink basin with water. She dipped her hands in it, letting the liquid cover every crack and void in her skin.

She opened her eyes, realized she needed to take her watch off in case it got wet and saw that an hour had passed since she had returned home.

Oh.

She dried and dragged herself into bed. She was committed to trying to sleep for a few hours so that she could wake before dawn to continue the search. The bridge from the photograph would be easy to find. The metalwork, the rivets, the angles, all subtle signatures of its design. It had to have

importance to the man. The men.

Her mind raced. She slipped out of bed. *I'm so close. My body can wait.*

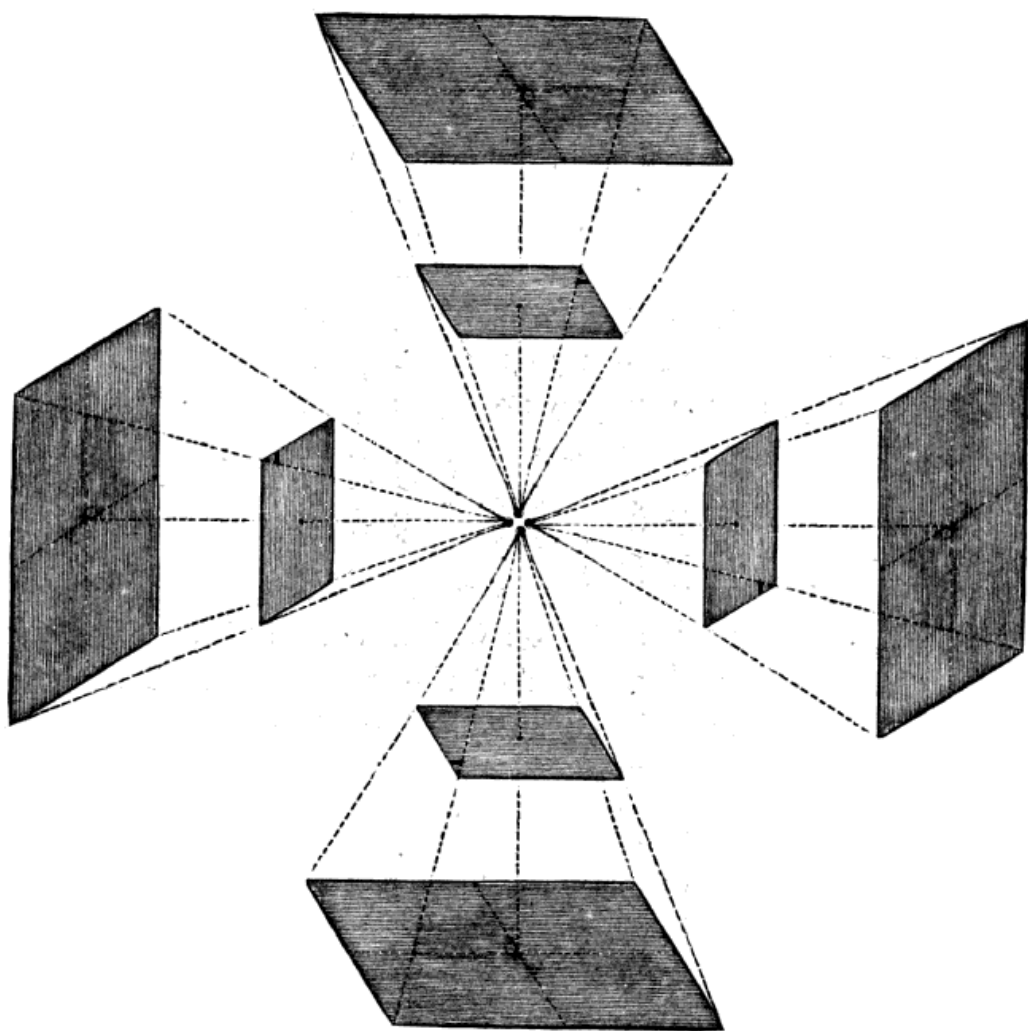
A small colony of bats unhinged itself from a great metal nook as the flashlight swung across the spans. Feeling the cold steel of the mighty bridge under her hand, Annie leaned out off the roadbed, out over the all-encompassing water beneath her, the majestic vein that moved from the valley through the crushing city walls before emptying out to the dead coast. Dull lightwires marked the edges of the monumental steel beams, their single bolts as tall as her alone.

She'd looked at so many photographs of city bridges, but it had slipped by during the day. Only at night, in the time before sleep overtakes the body, did her mind link the pieces. Once it was there in her thoughts, it couldn't wait.

Her badge had gotten her far through the city in the early morning before the sun rose, repelling the guards that would have forced her into slumber. She knew it happened at night. The bodies were always found in the morning. There was no other way. The man had forced her hand.

Staring out across the sliver of water that pierced the city in two, she constructed a cognitive map for the information she had. There were at least five of the men. The four dead and the living one that must still be alive. *Was he the original? Was he taking back his life? Taking control? And yet, what did original mean? They were all from somewhere.*

Standing on the precipice of the forged steel span, she realized that it was foolish to try and track down a home for the man. The city had become his home. The free storage, the free power, the free shelter; the city was monolithic and the man had connected to it in a way that others hadn't been able to. It was a knot that she had partially unraveled, and yet, there were clues she hadn't been able to disentangle, leads that went nowhere. She knew she hovered around the solution, was getting close to the unifying character, but it was taking a toll on her body. She couldn't keep living like this.



Production of shadow penumbras and a diminished nucleus

She'd ruined all of his other spots, turned them over, took their things. He would have to come to the bridge eventually as the noose tightened. Annie enjoyed the game. He had lived off of the city, but she had grown to live off of him. She thought of Christopher, how little she'd seen him this past month. Talembo who she only saw as he was coming or going. Ezra and his pleading for her to sleep. The man had become a host for Annie's psyche, for her unwillingness to follow the schedule. She tried to form the thought that it was the parasite's doing, that this wasn't how she used to be, how she would have done things before the riots and before the unintended release, but the hard edges of the idea eluded her.

She shivered in the cold of the summer night. The water beneath the bridge chilled the air. The stars peaked through the metal towers and braided cables, the noble span a cathedral to conquering the open spaces. *Human over nature*. She thought honestly for the first time about what was inside her. Her head wasn't clear anymore, like Ezra had said. Her body needed and subsequently rejected things, oscillating between craving and repulsion. The schedule was so hard to follow when she needed to focus on the case.

The surface of the water looked inviting. She yearned to plunge into its icy depths, feel it smother her, yet knew it was wrong, aberrant. Her body twitched and she struggled to control it.

A headache fluttered across the top of her head and down to her eyes. She felt seasick and gripped the rail. On one knee, she felt the stream of blood coming down from her nose as it started to drip onto the giant bolts running through the bridge's edge. Attempting to stand, she slowly turned as a foot crashed into the side of her face. Night fell in her mind.

She dreamt. She was back at her mother's shore house on the bay. The home was long destroyed, yet she was younger now, her arms soft, her hair full. *This must be after I left school*. She felt no pain.

To the west of the cove, she saw the great stands of cedar and just a sliver of the corn fields behind the house, to the south.

The golden grass under her feet had been inundated by high tide, then dried out in the midday sun, cutting her feet as she ran to the pier.

At the water's edge, she climbed the grey and blue rocks to the wood slats that straddled the small waves of the bay. She bent over to knock the barnacles off the pier, smiling at the '*pop*' each made as it came off. At the edge of the dock, she sat down, her feet hanging off, her toes only breaking the surface when a particularly high wave came towards the seawall. The cool water sent a shiver up her spine as it grazed the soles of her feet.

She lay back on the wood, felt the knots and whorls of each slab in her back, the salt water having raised each imperfection before the sea wind smothered them down again. Propping herself up on her arms, she rolled up her shirt and looked at her belly. She took her hands and slid them over the center of her body and pulled the skin back in thick layers.

Reaching inside, she could feel a tingling sensation up to the insides of her ears. She pushed in deeper, her hand gripping something, hard and angular. She slowly slid it out, watching as her elbow slid past her navel. Now her forearm, her wrist...

Annie awoke in the darkness. She scanned her surroundings, looking for any bit of light. She could see slivers of it streaming through the seams in the walls, the steel slabs forming her room having become twisted over the years. She sensed a great weight above her, noted a continual clicking and thumping.

I'm inside the bridge.

She scanned the small room, wondering if her attacker was in there with her. She could feel how tight the space was by the pressure of the hot air on her skin. She thought of Christopher. She hadn't told him where she had went. He had awoken briefly as she slipped into bed, but the alarms had taken him back under.

I should have left a note.

The rumble above her continued. She wondered how the man got around through the alarms, through the guards. He was resourceful. She felt so dry and desiccated in the room.

A voice cut through the darkness. "I'm the real one, you

know?”

Pushing herself off the floor of the small room, she could feel a layer of rust on the raw steel, the gritty dust covering her palms.

“Oh, really?” she asked, not sure what to say to the phantom she’d been chasing.

“I didn’t ask for them to come here.”

She dragged herself towards one of the slits of light, hoping she could see him better if the illumination was behind her. As she pulled herself up, she saw the door of the small room open. The sun exploded and washed over her.

“Goodbye,” the man said, ducking through the opening.

“Wait!” Annie called out to him, but the door was already closed. She tried to follow him, stumbling as she stood up, her head throbbing. She was so thirsty. Her eyes closed. When she opened them, she wasn’t sure how much time had passed. Her throat was dry, it was hard to swallow.

She had to find the man. Crawling towards the door, she pushed it open and threw her body out into the open world. The wind caught her shoulders, tugging at her. The water raged below her. She slowly stood and leaned out over the abyss before grabbing the frame of the access door and pulling her body back in. There was only a thin ledge separating the room from the river below. As the wind continued to rush by, she felt uneasy, unsafe.

Water.

She leaned out, peering onto the rapids below, the marine artery twisting past the concrete piers in a fury. There was a thin film of grime on her, she needed it off, needed to drink and feel and absorb the water below.

Taking a look back into the tight space, she saw a small wooden box ensconced in a thin ray of morning light. She picked it up and sat down on the edge of the door frame, her feet dangling off the bridge. The box’s chestnut sides were splintered and worn. Small, dark nails held the pieces together. There was a worn label on the outside, red and cream ink in faded curling bands.

For some reason, it felt wrong to open it. She’d pieced

together fragments of this man's life, come to know how he had constructed it, how he tried to live it in the face of crushing urbanity. How far would the trail go? How much more of her would it take? She thought of the water and her death.

She paused, hesitated on breaking the seal. An impulse grabbed her, she opened the lid. Inside was a thin journal, its faded blue leather cover chapped and cracked. Beside it was a small pencil, sharpened, its edges natural and raw.

The urge to open the slim notebook tugged at the edges of her being, the need to see some aspect of the mystery laid bare. As she blinked, a vision exploded in her head and she saw a tiny, slanting script covering the pages, voluminous notes that told the story of a massacre in a small valley town years ago, the center of it all. The knowledge had flashed in and was gone. *How do I know this? Did he tell me as I slept?*

Placing the unopened journal back into the box, she grabbed the wooden edges and hurled the case into the river below. It opened up in midair, slips of paper from inside the book falling out and scattering in the wind. *All clues*, she thought. *Clues lost forever.*

There would be no more to the case, no more sites to stake. The bodies stopped appearing. The unsolved pieces went in a box that would sit in the basement of the office, untouched and unremembered. She fought to keep obsession just outside her vision.

As autumn broke, Annie placed the lapel pin on her chest. As her mind cleared, she thought back to the river, thought of the sign she had always wanted. *Coffee and hamburgers*. It lay just beyond her reach.

The Music From the Yellow Room

I

My apartment back then wasn't that big, say fifteen feet by twenty-three feet, but as a young citizen, fresh and wide-eyed at all the streets had to offer, I had no need for more. A bed, a desk, a small kitchen. To be honest, one burner for a can of soup or a skillet of creamed chipped beef on a Sunday morning was more than enough for me.

The window, however, what a view.

At first glance, you'd think the great pane only faced out on the monolithic bank building across the street, a huge Beaux Arts structure that dominated the picture plane. But if you angled yourself just right, pointing your eyeline only a few degrees from the flat side of the building, you could see a small slice of Tanev Square, its beautiful giant red oaks reaching up to the skies, their gnarled bottoms covered with blistering orange flame azaleas and the soft pinks of catawba rhododendrons.

It was a view that would have commanded high dollar if it fronted onto the park, but I believe most realtors would have overlooked the slice of paradise if they weren't looking for it. Taking care of my secret vista, I positioned everything in my room to capitalize on it. The bed was placed so that when I hit my alarm clock and sat on the edge of the mattress, slowly working my muscles to begin the day, I could see the morning sun just dappling the elm leaves in the park, the early morning arabbers filtering in and out of the great expanse.

While I was forced to position my desk on the other side of the room due to the meager square footage, a network of mirrors – one above my bed and one above my desk – refracted the relaxing view to a space right above my workspace. I could enjoy the brilliant green leaves of the smooth alders, the soft

whites of buttonbushes, the blur of the yellow and black on swooping orioles. Further zigzagging mirrors reflected the nature scene on into the room, eliminating any need for art on the walls.

It was perfect, the never ending, deepening greenery covering my small slice of the city. When the music next door started, the soft strains of solo violin playing, it only heightened the repose I felt in my small room. I could look past the beginner's skill level for the few small stretches of beauty that the player would chance upon.

Since I'd never met any of my other neighbors leading up to that point, it wasn't odd for me to not attempt to reach out to the musician. I'd always assumed that some of the units were empty or that my regular ascension and descension of the communal stairs simply never coincided with the other tenants. I just accepted the beautiful music that washed over the whole level, starting slightly after dawn and ending a little before the sun set, and I became content with the routine, coming to relish my time spent at home after work as the musician became increasingly proficient on the instrument.

Weeks passed, autumn came and winter began. Suddenly, abruptly, during one of the first days of the new year, the playing became dissonant, chaotic. The skill level fell so quickly and drastically, I wondered if it was the same person as before. I thought perhaps the room had a bit of a draft, like mine, and the player's fingers had begun to grow sluggish and dull in the lower temperature. The middle of winter has a way of doing that.

Towards the end of the month, the screechings and scrapings from the room barely resembled music. I could barely take it, growing to hate the daylight hours in my apartment, the noise robbing me of the joy of staring out my window.

And so, like an audience that quickly turns its attentions from a comedy that is no longer working on stage, Misha rapped softly on my door one Saturday morning.

"Hi," she asked more than stated as I slowly opened the door. "I live across the hall. Have you noticed, the, um, noise coming from the violin player's room? My daughter can barely sleep anymore."

I swallowed my surprise at seeing my first neighbor in the flesh. Misha seemed to have no problem with it at all, which I felt put much of the blame on not seeing the other residents squarely on me. "It's become quite distracting, hasn't it?" I asked. Bolstered by the presence of another resident, I stepped into the hall. "Let's see what's going on."

I turned left and stared down the long hallway, the peeling floral wallpaper and pitted bronze sconces wrapping around the two of us. The eight steps to the next door passed and as I stood at my neighbor's apartment, the wailing was even louder and more off-kilter than I was able to discern through the aged walls of my small space.

I knocked.

The violin continued, unabated.

I knocked again.

Still, no change.

A third and final knock and I turned to Misha, shrugging my shoulders. "I'll call the super," I told her, greatly sorry that I was unable to do anything for her and her child. "I'll let you know."

I had only met the superintendent of the building once as she was fixing a broken window leading from the first-level entry vestibule to the stairway. A grunt was all I was able to elicit at the time and the phone call about my neighbor registered much the same concern from her.

A week passed of the increased cacophony before I realized I would have to take matters into my own hands. I knocked in the morning before the music started, late at night after it ended, in the middle of the night when the player would surely have encased the string instrument and taken to bed or the couch. No response.

Misha came again the second week. "I can't take it anymore, I'm going to have to move out." It was a shame, an entire building driven mad by the declining skills of a once-passable musician. And though I'd only met her a few times over the preceding weeks, and only at a very superficial level, it was reassuring to know that I had an acquaintance in the building now.

Someone that I could count on for a cup of sugar or to pick up packages that I didn't want left near the door.

I had bought her daughter a package of rock candy earlier in the day and as I handed it to her, I told her I would get to the bottom of the racket. My mind had already begun turning and as I sat looking out my window, taking in the pie slice of Tanev Square, I jotted a few items to pick up on the way home from work the next day. I stared out onto the small park, the lightwires beginning to glow as the sun set, wondering if I, too, would be driven out by the noise.

As I sat at my desk the following afternoon – it was a Wednesday, I can clearly remember – I arranged my new purchases on the desk. A long wooden pole, a sturdier version of a common mop handle that I had raced down to the garment district to procure, a box of screws with driver, and a new mirror with a thick wooden frame, a bizarre purchase in the already mirror-covered room. I attached the mirror to the end of the pole with several screws to assure me of its strength and, satisfied, I crossed the hall to Misha's apartment and knocked softly, always aware that I could possibly be waking her daughter.

She followed me into my apartment and I explained the procedure to her. I would lean out the window, holding the mirror over into the space of the next apartment, while she watched through the looking glass to see into the room. With myself leaning out the window and using my body to get the mirror into the best position, I would need her to be the one to find the correct angle into the apartment. She agreed to the plan.

Pushing open the heavy glass and steel frame, I leaned out, the breath being sucked from me as I took in Tanev Square in the high winter, the clean sun cutting through the dusty branches and dry bushes. Misha handed the mirror extension to me, and I leaned out as she positioned herself to the left of me.

"Lower, lower, towards me, kick the bottom out a little. There," she said, the words slowly falling out of her mouth as she tried to look and speak at the same time.

"What?" I asked. "What do you see?"

"Did the music stop while we were setting up?"

The question took me aback. The music never stopped during the day, but as I lay there prostrate, my torso hanging out of the window frame, my arms outstretched with the mirror contraption floating six stories above the ground, I realized that the playing had stopped. We had been so caught up in the scheme, we had missed its abrupt end.

"I don't know," I said, my chest compressed by the exertion of dangling out the window. My arms were getting tired.

"Well, what do you see, anyway?"

"Nothing. It's just an empty room," she replied.

"Empty?" I asked. "Let me move the mirror around a little, get a better angle for you."

"Still nothing. It's an empty room. But the walls and ceiling are completely yellow."

Exhausted, I pulled my body and the mirror back into the room, shutting the window as the last bits of afternoon light raked up the buildings.

"Empty?" I asked again, incredulous of Misha's assurances. "You mean empty as in sparse, few belongings? Or that it was simply four walls, a ceiling, and a floor?"

"The second one. Completely empty. But the yellow. It was the most beautiful color, the inside of a daisy, the petals of a forsythia." At this, she let out a slight sigh. "How beautiful, the walls, the ceiling..." She trailed off, lost in the perfect shade. I thanked her for the help as she stumbled out, still wandering through the depths of the color.

As I lay in bed that night, I thought about a friend I once had in junior high. We had gone on a field trip for some made-up reason just to give us kids a break from school and went to the downtown, when that was really the "city" to us, before the rest of it all had been built up. It was a few weeks before Anchor Day and we walked down the street, eyeing the decorated storefronts and parade preparations. It was getting close to nightfall as the whole group of us, maybe fifty with a handful of chaperones, ducked into a great toy store.

Our eyes wide, we walked along the huge aisles, wishing we had the money to buy the model airplanes and multi-

dimensional puzzles. As we met back up at the front of the store, we soon felt the slow crush of realizing one of us was missing. The adults checked the store, the street, the nearby shops. The police came as we cried and our hearts raced.

He was gone, vanished. There was never a clue, never a shoe found in the morning trash or a future confession or a photograph snapped on the other side of the country that showed him in the background. Just gone. It was a hard lesson, but even as a child, I came to know that mystery abounds in the world, slight and nimble, hiding in the shadows.

And so, I let the music pass. Perhaps Misha had been incorrect, perhaps there was a portion she hadn't been able to see. I didn't know, but the concern drifted to the back of my mind. I kept to the diners and libraries of the city until the sun set, eschewing the afternoon views of the park and only enjoying the small moments I was able to grasp if I awoke early as the sun rose.

A few weeks passed and I met Misha and her daughter in the hall early one morning. They'd forgotten something in their apartment. "Getting better, eh?" she asked, as they swiftly flew down the stairs.

It was as she said. The playing began to get better as time passed. What were once amateur squeaks and peals had given way to the methodical plodding of the student. Pieces emerged, a style carved itself out of the noise.

"I don't mind it so much, anymore," Misha said to me one afternoon as she unlocked her door, a bag of groceries under her arm. As I watched the activity in the park, I realized that I didn't, either.

It went like this for a few more months until a storm came late in the summer. The power went out across the city in the early afternoon. And the music stopped. I thought perhaps, now, that the music had been a transmission, a stereo carrying the sounds from a recording. That was why there was no player in the room. The speaker could be located in the bathroom towards the front of the apartment, near the door, which Misha wouldn't have been able to see.

As the rain poured down on the city, steam rising off the

hot asphalt of the summer street, I opened my window, and, with a bit of care, stepped out onto the decorative fascia running beneath the windows of my own level. I had to find the source of the music, for my own curiosity. Only a few feet separated our two windows and I was easily able to stand with one foot on the moulded concrete and the other curved around the sill in my room. In this cocked manner, I pulled open the window in the next apartment.

It was, as Misha said, perfectly yellow. What is the point of describing it? Imagine yellow and it was that.

I stepped inside the empty space. The late afternoon and the continuing storm combined to darken the atmosphere as I moved towards the back of the room. There was no kitchen as mine had, but there was, as I had anticipated, a small room in the back for the bathroom. All my thoughts focused on this in the few seconds it took to cross the wood floor. So simple, I thought. The music must be coming from here. I reached the room and peered through the open door. Shower, toilet, sink. Nothing else.

I looked up at the ceiling of the small room and noticed, in the dusk light, that there was an opening in the tiles that made up the space. I couldn't see beyond the darkness around the lip of the small chamber, but I could tell that there was light coming from the room above. With a short jump from the top of the toilet, I grabbed the edges of the opening and pulled myself up, using the top of the door as a final launching point.

As I crossed the vestral threshold of this new room, I realized that there were no windows. The light was a dull luminescence that seemed to arise from everywhere. As I began to look around, the level of even this small amount of radiance began to dim until it went to full black. I fumbled on the ground for the hatchway back to the apartment adjacent to mine without luck.

The level of light began to rise once again and I realized I was no longer in the building.

II

I opened my eyes and felt the concrete walls of the small

enclosure. I had read of the long-abolished prisons and knew instinctively that this is what one must be like. There were four walls, a floor, and a ceiling. The floor was a smoothed concrete, worn by years of occupants having traded the softness of their soles to take the roughness off of their room. The ceiling above was more slipshod, the dried cement oozing out from between the layers of cinder block.

The front of the cell, if I am to choose sides, was a full opening covered with iron bars. I could see nothing out the front save an endless expanse of grey concrete, reaching out flat until it vanished with the horizon. Often, there was a slowly creeping fog that moved across the plain, obfuscating my sense of distance and perspective. Once, I woke up and snow had been tracked across the floor, three sets of footprints traversing from left to right across the unknown beyond.

The walls on each side of me were crushing in their plainness, great slabs of silver and ash, but newly covered in a thin stucco. At the bottom of each was a opening, three inches high by eight inches across.

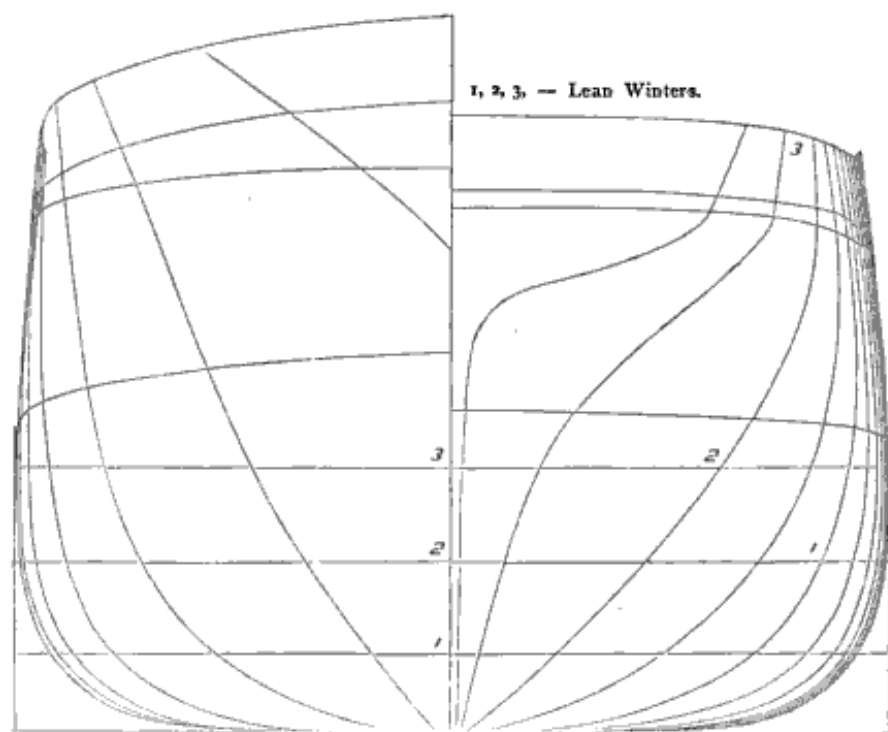
The rear wall of the room was much like the sides except for a small window built into its upper portion. Only a foot square, the grated opening shot out onto a clearing that seemed perpetually in early spring. The green grass eased sidelong onto itself as it grew in the sharp sun. Dominating the center of my vision plane was a great osage orange tree, its enormous branches reaching up to the sky and holding onto the puckered green-skinned fruit it held aloft.

The room had a small cot, a blanket, a sink, and a toilet. My mind fumbled in those early days to take it in, before the boredom had eroded any will away. So I yelled, yelled until my throat was raw and I could taste the blood in the back of my mouth. It was to no use. I resigned myself to my lot.

As the hours passed, a meal pushed through the slot on the left side of the room. I scrambled to the floor, peering through the hole.

“Hello? Where is this?” I asked.

The tray scratched forward. As the steel dish entered my



room, another followed it. And another. I realized as they continued in that I should pass the extras on to my fellow prisoners until only one was left for me. As I slid the extra trays into the room to my right, I heard a hand clutch it and pull it into the room along with the rest.

I held the tray, fighting back against my prison mate. Shoving my face up against the opening, the food scattered across the floor as I lay low on the cold slab.

“Please, I need to understand. Say something to me.”

The other prisoner paused. I pressed my face closer and waited. My eyes flicked up to the great expanse outside the front of the cell and back to the opening. Through it, between the walls of the hole and the tray, I could see into the next room, itself the same as mine, the opening in it extending into the next room and the next and the next, over and over again like the woman on the box of cocoa I kept above my refrigerator. The wait for a response hung in the air, caught on the thick blocks of concrete that made our walls. I let go of my hold on the tray. Another pause. The tray resumed its movement. There would be no discussion.

I passed the rest through, realizing that I had to keep the well-being of my fellow companions in mind. Perhaps they had climbed into the same abyss that I had and simply gave up. I couldn't deny them their sustenance.

And so night passed. And day. Over and over, although I felt no unpleasant changes in temperature from the open window or the door. I thought after some time that the prisoners to my sides would eventually speak, but they never made a sound or gesture. So I gave up on them.

As I waited for my two meals a day, one slightly after dawn, one a few minutes before dusk, I used the small space to work out, stretching my body and working my muscles. It was all I could do to keep sane, to keep order. I ran through lists of words in my head, naming everything that I could under the letter A or Q or J. I recited all the names of all the nations that I could remember, I sputtered out the presidents, listing events in history during their times in office. All this to keep some hold on my old life, my own world.

Sometime a few weeks into my imprisonment, books began to be placed outside the front cell wall. Some magnanimous soul running the place must have instituted the new program to raise morale, for in my case I had gone just to the edge of despair out of boredom. When I awoke, I'd grab the leather spines, turning them sideways to pass through the opening, and keep each private world in the cell until I finished, lingering over every word, using the print to alight my memories to foods and smells and interactions that were continually fleeting as each day passed. Finished, I'd leave the book outside the cell door and when I awoke, there would be a new title waiting for me.

I flew through dozens of books, cherishing their words as my only stimuli. When I would finish one work and before receiving a new copy – which always came at night, as I was sleeping – I would stare out at the osage orange tree in the field. It never changed, no limbs ever broke or tore from strain, none of its fruit ever dropped to the ground. But it was such a magnificent specimen. I can remember the angle and splits of every arm, the gnarls of every exposed root, the way the leaves would blow gently in the soft wind from the north.

More time passed. One morning as I was exercising, I lay on the ground with my elbows out, palms on my heart. There seemed to be less space in the enclosure than before. I continued my morning routine, but as the days passed, I continued to believe that the room was actually getting smaller, albeit almost imperceptibly. It must have been fractions of an inch, simply a new layer of thin concrete over the walls, but noticeable when only a few components can be accounted for in life.

I used the trays that were passed back through the slots after meal time to gauge the size. I kept a mental track of how many I could fit wall to wall, how many fractions of a tray were left over. The size reduced slowly, but it was real.

One morning, as I cracked the cover of a new tome left for me, I heard a voice from one of the cells.

"We aren't supposed to live like this!" There was the sound of one of the metal trays against the iron bars, clanging loudly, over and over. "You've taken away everything!" the voice

yelled.

I pressed my face up against my own bars, aching to see anything. I heard the door of a far-off cell open and close. There was one less tray that night.

As my own cell got smaller – something I became sure of after countless measurements – there were more outbursts and less trays. This must have been a test, a way of whittling down the potential candidates. The space became tighter, insufferable. Even the ceiling got new coats of cement, covering up the once haphazard building quality with a smooth layer. I attempted to stay up as long as possible to see my captors enter my cell, but the effect was only to send me deeper into sleep. I corrected this, returning to a normal schedule, but still could not catch them in the act.

The anxiety became almost unbearable, a crushing weight on my chest. The idea of me as some kind of pawn, it was too much. I tried to think of ways to take my life, but the options were limited. No ledge to tie my tattered clothes into a knot, no sharp objects, barely enough water to wash my hands. It wouldn't do. That was the level of helplessness the cell engendered.

I awoke one morning to see a figure outside my window walking away, towards the tree. It seemed dreamlike, unreal. As I dazily stood up, I became aware of the rags on my body, the long hair of my beard and scalp. I was filthy. I had simply not noticed it as time passed without any human interaction. But still, I called to him. He didn't turn. His grey jumpsuit lumbered across the grass, a ladder slung over his shoulder. He passed the tree, reaching up with his free arm to graze a branch and was gone, over the hill and away. I stood at the opening, speechless, my voice hoarse. I tried anything to tear apart the iron bars, but to no avail. The grass began to rebound from where his footsteps had been and he disappeared forever.

As I stood at the window, staring into the sky and beyond, I noticed the pencil left behind by the man on the outer edge of the window sill. I grabbed it through the bars and tore the end papers from my most recent book, taking care to leave no shredded edges to alert the librarian. I wrote a quick note describing my

predicament, gave my address, and sent the sheet out into the world, hoping the breeze would take it into the hands of a kinder individual than my captors. The days were long, the grass dry, and I watched as the soft wind grabbed the secret note, lifting and tumbling it towards the horizon, away to a possible savior.

I continued this with each successive book, sending out my notes into a world. I figured I must get lucky with one. I realized it was imperative for my time in the cell was seemingly drawing to a close as the room continued its squeeze. There became little space to even hang my legs over the bed and trays had be pushed with each other to get them through the elongated length of the slots. Concrete slowly began to take over the pipes of the toilet. Eventually, it became difficult to stand. More voices rose up in protest, more cells opened, fewer trays arrived each day. I was resolved to be the last and pulled further into the world of my books.

On the topic of printed matter, the titles that passed through my hands were quite an assortment. Ship-building, extinct birds, cloud studies, obscure folktales, a slim work on documented doppelgangers, a history on paper production, a treatise on discarded mapping techniques. I learned an astonishing amount in that small room.

But soon there was only one extra tray passed in from my left. There was only one cell to the right of me. I begged and pleaded for this person to say anything. I passed notes. Eventually, I heard her voice, soft and barely formed, imploring for shelter. The bars opened. I strained to see at an angle through the front of my cell, but couldn't catch a glimpse at anything beyond.

My food and books continued. I had no way of knowing if there were other prisoners above me in succession or if my captors merely passed my food through the north cell.

And yet, one day, the door of the cell clicked, the metal bars pushing only a small distance open. I grabbed the steel frame and flung it open, running forward into the great unknown expanse, the mist of a still-lingering fog enveloping me. I could feel my atrophied muscles tensing and cramping, my emaciated frame struggling to deal with the realities of the world. I thought I

felt a hand reach out for me, the soft fingers grasping at my calf muscle in the dim light. My mind imagined a miniature human chasing me and I pushed on despite the burning in my flesh.

I staggered and fell, pulling myself up off the ground in a relentless urge to reach anywhere but the cell. I thought I heard the strains of a violin and it disgusted me. Heading deeper into the mist, I realized the void seemed to stretch on forever. I spun around, trying to orient myself, but knew my sense of direction was lost. I became confused, stumbling forward into the nether place, pushing forward, hoping I was going away from the bank of cells and, suddenly, the world became real.

I was in the hallway of my apartment building.

My ragged clothes and haggard body still existed. My experience had been real. I found the spare key I had hidden in the wall plate behind the hall sconce and opened my door. Nothing had changed. I turned on the radio, but realized there was no electricity. I quickly ran to the bathroom, cut my hair and beard, showered in ice cold water for what seemed like an hour, shaved, brushed my teeth and got dressed. My body was lean, my clothes hung off me, but they felt comforting and protective.

I heard a knock on the door. Misha was standing there. I hugged her and she laughed, but was caught off guard by the state of my body.

“Are you okay? You looked fine yesterday, did you come down with something?”

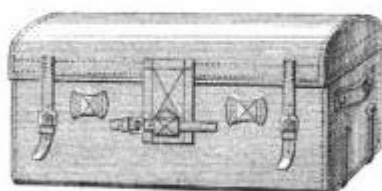
I realized that so little time had passed for the world that my absence was barely noticed. Misha brought me cold soup and bread before having to leave to pick up her daughter. As she left, I noticed the window was open and got up to shut it.

Caught in the pane, fluttering in the soft afternoon sunlight, I found a slip of paper. It was one of the endpapers I had set off into the world. Others would trickle in over the next few months, envelopes addressed by children all across the world telling me they had found my notes. They told me their stories, their lives. I put up a map on the wall, pinning the locations of each letter’s origin, charting their reach across the four corners of the globe.

Now, a decade later and far removed from the physical confines of my cell, I can sit on the windowsill of my new apartment, an expensive flat directly overlooking Tanev Square, and ponder the great natural expanse within and beyond the city walls. I saved for years to purchase it, but knew I had to escape the weight of the yellow room. It hung beside me, full of space, yet I knew it empty and never sated.

But every once in awhile, when the rain hangs heavy in the afternoon air, I'll pull the map out from the closet, running my hand across the red and blue and orange pushpins holding the letters. These moments when I can simultaneously take in both the view of the park and the map showing the world, the twin slivers of my life, make me miss in my heart the mighty osage orange tree that stood outside my prison walls. There was a contemplation there, a beauty that escapes the hard definitions of the world I returned to.

So, late at night, quietly, softly, I've taken to walking the perimeter of the park, dropping seeds when the guards are turned, hoping one day a small sapling will fill some of the longing.



What cannot be carried

Avec

The Concierge

It was the end of autumn as the couple stepped off the ship, pulling their jackets up close to their necks and leaving only their fingers out of the ends of their sleeves to hold onto the luggage handles. There had been an error from the home office – the departing representative had yet to vacate the associated home – and the couple was forced into a hotel for the time being and, yet, despite this, it was all still better than being aboard the lilting stateroom they'd called home for the past two weeks.

They walked from the piers of the industrial district down to the waiting cars and noticed the city slowing down as autumn hung heavy on its shoulders, its phases in lockstep with the orange trees and wilting flowers that colored the municipal parks. Against this, the pair felt a sense of awakening at being there. It was new and that, in itself, was a rush.

Their gleaming hotel finally rose before them as they exited the taxicab, the great building majestic and weighted with a sense of purpose, its muscular brick walls canted inward in the style of the previous century, and calling to them with the air of the old world as they took their bags up the marble steps. They checked in at the desk, climbed the stairs, and Jack laid his belongings on the bed.

"You head to the department, I'll deal with the delegation," he said to Maxine. She had wanted to relax for a moment, but these matters were important and the pair were needed.

He kissed her on the back of her head as she retrieved the documents he needed from his battered valise. "Let's go to the coast soon," she told him. "A reconnaissance trip. I'll tell them that. It's needed after all this travelling and ferrying to and fro."

She thought of the shore that she had seen so often in books, the indomitable maritime pines lining the long and secret pathways to the great white beaches along the sea, the warm water flowing softly without the force of the heavy ocean tides. She realized that this image had been sprung from travel brochures and wine advertisements, the small photographs signaling a greater mystery that couldn't be handled long distance. To be honest, the images themselves had been partly responsible for her applying to this far-flung post to begin with.

"We'll see, Max," Jack said, smiling as he grabbed his light jacket. The door clicked behind him as he left.

She flipped on the television and watched as a reporter was interviewing soldiers returning from the front lines. They were shaken, scarred, just kids really, but it was so far away that it was difficult for Maxine to feel the reality of it. She had felt safe in her detachment from the neverending hostilities back home, but now they were closer to the fighting, nearer the consequences of arms trading and blockade breaking.

She turned off the television and looked out the window, trying to recapture the thrill of a new place. The only child of young immigrants, she'd rarely vacationed in her youth, never straying far from home. They'd sent her to summer camp one year, only once, and she'd felt the wanderlust take hold in her young mind.

That searching had brought the couple here, and while the wars dragged on and on, she knew the embassy would always be a safe haven, a repository of heady expatriates that would come for shelter when times got trying. She could hobknob with these artists and thinkers and spread goodwill throughout the ruined villages and destroyed cityscapes. Phrases like "Interesting philosophy you put forth in your book," or "Would you like to make a donation of the canvas for our outreach programs?" tumbled through her mind. She had yearned for a cultural life back home, but despaired at finding only the entrenched isolationism of a superficially neutral nation. Leaving had been easy.

With a click, the door shut behind her. She needed a cup of

coffee and made her way down to the street as the sun was beginning to set. The light scattered over the slanted rooftops of the buildings that spread out along the street in front of her.

Out in the thoroughfare, she bumped into an old friend from university. It had been years since they'd spoken, but they'd both gone into international relations, it was bound to happen eventually in some city. Maxine thought her friend seemed shorter than she'd been, wondered if she'd been crushed by the world, but found her as lively as ever. The woman had been a deft practical joker and Maxine would have loved to spend time with her, but she was leaving for a diplomatic mission the next day. They spoke quickly of places to eat, hidden spots within the city, escapes a short drive from the bustling downtown.

"We have a house on the beach, to the south. You and Jack should come when I get back," the friend told her.

"We would love that. We haven't been on a true vacation in years."

The friend left down the crowded cobblestone street as Maxine turned and saw a soundless news report through a cafe's front window. Fighting had spread, front lines were being lost. She hurried back to the hotel room to arrange her papers for the next day's meetings.

The phone rang as she entered the rented accommodations.

"Yes?" she asked, sitting at the provided desk, pulling forth a pad of paper and a pen to take notes. She imagined that she was needed in some section of the city in order to secretly move away important artworks or find housing for the local orchestra.

"Yes, I'm his wife," she answered to the query on the other end. Her heart paused as she listened to the thin voice. She wrote down the address of the hospital, took an elevator down to the street, and hailed a taxi.

The Tramontane

Maxine struggled with the thought of losing Jack. Two weeks had passed since the accident. He lay there, unable to move, his body run by machines. A thick blanket covered him, but

she could imagine from the X-rays where his chest had been crushed in and artificially propped up. He looked peaceful, but she knew he wasn't exactly asleep. "It was induced for his own good," the doctor had said. She thought of her own good, about what could be done for that.

Hours passed, and as his condition declined, the nurse had brought in the mnemosynic connection. She checked Jack's paperwork sent over from the home office, saw his signature under the requisite line. There was an implicit knowledge that bringing in the machine usually meant the end.

"Here's the switch. Turn here and here," she said, leaving the room. "Let me know if you need anything."

Maxine sat in the soft, plain chair of the hospital room. It wasn't like the sterile, white and blue spaces she was used to back home. There was a delicate, floral-patterned wallpaper encircling the room and the walls were capped with a decorative wood trim painted yellow. The television had been on a muted news report, but now, hooked to the machine, it was simply a serene static.

She watched Jack on the bed, his chest moving up and down slowly, artificially. She held his hand. The skin and muscles were still vibrant, still hard, but there was no strength left. His beard had started to grow in and she wished she could shave it. He never wore a beard and now her final memories would be of him with one.

There was an explosion outside. She'd been told that there was occasional violence throughout the city when they were briefed on the position, but still it startled her. As the screeching ambulances scrambled through the streets, she settled back into her seat and turned the dials on the slim grey box, watching pensively as the screen flickered on.

She saw a rapid succession of images, scenes of them running through fields, relaxing under linden trees, tracing the shape of the Argo Navis in the night sky. They were disjointed, scattered, but at the top of the sequence, they were the most important to him. An image floated by on the screen of them on one of their first dates at a drive-in movie theater. She felt a lump in her throat. It had been these early memories that had been so

important to her, as well. The dinner parties and award ceremonies later on had their place in the pantheon of remembrances, but these pure and clear moments during their courtship, these were the truth of their love. She thought about how rarely she had brought up these brief, youthful excursions and was amazed that they were were so prevalent in Jack's mind.

More memories rose in the procession. Rainy Sundays, the two of them at restaurants, working in their garden together. As their life passed by on the screen, Maxine clutched Jack's hand. The artificial breathing machines wheezed, in and out, in and out. She hoped he would wake, but wondered how long she should keep him alive if not. How long would they let her?

Staring out the window at the drizzling rain, Maxine caught a glimpse of the screen out of the corner of her eye. It was Jack canoeing with another woman. She froze the image, tried to remember the afternoon so many years ago. The moment felt familiar. That was supposed to be her. She had been the one at the lake with Jack, right? She thought back to the afternoon, trying to separate real memories from those created by other's accounts. There was a negative impression she felt on the edges of the memory. They had fought over something. Being late, maybe. She tried to definitively remember the trip.

She sunk into the chair. A rocket tore across the sky behind her. Had Jack tried to cover her up in the memory? Maxine couldn't recognize the woman outright, struggled to place the face. She wasn't even sure if she'd been there or not. If there had been a fight, it had been ages ago. He made a mistake, Maxine thought. She tried to return her interest to the screen, but found her hand shaking and heart racing and gave up.

As she poured herself a glass of water, the machines next to the bed began to click and whir. An alarm sounded in the room. Nurses and doctors rushed in, forcing her out. A few minutes later, one of the nurses allowed her to return to the room. He'd been stabilized.

She fixed his hair, messed from the chaos earlier. Her mind drifted back to the machine. She knew she couldn't let him die with that memory of them replaced. He would want it

reverted. She picked up the phone. She was switched between various divisions before reaching the science arm of the local delegation.

A deep voice on the other end helped her. “Nobody does that work anymore. Maybe an old scientist out in the hills, but it’s been banned for too long for anybody here. They couldn’t reverse it, anyway. It’s a one-shot operation. It would weaken the fibers too much to keep poking around in there.”

Maxine pushed the chair away from the desk where she’d been sitting. She knew it could be done, she just had to find someone who would do it and not fear the repercussions. She rushed back to the hotel to get a contact list, ordering the taxi driver to swerve and speed through the narrow alleys and passageways that passed for streets in the city.

There were more bombs as she arrived. Maxine knew something was wrong as the city quickly degraded. She was taken aback by how fast the fires were spreading through the old blocks. Whole lives extinguished. She thought of the artists she had wanted to meet, their manuscripts and sketchbooks awash in flames. Even the streets took to the blazing as oil slicks and gas puddles caught, their serpentine trails setting off explosions in cars and starting a chain reaction.

They would need her at the embassy. She tapped the taxi driver, told him the directions. As she raced up the steps to the third level of the building, she saw the offices in disarray. She moved towards the bathroom, hoping the pipes would protect her. She watched through a small casement window above the sink as more rockets attacked the city.

There would be no way to reach Jack. The realization settled on her quickly, despite her trying to fight it. The power in the city would soon go off, the breathing machines and pumping dilators spinning to a final end. She imagined him taking one last breath, a deep sucking at life, the kind he’d done after running with their old dog, and simply letting go.

She remembered the trip to the beach before they were engaged, walking along the shore as the breakers tumbled over their toes. Their dog, Henry, was dead now. Jack was nearly there,

too. She wondered if the experience even existed anymore with only her to know it, a single repository of a subjective moment. She wondered if all her memories, all her life, would slowly whittle down to only her and she feared losing that grip on them. If the war spread to home, she might lose their photographs, their letters, everything they'd put into storage documenting their life. She'd always needed this constant validation to fall back on, the vindication of her experiences from a third party.

There was an explosion somewhere far off in the building that rattled the walls. Maxine grabbed her satchel and her notebooks. It was time to leave.

The building was in chaos. There was nobody waiting to see where she was going, to take an address or telephone number in case the government needed her. She simply stepped out and left that life behind. Cars flew by, men hanging out the windows with guns, rifling off rounds into windows. Mobs looted the stores as panicked families huddled through the streets. Maxine wondered if they had anywhere to go, anywhere to be safe.

She pulled her hood close around her face and stooped over. She positioned a letter opener in her pocket so that she could retrieve it at a moment's notice. It was the only weapon she had been able to find.

The moon was rising as Maxine navigated the unfamiliar network of roads in the new city. In the silver light, she saw victims covered in blood and bandages, their less fortunate countrymen collapsed in the gutters. She saw other people singing and dancing, holding hands as buildings fell around them. A woman ran by yelling, screaming stories of her youth. It was madness, she thought. So many people were acting strange, abnormal, not violent like she'd expected. She didn't know what to make of it.

Maxine wiped her forehead and felt her skin covered in grit. She pulled her hand away, looking at the palm. She saw small flecks of dust glittering in the creases of her skin. She wiped her nose, her cheeks, her mouth and found more of the dust. Her hands were covered in the shimmering brilliance.

There was a shout. A man ran by her with his right arm

hanging by a few strands of muscle fiber. She put her head down and ran for what she hoped was the edge of the city.

The Fish Wife

The sun was rising as the train finally pulled out of the station. Maxine tried to relax against the cold steel, remembering the night before. As she ran through the city, she'd stumbled across the tracks, following them until she found the group of people huddled around the boxcars. She realized these remnants seemed less affected than the others she'd passed by in the night. There'd been a mob that crushed around her at one point when she was still in a concentrated district. Somebody had grabbed her bag and torn it from her body. She had wanted to yell, to push back on the crowd, but it was useless. There were too many.

So she had rode the wave, watching, trying not to be noticed. She studied the group in its frenzy. There were the violent ones, there were the singers, the jerkers, the cryers. What had earlier seemed a response to the destruction that was befalling the city gave way to the realization that a mass hysteria was passing over the populace.

Maxine ran to escape it and as the dense city buildings thinned out, the crowd began to break up. She slipped off and made for the countryside, passing once-lively fringe districts that were now completely devoid of activity. She wondered if the geography of a place had an effect on how the hysteria was experienced, if all those in certain areas of the city just stayed in bed counting the threads on their sheets or picking at their fingernails until their hands fell off.

Now the ones that were left, the ones that were seemingly immune to the madness, all clambered on in the dim light of the early morning, the conductor telling them he was unsure how safe it was ahead, but ready to help his fellow citizens. Maxine had been able to pull herself onto one of the cars and watched as those left behind began to sob. She wondered if another train would ever pass through again as the stragglers tried to grab onto the metal bars and handles that protruded from the sides of the cars.

They wouldn't be able to hold on forever.

They were quiet in the car, each of them trying to process the horror of the night before. Maxine leaned her head back against the corrugated steel and watched the sun slowly rising over the sycamores that ringed the city. They passed the houses on the suburban edge and pulled south, towards the sea. She was softly jostled by the trundling freight car, trying to collect her thoughts, wishing and hoping that Jack had passed peacefully in the night. He'd died with those memories of the other-person and there was nothing she could do.

As the train bumped along, most of the people struggled to keep their eyes open, despite the chaos they'd left. She examined their faces, knew they had all run and left behind their own private world. All she had of her own life now was the clothes she had on and her memories.

An argument started between some of the survivors that happened to be awake.

"There're two bombs. The regular ones and the ones that mess with your mind."

"Ah, you don't know that!"

"There weren't any bombs," another voice replied. "We would know if there was a real one."

Another face. "It happened to my wife. She changed. The bomb exploded, glittering in the night. She started opening all the drawers in the house, upturning them. Tried to pull the carpet off the floor, take the doors off their hinges. I tried to stop her. She got worse, banging her head on the countertops. She ran out and that was it." The man began to sob.

"All I know is I was attacked by somebody. For no reason, a guy just snapped."

Maxine drowned out the voices, getting lost in her memories. The landscape passed by the open car, clumps of green and brown and gold and red. There were no fires, no explosions. She caught glimpses of small towns and villages in valleys. She wondered if the people were preparing. Occasionally, as the train slowed around a corner, she would see small groups of people emerge from the edges of the forests and fields, expectant and

hopeful looks on their faces, as if they could hop on the train as well and be taken away from the oncoming disaster.

Feeling crushed, Maxine slid across the rough wood floor as the train rounded the ridge of a small range. There was a sparse hamlet down below on her left, tucked in the bend of a river running through countryside. Maxine could see the smoke rising from half of the twelve buildings in the cluster. Bodies lay sprawled out in the open grass, unmoving in the morning sun. She turned away.

The train stopped hours later as the afternoon sun began to set, dusk settling in over the countryside. They were far from the city now. She thought they were near the coast. The air felt different, tasted saltier. As the group climbed out of the rail car, Maxine saw a small girl huddled in the corner, asleep with a cloth bag.

She hesitated. She had never been good with children. Her brothers and sisters had been years older than her and her parents had frankly been worn out by that point. As a young girl, she had wanted to grow old so fast that she never felt like there was much of a childhood for her to look back on. But still, this girl, all alone, so far away. She worried for her.

She grabbed the girl's shoulder, softly waking her. The girl rubbed her eyes, slowly stretching as if the world was the same as it had always been. Maxine felt sad for taking her away from her dreams.

She remembered once as a small child going to a harvest festival with her family. They walked through cornstalks, sat on giant pumpkins, drank fresh cider. There had been a maze created from hay bales, long tunnels running in various directions. Maxine had gone in, but gotten turned around, came out far away from where her mother had expected her. As she looked across the strange faces around her, she couldn't find her mother. She got scared, ran into the cornfield. Her mother panicked, running across the fairgrounds, checking each end of the maze for Maxine. Hours passed and as the sun set, they had found her asleep in a clearing in the field. Maxine realized then that the world can be a mighty and fearful place and it was a piece of herself she could

never get back.

“My name is Ada,” the young girl said in her own language.

Maxine had never had great relationships with children. Jack had been a history teacher before the government and she tried to remember the experience of dropping in on his classes. She thought of the foreign words before she let them escape her mouth. “Hi, Ada. I’m Maxine. Nice to meet you.” She wondered how much the girl knew about what was going on. “How did you get on the train?” she asked.

“My papa put me on. He said we only had one ticket. He’ll meet me tomorrow.”

Maxine’s heart began to race as she wondered how she could explain everything to the girl. She took her hand and led her off the car. They walked down to the small village that had grown around the depot station. Passengers from the train walked in and out of the houses and Maxine realized they were empty, all the inhabitants dead or gone. She led the young girl to the river, holding her hand as they crossed roots breaching out of the soft earth. Apples dangled on lithe limbs, free for the taking.

She tried to tell the girl what had happened, fumbling for words and reasons, but realized that the girl knew more than she let on. As the sun began to set, they walked back to the village. Clumps of passengers talked amongst themselves. There was a fire someone had started and as it began to get darker, the group gathered around it, bringing food they’d found in the empty homes.

Maxine pulled the girl close to her in the chill night. There was a clink as the child’s bag fell from her shoulder. She bent to pick up her things and Maxine saw the glinting glass jar in the dim light of early nightfall. With electricity gone, the village was dark, yet the jar shone magnificently, generating its own light from within its fragile walls. Maxine watched as the ember inside slowly quivered as it pulsed to a steady throb.

Maxine bent to cover the strange luminescence as quickly as she could, but a stranger from the group saw her quick movements and turned. Maxine stood up and was caught holding

the jar as the stranger yelled and pointed. Others in the group turned to see.

“What is that?” someone yelled.

“Looks like a bomb!”

Maxine struggled with anything to say. She didn’t know what it was, but didn’t want any harm to befall the girl. She grabbed the child, brought her closer to protect her from the group that was edging around them.

“It fell from the sky,” Ada said, trying to assuage the group’s fears with a naïveté that only a child can possess. They rushed Maxine. She tripped, falling backward as the jar tipped out of her hands. There was the crinkle of shattering glass and the sphere lay there in shards, glowing and pulsating on the soft grass. As it oxidized, a thin, papery skin grew on the surface of the object and began to flake off, the pieces catching in the wind before a new layer quickly formed on the ember. The sheets broke apart and Maxine recognized the result as the dust that had fallen the night before. She grabbed the girl and together they ran towards the forest.

It was dark without the lights of industry and from the tree line surrounding the clearing, Maxine could see the object’s effect on the group. Some grew angrier, far beyond what could be expected by the girl having kept the mysterious artifact a secret. Some began to sing as she’d seen the day before, others grabbed at themselves, pulling their skin and hair. She realized that it was the object that fell from the sky and its strange skin that was doing this, perhaps had done everything to ruin the world. Even from her distance, she could see the object continually shedding its skin, the delicate membranes shattering with each gust of wind.

Her hand had been covering the girl’s mouth instinctively, trying to quiet her, and she now realized the girl was sobbing. But there was no time. The cries from the weaker members of the party let Maxine know the rest were becoming violent.

And so they ran. She took the girl in an arc, swinging back towards the tracks after heading away from the village for a mile. Following the steel lines for the night, she let her instincts take over, knowing there must be something to the south, a place that

was safe.

In the morning, the rails crossed a small roadway and the pair turned down it. They entered another deserted town, ate and rested, and started back on their way. More villages and hamlets appeared and the pair ran and hid and rested when they could, but always kept trying to get to the coast. The landlocked areas were dead and Maxine knew they had to get someplace where the ships could rescue them.

The Quay

Months had passed since the giant had fallen from the sky. It had taken the townspeople some time to realize – and accept – that it wasn't associated with the war, but there were never invading armies, never a boat or an airplane with foreign markings indicating that somebody else had won. The giant had crashed just off their seaside village, not sent by anyone or anything, no ulterior motive, no plan of attack. It'd come from somewhere else and the timing had simply coincided with the terrestrial conflicts.

Maxine thought of her father's death when she was a small child. He was an umbrella designer caught in the terror of surprise factory bombings, a last-ditch raid by the enemy meant to cripple her nation's industrial base. Tragedies were often joined together like that, separate and random in their own ways, but brought close by their synchronicity. The giant was its own occurrence, separate and insular and above the fray of the human battles.

As the men of the town sailed out in their small fishing boats to inspect the fallen colossus, they poked and prodded and brought back spherical rocks they'd been able to pry from the hide of the great beast. Maxine realized these were what the ember had been, no longer glowing, no longer shedding its layers. It was just a rough rock. She wondered if its effects were controlled by the life of the giant and was thankful of it losing its ability.

She knew Ada would put together the pieces and ask her about it someday. She thought of all the psychoactive plants and animals she'd seen and read about, catapulted onto a grand scale.

She tried to rationalize it, wondered how to make it relatable, but couldn't overlook the otherness of this creature from beyond.

Still, though, a guard had been set up on the shore, their rifles trained along the coast at any that dared to approach the giant. Several attempts were foiled, the perpetrators now buried in the small field past the church. The child asked why they would die for the giant. Maxine didn't know, but assumed there was a trade in the pieces of the monster.

In the late afternoons, the young men of the town would often sit on the great rocks along the shore and stare out into the sea, wondering if their fortunes lay there. Maxine had heard a rumor that the guts of the giant brought back youth and she could only laugh as the old salts stared out, stroking the whiskers on their chins before turning back towards their ramshackle homes, their wives standing in the doorways, shaking their heads.

Yet, despite the elements and the tides and all manner of confused seabirds, the colossus never sank. Gently bobbing in the water, Maxine would watch it from her window overlooking the sea, the thin linen curtains rippling gently in the soft coast wind. She'd watch the sun coruscating off of the ragged mineral skin of the giant as it lay supine, looking up at where it came from, where they'd all come from. Her mind filled in where its head and heart may have been. She thought it looked peaceful.

Travelers would sometimes pass through the village, weakened and confused from their trials, but they never had information from beyond the mountains and the shores surrounding the region. Maxine noticed there was a deep fog over anyone that tried to take initiative and rebuild the world, but, still, in these early moments of the bright explosive light of news, she wondered about home and realized that the endless isolation, the lack of any ships or airplanes or peacekeeping forces, it was all proof that there were more of the giants, that they'd covered the land and sea and thrown the world into chaos.

So, she resigned herself to the change.

During the day, she began to teach Ada the ways of the old world. She gathered the books in the town and brought in the other children, taught them of governments and science and art, of

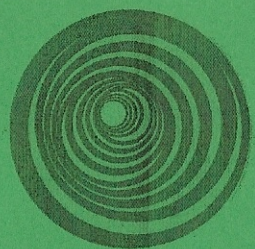
geography and biology and poets. And at night, as the child slept, she wrote in makeshift journals, scribbling down every memory she could gather, no matter how minute or depressing. She remembered good moments and bad moments and even worse moments, but they all mattered. She took great pains in the cataloging, still never quite overcoming the grief that came with the idea of Jack's body out there, rotting away in an abandoned building and knowing that there was a memory tucked inside his neural pathways that wasn't quite right.

One morning, as the rain fell on the tin roof of the house, Maxine could see the early sun reflecting through the clouds onto a few small puddles on the indentations and imperfections of the giant's skin. Jack would have been enamored with these things, she realized. Laughing softly to herself, she imagined him trying to outwit the guards and paddle out to the beast, just to be close to something so otherworldly. It would have been a fantastic puzzle.

A soft breeze blew outside the cracked window. Maxine continued to watch the puddles accumulate water as she thought about her lesson for the day. In an instant, the husk collapsed, shattering under the liquid weight. Water poured over the sides of the giant, rushing across the grey skin, the body becoming submerged under the everflowing expanse. The frame seemed then to break in half at the midway point, its upper and lower portions tilting slightly as everything sucked in towards the center.

Maxine knew that nobody else was awake and she took this moment for herself. She'd seen the end of the giant and it was a memory for her alone. As the last bubbles escaped the sinking colossus, she felt a great vacuum inside her head, a sudden release as the pressure of memories and obligations and burdens evaporated into the morning sky.

There were many things to do and as the sun broke through the clouds, Ada awoke and Maxine wondered if the ships would be coming soon.



BETA DECAY HOUSE