

# BETA DECAY



NUMBER EIGHT

BETA DECAY  
#8

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How to Train the Aura

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'The path that leads thro' darkness up to other planes



## Tobacco & Main

Stet O'Hurlihy lived alone on a half acre lot in a modest brick bungalow all the way over on the north side of Welt's Estate, the old house showing the mouldings and braces and detailwork of a master craftsman. His home was adequately cared for on the outside with cherry trees and azalea bushes and even a rhododendron near the garage, but to be fair, he wasn't that interested in yard work.

During the day, he was a book curator—that is, he purchased books for coffee shops and hotels and other establishments to give an air of refinement to the lobbies and board rooms of the uncaring public. Stet took great pride in his work. Whereas others in his field would simply purchase the kinds of red leather and gold page tomes that populate the so-called libraries of the recently rich, Stet chose a theme for each collection and worked diligently for weeks or months to present the business owners with a coherent vision for the extant library he provided and guidelines for any future purchases that may be necessitated by expansions of shelf space or losses to theft.

Take, for instance, Hume's Dairy Bar on 2nd Avenue. Stet furnished seventy-three works concerning the Doubs, that beautiful tributary of the river Saône, which runs through western Switzerland and eastern France. The books sat on a rough hickory board behind the counter, evoking the farm life that would have once produced the vital lifeblood of the establishment. Had the owners ever made the connection that the Doubs runs through the Jura department? That the commune of Dole is situated along the banks? That Louis Pasteur grew up playing in the water, cleansing his soul, looking at the interplay of river and fish, tadpole and cat's tail? The Doubs, Pasteur, dairy and ice cream—there was a lineage there.

Or turn to Benton's Printing, a paper goods store

specializing in high-quality and well-designed stationery and letterhead. Did the ninety-two books Stet provided on Phoenician ship-building ever raise an eyebrow? All the art behind rigging and oar placement, did it bring to mind the ancient thalassocracy that covered the Mediterranean? The descendants of the Canaanites bringing their merchant empire to the seas surely changed the world for the better, but more importantly, the spread of their alphabet brought a revolution in knowledge. Ships and trade, the mysteries of letters, modern printing—all connected.

It was in all this book digging and estate pillaging that Stet stumbled across the manuscript. The house sat just at the foot of the Antaero Hills, a small shack waiting to be subsumed into the earth and turned back into its constituent elements. The bank and the sheriff's department and had come and gone and it was only a tip from a backcountry friend that Stet irregularly supplied with vintage erotica designed for synesthetes that led him to standing on the moss-covered screened porch before the bulldozers came.

Within a Roger Samoson roll-top desk, which in its own right was a valuable piece of art that Stet had shipped back to his house, lay the small yellow book. Around it was junk, books on accounting, gardening, auto repair. There was a slight murmur of the man's heart as he noticed the embossed cobalt title, a rare blocktype from the Naardinian House foundry. He wiped it with the back of his sleeve and read the title, *'The Gilded Aura; or, an Attempt to Remove a Ghost Limb and Certain Other Consequences.'*

In the dying autumn light, with the wet air of the aspen forest surrounding him, he read. When the sun set, he pulled out his flashlight and continued reading. Late into the night, as a wolf howled into the hollows that separated him from the hard city, he finished. Pulling the flask of thyme liquor from his jacket, Stet stared up at the great cliffs above him and thought about what he'd read.

The author's name was not given, but he was a doctor practicing after the war. His patient, an R. Meleis, had been a soldier, losing his arm to mortar fire. Miraculously surviving the plague-like conditions of the field infirmaries, Meleis had



returned to his farm in the harsh, post-war years with little more than a commendation. At night, while laying in bed with his wife, the veteran would often experience twitches and pains within the arm that was no longer there. After some years of dull aching, the pain became so bad that he could no longer work in the fields. A friend, blinded during the war, referred Meleis to the doctor. The author had evidently been practising for some years before the war and had a great knowledge of the connections and gulfs between the body and mind.

By the time Meleis made his way to the doctor, the missing limb had gone through several stages of sensations, finally settling into the pain of intense pressure from excessive squeezing of the palm and flexing of the muscles that no longer existed. Meleis said he could no longer think straight, let alone sleep or eat, with the missing arm continually moving inside his mind. The doctor thought for some time before arriving at a system of mirrors that would make a copy of the man's existing arm and, in an instance of trickery to the mind, appear as the missing arm before the patient's eyes. Continual training would lead the brain to believe that the arm existed and couldn't possibly be jerking and moving when it could be seen that it was holding still. The phantom limb was amputated; the procedure was a success. The doctor gave Meleis the mirror system and the cured soldier disappears from the record.

The second half of the book concerned a new patient, a religious recluse the author refers to as the Snail. Where Meleis had only wanted to return to a normal life, the Snail rejected all that was normal. He hadn't been in a war, hadn't lost a limb in some kind of factory accident. The Snail wanted merely to disappear. Somehow he'd followed the doctor's previous breakthroughs and wanted to turn the research on its head, using the reverse of the pioneering mirror system, twist it to show blank spaces where his limbs should be, and in that way cause his brain to sever its connections with his limbs. If he could see his torso with no legs and his chest with no arms, his brain could become free of extraneous clutter, released to focus solely on esoteric philosophical matters.

The doctor helped him, using trick mirrors to slowly chip away at the man's body, first the toes, then the feet, the calves, and the thighs. As the doctor expressed his fears of what might happen if the man lost control of his bodily functions, the Snail brought in a retinue of followers to care for him as he shed the ability to take care of himself. The proprioceptual amputation continued, following the groin up the abdomen and taking a detour to remove the fingers, hands, wrists, arms and shoulders.

It was at this point that the ethical qualms involved in removing the man's chest—his heart, his very life—became too much for the author and he forced the Snail out of his chambers and refused to help. The Snail stated that he would continue on, his followers helping to position the devices to fulfill the man's vision. The doctor continued to stop in daily solely as a medical professional, taking health metrics with the knowledge that certain parts of the Snail's body could soon begin to fail.

The final steps took longer than the rest of the body had as the man's brain fought to keep what it knew it needed, the most vital parts of a human, but the Snail continued on, hour after hour spent staring at the mirror that would dissolve his chest and neck. Perceiving himself as nothing more than a floating head, the man's helpers set up the mirror to remove his jaw and mouth. Watching in horror at this penultimate step, the doctor saw the man's lips move and thought he heard him say "All is well, mother, I believe I'm vanishing." As the doctor turned to leave, he heard the man's voice whisper "I'm stuck in the walls," and hurried to exit the terrible boarding room.

The author returned one final time to the Snail's residence. On the final day of his visit, the doctor saw the followers of the Snail setting up a mirror to project a blank face on the man's skull, the end result to remove his ears, nose, and, finally, the eyes. The doctor begged the cult to reconsider, that there can be no going back once the eyes are removed, that there will be no visual perception to bring the body back. The people barely noticed him, their will divined by some final testament left by the Snail to complete the procedure. To what end, the author never knew. A few weeks later he passed by the building and saw a rental sign in

the window, the group gone forever, lost to the wind.

Stet sat in the dim moonlight facing the mountains and thought about the two men, one wanting nothing more than normalcy, one yearning for the opposite. The thyme liquor warmed him as he lay back against a wooden post, white paint flaking off onto the soft ground, his foot on the steps that led back up to the porch. He could feel a tingling in his left leg as it fell asleep and he felt disturbed by the sensation. Standing up, he tucked the book into his jacket and drove home.

He continued on with his work, producing a slim thirty-four works for the Eisenkrantz Bakery detailing the Karaca Dağ and the southeastern provinces of Turkey, the site of the first domestication of wheat in human history, but couldn't shake the dual tales of R. Meleis and the Snail. He himself had no wife and few friends. Would it be so bad to disappear like the Snail? But he loved his work, found great passion in it. Should he continue on like R. Meleis? He hadn't ever thought so much about his life and his purpose before. The book on phantom limbs troubled him more than he could understand.

In those dark moments before sleep, when subconscious thoughts spring forth into the mind, the idea came to Stet. If missing limbs that somehow still provided sensation could be completely removed from the brain through mirrors and the same system could remove extant pieces of the body for whatever reason, could perhaps a system be devised to, in turn, create superfluous appendages on the body? Stet could see no use for tricking the brain into having seven toes on a foot or three hands on an arm, but the idea kept coming back to him, night after night.

During the summer, Stet's office was burglarized. A small fire was set in the back room, destroying an ongoing collection of works on Saint-Loup-de-Varennes for a local photomat. Withdrawing from his commissions and other miscellaneous work during the dog days, he spent many hours and days reading the book that had so inflamed his mind. At night, he would drink and think about the extra appendages.

One particularly lonesome night, he stayed up far beyond usual on his back porch, staring into the woods beyond and into



the mysteries of the natural kingdom. An owl commiserated with him before taking off into the recesses of the forest, searching for a meal. Subconsciously, he must have been planning the experiment, for he found the mirrors he needed quickly, a force coming over him and setting them up in a fashion to double the small finger on his left hand.

It took several hours of staring, his head nodding occasionally as sleep attempted to overtake him, but as the cars in the neighborhood pulled out of their garages to go into work, Stet pulled his hand away from the mirror and looked down to see the six fingers on his left hand.

In his mind he flexed them and all six clenched together and released. He used his right hand to run along the palm and each finger of his left and the delusion was so powerful that he could even feel the new digit between his fingers.

A day passed, but that was as long as Stet could hold out, succumbing to the desire of extra appendages the way a tattooed man will cover his body in the art. He started with only extra fingers and toes, before finally adding an extra foot. After adding an extra ear, he was sure he could hear things that had gone unnoticed by him before. A third leg was added before a local salt shop called him for one of his book collections.

He told the store that he would need a few days and used those waking hours to amputate the phantom limbs in a reverse of how he'd added them. Back at work, he buried himself in his commissions, but could barely focus, his mind wandering to the world of excess limbs and extraneous senses.

There must be others like him, he thought. Body modifiers or occultists that stumbled onto the same ideas and methods. He ordered subscriptions to tattoo and piercing magazines, journals dedicated to ancient gods and new religions, and underground tracts on the occult and magic. None of them produced any leads.

He placed cryptic advertisements in magazines across the world, classifieds asking for two left shoes and one right, or five-eyed spectacles, but nobody ever wrote. A few months passed and he delivered the forty-five books on Neolithic home-building in the Neamt area of Romania to the salt boutique before again

taking a break from work.

The extra limbs called to him. The attachments went quickly, extra feet and arms, superfluous fingers and ears. An extra eye gave him the impression he could see a person's luck. His mind wandered to the sexual world that lay just beyond his imposed limitations. And then, as spring broke, a letter arrived in the mail. A woman had written, inquiring if he knew of *The Gilded Aura*. It was stark, but he knew its intent. Finally, he thought, finally I've found someone. He wrote back and eventually the pair arranged a visit.

The woman arrived a week later, knocking on the door with no answer. Placing her luggage on the ground, she went around back and found the rear door unlocked. She opened it a crack, unsure how to treat the strange situation she found herself in. "Stet?" she called.

There was no answer. Turning to leave, she heard a weak whimper from one of the rooms. A voice whispered "Help" as she stepped into the hallway. Turning a corner, she saw the body of Stet O'Hurlihy laying on the yellow pine floor of the bungalow. He was moaning softly as his body writhed on the ground, bucking and twisting, his skin undulating with unknown sensations. A dozen mirrors and their stands lay shattered on the ground around him.

"What have you done?" she asked in horror.

"I got carried away," Stet answered. "There's too much now...too much of me. Quick, you must bring me something to write with."

The woman went to the kitchen and found a pen and notepad in a drawer. "Here," she said, handing him the pen. "Take this." Stet moved what were dozens of arms in his mind until one of his real hands was able to grasp the instrument.

She held the pad as the man struggled to depict the image of himself that existed only inside of his mind. He pulled the pen away as he finished. The woman turned the sheet of paper to herself and gasped. Limbs spilled out of other limbs. Cavities and protuberances were lumped upon each other. Eyes and ears and noses were stacked in various arrays to capture all kinds of

impressions. “Oh, God...what is this?” she asked.

“There were sensations I stumbled on. Once I found them I couldn’t turn away.” Stet’s mouth mimed air, opening and closing as other thoughts and conversations tumbled out of him unspoken. “The things I’ve seen, the colors and the depth. The smell of love and loss. The sound of hopelessness and joy. You can experience these. We can. But our bodies are so limited...”

A strange jerking overtook Stet’s body as he spoke, yet he failed to notice it, living more in his illusory state than his corporeal one. The woman backed towards the door, disgusted and frightened.

“No, please, Dana. You have to help me with the mirrors, help me amputate the limbs. I can’t control my body that well anymore.” His arms and legs flailed as he tried to right himself, the body inside of his mind far too cumbersome to properly control, the impressions and motor control disordered and ragged. “Please.”

The door shut. The house was empty. The man struggled to stand, but could barely move, his simple brain unprepared to handle the false body. A taxi came and went and the sound of the trunk shutting and the doors slamming reverberated throughout the house. He was alone.

Over the mountains, a small abandoned shack was quickly bulldozed into the ground and as the quiet sun of late spring began to set, Stet O’Hurlihy struggled to find a shard of broken mirror to look into come morning.

# The Man That Ate A Thousand Candles

The crickets prattled on in the night, waves of them echoing across the cornfields and oak fenceposts of the farm. Perry was in the attic of the house, staring out through the dormer window at the moonlight as it cradled each leaf and stem of the still-blossoming crop. Spring had been good to the fields, there'd been plenty of sun and an abundance of soft rains.

It was almost midnight, yet he felt no urge to sleep, no desire to crawl into the soft folds of bed. In the morning, the fieldhands would return, not leaving until dusk, and for now the house was silent and serene. The Caith was downstairs asleep. Perry pushed the man from his mind and tried to relax in the cool night.

An owl hooted in the distance, prowling for mice amidst the green chaos, and Perry slipped into a low-slung wooden chair, relaxing with a cup of hot tea. The floor creaked as he eased into the seat, the two centuries-old home never quite comfortable with itself. Stacks of books lay scattered about, their corners frayed and ragged from readings and re-readings. He'd marked the pages that covered abandoned naval ports, beryllium refineries, and depth fatigue outbreaks, trying to make a connection between them all.

Flipping on the small desk lamp atop the yew tree table, he stared at his watch. It had gained two hours over the day. Piece of junk, he thought. But it had been a gift from his grandfather, the man having died so many years back. He loved the memory of it and there simply weren't that many people around any more that could repair it and so he lived with setting it to the ringings from the haven every three hours. The melodious bells tolled far from the farm, but were loud enough to reach out to sea, loud enough to reach the immured city, loud enough to reach the small dormered attic that stood sentry over the fields. Perry even thought that he'd

once seen the Caith's eyelids flutter as the copper and tin rattled on in the midday toll, but had come to forget the moment as the trials of taking care of the man wore on.

He sipped the tea. He stared at the watch. Seams of thin green filament broke into his vision, swirling around the metal housing, through the glass crystal, entwining the bronze hands. Phantom pieces were aligned and tightened in his mind. He saw in that moment the path to fixing the timepiece, how each gear and spring should be rotated and set, yet he didn't have the tools or the finesse to do it.

With a relaxing sigh, he thought back to a year before, of the operation, of the waiting. The tube from his brain had leaked fluid for weeks—slow drops falling along the narrow channel—as he waited for it to change from dark orange to completely clear. It went from a deep rust to burnt carrot, from pumpkin to tangerine, finally peach into champagne. The last few days had been agonizing, waiting to be free, aching for the release from dreams and creativity and all the mental clutter that came with it.

*Relax, wait and be free, but there are so many sounds, it's excruciating.*

Pushing himself out of the chair, Perry made his way towards the stairs. At the top of the flight, a stained-glass window looked out into the night, but as he descended the oaken planks, successive windows allowed him to look out onto the fields. He'd won the lottery to get out of the city and run the farm, but what had happened to the Caith felt like a punishment. Taking care of the man never ended and knowing all that they'd had together and all that they'd lost tore Perry up even more.

At the upper level of the house, he stopped and looked down the hall, two rooms on each side and the bathroom across the house from him. The cloth runner on the hallway floor was a jagged red and blue. The Caith had brought it from home, lugging it from seaport to landing strip, from jetty station to train depot. A black spot marked the ink stain where the man had fallen the first time, clutching his temples and grinding his teeth. Perry could still hear the thud of the man's knees hitting the ground.

Twisting further down the spiral staircase, he came to the

ground level. Pausing at the landing, he could see through the fanlight surrounding the door to the lightwires that bordered the driveway. The parallel streams ran for a quarter mile before curving to the right and meeting the main road. Perry thought how easy it would be to carry the Caith out to the car and get back to the city, back to a simpler life of routine and automation.

He turned to face the back of the house. To his right were the dining room and kitchen, to his left the study and the living room. The fire in the hearth crackled, drawing his attention to the man sitting in the chair, his legs piled high with thick wool blankets. The Caith was always cold to the touch and there was nothing Perry could do to help him, no matter how warm he kept the house.

He walked softly towards his friend, watching, hoping for any kind of movement or sign to indicate his awareness, but there was nothing. He reached the man, grabbed his shoulder, felt the bone underneath the thin layer of skin. To the outside world, the Caith was dead weight, but Perry knew he hadn't completely disappeared. He'd been able to see the dreams inside the man's head and knew his friend lived on inside a world more fantastic than what most could fathom.

As he glanced at the man's expressionless face, Perry wished that the green threads would appear and show him how to fix the Caith's brain, how to repair the connections between it and the body, what patches and neuronal movement needed to occur to wake him. He'd stared at his friend thousands of times, begging for a solution that never came. So he waited. There was space for the Caith here and time enough to wait for the doctors and the rest of the world to catch up.

Moving towards the kitchen, Perry again looked at the front door and noticed the left lightwire had gone out completely. The right line looked lost, drifting aimlessly without its parallel brother. He realized that was how he'd felt the last year, a phantom pain without the other man.

He reached up to the shelf above the casement window next to the stove and pulled out the percolator. Coffee would help him focus, let him get some work done. He filled it up, sprinkling



a bit of cinnamon and crushed cardamom on the grounds. His aunt had come from the desert and she'd always said that was how they did it there. He never found a reason to doubt her, but it was certainly an acquired taste. He could feel the pulse of the device as the water heated and shot through the stem, exploding on the glass knob at the top of it.

The coffee would take a few minutes, so he grabbed a log from the firewood holder—apple, always apple, the Caith used to say—and tossed it onto the embers. The silent man's eyes stared deep into the glowing coals, past the orange and red, piercing into the white veil, beyond all in the room, surrendering to the destruction. Perry found the fire cleansing as well and climbed onto the soft grey daybed in the corner, underneath the great window staring out onto the southern fields.

The percolator continued on, the bubbling water sounding like the far off waves of the ocean. His eyes felt heavy.

As he opened them, the room and the darkness beyond were gone. The Caith stood at the edge of a low fieldstone wall, looking back at him over his broad shoulders, a slight smile at the corners of his mouth. Perry ran towards him and the thick ash floors turned to grass, soft and cool beneath his bare feet. He ran after the Caith, knew his in mind that the man had something he wanted. They were joking as the Caith turned around, moving the object from hand to hand, just out of Perry's reach. The Caith was laughing, his long hair whipping as he turned his head in the burning sun of summer.

He turned away from Perry and threw his arm in a huge arc, tossing the item far into the yellow field that spread away in front of them. With a sly look, he turned and ran away from Perry, beckoning him to pay chase. Perry felt his body for the first time now, knew his arms were stronger and his legs tauter than they had been a few minutes ago.

He ran.

The air felt cool on his skin, the wind caressing the short stubble of his beard. The Caith seemed to glide over the grass, leaping bounds ahead of him. There was a loud crack and a line appeared both in the sky and the horizon to his left. The trees to

his right began to dissolve away, the sky transforming into the planed cedar of the farmhouse ceiling.

*No, no, please, let it go on a minute longer.*

He stood up, dazed, trying to regain the hardness of the real world. Puddles and pools of the dreamworld flickered in and out of his peripheral vision as his hands grasped outward, hoping to bring anything with him from the beyond. As he blinked, there were only the mustard yellow walls and bone white wainscoting of the hallway. Stumbling a bit, he tried to hold onto the other life, but realized it was hopeless. The wall steadied him a moment before he returned to the kitchen.

It had happened before, the drawing in. If he slept near the Caith, he could enter that far world of the comatose man's dreaming. But it wasn't a guarantee. He couldn't rely upon it happening and as the connection began to weaken as time passed, it became easier to believe that it had never happened at all. Perry sighed.

There was a crack somewhere outside the house. Standing at the kitchen sink, he saw a rustling in the cornstalks at the edge of the fields. He heard a crash and wondered if it was a fox. Turning, Perry heard the snap of a cornstalk being broken at its base. He looked out the window as the arm of a person stuck out from the edge of the field. He could see the deep knife wound in the stranger's hand and, in only a moment, his mind had thrown up the lines for how to suture the cut.

The sound of more stalks crumpling echoed off of the house and broke his concentration. The air caught in Perry's chest as the rest of the body emerged. There was a slow, methodical movement to the intruder, a stiffness that reminded him of the final days of the Caith's waking life.

Another body emerged from the edge of the field. Then another. A group of three followed. More poured out until they covered the dirt road that ran along the boundary between the yard and fields. The soft black soil covered their naked feet, reaching up towards the cuffs of their torn jeans and slacks.

Perry's body froze as he watched the failing forms emerge, lethargically stumbling from the tall stalks of corn to the short

grass that formed a perimeter of yard around the house. He slipped backwards and turned off the kitchen light, afraid they might see him. A flickering orange glow filled the back of the house as the wood in the fireplace continued to burn. Moving back towards the window, he could see the faces and expressions of the horde in the swath of light cut by the fixture underneath the eave of the barn. Their eyes dead, they hadn't even noticed the light in the house turn off.

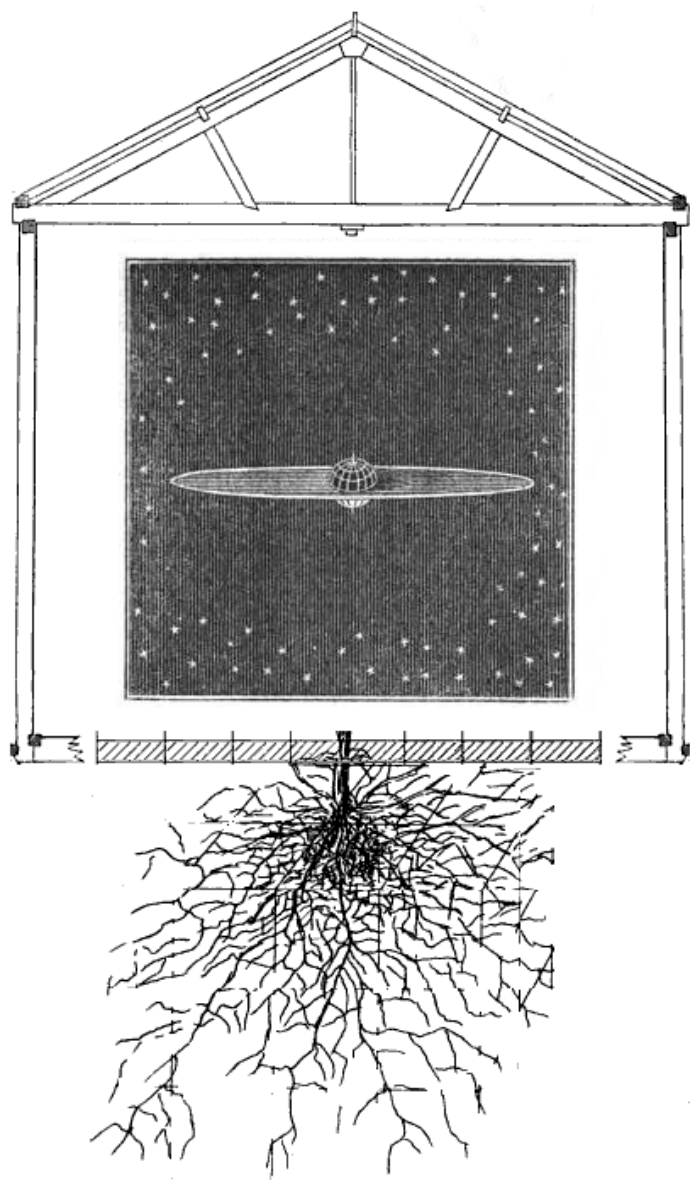
He remembered now the parasite in the city's water. The radio had rattled on about boiling anything from the tap, but Perry had drowned it out, so far from the municipal lines. He had bought some arnica to make tea for its toxicity, but the well was safe and the sandstone aquifer beneath the farm clean and pure. He hadn't even bothered to open the box yet.

He racked his mind to remember the details of the sickness. He thought back to the reports of how the parasite entered through the nose, burrowing into the brain, then bored back and forth through the bone of the forehead, creating thousands of holes in the skull, destroying cognition and personality. By the time the bugs started, there was no cure. But nobody had mentioned bands of victims roaming the countryside.

*Can they see? Do they see in a different way now?*

Grabbing the handles on the Caith's chair, he wheeled him through the darkness into a closet. It felt degrading, but there was no time to carry him upstairs and being hidden was the important thing. From the hallway, he could see more bodies spilling out of the field and ran upstairs to the attic to see the size of the horde.

Peering out of the small dormer window, Perry strained to see the field in the moonlight. Small perturbations disturbed the tops of the corn rows all along the horizon, stretching hundreds of feet back to the creek that lay at the far end of the property. He thought about the gun his father had mentioned when he'd spent his last few months at the farm before passing. It was hidden in the house somewhere, but Perry had always been averse to firearms. In his mind, he ran through different places it could be concealed—loose floorboards, hollow basement beams, anywhere that his father might have stashed it—and felt stupid for not



knowing where it was hidden.

More arms and legs emerged from stalks, the moon catching on the pates of the staggering mass. They seemed like a hivemind, but the sum was worse than its parts, the surging body indiscriminate, blind in its flood across the field and farm. He watched as one particular body came nearer the house than the others, more determined than his cohorts. He waited a moment to see what it would do. There was a loud crack and the body flew backward as the screen door from the living room exploded outward. Every atom of Perry's body froze as he watched the Caith exit gracefully and purposefully through the rear portal. He watched as the man navigated effortlessly through the mass, stepping left and right, perfectly timing his forward movement to the great shed behind the farmhouse.

The one that had been knocked down had dragged himself up and was a few steps ahead of the Caith, but the rest of the horde was oblivious to the faded man, their deranged bodies continuing on through the emerald yard unabated. Perry's hands shook as he was unsure if he should continue watching from the vantage point of the attic or if he should move to the ground level and try to get the awakened man back in the house.

As he watched, the one that the Caith was pursuing turned and broke back through the mass towards the man. Perry bolted, crossing the small room and flying down the two flights of stairs, his feet barely hitting the runners as he hands slid along the oak bannister. He glided across the main hallway and ran out onto the back porch, pausing on the stoop to take in the scene. The Caith was past the mob now, almost at the walls of the barn, wrestling with the monster. He pushed it back and the creature began to claw at the others of his kind, his sickly skin cracking in the moonlight, trying to make its way back towards the invisible path and away from the awakened man.

In the dark night, Perry could see the green lines swirling around the brain of the Caith, showing him how to fix the pathways and connections that had been destroyed. He'd waited so long to see them, wondering if they'd ever come, and now there was no time to study them, no way to make sense of it all in

the chaos.

Swallowing hard, he ran.

The raking moonlight only caught bits of the group's faces, illuminating crooked noses and dishevelled hair. As he approached the group, Perry thought he could even see slight depressions in their foreheads, the result of the parasites attacking the bone structure, the skin sucking in against the front of the brain. Slipping in and out between the bodies, he swung in an arc around towards the Caith. He could feel their eyes burning into him even if their bodies were uncaring. Side-stepping a cluster of the main horde, Perry broke out of the stream to the other side. He saw the Caith's long auburn hair in the night and made his way towards him.

Approaching from his friend's right, Perry grabbed the Caith's arm and shoved him towards the barn, hoping he could get him behind the doors. He saw now that the one monster hadn't been trying to escape, but had been trying to get others to join it. Three of them now came towards the barn, hoping to destroy the two men. For a moment, Perry could see into their eyes. They were more human than he thought, a spark of intimacy glittering behind the smoky irises, but there was no time to think about what they wanted.

The Caith made a whimper sound. Perry grabbed the giant door of the barn, pulling it open and shoving the man inside in one smooth motion. He turned and saw the three pursuers right behind him. Falling backwards against the outside wall of the barn, he tightened up and kicked the leader in the chest. There was a dull cracking sound as it was sent hurtling backwards into the unceasing horde. The other two blinked slowly as Perry slid inside and latched the door.

The two-level barn stood sentry over the rear of the farm, its walls of walnut heartwood standing solid, even while being baked in the harsh summer sun. The hay crunched underneath Perry's feet as his eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. There was a rattling from the weight of the attackers against the metal bolt of the door, but it would hold long enough for Perry to focus himself. He remembered now that the stairs to the loft were on his



left. He'd have to get the Caith up there somehow.

Suddenly, the weight of what had happened fell on Perry. The Caith, the faded man, reduced to staring at window-shorn vistas from a chair for years—unmoving, unblinking, yet perhaps always dreaming—had gotten up, walked of his own volition. Perry struggled for a link between the parasite-riddled group, the Caith's brain, electrical signals, and all manner of unexplained connections.

A body landed hard against the door, the thud echoing through the vast barn.

Perry reached for his friend in the darkness, approximating where he would have been if he'd stopped walking once they had entered. He found nothing but the void. Swinging his arms, he hoped his fingertips would graze the soft flannel of the Caith's shirt. His back to the wall, he stepped forward and tripped over the body of his friend. Perry ran his hands over the form huddled into the slope of a pile of hay. He ran his hands under the man's nose, felt for the moist air of every exhalation.

There was another thud on the door. Perry could hear hands now, more than from just one person, slapping against the wood, begging for entry. With one hand sliding along the inside wall of the barn and the other underneath his friend's armpit, he dragged the Caith into the corner. The man had lost so much weight since his youth, but there was no chance of getting him up the ladder. Perry just couldn't do it. The corner would have to do.

This done, he crossed to the opposite wall as the door started to push in, the upper sliding rollers pulling away from the wall. Farm tools were arranged against the wall, held in place by large metal hooks and Perry strained his eyes for the moonlight that seeped through the cracks between the boards. He ran his hands over the implements: shovel, hoe, rutter, spade, axe, thatcher, scythe. All too large. His hand fell finally on a small adze, the hand tool used for working logs into beams.

He grabbed it as the door began to pull away. A hand reached through and Perry slammed the adze into it, the flesh and bone exploding as the heavy steel edge bit in. The creature made no sound, no whimper, just retracted the destroyed arm. Only a

sliver of moonlight slid in between the door and the frame, yet Perry spotted the original pursuer. He knew it by the eyes and he watched as it saw him, the monster focusing its soft eyes on him. The others behind pulled away, joining back into the traveling mass.

The door fell back into place until Perry slid his foot in, stopping it, allowing him to see into the face of the monster. They watched each other, studying the way each moved. To Perry, the hollow cheeks of the creature showed the starvation setting in. He wondered what the other thought as it looked at him, if it understood what it once was. Maybe it didn't care, maybe it had found other answers. Perry could see the bone of its forehead caving in, the circular hole all but destroyed by the parasites' cyclical journey. It reached out for Perry and he stepped back. The monster froze.

The farm grew strangely quiet. The group outside began shuffling slower, more methodical than the previous chaos. In the silence, Perry could hear the Caith's breath quickening. He was dreaming. Perry froze, held his breath, the adze slowly sliding out of his sweaty grip. It chinked a rock as it hit the ground. The face blinked at him. The hand pulled back. The pursuer rejoined the group.

From the crack between the door and frame, Perry could see that the size of the horde had diminished, a few lone stragglers trickling through the edge of the field to join the rest. They'd be moving on to somewhere else. He moved back towards the corner, near the Caith crumpled on ground. He slid down the wall. It was safe. The attack was over.

The crickets began again, prattling on in the night, oblivious, and Perry realized he hadn't even noticed their stoppage during the past hour. They comforted him and, even in the dark, he could feel the life of the rest of the field behind him. The rabbits and foxes, the owls and the mice. There were the staple crops, mostly corn and grain, but there were other roots and brassicas tucked away, hidden. They wouldn't be ready until autumn—there was a beautiful mystery to the interplay between frost and the flavor within them—but, still, he knew they were

there and that their energy floated out in all directions.

Perry took the Caith's hands. The lines that showed him how to heal the man's brain were gone. He wasn't sure if they'd ever come back, but now, all he wanted was to be near him. He waited for sleep, praying, hoping, and begging that his nearness would take him into the dream world of the man he missed so much.

The bell of the haven began to toll. Morning was coming.

# Aubergine Weather

The deep night sky swelled with an approaching storm, a great pocket waiting to be split, crawl to sternum and unleash its fury on the soft countryside. The shops that lined the main street of the small town were darkened, their brick and mortar mass on the top of the hill silently overlooking the confluence of the three streams. The watery threads bound together near the first lock and joined to form a raging river that carved a space for the town between the two peaks.

A century and a half ago, battles had raged across the small valley, the strategic position of the hamlet causing it to be lost and recaptured several times over during the war. For years, blood had run down the stone steps in front of the shops, but now tourists flocked to the town to sate their curiosity about the nation's violent past. Candle stands and sweet shops, gift markets and bookstores, all bubbled during the day, doing a brisk business in the travelers from the far corners.

But, at night, the town shut down.

Vivian walked the past the shuttered stores, the dim yellow streetlights reflecting off of the great glass windows, up towards the cemetery at the top of the hill. Even at night, the pottery factories along the banks sent thin yarns of smoke into the black air as their smoldering ovens kept burning. She crossed the street, her boots clicking against the cobblestones, and made her way to the scrolled iron gates protecting the edge of the cemetery. It stood luminous even in the dark, holding something larger and brighter than she would ever be. She crossed the threshold, stepping into the green expanse.

Stone steps smoothed by generations of pilgrims rose to the top—the unruly peak, the disturbing crest—of the graveyard. Vivian would have to rely on her memory to navigate the new ground. It had been years since the woman had told her of the

spot, the ancient square located within the cemetery, the small section that was the total inverse of all that lay around it, an island in a spectral heap of dead. Somewhere, Vivian knew, was the plot that the town's inhabitants had all used in the old days as a kind of reversion of burying, of death, of decay and loss. They didn't come to the spot quite for a maternal birth, but something more carnal, more peripheral, a way of life long forgotten with electricity and radio and television.

Halfway up the moonlit steps, she reached into the leather bag she had brought. Atop the tools and medical instruments was a small tea cake, wrapped in a handtowel and studded with caraway seeds that had been soaked in rye whiskey and orange peel. She paused at the base of the aspen tree that she had made note of, its bark covered in the characteristic diamonds of its outer growth, but also in the symbols and runes of the people that had made their way before the steam trains. The signs were terribly inefficient methods of communicating, but quite effective for the inhabitants of the woods.

The cake crumbled away in the cold dark night, the autumn reaching out and taking what it needed. Across the sloping hill to her right, Vivian could hear a dulcimer playing in the night, the plucking only marking a few strains of a lost melody, repeated over and over, approaching perfection in the briskness, but always just losing it and starting over. She paced her steps to the sounds.

The laboring site was near, she knew it. Vivian's eyes fell to a spot ahead of her, slightly on the shoulder of a small hill, a spot devoid of gravemarkers. The place where she needed to be was near and she shivered. A cold had descended on the town, exacerbated by the height of the cemetery and the confluence of the three rivers below her. She pulled her wool shawl tighter around her shoulders with her free hand.

Setting down the bag, Vivian opened the leather sides and pulled out the cloth-bound package. Unfurling it on the damp grass, she ran her hands along the scalpels and forceps, the needles and pliers, having taught herself precisely how to use each tool. She paused, remembering the words of the woman from her childhood, the snippets of a conversation that had seemed so

bizarre and illusory then, but held the key for her future now. She'd only been a child, but Vivian had known the woman was suffering from something, anything, a vague illness of the heart and mind and constitution. The old woman had snatched words from the recesses of her shattered mind, but Vivian had spent thirty years remembering the mention of the birthing grounds, the rules, the rituals. Libraries had provided little in the way of concrete facts; even anecdotal remembrances of the old ways seemed lost to time or seclusion or just the decay of all of the old towns so far outside of the cities.

A string of lights that ran along the canal locks flickered as Vivian reached the crest. Ahead of her, she could see tin cans on the ground, placed into an ellipse, their lids pried apart with bottle openers so that their triangle teeth radiated away from the tops like inverted smiles. She knew then that there was a rare kind in the town that still followed the old ways.

She stumbled in the dark over a low brick wall that circled the outer edge of the modern cemetery, the deep copper red of the clay blocks covered in a stringy black moss. What had once been waist high was only a few inches now and she realized how much dirt had been brought in to layer the bodies atop each other.

Stepping over the low barrier, she was now in the obscured zone, a place and a perspective beyond the edge of the formal graveyard. She felt warmer and more serene as the moon's luminous blue rays in its waxing form fell upon her, no longer blocked by the great wych elm canopy of the ordered funerary grounds. A man in a bar had once told her that the trees had been used to keep the spirits inside the ground.

In the dim light, she could make out the low earthen berm that marked the outer edges of the older cemetery, giving life to the square of land that rose in a shaft into the night sky. She walked towards the center, her feet crushing the soft clumps of cicely growing wild in the patch, licorice trailing through the heavy air. She knelt and spread out a wool blanket, the fabric striped in red and black. Small cairns of rocks were scattered in strange constellations and she grabbed some to hold down the corners of the covering. She lay on her back and thought of home,



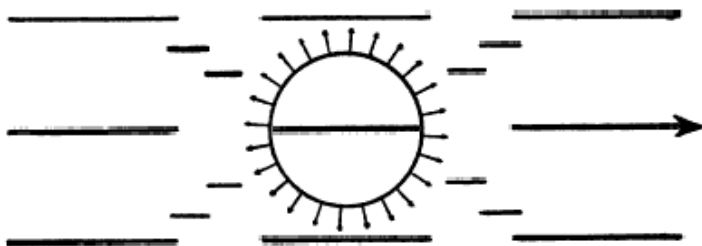
the curved porch and secret staircases of her childhood, the warm sun that no longer seemed to fall on her skin as it once had.

The surgery was dark and tenuous. As she pulled it out of her chest, she hesitated a moment before letting go, wanting to know more about it, but the open sky pulled at it, tugging softly and with all the grace of wild cat. She let go and watched as it slowly grew, puffing out at the edges. She thought of saying 'goodbye', but felt embarrassed. A gust of wind from the approaching storm came and the form was gone.

Vivian blindly sutured the wound below her throat, almost passing out several times from the pain, but as the skin was closed, she felt a clarity return, a composure that had been gone for years. She sat up with a grimace and returned the tools to her bag. There was a snap in the darkness and the sky opened up, rain coming down in sheets of cold water that ran down the hill to the rivers below. The emerald grass grew slick, revived by the night storm.

She stood. In the moonlight, the green copper gutters of the buildings on the main street overflowed with rain and spilled onto the streets and alleys below. Vivian felt a measure of vitality watching the water swell and run down the cobblestones. She stood up, sharp arrows of pain sliding through her limbs. The wool blanket was soaked in blood and she decided to leave it, hoping it would be absorbed into the ground, keeping warm whatever was down there.

She straightened herself and pulled her thick shawl tight as the rain ran off of the tight oiled wool. There was an trilling in the dark woods to her right, some kind of sedge wren carrying on its night business in the secret center of the world and, as quick as it came, the rain stopped.



# Piñon

The radio crackled in the afternoon, a flip song about teenage prayers and teenage dreams, as the sun sparkled, just catching the aluminum cap of the soundwall that stood far off in the distance between the heavy boughs of white oaks and red maples. Les spotted it for only a second as the wind blew and parted the sentries before another gust came and closed the vista he had been enjoying from the blue flagstone patio. He'd been born in the small cape cod behind him, the maroon shutters and screen porch all overgrown with ivy, and he couldn't remember a time without the abandoned land hidden behind the quiet concrete walls that stood far behind the house, alone and unknown.

It was a warm afternoon. Arbor Day had passed a few weeks before and in a couple of months, he'd be gone for university, but the first part of the Saturday had been lazy and serene and only for him. His parents had gone north to visit distant relations and he'd found a bottle of their Black Watch gin above a vent in the basement, sandwiched between two ancient rafters. He'd seen the bottle as a child and had always remembered it as being named Black Witch, his mind spinning out an arcane occultist history for the drink. Now, as a teen, it was rough and hot going down, and a little boring in back story.

Sitting on the back stoop of the house with his dog, Attis, he mixed the gin with a can of lemon-lime PopUp! and sipped it from a small glass, staring out into the woods. There was a youthful yearning that he didn't know what to do with. In a month, he'd be done with high school, but high school had been done with him for a long time. He was ready to get away from the shrinking factory town and see the world, but a certain anxiousness crept into the corners of his mind when he thought too much about being far from the clapboard siding and weeping cherry trees of his home.

He knew that there were roadways that lay beyond the soundwall that'd he'd glimpsed in the afternoon sun and he thought back to what his parents had told him of them. The great planners—alone in their wisdom and knowledge of the inner workings of the world and the lowly people that inhabited it—had come and said the future was now, that the road network was needed to handle the people who would be pouring into the region following the government's grand advance.

But most of the factories had closed and the jobs had left. The economists had been wrong, yet the asphalt had already been poured. The fluted concrete walls had been built to keep the sound out of their small town as the constant bustle of traffic would have carried them into the future, but now the giant vertical ribbons surrounding the swaths of roads simply kept the town cut off from the beautiful reserves to the southeast that held the true vision for the new world.

He wondered why he'd never ventured out to them, always stopping some distance away, even as a wide-eyed child. Parents and neighbors had always told him and the other kids on his street to keep away, but he'd assumed it was just because some of the rougher kids probably hung out there, smoking cigarettes and shooting BB guns. Older now, he realized that nobody ever talked about being there. Even the criminals had seemed to shun the abandoned zone for what it had done to the town.

Les looked up at the sun. He figured that it was about four o'clock. Placing the sweating tumbler on the concrete, he stood up and stretched his back. It welled up in him quickly, the desire to see it all, to make something of himself before he became an official adult. Three and half, maybe four hours remained in the day. He was determined to go down, scale the walls, and see how the roadway had stood up all these years. It was a perfect Saturday afternoon adventure. His parents would never know. With the gin running through him, he went into the kitchen and grabbed his pocket knife and a flashlight, just in case.

Attis kept close to Les' heels as they descended the hill behind his house that ran down to the roadway. It had been a slight valley once, leading down to a riverbed that had used to fill

in the early spring, but was now just a hidden underground sewer. The light was still strong in the afternoon, but the journey seemed longer than Les had imagined it would be from the house, the trees changing from the openness of mighty hardwoods to the cherry trees that must have once been along the older, smaller roads, and finally to the thick brambles of berry bushes that had grown in the dark pockets of the wall. Honeysuckle wafted in the air.

Les approached the giant concrete sentinels that stretched each way into the distance. It must have been a monumental construction task at the time, but now great chunks of the material had sloughed off in the years since completion and yet still, in the waning afternoon light, he found them majestic. There was something about man so completely dominating the natural world that seemed both awesome and devastating. His skin pricked up even in the heat of the early summer.

Attis barked and Les looked down to see the dog working quickly, digging a small hole. "Come on," Les yelled towards the animal. "We need to find a way in."

The pair followed the brambles down the wall, a sliver of thin, wiry grass separating the natural world from the concrete. There has to be a break somewhere, he thought. Rounding a bend, Attis took off, his soft paws digging into the soil. Les yelled after him, but as he, too, took the corner, he could see that the dog had found a crack in the wall, a vertical slit where the posts had not been aligned. With a last look at the world beyond, Les slipped inside.

There was a temperature drop, the space inside the wall much cooler than the woods he'd just been in. He took in the surroundings. The black asphalt of the road had cracked, grass and weeds growing up through the openings. The far wall was sixty feet away, its sides covered in ivy and creeper, thin shooters hugging the wall and spreading away into the distance, bright orange flowers exploding across the surface. To his right, a section of the road broke off and turned left from the main trunk. He called for Attis and heard a bark in the direction of this new opening.

A silence had settled in the thin stretch of blacktop between the walls. Les realized he could no longer hear the birds from the woods or the grasshoppers from the bushes. The wind had died down, blocked by the walls. Moving towards the turn, he brushed against a small, silvery licorice bush, the torn bark giving off the smell of sweet anise. It was strange being so cut off from the world, a small slice of modernity set aside for man, but completely given over to nature. It felt unnatural. He called again to Attis and followed the barked replies.

Turning the corner, he saw the dog hunched over something, examining it with his snout, rolling it over and pushing it aside. Les pulled the dog away and bent down. On the ground was a pile of blood and fur and feathers. The creature's death had been a day or two before, he thought. Attis tried to get back to the carnage on the ground and Les pushed him away as he studied it. There were pieces of bone, thin strands of muscles, claws, maybe a beak. He wasn't sure. In his mind, none of it fit together to form any animal he knew.

Attis let out a grunt and Les turned to see what else the dog had found. Laying in a pile of short yellow grass that abutted the asphalt, Les saw the key. It was a thin piece of burnished copper attached to a green metal septagon. He knelt and picked it up. It looked recently used, the teeth of the key a bright orange compared to the patina on the head. Holding it, he realized there was a second key, smaller and made of steel, that was behind the first key.

Looking up, Les felt lost. A dizziness gripped him. The walls rose all around, reaching away in three directions now—to his left, to his right, and behind where he'd entered into the new area. The network had seemed so small from a distance, but now he felt that he couldn't piece together how large it was even when drawing from his spatial ideas of the surrounding area of the town. There were fields to the north and the water to the west...but the thoroughfares and neighborhoods took so many twists and turns as they sprawled through the countryside that he wasn't sure how it all fit together.

His mind spun. He tried to think. The town had been so

hurt by the depression that everyone had forcefully forgotten the new highways and all the promises that had been made. They existed both fleetingly at the fringes of the residents' minds and in reality at the edges of their decaying town and this combined to make them almost like ghosts.

A strange cawing rose in the distance and Attis ran towards it. Les followed him as the road wound around and quickly rose up before falling beneath an overpass. He could see the dog on the other side of the tunnel, the darkness of the space beneath the roadbed separating them. It was only a few dozen yards, but a chill came from the murkiness that made Les hesitate. Attis took off and Les had no choice but to follow.

Breaking the threshold of the shadow, his skin became instantly cold and Les ran, the urgency of escaping the dark taking over any fear he had about tripping in the shadows. His legs tumbled over each other and the adrenaline pumped so hard he couldn't feel his feet hitting the pavement. He didn't dare turn his head. As he reached the other end, he felt silly, like a child. He'd be off to university soon and there was no time to act afraid anymore. He could see his father's face in his mind, disapproving of him. There was a shame that always existed in his teenage mind, always trying to please his father and always failing.

These minor thoughts flew from his head as he stepped into the light and saw a group of small structures abutting the base of the overpass. He stepped towards them, studying what he found to be small rooms that were attached to the concrete soundwalls. He knelt and studied the squat boxes. They were not quite lean-tos, but less substantial than any structure he thought fit to live in. Les counted seven of the shelters running the two dozen feet from the submerged section before the roadbed rose and evened off to meet the plane of overarching blacktop that it had descended from originally.

The sides and roofs of the small buildings were hobbled together from old signs, bits of aluminum siding, scrap wood, and other detritus salvaged from the dumpsters of the factory town. Each of them had a small circular opening a foot off of the ground and a wooden door without windows that opened out onto the



road. Four of the seven doors were hanging open, the wood splintered from the elements and the hinges rusted from the rain. The other three were sealed, giant padlocks holding steel bolts across the doors.

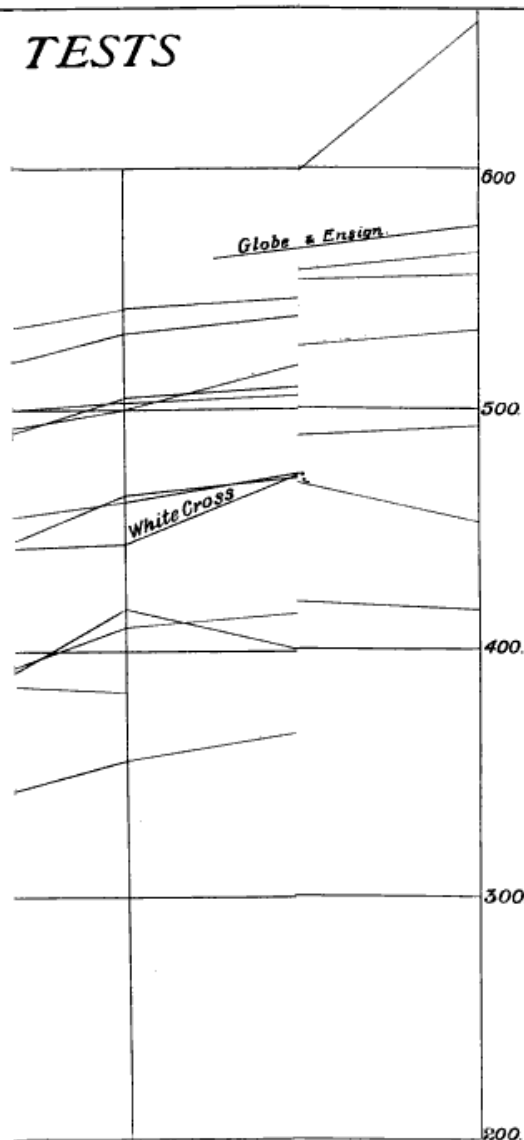
Les stepped forward, forgetting the dog for a moment. He ran his hand along the surfaces, the entire mass rising no more than to his waist. He studied the joining. There were no nails or screws holding the discarded pieces together. Each was sewed to its neighbor with a thick string of leather. The laces crisscrossed and overlapped, holding the pieces tight. He instinctively reached for the door, then paused. The thought of the dead creature, whatever it had been, came back to him. He stepped back and realized the rooms looked vaguely like coops. He remembered the keys, but kept them in his pocket. Pushing the thought of opening them from his mind, he went off in the direction of Attis.

The roadway twisted and turned, folding back on itself as it continued farther from town. The sun was so bright and the air so still that Les couldn't realize how far he'd gone. He turned a final corner and spread before him was an expanse of dry grass, knee high and golden yellow, blowing gently in a soft breeze that was able to come alive as the walls fell away. It seemed a mirage at first, but slowly he noticed the farmhouse perched on a small hill in the distance. The structure stood solitary in the field, its white clapboard siding and light blue scalloping at the peak of the roof almost blending it into the sky above. The black metal roof and red shutters handled most of the outlining for the building.

He thought of his own suburban house, non-descript, forgettable. He wondered what kind of person could have grown up in a house like the one on the small hill, what they would have become with that kind of force behind them. Noticing the grass parting in the distance, he jolted, his mind spinning out an idea of some kind of creature emerging from the coops and making its way towards him. Les let out a sigh of relief as Attis leapt from the grass onto the asphalt, his coat covered in briars and seeds. The dog shook as Les helped him clean the fur.

The sun was setting, twilight drifting down over the mountains of concrete and asphalt. They'd both spent too much

# TESTS



WORKS DEPT.

time between the walls. Les wasn't sure he could get out. But how hard could it be? he thought. No different than driving on the road. He realized that there'd been no signs for exits and on-ramps, no markers that he'd expect a roadway to have for directing drivers.

Eyeballing the house, Les could see a stack of firewood just around the corner of the building. He wondered about starting a fire. Nobody would miss him. Not tonight. His parents wouldn't be back until the next afternoon. If his friends called his house, they would think he'd just fallen asleep. He realized it was silly, camping out on this desolate hillside near an abandoned house, no food, no water, not even a blanket. He'd have to get out.

Hearing a gnawing sound from Attis, he turned and saw the dog's foot, blood dripping onto the blacktop. The dog must have hurt himself in the pursuit of whatever had taken him towards the house.

Kneeling to help the dog, Les realized the sun was setting faster than he expected. The twilight seemed to be almost over already. His heart raced. He knew instinctively that the road to the west must lead to the waterfront, but just how far he couldn't be sure. And would there be a way out? He vaguely remembered a giant wall near the watertown piers when he'd taken a girl on an Anchor Day date. They'd walked along the warping boardwalk as fireworks exploded upwards, the glowing reflection rippling on the water's surface. She'd made a comment about her father having worked on the road as a teenager and that it stopped near where they were standing. But it could be miles.

Attis howled the soft, mournful bay of an injured animal. Les knew the dog wouldn't make it however far away the water was and that he wouldn't be able to carry him the distance. He glanced up at the house. It wasn't looming like the houses of his childhood nightmares. It was just plain. A forgotten farmhouse on a forgotten hill. He slid his shoe off and slipped off a sock to put the pet's paw into. Attis smelled it for a moment, before following Les up the hill.

The grass of the field leading up the hill was golden and had fallen over onto itself from the heavy rains. In the orange and

purple light of dusk, the soft mounds reached away around the shoulders of the hill before a low, fieldstone wall delineated the yard proper. The stones had sunk into each other, not fitting together the way a craftsman would have placed them, but slipping into each other's crevices in the way only gravity and time will allow. Les kept Attis close at his side, not only due to the dog's injury, but it made the boy feel safer in the approaching night.

The house rose as he crossed the stone wall. The grass gave way to a dirt path. Les studied the house. It was more detailed than he'd originally thought, being one of the fancier styles from the turn of the previous century, narrow and thin as it rose up to the attic, but squat when viewed with the curved porch that ran all around the foundation. The lower level had plain clapboard siding, while the upper level had shake shingles and the jutting, third-story tower section had scalloped wood detailing. Corbeling held up the overhanging roof. Several chimney stacks stood proud in the dusky light.

"Hey!" Les called. He felt eighteen at that moment, embarrassed to be yelling into the murky void. He knew his voice wasn't intimidating, that anybody behind the thin glass windows of the house would surely laugh at the exasperated and lanky kid with one sock on screaming to roust about any indigents he thought might be by, his parents' bargain gin still on his breath. But no sound came back to him.

He paused, but Attis kept walking, interested in the smells and possible food that a new house could hold. He started to call the dog back, but gave in and pulled out his flashlight. Flipping the switch, an arc of light cut into the darkened front yard. A few feet ahead was a circular concrete opening, covered by a thick stone lid. Les assumed it a well from the days before municipal water.

Walking towards the house, he strangely felt little fear, still basking in the flushed glow of the highball and the adrenaline of the run. Attis ran through a hole in the screen door and turned, the main door having been left open. Les quickened his pace. Reaching the edge of the porch, he paused, staring up at the

vertical expanse of the facade. Close up, he could see the house breaking apart. It wasn't the monolith he'd envisioned. The siding had warped in parts, the shake shingles had splintered from rain and heat, the paint was cracking and flaking off. Yet still, it had a weight to it, an immensity of body and mystery that made it seem so important.

Attis barked.

Stepping through the screen door, Les swung the flashlight, the circle of light drifting across the crooked and scratched daguerreotypes and heavy patchwork quilts that hung along the wall. Cautiously, he made his way through the rooms. It wasn't too different from his own house, he realized. A sitting room that was probably never used, a dining room, a kitchen. He didn't have time to notice the details, just picking up on the broad strokes of the layout as he followed the barking. A stairway near the rear of the house led upstairs.

The floor above him creaked and all at once, the fear grabbed him. The monster sat on his chest, making it hard to breathe. In his mind, he pictured a crazed family of backwater weirdos on the upper level, quietly sharpening axes and knives, waiting for some stupid kid to wander into their murder den.

He turned the flashlight up the stairs. They only went halfway up to the next level before turning and making the final ascent to the upper rooms. Thousands of dust motes drifted lazily through the air. Les exhaled and an invisible wave moved through them, shooting them off in all directions. The fear was so intense that he couldn't move. He imagined being chained up in a barn and being sawed slowly in half, thin slivers of eyes watching him from just beyond an arc of moonlight. He couldn't even turn to move.

The floor creaked again, slower, more methodical. He stared up at the turn in the steps. There was a soft padding. Attis stuck his head around the corner, a lopsided, dopey smile spread across his muzzle. He gave a short, quick bark and Les could see the blood on the fur around his mouth. The fear let go of him. He rushed up the stairs, but the dog was back down the hallway before Les could get there.

Two rooms were on each side of the short hallway. Les walked slowly down between them, each creak of the ancient floorboards reverberating through his entire being. The fear that had gripped him had resided, but he couldn't shake the idea of somebody living in the house slowly walking up on him. And who had built those cages? he wondered.

The first room on the right was empty, long pine floorboards running from the door to the tall casement windows. He stepped out, softly, and crossed to the room on the left of the hall. He swung the flashlight in, catching the light on the huge sheets of paper attached to the wall, each covered in grids and pencilled markings. Turning, he saw there were at least two dozen of the large sheets tacked around the room. Names ran down the left side of the paper, strange appellations like Miter Betty and Taliensis Yadira. Boxes ran across to the right from the names, marked with Ys and Ns and all kinds of numbers.

Les thought for a moment that it was a milking chart before he looked to the top of the rubric to see what the markings denoted. Running along the top of the sheets were bizarre terms that he couldn't correlate with yes's or no's or numerical values. There was 'giving' and 'breeching' and 'lament' and 'blame'. The one labeled 'descending' seemed particularly unnerving in the darkening room. A few of the columns had variations on the title 'other' before giving way to symbols that had no legend. The markings in each square were different; different handwriting, different colored pencils, different notations.

Stepping back into the hallway, he walked to the other two rooms. The room on the left was again empty. He stepped into the final room and found Attis sprawled on a large pillow, itself the size of a small bed. When Attis saw him, the dog rolled onto its side and stuck its hurt paw into the air. He'd been gnawing on it and that was where the blood on his mouth had come from.

Les removed the saturated sock. A deep cut ran along the main pad, rocks and grass stuck to the blood that had dried. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tissue, spitting into it before using it to clean the wound. There was nothing more he could do than put his other sock on the paw and hope the dog

wouldn't try to remove it.

Les rubbed the dog's belly. He wondered what it was like to have no fear, no concern for what might be around the next corner. Attis just smiled, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. The flashlight illuminated a door in the far corner. There hadn't been any closets in the other rooms. Les walked towards it, the room behind him still lit in the soft purple of the dying sun, and with a slight squeak, tugged on the glass doorknob. He swung the flashlight quickly into the opening and found another set of stairs leading to an attic. Far from the initial fear that had gripped him, exploring the house had become an impulse. "Attis, let's go." The dog hopped off of its resting place and followed behind.

Each step creaked as the pair made their way up. The steps were much narrower than the main stairway, almost reaching the boy's shoulders as he rose to the attic. The final level was much brighter than the rest of the house, with four windows opening on to each cardinal vista, capturing every bit of light that remained from the day. He could get a sense now of where the house stood. To the west he could see the scooping out of the horizon that signaled the bay and to the south he could make out the houses of the town clinging to the gentle hills of the northside. Even though he couldn't see them in the dwindling light, the acres of farms would have been to the north, with the vast reserve to the southeast.

It was comforting orienting himself. But more so, it was a beautiful sight, like nothing he'd seen in the town before. The roadways spiraled all around him, rising up and falling, twisting and arching, dazzlingly complex ribbons of concrete and asphalt. Such a monument to nothing, he thought. The town was never going to come back. Slowly, everyone would drift away, finding a new industry in a new town. His house would slowly be abandoned like the house on the hill. Running off to university didn't help matters, but he had no interest in staying behind, watching the friends he'd looked up to slowly drink and townie themselves away. He thought about Vicky and Roberto and Toni and all the friends that had come and gone, trying to imagine them in ten years, hoping everything would turn out fine. He thought of



being eighteen forever.

Staring out to where the town was in the shimmering purple and orange twilight, he thought most about Lisa. How close they'd been, everything that had gone wrong, the divide that was there now. It seemed strange to imagine not being in each other's lives, that there was a schism that would become a gulf and finally a complete separation. It still seemed to be such a waste of time that they couldn't work things out. He'd realized that losing friends was the worst part of being a teenager.

He sat down. His legs ached. Attis came up beside and eased himself down onto his belly. Les' feet were hot from walking on the asphalt. A wave of sleep came over him and he lay backwards, stretching his back out, shivering for a moment as his spine flattened. The floorboards were cool through his thin shirt. Except for the dog's panting, an ominous silence lay over the house.

Les tried to relax for a moment and think about what to do, but all he could think about was the old house. It made him think of his grandfather, Okie, and what the illness had done to the aging man. They'd taken so many photographs of him over these last few months, at the hospital, in the car, in his bed, but the man possessed none of the imposing masculinity, the blunt muscularity that Les remembered fearing and being in awe of as a young boy. He had tried to push this weakened image of his grandpop from his mind and it mostly worked. When he closed his eyes, he saw the faded photographs of his childhood, his ancestor looming over him like a giant lumberjack, the large hands and thick fingers able to protect him from anything.

Attis whimpered. Les sat up, realizing that while his paw probably hurt, the dog was more likely to be hungry than anything. He, too, felt a gnawing in his stomach. He hadn't seen anything coming up through the house, but called the dog after him as he trudged back down to the kitchen.

He flicked the lightswitch by instinct, but nothing happened. It was almost completely dark now, that small sliver of time between the dying glow of twilight and the warm haze of the moon. Throwing open cabinets, all Les found were empty shelves

and the occasional coffee mug. Damnit, he thought. He swung the flashlight around and found a second door he hadn't noticed at first.

A wave of fear gripped him. Old people's basements were always terrifying. They weren't the carpeted rec rooms of his neighborhood. They were always damp and dirty, with spiders dangling from the ceilings and cave crickets covering the floors. Attis, fearless as ever, broke through Les' legs, bounding down the dark oak planks. The boy almost opened his mouth to yell, but thought better of it. Checking the tightness of the flashlight's battery door, Les followed the dog in.

The light caught waves of dust particles moving through the damp room, larger than the ones from the kitchen stairway. A chill came over Les as he reached the ground and realized it wasn't even cement, just raw dirt studded with pebbles. The swinging light caught on the detritus that builds up in basements. There were old boards, poles, pieces of metal, cardboard boxes. Drawing the light around, it became clear that the basement was much larger than the footprint of the house above it. The stairs had run along the end of the house, but there was another section beyond the back wall that led off into darkness. Thin slivers of blue light came through the windows set at the top of the foundation.

Les yelled in the strongest whisper he could muster. "Attis! Attis!" The dog was nowhere to be seen. Walking through the unfinished room, Les could sense that the floor was sloping, pulling away from the beams above him.

He turned his flashlight and gasped at the person he saw across from him in darkness. He recoiled, dropping his own flashlight before realizing it was his own reflection, sent back from a large mirror leaning up against the far wall. Stepping closer, he saw that there were a dozen of the large mirrors lined up along the wall of stacked rubble. They were grouped into four sets, with the three of each set closer aligned. He felt strange, like the mirrors were eyes, portals that something could use to watch him from afar.

Bizarre as the collection was, he thanked them for their

ability to multiply the meager light from his flashlight. He stepped closer and found piles of glass in front of the center mirror of each set. Each grouping was of three cones, with the middle pile being taller than the two flanking it. Crouching, he examined the pyramids with his fingers and realized that they, too, had once been mirrors, the reflective edge of the fronts and the dull grey on the backs visible even in the broken bits. Moving down the wall, he found the coarseness of each pile of mirror fragments to get finer as he made his way along, from great jagged chunks to a consistency almost like sand at the end.

There was a crash and Attis came hurtling to him through the darkness. He fell to his side and raised his arms, eager for his master's attention. Les stooped down. The dog was wet and covered in grey mud and silt. He tried to temper himself. "What have you gotten into, boy?" he said, aiming his flashlight into the far end of the basement, far past where the walls of the house were situated above. He slowly dragged it across from the right, staring at the mixture of rough stone and concrete block.

Halfway through his arc, Les paused. There was a shimmering, a difference of what had been there a moment before, just on the left edge of the light. The flashlight shook in his hand. He couldn't move it any further to the left, couldn't bear to see what might be there. The cages near the overpass flashed into his mind. What had they held? What had the two keys kept locked inside?

He fought to steady the flashlight, the handle clicking up and down so hard against his palm that he could hear it thundering in his head. Attis had barely moved. The fuzziness at the edge came back and Les turned, running across the bare floor, the pebbles and dust crunching under his shoes. His heart pounded through his chest. Attis whipped his body off of the ground and followed, gaining on Les and cutting a hard left to make the stairs. The boy reached for the banister and dropped the flashlight. As it spun in the darkness, Les took one final look before the floor joists blocked his view. There were shadows, darknesses moving softly just at the edges of the light, dancing in the recesses of the golden beam.

He made the top of the stairs and slammed the door shut, struggling in the darkness to find any kind of latch before his hands landed on a simple hook and eye lock. He slid the pieces together. He could feel the blood rushing from his head as he tried to catch his breath. "Attis!" he whispered into the darkened house. The dog was right beside him and licked his downhanging arm. There could be no staying at the house. No matter how difficult it would be to escape the labyrinth of the road network, he had to try.

He could still see the layout of the house in his head. He crossed down the main hallway to the front door, Attis at his heels. There was the clang of metal on metal from outside and he froze. He crouched and held Attis, keeping the dog still. He pressed down the rear of the dog, forcing him to sit. In the darkness, Les slid across to the front window. The world was all grey and steel in the light from the waxing moon and he could make out a man in the walkway. An axe and a metal bucket caught a bit of the lunar light.

The man was thin and wore faded cotton slacks and a dark oxford with the sleeves rolled up. Les looked around, but the man appeared to be alone. Taking a lighter from his pocket, the stranger flipped the lid and drew his thumb against the striker. A fat orange flame erupted from the top.

The man knelt down and felt around in the yard. His fingers landed upon the stone lid that covered the concrete opening. With great effort, he slid it across onto the grass. He whistled into the exposed hole and Les could hear it echo back after a second. The man stood back up and pulled a knife from his front pocket, drawing the thin blade across his right arm, separating the skin in a smooth line. He fell to his knees as the blood poured out, the crimson liquid spilling sideways across his lap and burrowing between his bent legs. He swung his arm in a circle, the blood arcing around hole. The man spoke sharply, enunciating strange words, but Les failed to make out anything he said.

Standing up, the man aimed the bleeding arm over the open well and let the blood stream down into the hollow earth and the infinite darkness that lay beyond. Les tried to piece together

the layout of the basement he'd just been in. The extension he had found had been in the rear of the house, not the front. He realized there must be more chambers, extra passages tunneling through the ground of the abandoned zone.

It was only a flash, but he remembered his grandmother taking him on his first boat trip, far out into the ocean to catch a fish whose name he couldn't even recall. A storm had come up quickly on them, battering the small craft. Les yelled and his grandmother turned to him. She must have been in dozens, maybe hundreds, of storms in her life, but he could see actual terror in her face as the lightning cracked and the wind tore at the masts.

"Don't worry," she had yelled to him as the waves crashed onto the deck. "The terror is quick. You either live or you don't." She'd smiled at him and even through the inky darkness of the storm, he knew she was giving him a deep truth.

This was the only way out. Attis would be fine, nothing could catch him, but as for himself, Les couldn't be sure. If he fell or there was another waiting in the shadows, he might not make it. He felt his chest tightening thinking about getting away.

He moved sideways back to the front of the house. Once he opened the screen door, the sound would alert the man to his presence. He took a breath, bending slightly to pat Attis on the head. Exhaling, he ran.

As each footfall hit the soft, warm earth, his mind exploded with all that he'd seen. The cages, the charts, the underground network, the flickers at the edge of the light. He couldn't piece any of it together. Les tried to run as far as possible from the man—the hideous creature illuminated by the dim moonlight—but the ground curved and his momentum brought him within a few steps of the opening. His youth burned inside of him, seeping out of his pores as his muscles strained for every inch of ground.

Attis threaded his way between the two of them, speeding off into the darkness of the roads beyond. The monster in the night turned so slowly that he barely seemed to notice the boy running by. He steadily moved his hand behind himself without even turning, exposing the blade of the knife he'd just used on his arm.

He held it out, stiffly, deliberately, waiting for the universe to bring him his prize. Les tried to correct his course, but tilted sideways, drawn to the man by some unknown force. The blade bit into the boy's leg, slicing cleanly through the denim into his fleshy thigh, a burst of white pain shooting through his body. The man hadn't even turned. Preoccupied with his ritual on the ground, his eyes had never left the hole.

Les wasn't sure if he made a sound from the pain or not, but he could just make out Attis' fur in the darkness and focused his entire being on the spot in the distance. Everything burned, not just the wound. His legs, his chest, his eyes. A landscape that seemed insane to navigate from the attic window proved its merit on the ground. Everything looked the same as Les tumbled into the concrete labyrinth. Yet Attis had it all figured out. The dog whipped around the corners, the path home committed to his memory by smell or instinct or some other sense that Les couldn't tap into.

The asphalt was still hot from the day's sun as the boy struggled to keep up with the dog. He passed the cages and sped up, squeezing a bit of extra speed from his dead legs. The pair plunged headlong beneath the overpass, finally reaching the cut in the wall. Up the hill, Les scrambled, reaching the patio behind his house. He turned and threw the pair of keys into the broad and enigmatic forest. Attis waited for him at the door and followed him in. He ran through the house, locking all the windows and doors and grabbing a knife from the kitchen before locking himself in his bedroom.

Leaning his back against his door, he looked down at his leg and studied the wound. The fabric around the cut was completely soaked in blood. He thought back to the man, how he'd been dripping his blood in a circle around the open pit in some kind of ritual. His own blood must have flown out of the wound when the knife had bitten in, drops of it splattering to the soft ground. How thirsty the earth had been when the man had done it, he thought. He imagined his own blood seeping into the ground, what it would be used for, how it could tie him to the abhorrent house on the hill. An overwhelming sense of dread

mixed with the feeling of the blood rushing out of his head. The boy passed out with every light in his room still turned on.

Attis turned slowly onto his side and closed his eyes. The dog's brain was alight with all of the terrible things he'd sensed on the journey, detected in the way that only an animal can. Finding sleep, the dog dreamt of all of the other worlds he'd glimpsed in the cracks of the ancient house and the crevices of the invisible night—the terrible secrets that his master would never know.



# The Kayak & The Umiak

Jorie turned the car onto the main road. The ragged black strip ran straight through the entire length of the reserve, coast to coast, ocean to ocean. She watched the glass screen on the dash, two hard lines separating her empty swath of land from the populated areas to the north and south. The screen had been blank for weeks from any intrusions. No stragglers, no separatists, no wanderers that made their way into the reserve with even a scrap of electronics. Sometimes as she sat bored looking across the empty lands, she thought that the government might have done its job a bit too well.

Reaching a curve that looked down onto a soft riverbed, she felt a deep loneliness that had begun to cut away at her, more acute than the simple boredom that affected most rangers. She longed for something, anything, to take her mind off of her vigilance for the vast forested land between the coasts. The freedom from the world beyond had begun to feel a bit like captivity.

Frustrated, she spun the truck around and sped forward to the high hill of her cabin. Reaching the top, she got out, stared across the open valley to the other side. The corkbark firs and box elders strove up from the ground, reaching for the sky and an escape from the soil. She looked through her binoculars, saw Arnold across the chasm, hunched over in the sun, the treetops arching over him in reverence. The older man moved across his patio, watering herbs in a daily ritual he'd carried on for years. They all kept rituals to ground themselves in the peopleless lands, specific steps to surveying their districts, games they played in the car with points on the landscape, compulsions they harbored to keep the monotony at bay.

Thunder cracked somewhere off in the far distance as Jorie

climbed to the edge of the escarpment and stuck her left hand backwards in front of her face, slipping her ring finger between her lips. She blew hard, twisted her lips, modulated the sound to be received and interpreted by Arnold.

[I feel we are all islands upon a common sea] she whistled.

Arnold turned his head, put down the watering can. He turned and faced west, found Jorie. The old man responded in kind, whistling: [Though the islands seem to be desert—uninhabitable and almost inaccessible—] he paused, [the air breathes upon us most sweetly here]

[How I would give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground] Jorie replied.

[Seven more months, restless youth] Arnold turned and went inside the house.

The old man's phrases had grown shorter as time passed. He'd once been a great poet of the mountains and valleys, and yet, now, Jorie had to drag the words from him, pleading that there was more than the watering of his plants. What did he see in them? she wondered. She knew that it had been his extended tenure in the zone. Most everybody did two years. Arnold had been watching over his domain for near on forty, a patriarch of the woods and rivers and snowy egrets. Everything below and above thrived without people and so, too, did he.

She wondered how long her friend had left to live as the sun began its long descent behind her. A storm was rippling across the distant range, a fuzzy grey mass devouring the sky ahead of it. Crossing her own patio, Jorie moved through the doorway to the long table that served many functions in the spare home. She set her bag down upon it and moved to the far wall, opening the black walnut blanket chest near the other door. Slipping her hands past treasured tomes and thick quilted coverlets, she found the small wooden box that she'd thought about on the afternoon drive. An image had come into her mind of a photograph she'd taken as a teenager—bright green weeds growing up through the blades of her father's orange and blue push lawnmower—and she'd been taken by the domesticity of it all, yearned for the return to breakfast tables and nights on the porch surrounded by family.

She sat at the table and slid the wooden box in front of her, flipping open the lid and removing a stack of photographs, mostly of friends, some dead, some essentially that way, some lost to the wider world. She looked at their smiles, sharp, gleaming in the sunlight. She tried to remember the last time she had smiled, alone up here, away from the streams of people, the warmth of another body, but couldn't quite grasp it.

A better time came to her. A moment with her sister before they'd both left. They stood at the beach, young, unknowing of the vast cosmic space beyond the atmosphere. They smiled, free and unencumbered. She herself would leave for the reserve the next morning, the hard and relatable soil that needed protection awaiting her, while Denny was only a few days away from her departure for the outer darkness, the great void that, in a way, needed its own sentries, as well.

Jorie tried to remember the early days, the moments without the crushing weight of the universe upon them, the vast firmament full of all of the hopes and dreams of humanity and those that wished to navigate it. Sitting at the table, she could see through the great bay window, the curvature of the earth pulling down as the land traveled away, the sky opening up to the deep beyond, the stars and the magic that still existed at the fringes. She hoped Denny was happy.

A tree-mounted klaxon outside the house screeched out across the clearing and through the small frame house. Jorie was pulled from her memories. She saw the small screen above the granite fireplace mantel. A red dot flashed on and off through the thick aqua-colored glass. The location was about ten miles away. Grabbing her keys, she made for the door. The sun would be setting in an hour and she had to move quickly.

The roads were in disrepair, forgotten and left to the care of the rangers in their forlorn cabins. Cracks, potholes, uplifts from roots, her yellow headlights lit them all. The vehicles were tough, but they were old, all hard-wired and steel and grease-fittings, made to last after the world had no more use for circuits. Heavy raindrops fell randomly on the roof of the car, the storm unsure if it wanted to unleash its full fury.

Jorie watched the dot on the screen out of the corner of her eye as she sped across the overgrown landscape. Roads that had once been four lanes had shrunk down to one as the forests reclaimed what was once theirs, strips of blacktop that had only been loaned to the humans who had seen fit to waste it. Roads had become a matter of survival and at some level, Jorie was glad the rangers were losing. It would all be natural again, too difficult for most from the cities to live in, creating an environment free of humans, as if it evolved in that way to protect itself from the soft kind.

The dot was up ahead, down the side of a small hill. A few minutes of light remained. She needed to beat the storm.

Cresting the small hilltop, Jorie parked the small vehicle. She was near the spot marked on her screen, almost atop the source despoiling the reserve. The woods were silent, only the small waterfall in the distance gurgling through the low sycamores. Walking around, she kicked the dead leaves and fallen branches covering the forest floor. The ruins of a stone chimney rose up out of the earth as she turned past a cluster of trees.

Jorie stepped back, trying to picture the size and shape of the house before nature had reclaimed it. She could imagine the round walls, the tin roof, the foggy windows. All razed during the war. Moving through the ruined site of lost childhoods and forgotten weddings, she stopped at a spot near the chimney, a clearing set into a gently sloping hillside behind it. The leaves were freshly swept away, fingermarks in the soft soil.

She kicked away more of the detritus and saw the metal hatch, the cover rusted, the lock scratched and pitted, the corrosion and oxidation freshly scraped away. She thought of the first time she'd seen one of the portals when she'd originally come to the valley. The people that had settled the area had been known for their alcoholic spirits, infusing them with the herbs and roots of the alpine districts, caraway and sweet flag, gentian and germander, coriander and centaury. Each mountain and valley was unique and proclaimed their tonics and elixirs to be the best in all the world, although, often to each, their crest or canyon happened to be the actual entirety of the world.

As the final war had raged on, the area was requisitioned by the enemy, the war machine demanding both liquor for its troops and raw alcohol for fuel and medicine. The destroyed people hid their most precious bottles and barrels in their underground cellars, covering them with dirt and moss and rocks and hoping the invaders would never find them. When they fled as refugees—the war of attrition having become so ruinous—many never returned and the cellars and caverns stayed hidden, an underground world of a lost art. After the war, the middle of the nation was cordoned off and most of the caches were forgotten forever.

In the twilight, Jorie spotted the flashlight on the ground, a few feet from the hatch. She wondered for a moment if it was a looter come to raid the buried vaults, but quickly disregarded the thought. The approach to the entrance had been too precise, too sure in the great expanse. Out of all of the millions of acres devoted to the protected earth, the person had known precisely where to go. It was a family member, come to find some bit of their heritage, she thought. She stooped and picked up the slim device, removing the batteries so that it would stop emitting any kind of signal.

Placing the flashlight on a rock on the slope, she turned away, facing towards the woods, knowing there were eyes on her. “You have one day,” she said, spinning to let all the world hear her. “One day to take whatever you want.” She held up the batteries. “You have to work by the sun. Do not turn anything else on.”

There was no response from the walls of birch and juniper. She slipped the batteries into her pocket and headed home, the setting sun raking across her face. She looked at the screen, the dot gone, yet she wasn’t happy. She felt no joy or relief at stopping these people who’d only come to dig up their own past, an ancestry torn from them by long-ago battles. The looters she felt nothing for, but these people were different. Turning back onto the road, the sky cracked open and waves of rain fell upon the narrow path.

As she crested the hill of her home, the storm had stopped

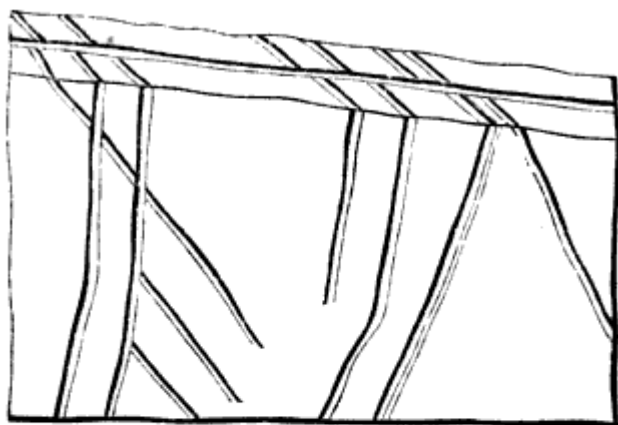
and dusk had set in. When she had first started at the post, she had had such beautiful talks with Arnold after the sun set, the majesty of the weatherworn crests and virile canopy like an elevated backdrop for their musings, but she knew now that he would be asleep, the great pull of age—and perhaps further off, death—overcoming him in the late hours of the afternoon.

He would die soon, she knew it. She believed he knew it. Arnold held special communion with the twist of the brooks and the flutter of the aspen leaves, but it could only last so long. The government would find a new replacement. Those were always the hardest moments for Jorie. The change of what seems fitting, even if it no longer works. Family members moving out, the last day of an old job, finishing a story. Sometimes the stasis seemed so perfect to her that Jorie would affect a disruption at the end so as to prolong the beautiful moments for herself, otherwise she knew she would just run away. She had run away once before from the old world and vowed not to do it for her new one.

The house was nearly dark as she crossed the oaken threshold. The small cabin committed to memory, she made her way to the closet and pulled the box of glow putty from the top shelf. Usually, she went to sleep with the sun, staying up for a few minutes to watch the stars as they emerged, wondering where everybody was, but tonight she felt like staying up and feeling the magic that Arnold said was always in the forest. There'd only be seven more months to enjoy it.

She pulled a bar from the box and tore back the brown paper wrapping. Working the soft dough with her hands, she could picture her mother in the kitchen, covered in flour, turning out buttermilk pies and sourdough pretzels. Jorie had never even bothered to write down the recipes, thinking that life would never change, that those foods and dinners would always be there, the soft glove of communal family life always fitting. It was hard to see it all gone.

In the darkness of the hand-built cabin, the putty began to glow, its luminescence a soft pinkish-white. Jorie divided the ball into several globes, placing one near the front door, one on the mantel, another on the table, and a final orb on the kitchen



## THE SANCTUARY



windowsill, the small dots growing in brightness as the chemicals coalesced. In the warm light, she opened a bottom drawer and pulled out one of the beautiful bottles of mountain spirits she'd found by accident.

It had been an incredibly hot summer day, a few weeks after she'd started. A trail needed clearing, ostensibly for a future reopening of the land that never came, and as she rolled a sliver of spruce away from the desired route, she tripped on the large metal hinges. With a bit of work, she got the aperture opened and slipped inside, lighting a candle as she moved from the arc of light that the hatch let in from above.

The walls had been so smooth, she remembered, as if they'd been there for centuries, bodies moving back and forth, shoulders rubbing away the carved rock. The people had believed that the storage in the earth did something, a sanctum aiding some mystical transference that elevated the liquor above a simple distillation and infusion.

There was a chill in the cave, a coolness that fought bravely with the heat above. In the far back, Jorie found a collapsed wall, a ruse set up to trick the invaders, but the bricks had fallen after an explosion. The light from her candle caught the glass and the vivid green liquid inside, a small hand-applied label showing the delicate purple and white flowers of cliff aster. She'd taken two bottles, but left dozens of others behind, saving the sweet and bitter spirit for the earth.

In the cabin, Jorie poured a small glass for herself as a slight patter of rain again began to fall on the metal roof. She flipped through the photographs, searching for the one of the lawnmower, but couldn't find it. She was frustrated, but then realized Denny had it much worse. Sipping the thick liquid, she stood up and went out onto the porch, staring across the valley to Arnold's house, swathed in darkness. A spotted owl whipped by the cottonwood posts, startling Jorie. She dropped the glass, the crackle echoing across the chasm of the valley.

She bent to pick up the pieces as a whistle came from the darkness. [There are wars and rumors of wars]

She knew instantly it was not Arnold, the sounds lacking

the melody of his communication. She paused, thought for a moment. [True as always it may be, but we do not all take up the sword]

[The wayward don't, but they are they are the minority]

[We all strive for the common ground]

There was no response. She waited an hour, her heart racing, her mind tumbling over at what might emerge from the forest, but returned inside when the rain became heavier. If one of the descendents she let stay the night in the reserve came after her, she would be on her own. Locking the doors, she closed her eyes, straining to hear anything unusual in the night. An hour passed before she fell asleep.

The next day tumbled by slowly. There was a beaver dam she'd been watching near the river. She thought about writing the commission to see what she should do. The beaver was natural, but the fish needed to move, as well. She hoped the problem would resolve itself without her intervention. There was a bit of clearing that needed to be done along with some nest observations of yellow-cheeked warblers and sage-grouses.

Early in the afternoon, she drove back up to the house. Looking for Arnold through the binoculars, she could see his car, but couldn't find him amidst the patios and porches. She whistled [Everything alright, friend?] The final question mark sound always slipped out of her lips incorrectly, but even still, it got the point across.

There was no answer. She feared the worst. Grabbing her bag, she took the truck down the hill and back up the mount of Arnold's house. There was a wooden sign he'd carved with the name he'd given the site, *Ablution*. Jorie always wondered what it was that the old man had done earlier in his life, what he was serving penance for, but he never spoke of it.

She'd named her own house after her last name, Anker. Denny had always called whatever broken-down apartment she lived in *The Ankerage*. Jorie had never given her sister enough credit for how clever the name had been, but had found it fitting to use for her temporary home on the ridge. She wondered if Denny had bestowed that name on the station she was at now.

Cresting the site, she parked the car. The crunching of the gravel was the loudest thing in the world as she walked slowly towards the door. "Arnold?" she called. There was no answer. Stepping inside, she looked into the kitchen and found it empty. Moving across to the living area, she swung her head and barely noticed the man propped in the heavy oak chair. Her hand shook uncontrollably as she moved closer, stuck her fingers out to feel his warmth.

"I'm alive," the old man said, turning his head a few degrees towards her. Jorie let out a gust of air, the blood rushing to her head. "I've had a heart attack. It's passed." It was strange to hear his actual voice.

"Let's go. I'm taking you to the border."

"No, let me die here. Beyond the border is cold and glass and wires. Let the trees be the columns of my mausoleum, the blue sky the dome. All the magic in the world is here."

"Don't you have family?" she asked, trying to put her shoulder under his arm to lift him up. The old man resisted.

"The yellow rails and the piping plovers, those are my brothers."

Jorie walked back to the front door. She started the truck, driving it around as close as possible to the side door, thinking if only she could get him to walk the few feet, then she'd be able to get him help.

Walking back into the house, she could feel the air had gone out. Stillness had crept in, weaving its way through the trinkets of the old man's shelves, the stick figures and the abandoned hornet's nests, the polished river rocks and the myriad skulls. Everything held power except the body of the man in the chair.

"Damnit," Jorie yelled, louder than anything she'd yelled since she had started at the reserve. She screamed it again and again, letting her throat grow raw. Her face grew red and her lungs emptied.

Walking out onto the porch, she sat in a chair and watched the setting sun. Change, she hated change. In the distance, she saw a fluttering orange globe moving at the bottom of a far hill,

following the course of the thin run of river. She'd forgotten all about the intruders. But the klaxons were silent. They hadn't turned any electronics on. The training had been vague on law-abiding intruders. There was an old statute that allowed anybody onto the reserve if they were visiting a graveyard. An ancestor could certainly make the case that they had legitimate religious reasons for being out there.

Twilight settled on the deep valley below. There was no time to drive to the border. Arnold would have to wait, although, Jorie felt that was probably what he wanted most. One more night alone with the red foxes and the opossums. She climbed back into her truck and drove down from Ablution. At the bottom, she turned back onto what remained of the main road. Nearing the bridge that crossed the small creek, she could see through the wax myrtles, making out the orange glow of the fire against the deepening night.

With a screech of pebbles and sand, she parked.

She followed the light, pushing her way past the brambles and the rushes. Mosquitoes and other bugs nipped at her in the warm darkness. This was how Denny must feel, she thought. Surrounded by terrors, blinded by the fear of what lays beyond. There was a clearing up ahead and as she made it to the edge of the undergrowth, she could see the fire growing. Smaller orbs split off from the main body, dancing in the night, moving and twisting.

As the fires grew, Jorie could see more. There wasn't just one descendant and a family, but a whole caravan of travelers. She tried to make out through the haze how many there were, counting several dozen. There were older and younger members of the group, men and women, boys and girls. Their bodies were loaded with bags and satchels. It seemed many were injured in some way, limping on hurt legs or with arms in slings. The fitter ones carried the torches, swaying to some unseen beauty, taking in the holiness of the reserve.

She glanced at her watch, midnight. How long had she been watching them?

A voice came up from her side. "You all think you can tell the water where to flow." Ruth turned, but she wasn't startled, the

light and the movement forcing a calm on her.

“What is this?” she asked.

The woman pointed. A clearing had formed in the center of the group. A body lay in the center, a skeleton. “We came back for him. We thought we could still save him.” The group backed up and formed a circle around the remains. Through the piercing blackness above their heads, Jorie could see small clusters of dark red begin to agglomerate in the sky, square like the clay blocks of the ruins she’d seen in the forests.

The bricks came together to form a wall, circular in the way of the old settlers. No corners to harbor terrors. The phantom wall glowed, celestial and alive. Jorie felt a hum in her bones. She knew, somehow, that there was a deeper connection between her on the hard earth and Denny—the sister relegated to the far universe, the infinite blackness, the eternal cold of the distant vacuum—than she’d thought previous. Kinship and tradition and magic.

She whistled, speaking alone to Arnold. Nobody around paid her any attention. She spoke of all the dreams she had, all that she’d learned of the ways of the world from the old man. She said goodbye and left the woman and the others in the clearing. They could have their night.

She drove the car back to her house, driving the lonely road up towards The Ankerage. The stars burned brilliantly, billions of them spread across the sky waiting for Denny. They both had their jobs to do. A whip-poor-will trilled in the night, somewhere off near Ablution. She thought of something that Arnold had always whistled to her, on the coldest and most desolate nights, [the open air holds all the world’s mysteries, a leaf of grass contains the solution] She fell asleep in the warmth of the stars, reconciled with distance and loss. Seven more months.

# Leave the Window Open

It was a great genocide that accompanied the destruction of South Ellwood. Hell, Ellwood itself no longer even exists. The provincial government renamed it Ellrang. But Ellrang is where Coalpe used to be. They obliterated that place—which was honestly more of a crossroads trading depot—and redrew the village limits, appending the new standardized town suffix behind Ell in the hopes that future historians would think that the original and the new were one and the same, one town heading forward on the way to progress. They will say we gave it up, but I was away on land business and missed the massacre. I'm sure everybody fought for every last inch of Popman Street and Ingledamm Boulevard. You know, it is one thing to obliterate living people, but to erase a place—as I'm sure will happen when Ellrang eventually becomes renamed Kresselrang or Darningparrang or Oppenstancerang—that is done in pure cold blood.

But I often wonder if anybody tries to order Ellwood pie anymore. It was chess style—a thick buttermilk custard flecked with mace and allspice, the crust holding a fine dice of preserved lemon, a bit of fresh thyme, and all the secrets of the world. With a cup of coffee, you'd surely be taken to my grandmother's back porch in the soft autumn afternoons of our youth. I'm lost now, even.

One day, you might find yourself outside Ellrang, though (or whatever the name happens to be at the time). If you are there in the early spring, head west three miles from the terrible iron temple that the purported reactionaries erected at the old water pit. Keep heading west past the small mound of dirt that was once home to many a summer morning until you get to a field of beautiful and varied daffodils. There are small yellow flowers with thin golden trumpets, white ones with rippling orange centers, lacy and large-petaled saffron specimens with ivory

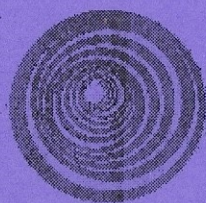
centers that are ringed with dappled edges of purple. The field is quite large—you'll hopefully get lost for some time—as the bulbs have been subdividing for, oh, forty years now without a greenthumb to gently replant them, but on the far edge, you'll see the pink ones.

Sure, they aren't exactly pink. I will give you that. They're much paler than amaranths and carnations. I'd say that perhaps the pith nearest the flesh of a beautiful fresh grapefruit rind is the closest approximation. Those will be at the absolute edge of the garden because my father planted them as close to the back door of our house as he could. They were always my mother's favorite.









**BETA DECAY HOUSE**