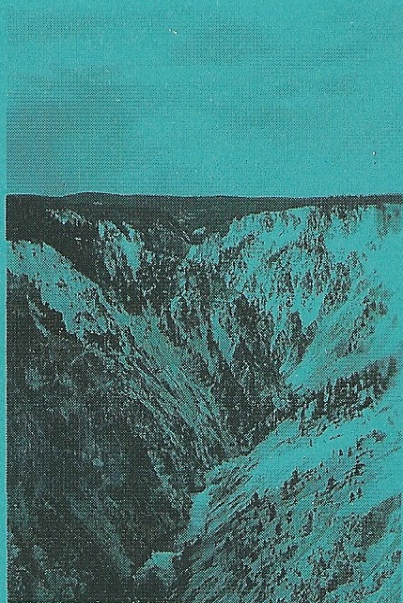


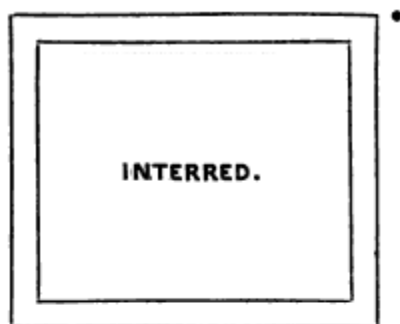
BETA DECAY



NUMBER NINE

BETA DECAY
#9

by ANDREW JACKSON KING



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Your Skull as an Eastern Boxwood

For Lucy & Morris

Taylor cursed under her breath as the dry limbs of the ancient boxwood bit into her arm. A bright line of blood pooled on the skin and, just barely through it, she could see the chunk of flesh torn open. She cursed louder, venting her frustration into the canopy of red maples above her.

Ray shut off the lawnmower and came from around the corner of the house and saw her holding her arm. “Come on, let’s get that bandaged up. The inspector will be here soon.”

Sitting on the edge of the bathtub, Taylor squeezed the blood from the wound as her husband dabbed it with a drunk cotton ball. He rubbed ointment into it before putting a pad on top and sealing it all off in a bandage.

“This was stupid,” she said, holding her arm. She could feel the heat welling up inside of her head. “Taking this house. It was stupid. We had a house. We had a beautiful house a few towns over. We’ve only been here two days and look at this,” she said, spinning the broken knob of the sink and shaking her head. “But I had to have my childhood house.”

“It’s good that your dad knew you took it. It just doesn’t help that it’s so old and he wasn’t able to do much in the past few years. But we’ll make it work. It’s nice underneath all of this mess.”

Working back out in the midday sun, Ray swept the maroon petals from the giant crepe myrtle that had been rattled by the winds that blew down off of the mountain. He watched as a thin curl of smoke rose from the top of the peak and twisted into the clouds and tried to divine if the ground would unsettle itself before finally deciding it wouldn’t. A car horn broke his concentration and he turned to see the blue truck of the structural

engineer. “Honey, she’s here,” he called.

The couple followed the woman around for an hour as she walked through the basement, climbed into the attic, poking and prodding and probing various cracks and crevices. Protractors and plumb bobs and various lasers were brought from a case and the measurements they produced were recorded in a brown notebook. Eventually, she walked back from the truck with a thick stack of papers on a clipboard.

“Well?” Taylor asked.

“There’s no easy way to tell you this. The house is pulling apart down the center. It’ll take quite a bit to stabilize it.”

Ray felt his wife’s hand slacken and go cold. “Damnit,” she whispered under her breath. “Damn Dad.”

They talked and nodded and thanked the inspector as she left. The stack of papers sat untouched on a small table on the porch, held in place from the breeze by a small rock.

“We could—” Ray started.

Taylor stopped him. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

She held her husband’s hand. In silence, they watched the cars of the neighborhood coming up and down the street under the thick canopy of hickory trees. The branches reached across the roadway, the leaves blowing softly in the wind as the waning sunlight came through in warm patches. Taylor could feel herself calming down, but every thought she had about the costs for repairs made her face flush again. The couple’s pair of dogs came and sat at her feet and she felt herself coming to peace with the condition of the house.

In the fading twilight, a car pulled up to the house across the street. Ray turned his head, sipping on a warm cider. “Look at this guy, Tay.” In the purple dusk, a man had gotten out of the car, thin, almost a wisp of corporeality, his arms seemingly pulled tight to his sides. He was hunched so far over, curved down almost to meet the world, and shuffled slowly. “Time does some terrible things to our bodies.”

Taylor squinted into the night. “He’s not old. That guy graduated with me. He’s our age.”

“What? That can’t be.”

Taylor leaned forward. “That’s definitely Jerome. His parents died about ten years ago. I remember my dad telling me. He inherited the house.” Sitting up straight, she focused into the dusk of the early night to see the far house better. The man moved slowly toward the front door. “He was a weird guy even when we were kids. I remember he was obsessed with worms, would sit down at this big sewer grate near the elementary school and watch them tumble out during rainstorms, the ones that washed down from the roads and sidewalks. I’m pretty sure that water was mixed with sewage or something, though, because he would be there even when it wasn’t raining and there was still water coming out. The worms were probably attracted to the nutrients in it.”

Ray’s face contorted into a look of utter disgust. “Ugh.”

“He would wait at this grate for hours, trying to find the biggest worm. He brought one to school once in his baseball helmet. It was the size of a banana, I swear. The teacher called his mom so she could come get it.” The door across the street opened. No light spilled out from inside. All that Taylor could see beyond the threshold was a dark, incomprehensible void.

“I remember I had to work on a project with him, making model lungs out of clay or something. All he could talk about was this search for, damn, what did he call it? The Worm Superior, I think that was it. An ultra worm. One great worm, monolithic, eternal. I could never tell how big he thought it might be. A dog, a car, a house?”

As the door shut across the street, a light came on for only a brief second, a trapezoid of gold caught between the mysterious inside of the house and the growing night outside. Taylor caught a glimpse of his whispered frame before the door closed and the light went off.

Ray shivered. “That’s unsettling.”

“Je-worm. That’s what kids called him in middle school. That was really mean. I remember trying to talk to him at lunch and stuff, but he just became quieter, more focused on his quest. I can’t even recall him from high school. I don’t even know if he graduated with me. People kind of slip away during those later years, everybody starting to focus on what they want to do in life.

I guess his world was underground.”

“That’s just about enough for me. I think I’m going to slip away to bed. Lock the door when you come in.” Ray bent and kissed his wife’s forehead. “Love you.”

“All right, let me walk the dogs in a minute and I’ll be up, too.”

The night had come on fast after the day of work. Taylor tried not to think about the house, but visions of it decaying and collapsing flashed at the corner of her mind. She even imagined the porch swing she was on breaking loose and falling through the floor, pulling her into a chasm leading down to the world of the worms. She had no idea where the money to fix everything would come from.

A light in the attic across the street flickered on at Jerome’s house and a black form moved across the square panes. Taylor struggled to make out anything concrete, but then the light was off. She remembered Jerome telling her once that he had made his parents let him sleep in the basement so that he’d be within the earth, surrounded on all sides in safety, ensconced in the dark world of the soil. She wondered if he still did and why he would be in the attic at night.

One of the dogs stirred and stretched at her feet, waking up its partner. Taylor took off her glasses, rubbing her face as she stretched. “Alright, let’s go.”

Walking up the street, she felt a soft chill in the air. The trees leaned in over top of her, creaking and whispering. Almost all of the friends and families she’d known on the street had left and been replaced by new people, strangers. Was it worse or better? She didn’t know. She couldn’t find in herself who she’d once been. Ray had just turned thirty-five and said he felt no different than when he was fifteen, but she felt a vast gulf between then and now. Did she care about those old friends? Those old memories? She didn’t dwell on the past like other people she knew. She had barely even thought about her own teenage years until she’d seen Jerome.

She was at a loss for what could have happened to him and where he’d been between middle school and that night. She

wracked her brain, trying to figure out if he'd been at prom, a stray football game, graduation. Nothing came. Where had he gone to? His appearance was so unsettling, aged a dozen lifetimes in only two decades. She still felt so young, so strong, especially after the day working in the sun. Maybe fixing the house would do her good, keep her mind and body fit. Anything to keep from becoming the phantom Jerome was now.

Turning around at the seventh house up the hill, she made her way back down the street. From a distance removed, the childhood home she'd inherited stood before her, simple and clean and majestic. She could see the walls, sloping out as they were, the wide porch with pointed arches, the narrow and curved windows with their gleaming pediments, the fancy vergeboards running up the insides of the paired gables. Most people wouldn't have been able to do it after her father's death, go back in and clean up and remake a home, but it felt liberating to her, a deep cleansing of all the inequity she'd felt, all that she'd missed out on in her twenties. The home was payment for a life that had been chipped away. She'd be even more proud of it once it was fixed.

The dogs pulled her back down the hill and raced each other up the stairs. Taylor slid the lock on the porch gate and took one last look across the street. The attic light flicked on again and then quickly turned off. She couldn't be sure, but in the bright aftervision of light, she thought she'd seen a face looking out, watching the street, watching her.

She bent to rub the dogs' sides and felt secure. Stepping inside as they followed on her heels, she locked the door and made her way upstairs. In the thin moonlight, she could see that Ray hadn't even made the bed, just laid down on the mattress with a blanket on top. What a dummy, she thought to herself. Folding a top sheet, she placed it on the bed and climbed in beneath the thin quilt. The windows were open. She liked being warm under a blanket and feeling the cold on her face.

Had she shut the downstairs windows? No, it didn't matter. There was no crime in the small town, her quiet familial home. It should be safe, she thought. It should be safe.

Wrens and finches announced the morning. Ray woke first, rolling over to stretch his arms, the unsettling of the bed tossing Taylor. Her eyes crept open. "Why do you have to do that? You know it wakes me up."

"Just wanted to see you."

Both had taken two weeks of leave off from work to fix up the place for their move-in and they took to it as soon as they had eaten breakfast. Ray worked in the house bagging piles of clothes for the war vets to come pick up. Taylor and the dogs took to the yard, attacking the low limbs of the pin oaks, the unkempt azaleas, and the knee-high grass. She found herself looking up from her tasks often, glancing across to the other house, checking to see if the car moved or if Jerome would shamble out into the bright day, but he never did.

She began to dig a hole to transplant one of the crepe myrtles that was too close to the house, but paused after throwing the first clump of dirt. Half a dozen worms wriggled out of the clay surface, the earth shaped smooth by the edge of the shovel. She watched them as they pulled backwards out of their tunnels and fell to the ground, making for the dense protection of grass and leaves, racing against the sight of the juncos and starlings. One did seem a bit larger to her, but nothing approaching a size that would interest Jerome. She wondered if anything over the past twenty years had come close to capturing his mind like the Worm Superior had in his teen years.

There was a crunching of leaves behind her and she turned around, startled to see an old man shuffling toward her. "Your leaves are blowing into my yard. All from last fall, they're still there. You need to come get them," he said, still making his way toward her.

Taylor took a step back. Mr. Bronncache had seemed so old to her as a child, and yet now he stood here thirty years later, still shambling through the neighborhood cranky and dour. He'd always thought that he deserved extra leeway in life for having worked on the mission to contact the Living Star, but that was all before Taylor. To her, he was just a bully that had pushed everybody in the neighborhood around, even his own wife up

until her death. He was just a little old man.

In an exaggerated motion, she looked up at the canopy of trees, the weighty boughs crossing lot lines in both directions and mixing with the trees in the common land behind both their lots. His face refused to change. She wearily accepted the old man's petition. "Got it, Mr. Bronncache."

"Ahhh!" The old man swung his hands, frustrated at her indifference, and turned to walk back to his house. When Taylor turned back to the hole, she noticed the dogs lying with their heads in front of their bodies like humble parishioners and knew that they needed a walk.

Leashing them, she went south down the street, the hill of homes giving away to the vista of the valley and the river below and, far beyond, on the other side, the wild rim of the volcano, the thin everpresent smoke coil of a churning earth seeping lazily into the sky. The dogs bounded along the thin stretch of flat ground along the creek's edge, dry after the recent sweltering stretch of heat. The water had been higher once, much higher than the trickle she watched from the bank.

She remembered her father taking her out onto the creek in a canoe that he'd built himself in the garage. He had let her steer with her tiny oar, but she realized it probably hadn't done anything. His huge arms and broad shoulders had cut through the water with all the power the small craft needed, an early life on battlefields converting energy into swift movement. In her mind's eye, she could see how wide the water had been then, shore to shore, pulsing with vigor and soul. The loggers had used it to move timber. Now, she wondered if she'd even be able to get that old canoe across it.

There was a bark and she turned, the dogs pulling their leashes out of her hands. She watched them racing each other back up the sidewalk to the house, past the bungalows that snaked softly up the hill. She followed, leaving the forest and the river behind her. The dogs had already fallen asleep by the time she made it to the porch.

"Ray, did you see my dad's canoe anywhere? Out in the garage or anything?" she called into the house.

The man's voice tumbled out of the attic. "I've been working inside this whole time. If it's there, you would have seen it."

"Okay, butthead."

"What was that?"

"I said 'I love you.'"

There was a rumble from the attic, but Taylor had already opened the back door and was making her way to the garage at the end of the driveway. She threw open the wooden door. Dust and cobwebs covered everything. There were boxes of old magazines, coffee cans and glass jars full of screws, stacks of old paint cans perched precariously on scraps of wood. Old men are all the same, she thought. Most of the right side of the garage was taken up by the panel truck for her father's outdoor company, Pressure-Lite. They'd had a good run during her childhood with making camp stoves, lanterns, tents, and the like, but the market had changed. It was harder to get people outside these days. "It was fun to have done it and we made a little bit of money, too," her father would always say. "Can't complain 'bout that."

In the far corner of the open rafters, just barely lit by a small octagonal window in the gable, the prow of the canoe stuck out, the red cedar her father had worked so long to smooth and varnish glinting in the light. She couldn't get it out that day, but felt better knowing it was there.

Ray made a pizza for dinner. As they sat down at the flimsy kitchen table, there was a knock at the door. Taylor could see Mr. Bronncache through the screen of the storm door. "You know, the pebbles from your driveway are making my tires lose traction when I'm pulling up to my house. Your father never had that properly sealed. I told him that. I told him that it needed to be sealed."

"Going to get right on it," Taylor said, slowly closing the front door. She crossed back to the kitchen. "If I see that guy one more time, I'm going to kick his teeth into the back of his skull. I think my dad just gave up after having to deal with him for so long."

Ray shrugged, holding a pizza crust between his right

thumb and forefinger so that each dog could bite one end. "It'll get better," he said without looking up.

Night came on quickly again after the long day and Taylor slipped out of the house with the dogs for their final walk. She looked up at the attic window across the street whenever it came into view between the black limbs of the trees, but the light remained off, the square of glass an endless void against the darkness of the night. Sidewalks lined both sides of the street and she crossed over to Jerome's side with the dogs. The man's car hadn't moved all day. She hadn't seen any action inside the house at all. Hooking the dog's leashes onto the stub of a branch, she ran across the yard, the dew clinging to her ankles and legs, compelled to find out what it was that Jerome did all day.

Approaching from the side of the house, she could make out a faint orange light coming from the basement window. She tried to look inside, but the glass, obscured by a thick film of condensation, offered no purview into the subterranean chamber. She moved closer and could feel heat coming from the basement, from the earth right in front of her, like an open oven after baking bread. She took a step to move around to the back and find another window before Dusty and Severna began to bark. A domino line of neighborhood dogs picked up the chorus. Taylor ran through the yard back to the dogs, dragging them by their collars across to her own porch and up the stairs and through the front door, praying nobody had seen her.

Squatting beneath the front window in the sitting room, she watched for any changes in the house across the street and any movement inside, any flickering light, but there was nothing. As she turned, just in her peripheral vision, she thought she could make out a face in the attic window. Impossible, she thought, the deeper darkness of the house barring anything from escape, but she couldn't shake the impression, the fleeting curves of a gnarled face and sunken eye sockets. Turning to face the view head-on, the image was gone. Only the small square of nothingness stared back at her.

She locked the door and checked it several times before heading to bed.

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The days passed as the couple worked in the house and fixed the yard. The drudgery seemed neverending. There was always another project, always a spot that needed scrubbing, always a wall that needed patching. She pushed the split down the middle of the home out of her mind, a problem that didn't seem dire when they couldn't feel anything immediately wrong.

Taylor was in the basement cleaning cobwebs when she reached up into the joists and found the bottle. Sliding it out, she nearly dropped it, shocked by what was inside. Turning the vessel over in her hands, she stared at the bird inside, the delicate avian frame trapped forever inside the glass.

She'd only been a child, but she could clearly remember the look on her father's face when he'd found the bottle on the beach. He'd been so entranced by the slender vessel holding the preserved bird, especially once he'd taken it home and removed the small slip of paper inside. The note told of a ship, a whaler far out in the ocean. Solid land had become a distant memory to the crew when two golden plovers had alighted on the masthead. The men of the *Juanita Claire* took it as a fortuitous omen of undiscovered lands and began to leave out bits of bread and dry pork for the pair to entice them to stay on as mascots. Days passed, the men studying the charts, sure they were too far from known land for the birds to have made the journey. It was a miracle. Yet, slowly, the pair began to weaken. The bird that would later take up in the bottle had died and a pall had fallen over the crew. The second bird took off a few hours later, bound for its mysterious home and never seen again. The letter writer used some lost nautical art to get the bird inside and preserve it for centuries of ocean travel and slipped the story and a note of well-wishing and warning inside for whoever found it.

Taylor remembered the fights her mother and father had had about the bird and bottle. Her father had taken to putting it on the mantle, forcing it into a role as the centerpiece of the house, a bit of magical awe and sombre reflection in a quickly-changing world. Her mother had hated it, a rotten bird, centuries old. She even looked up the ship, storming into the kitchen one night with

a tattered tome she had found at the library to prove her point. The craft had disappeared, all hands presumed lost except for a cabin boy picked up by another whaler, floating on a bit of the masthead. He had given a wild story about a vicious attack by celestial creatures, but disappeared into the secretive world of sailors and ports, never heard from again. "It's an augury of death," she'd yelled at him.

Taylor's mother hadn't stayed around much longer after that. She turned the bottle over in her hands, the soft features of the bird preserved forever, the glass beads used to replace the eyes staring off to an unknown horizon, a lost land. She wondered if the crew ever found where the pair had come from in that vast expanse before they had perished. The bottle grew heavy in her hands. She placed it back up in the rafters, a secret for herself, her father's private vision of a mystical world.

Tired of the house, Taylor again took to the back yard, dragging a huge tarp across the yard as she raked up the years of leaves that had accumulated behind the house. Much of it had turned to sludge and she thought about just covering it with more dirt and a new layer of grass seed, but that would still leave her with having to do at least some of Mr. Bronncache's yard. She'd realized it would be easier to placate him and wait until his inevitably soon demise rather than fight him on every step.

So she raked both yards, flinging the leaves onto the tarp and periodically dragging it back into the common forest behind the houses, a wooded slope that led half a mile down to the river. Technically, she wasn't supposed to do this per the town rules, but the idea of it all going to a landfill to be sealed up forever was horrible to her. She'd made five trips already and on the sixth, as she tugged backwards with her weight to get the tarp over a small embankment, the ground rumbled.

A minute passed before a sharp klaxon began to peal from the center of town, bouncing over the small hills of the neighborhood and reverberating off of the far peak. She looked up and saw a thin stream of grey and purple smoke rising from the cone of the mount and a black and orange fire growing on the slope. Ray appeared at the back door. She knew he would go to

help in any way that he could. He couldn't fight the urge, having been a volunteer firefighter for the past few years.

"Be careful, I swear," she said as he hugged her. "This isn't like a house fire." He nodded and was off, the tires sending loose gravel onto the adjacent yard.

The smell of burning leaves came through the neighborhood before the smoke began to follow it. Hot embers drifted through the air. She remembered her father's routine whenever the smoke started from the far rim. He'd go through it every time, even if the threat was remote. "It's not the big one you have to worry about, that'll get the house no matter what," he'd always say, "but it's the small fires that can sneak up on you."

So she worked through the list, first closing the windows on the house. She paused a minute on the upper level as she watched the wisps of smoke rising into the sky, imagining the fire engulfing the house, wondering if it would be a boon or an omen of something far worse. She moved the family albums and folders of important documents into the old bank safe in the basement. In the office, she collected Ray's boxes of photographs, his side work on cataloguing the arcane monuments of the Rado too important to lose in the off chance that the house did go up.

The dogs followed her into the yard as she turned on the hose and began to wet down the siding, roof, and surrounding trees, hoping they could resist a fire pushing across the land. The klaxon continued on. The ash grew thicker. The smoldering in the air burnt her nose, the harsh fumes of scorched oak making it difficult to breathe. This seemed worse than it had been as a kid, she thought. With the dogs, she walked to the far edge of the property to the hillside that led down to the creek, trying to see how far the fire had spread on the other side.

She hoped that the firefighters had turned Ray away from even coming with them, but the town was on hard times and would probably have taken any volunteer they could get. There were specialists to fight the wildfires, but regular citizens were used to contain some of the spread. Through the trees in the common land behind her own yard, she could see the flashing lights winding up one of the roads across the gap. Sighing, she

took a step farther and felt the ground give out beneath her, a rotten sheet of plywood that covered a void in the ground exploding into slivers of laminate and cheap glue.

Falling backwards, she tried to grab onto anything, but everything she found slipped through her fingers and a piercing terror cut into her chest as she plunged into the earth. Landing on her left wrist, she could feel the bones in the hand shatter as her face crashed into a rock and the world went black.

Soft dirt fell onto her face from the hard surface above. Her eyes opened. Above her, ground fell in from the sides of the hole as a soft rumble made its way through the earth. Wiping her eyes, she adjusted to the darkness of the subterranean chamber. The square of sky that opened in the earth was fuzzy and grey, streaks of red and orange sliding quickly across her vision.

She could feel that both dogs lay beside her on each side, quiet, unhurt by the fall. Rolling onto her elbows, the sharp pain of the broken bones shot up through Taylor's left arm. She winced and swallowed the discomfort. She got to her knees and studied the walls of the darkened chamber. The black earth was smooth, but gently undulated every few feet. Standing, she realized how cold it was underground in contrast to what looked like the approaching fire above.

The dogs had risen with her and stared off away from her. Taylor realized that she wasn't in a hole or a room, but had fallen into part of a tunnel, each dog guarding the void beyond. With her right hand, she tried to grab onto the wall to pull herself up, but her hand only slipped off the worn and smoothed surface. Digging in with her fingertips gave a bit of a handhold that simply broke off when she attempted to put her weight on it.

Hot ash began to fall from above and she moved sideways to take cover within the tunnel. A soft draft pushed at her hair and she realized that moving through the passage was her only option. With the dogs at her side, she groped forward in the direction of the moving air, hoping it would lead to the surface. As the light from the opening behind her began to dim, the burrow became impossibly dark. She tried to orient herself and felt that she was moving toward the street, wondering if the tunnel was created for

some public utility before being abandoned.

Both dogs began to growl, holding the low howls deep in their throats. Taylor stopped, letting her other senses besides sight take over. She felt a soft gust of heat, the same throbbing exhalation she'd felt at Jerome's basement. It passed and she could hear, far off, a soft rumble. There was a smell she couldn't place, the odor of pure earth, a mixture of broken roots and dead fish and scrubbed beets.

A memory passed across the front of her mind, triggered by the scent. She remembered seeing Jerome from before college. It had only been in passing as she'd walked her old dog by his house. It was early morning, the sun just slanting over the rim of the mount. Jerome seemed dazed by the oncoming daylight and was filthy, covered head to toe in earth. He smelt then like the tunnel now. She asked how he was doing, but he seemed not to notice her question, instead rambling on about what outside influences had lead to the massive tusks of bull elephants or the giant antlers on mating elk and how this applied to the Worm Superior. Sexual competition was the usual driver, he told her in his soft voice, but worms were hermaphrodites, which also ruled out battles for dominance. This left only the defense of a finite resource. But worms had seemingly everything they needed, he had said. Food, water, shelter. There was something else, something that scientists weren't seeing. Something hidden in the world below that led to worms growing larger and larger in an attempt to battle for and secure it from the others.

She could hear his voice in her head, the perfect memory flooding into her as the smell grew stronger. "If a worm were to test the surface of the earth, what are the chances it would find something worthwhile? Look around you," he said, swinging his wiry arms. "Most everything is either air, plants, concrete, or asphalt. But we do have valuable things, amazingly important and devastating and treasured things. It would be astoundingly difficult to randomly encounter a nuclear bomb, but it has guided the trajectory of humans since its inception. So, if you wanted to know what was influential to human life, you would consult a human, it's the only way to find and understand that rare, but

powerful thing that illuminates all life. But underground, that's the domain of the worms. Only they can tell you what is so special. And there is something special down there, I know it."

He trailed off. She hadn't known what to say. All of it had been predicated on his pitiable search for the Worm Superior. He shuffled off and she forgot him.

The odor faded and the memory passed. She pressed on into the tunnel. Her right hand groped forward against the wall and found a metal ring sunk into the earth. She felt a loop of rope wound around it and followed the line into the passageway. Every few feet, another metal ring appeared. She could feel the tunnel veering and bending back around on itself, refusing to straighten its course. After several rings, she felt herself walk into a fine, almost imperceptible lace of dust and mist, the particles adhering to her face and neck.

She felt a rush of blood rise up behind her eyes and the world froze. The darkness seemed to wrap around her and her mind turned in upon itself. Every molecule of her body communicated to her brain and she could feel the contours of each atom that made up her being. Time stretched and turned into a collection of slides, each pane a memory extending forward and backward infinitely. She saw her mother laughing, shooing her out of the kitchen on a Sunday afternoon. Another moment came. Her father bent over the fender of a truck, working on the engine. She saw her first kiss. She saw an afternoon spent wading down a cold river. She saw the moment she spotted Raymond for the first time on campus. She saw herself at all different ages, different nodes of time and emotion, all long since past. She saw herself now, disembodied, the tunnel ahead and behind her. There were different possible paths for each moment, a rapidly branching tree. She followed one vein as she grew older, saw the world changing around her, saw her body changing around her now perfect mind. She intimated her death just past this, but skipped ahead until the earth had swallowed her. She felt her body dissolving, each component being broken down and taken up into the roots of a new land, new nebulae exploding into the void. She saw others approaching the mist, the terrible subterrene net, unprepared as

she was and losing everything. It affected them all differently. She moved in multiple dimensions, trying to intimate what the thing was, where it originated, whether there were more, but whenever she approached its origin, the moment slipped away, lost in millions of other temporal and geographical intersections. It was easy to be consumed by the possibilities, but it was a false siren, a puzzle to be solved at a great price. She persevered where others had faltered and been annihilated. She blinked in the darkness and the sensation was gone. The journey had been only a moment. She realized her hand still held the rope. She had never let go of her tether to the world. Deep down, somehow she knew that this had saved her where others had been lost.

There was a rumble in the tunnel ahead of her that grew louder. She could feel the ground surrounding her trembling. Both dogs took their stances ahead of her and began barking. The heat and the powerful smell of dead earth rose all around her. There was a rush of colder air sucking from in front of her and she could intuit that it was an intersection of some kind. A moment passed, her breath frozen in her chest as she waited, knowing that she could be obliterated at any moment by the fruit of Jerome's search.

Then there was nothing. The subterranean void restored itself. She could hear the town's klaxon again and realized there must be an opening ahead. Following the sound, her arm hit upon a wooden door set into the passage. She searched with her good hand and found the knob, pushing forward with the dogs into a humid chamber.

The smell from before overwhelmed her. Her eyes teared up as she fought back a rising nausea in her stomach. There was a bit of light far to her right, an orange glow coming through a window covered in condensation. She steadied herself with her good hand. A sliver of soft light illuminated the corner beyond her, the treads of the stairs just visible in the dim room. She leaned against the wall, knowing that if she followed it, she would arrive at salvation.

Sweat built up on her brow. The heat of the room surrounded her, pressing against her mouth and filling her lungs. She wiped her eyes and kept the sleeve of her broken hand up to

her face. The dogs at her feet began to bark, louder than she'd ever heard them. She could barely see as she made her way along the wall.

The luminescence from the window grew brighter. Squinting through the stifling heat and the sweat dripping across her eyes, she could see tables and cages along the far wall. The sound of chains rattling filled the room. The dogs continued to bark as dull thuds and the slap of heavy flesh mixed with the metallic din. She heard Jerome's soft voice through the chaos and found his diminished shape near the door she had just passed through.

She yelled his name, but he didn't move. The rattling of the chains and the bucking of the tables and cages grew louder, reverberating through the concrete chamber. There was a chorus of elemental grunting and wailing that came from things other than the man. "Jerome, you have to get out!" She swallowed the air around her and fought back the sickness that was pushing up from inside of her.

The sound of the klaxon came down through the house above. The orange outside of the window flickered and jumped and she knew the fire had come for their street. A lumbering mass made its way across the floor toward her and, somehow, she sensed another body even greater beyond. The dogs jumped forward, protecting Taylor and clearing a space for her. She gave up on her childhood friend. Whatever he had found, whatever he hoped to accomplish by communing with the underground world, that knowledge would end with him.

Taylor broke for the stairs, the dogs at her feet. She took the worn oak planks three at a time and moved instinctively through the smoke-filled house. She burst through the front door onto the lawn. A fire engine came down the street, the sirens blaring, bringing her back from the chaos of the subterranean world. Flames covered houses seemingly at random. Hers stood protected. For all of its faults, it stood like a sentinel, unaffected by the growing firestorm.

Dazed, still awash in what she'd seen and heard and smelled, she crossed the street to retrieve her keys. An urge to see

the great final explosion come and consume the neighborhood rose up within her. There was a wild unknown underground, but she knew that it must exist everywhere, across the world. Obliterating this one place would do nothing.

The dogs grew quiet, but their hackles were still raised. They knew something of the secret, sensing more in that awful tunnel than she could ever hope to grasp. The pair followed her into the car and she drove, watching the street in flames, hoping to find Ray at the station, hoping to return to the world she'd known before coming so close to the hidden obsession that had destroyed her long-ago friend.

Aliquot Parts

The man stepped off the train and set his sights directly onto the ornate town hall in the center of the small town of Pigeon Bend. His suitcase felt awkward and heavy and he hated having to come to these small hamlets and crush these poor people, but his superiors told him it was progress. He wondered what the cost was of that progress, but nobody ever gave him an answer.

He looked at the buildings as he walked, the weathered facades a window into the lives and memories of the town, the people that lived there. Sometimes he winced at the thought of clearing out these old main streets, but there was no choice—at least, no choice for him to go back without having completed the job.

He could taste the clay dust of the dry soil as he climbed the marble steps of the great Eastern Revival building in front of the overgrown town green. The clock on the building's marble pediment chimed noon. He checked his watch, setting it to the local time. The crushed glass door was light to the touch as he swung it open.

"How can I help you?" a secretary asked him. He loved the quaintness of these old places, secluded away from the continually growing agglomeration of the megalopolis. Much of the nation's interior had rejected efficiency in the name of unfettered individuality and the man always felt just a bit freer on these trips.

"The mayor please. My name is Reuben Kent."

"Do you have an appointment with Mayor Drydon?" the secretary asked. The man could tell that it wasn't an important question, that there was no real business for the town manager of this sleepy dusthole to attend to, but it kept up the appearance of importance.

"No, but I'm sure she's been expecting me. I'm with the

Commission.”

“Yes. Thank you.” The secretary picked up the phone and spoke softly into it before ushering the man down the hall to the mayor’s office. The walls were lined with paintings of important figures from the town’s past, the explorers and politicians, the freedom fighters and philanthropists. A thin film of dust and dirt covered the layers of oil built up on each canvas and, as they reached the doorway at the end of the hall, Reuben took in the skill of the etcher who had put the mayor’s name into the glass at the top of the paneled oak door.

An hour passed before he left. As the secretary approached the door to usher him out, the mayor sat in her chair, tears welling up in her eyes, staring unsurely out the window onto the buildings of the main street, the historic stock of character that had come to define the town. The man looked down as he passed the secretary, his eyes on the quilted chevron pattern of the gold and maroon rugs lining the floor. His briefcase was now an ounce of inked signatures heavier.

Dusk was setting in as he left. He crossed the street to a diner, the Tip-on Inn emblazoned in giant red neon script above the plate glass windows. The man stepped inside, saw the abundance of white in the restaurant, the color used extensively on the tables, the walls, the waitresses’ outfits, all accented with thin green stripes. Beautiful design, he thought.

He sat at the counter next to a jadeite cake stand holding a slim chocolate cream pie inside of it. It was half gone already and the remainder beckoned to him.

“I’ll have a hamburger, fries, black coffee, and a slice of this pie,” he told the waitress that came up to him from behind the counter.

The residents of the town watched him as he sat there. They slowly started up conversations, asking where he was from, what he was doing.

“Surely, you’ve seen the surveyors stopping through, right?” he asked.

“We’ve had visitors,” a woman said. “They said they were biologists, studying the flowers,” one of the men answered.

Reuben grimaced. They weren't supposed to lie to the people. This made his job much more difficult. He could file a report, but that never amounted to anything. He wanted to do right by these townsfolk.

Opening his briefcase and pulling out the various maps, he carefully, clearly, told the people what was happening. The town would have to be cleared out, at least on most of the main streets. The transfer pipes had to be run straight through the town, there was no way around it, the physics of it all had been calculated over and over, the simulations run repeatedly, and there was no way to move the generated gravity without clearcutting the buildings.

"A goddamn gecko he is!" an older woman in the back yelled.

The townspeople gasped and slammed their fists on the tables and counters and out came the complaints. "These are historic buildings!" and "You can't do this!" and "This town has been here longer than we've been a nation!" hung heavy in the air. The voices rose up against him. He saw a cook angrily making a phonecall from the kitchen. These were the moments he dreaded, the moments that kept him up at night and that forced him to keep a small pistol attached to his ankle.

He eventually left, afraid that as the night wore on he might have to actually use the weapon. Walking the short distance to the hotel he had booked, he stopped at a corner hardware store on the way there. He felt the ragged marble on the fluted edges of stone surrounding the entrance. Great wood beams hung across the hollow of the entryway, two windows flanking the door and showing off all kinds of tools and nails and fasteners that were all delivered quickly and discreetly back in the city, but were available for slow perusal and inspection in the dusty town. He exhaled softly, quietly. He looked up and down the empty street.

This was the first building that needed to be removed. He withdrew a block of purple chalk from his briefcase and drew an 'X' on the bottom of the door, the edges tapering out in his loose handwriting that was barely used at all anymore. He hated destroying these old buildings, but he couldn't fathom going back

with the job unfinished. By getting the first one out of the way, he thought it would help him in the days to come.

In his hotel room, he set down his things and rubbed his temples. Trying to relax on the bed, he removed his radio from its case. He spun the dial up and down through a sea of static, flipping the switch from AM to FM and back again, but found only a continuous ocean of white noise. Shutting off the small wooden box, he took off his glasses and fell into a deep sleep.

As the morning sun skittered through the venetian blinds of the ground-level room, he awoke and rubbed his eyes. He coughed—a lingering effect of city life that he felt was quickly getting better out in the country—and cracked his knuckles. Something felt off. Gaining his eyesight from the depths of sleep, he examined his hand and found that the tip past the last joint on his right ring finger was gone. An inch of finger missing. Incredulous, he examined the stub. The skin was completely smooth past the bottom two-thirds, almost as if the top had never been there at all.

He tried desperately to draw a clear memory of the tip of the finger, something that would concretely put it as having been there the night before and now no longer extant, but grew frustrated as no thought could come forth from his mind. Maybe it had never been there. He picked up the phone, thought of calling his sisters or friends, but found no way to adequately phrase the question—*I know this is going to sound crazy, but do I have a tip on my right ring finger?* They would think he was losing his mind.

And so he accepted it. If it had happened, it was a small price to pay to appease the commission. If he left, if he ran from the town, it would be the end of him. Still, in the back of his mind, he couldn't shake the sensation of a full hand and then it came to him, the clear memory of all his fingers hitting the keys of his typewriter when he was a child, even the ring finger of his right hand.

That was it. Over and over he'd typed, never slowing, never needing to correct for missing 9s, or Os, or Ls. And he never missed a period. He was sure of that. He had to have had that fingertip. It must have been there always.

But still, sitting at the edge of the bed, he wondered how it could have disappeared and what could he even do about it? It made no sense. If he couldn't figure out how it went missing, he certainly couldn't figure out how to get it back. He left to clear his head and ate a quick breakfast in the small seating area of the motel—prepackaged and stale, not what he had expected from the small town—and realized that he barely noticed any deficiency from the shortened finger. Not something I can't get used to, he thought. A small punishment for a job well done.

A breeze had taken up in the town as he stepped out onto the marble sidewalks and it felt good as it worked its way underneath the collar of his shirt, yet he could still taste the mineral dust of the town's red clay as it hung in the air. A young man swept the maroon dirt from the stoop of a storefront across the street and watched him as he made his way toward the town hall. Reuben gave him a nod and smile, but the man only looked on through him, to a future that didn't involve razing the town fabric, to a prospective world that didn't involve the bustle of the big cities slowly subsuming the provincial lands. Reuben hated his job.

Shutting off his mind and emotions, he entered the government building, cycling through various inspection, zoning, and real estate departments, clearing each step of the deconstruction needed for the plan. A somber mood pervaded the building. Employees cried openly, struggling to get through the day despite what he told them about relocations and reimbursement plans. He heard cries of "gecko" behind his back as he left each wood-paneled department, the epithet for civil servants of the Great Engineering Commission coming to their lips easily.

Taking a break, he stepped out through the stairway into a secluded garden area. The air was thick, not just from the heat, but from the weight of destroying a town, a people, a way of life. From the courtyard, he could just make out a partial view of the overgrown town green he'd noticed the day before. There seemed to be people out there rooting around and working in the soil. From the maps he'd perused that morning, he'd seen that the plots

were zoned for agricultural use, but had since become a dense tangle of weeds. He wondered if there was an upcoming town celebration and if the residents were taking to the work to make the square look its best.

A Parks Department employee stepped out for a quick smoke. Something had been eating at Reuben after the whole morning spent looking at maps of the downtown. Now watching all the activity, he had to know. The employee wouldn't make eye contact, but Reuben pushed forward.

"Those farming plots in the middle of town, they're just for a sense of community?" he asked.

The employee stared at him, seemingly not understanding the question, before taking a long drag on the cigarette.

He approached it from a different way. "All these plots. I can't make sense of it. The town green was all one parcel once, way back at the founding. Then it was divided up, in half and then in half again, over and over, continually being subdivided. All deeded and traded without money passing hands. I found one created a few years ago that was two feet by two feet. I don't even know what that could be used for. But there are all these bigger ones on the outskirts of town, acres, all owned by the town board, that are left fallow. Why don't people use those bigger ones for growing anything? I mean, I guess it doesn't matter as much now, but was it just tradition to use the green?"

The woman snubbed out her cigarette on the low stone wall. "Those ones outside were the communal plots, the lesser plots. The ones in the town square are the superior tracts, everybody in town gets a segment. Why wouldn't they? Don't you know anything?" The employee walked off, unable to be bothered anymore.

The rest of the employees weren't much better as he made his way through the labyrinthine approval process. They dragged their feet, imposed phantom charges, locked the doors for long breaks, sent him to departments he'd already been to only to be told to go back to where he'd just been. Sitting on a bench in one of the hallways of the municipal building, he studied the amateur map of the town painted directly onto the wall. As his eyes

relaxed, he began to see a pattern amongst the angles and intersections of the roadways and the cultivated land, and yet, as he opened his eyes and tried to study their relationship, the connection was gone. There had been a shape there, some arcane symbol, but its special meaning was lost to the exhaustion of the waking hours.

Later in the day, frustrated with the bureaucratic nightmare of the offices, he again took to the streets, removing the block of purple chalk from his bag, and began marking more buildings for removal. It felt strange in his hand without the extra bit of finger that had gone missing, but since the stores had closed for the day as they usually did in the early afternoon in these small towns, he could take his time and mark them relatively easily, without obstruction from the citizens. A child walked past him, her hand outstretched, a ring on her finger clicking across the edges of the red clay bricks. Her palm slapped him in the leg. He turned, but she was already gone.

He stepped back from the buildings. All had been constructed at the same time, but each carried updates from different periods, little details that gave away the voice of their previous owners. It pained him, but the gravity transfer, it was such a large project. Who would remember this small town in a thousand years? Ten thousand? These were the scales they were working on.

In all, he had marked twenty-eight buildings, taking care to examine each one against the historical map and the planned thoroughfare. As he made his way back to the hotel, he could see shadows in the alleys, figures watching him as moved. A rock hit him in the back of the head. He whistled in an attempt to seem calm, but realized this might trivialize the fact that he was destroying the built tradition of an entire community, so he stopped. He kept his eyes on the ground and focused on the whorls of red dust that swirled majestically in the late afternoon wind of the interior.

Sitting on the edge of the hotel bed, he thought about his childhood, the books of architecture that lined his father's shelves. Row after row of design and fabrication. Monuments to human

creativity, absorbing the spirit of each era and encoding it in wood and plaster and glass. Destroying the buildings would destroy him. But the project is necessary for the coasts, he told himself. It was their last chance for a better future. He finally rationalized that someone else would do it if he couldn't.

The bottle of gin sat next to him on the bedside table. With the radio off, he could hear an almost forgotten violin sonata from his childhood in his head. His mother had always played that record when she needed to think. Hours, sometimes. He cracked his knuckles. He was alone. The phone sat on the table and he could think of nobody that would want to take his call. He stood up from the bed, buttoned his coat, and stepped out into the street. It was dark.

Fingers grazing the walls of the buildings that would soon be removed, Reuben absorbed the histories, the structures, the countless crossings of thresholds and the interplay of currency and goods and friendship and authority. In the weak glow of a dying lightwire tucked under the eave of a furniture store, he pulled his right hand out from his pocket and examined the finger. It felt new, but perhaps it wasn't. He stared at it. There was no blood, no wound, no scar. My brain is playing tricks, he thought. It must have always been missing.

Strains of soft summer music spilled down the street from the windows of the rooms above the stores. In the darkness, he gained a bit of anonymity, but felt no great consolation for his work, for his life.

"Get out of here!" a woman yelled from the alley up ahead of him. At first he thought it had been directed at him, the gecko, but he realized she couldn't have seen him from there. A car screeched out from between the buildings, tires squealing as it turned down the main street and off into the edge of the town. A woman's arm shot out from the driver's window and dropped a bundle of fire. Reuben paused for a second taking in the expanse—he knew these buildings would soon be removed—before turning around the corner.

"Are you okay?" he asked, hesitant to approach the woman as an outsider.

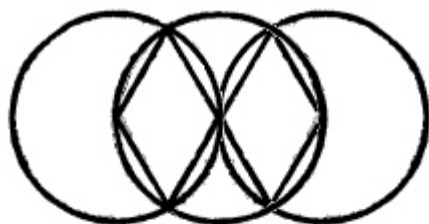
“Yeah, just a quarrel between friends is all,” she said, brushing off the sleeves of her dark denim jacket. She turned into a slim door set into one of the brick buildings and disappeared, the neon light from the toy store on the boulevard cutting a lime green swath onto the recessed wall. He walked back to the main avenue to see what the driver had dropped, but found only a soft pile of black ashes that caught in the wind and were gone, forever mixed with the ever present clay dust of Pigeon Bend.

Sleep came easy as he lay his head down on the mattress. He found little comfort under the wool blanket and the dreams he had were not memorable enough to come to him as he opened his eyes in the middle of the night. He tried to make out the clock on the nightstand. Reaching up to clear his eyes, his right hand felt strange as he brought it to his face. Thinking it asleep from laying in a strange position, he reached for his glasses with his left hand. A pale yellow glow from the streetlights shone through the venetian blinds as he held his right hand to his bespectacled face. Each finger extended only a half an inch from his palm. He sprung up out of the bed.

“No, no, this isn’t right.” He spun around, slipped his feet into his shoes, grabbed the doorknob instinctively with his right hand, but the metal slipped out from his fingers. He grabbed it with his left and turned, running out into the street. A sedan came careening down the street towards him, flames spilling out of the cracked rear window. Reuben dove back into his room, flipped the blinds open quickly to see the silhouette of the driver as the car passed the building. Almost swerving into a lamppost, the driver regained control of the car and sped off into the distance, the flames still dancing against the dark of the night.

He sat on the bed. His mind raced. He lay down. The fingertip, sure, that was minor. But his fingers! He couldn’t even use his hand anymore. He rubbed what was left with his other hand. How could this be? It had to be a dream. That was all. Everything was a dream. He lay down and closed his eyes. As the blood rushed from his head, he slowly drifted off to sleep, tossing and turning and hoping everything would work out for him.

He awoke again at three in the morning. He sat up, the



THE PILLARS OF MASTER BUILDING
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fingers still gone. Nothing seemed real. He picked up the phone. He'd call the field office, get everything sorted out. Holding the receiver, his hand shook. He couldn't do it. He put the phone back on the table. People had gone missing for much less.

He got up out of bed and walked towards the door. A thin, cold rain fell on the town, steel rivulets making their way down the metal rooftops and canopies of the main street. Reuben stepped out and stood under the awning that ran the length of the motel, the soft yellow light in the ceiling casting a weak glow out onto the wet pavement. He took a drink from a bottle of germander liquor, trying to clear his head and numb his body.

"Can't lay your head down?" a woman's voice asked to his side. He turned, seeing an ancient woman in the golden incandescence. She was hunched, barely able to hold herself erect, collapsed by gravity into a being of hard, pure knowledge and remembrances. "Happens to me sometimes, too."

Reuben took another drink and passed her the bottle. She didn't seem to know who he was.

"I've been here two days now, haven't seen a pigeon once, you know that?" he said, pushing his right hand into his pocket.

"Oh, Pigeon Bend?" the woman asked. "Can't say I can remember exactly when people started calling it that. After the mines failed, I'd say. Maybe when the trunk line came. Pitchblende, that's the real name, from when they first settled it during the rush. Don't think we'd win anybody over with that name now, though. Pigeon Bend sounds nice. A nice farming community. There was that bit about the neighboring towns calling us Witchblende, but that's all over now."

"Pitchblende," Reuben said, mostly to himself. He repeated it, letting the word fall over him. He hadn't known the town had been so important to the war effort, so important to the development of the world.

"Daddy was a miner. They didn't live long back then. The ones that did begged for death."

"Where were the mines? I've been researching the land here and haven't come across anything like that."

"All over. One entrance was right in the center of town,

right underneath the green. Only open for a year. All covered up now, though.”

“That so?” He took another nip from the bottle. The alcohol hit him square between the eyes. He turned to hand the bottle back to the woman, but she was already gone, walking down the dimly-lit veranda of the motel.

He lay back down. Everything felt strange. His body wasn’t his body. Who would fix this? He turned on his side and stared at the telephone, wanting desperately to pick it up and call his supervisor, human resources, anybody that would listen to him and fix what had happened. But he was paralyzed by the fear of retribution. He dozed off, the edges of the world softened by the liquor.

The sirens of a fire truck woke Reuben. He sat up in bed, his instinct taking over in an emergency, but through the slats of the blinds he could see that the truck was already gone, wheeling off down the main road away from the motel. He pitched his body to stand up and fell over. On the coarse carpet of the room, he looked sidelong down his body, past his briefs, to the void beneath his left knee.

“No, no, no, no, no. Please, no. Not this.”

Everything spun. He pulled himself up, holding onto the thin mattress, and climbed across the bed to the telephone. His hands dialed a phone number in one fluid motion.

“Hello?”

“Laren, Laren. It’s Reuben. Something’s happening out here at this town.”

“Reuben? Oh, morning. This is Moira. Larry’s left for work already. Is there something you need?”

He slammed the receiver before she could finish. Picking it back up, he dialed the office number. Laren could work from the inside, question the superiors, get Reuben pulled out without making it seem that he couldn’t perform. The call rang endlessly before he hung up.

“Getting out of this town. Gotta get out of this town right now.” Reuben hadn’t talked to himself since he was a kid. He didn’t necessarily think anything was wrong with doing it, but

he'd once seen a comedian mention how a crazy grandmother used to do it, and wasn't sure if everybody did it or just him. So he'd stopped, but now he needed it. Needed the consolation since there wasn't anybody to support him for a thousand miles.

Even with the lower leg gone and a hangover banging inside his skull, Reuben had his suitcase packed and was at the threshold in two minutes. He thought about grabbing his toiletries from the bathroom, but knew the mirror was in there. He couldn't see himself, couldn't bear to witness what had been taken from him. They'd fix him somehow, he knew it. He had to believe in that to allow himself to take the first step outside. At the threshold, he realized that the gun in his ankle holster was gone, too. The walls felt tight around him and he struggled to get a full breath of air as he left the room.

The town carried on, barely noticing him. He needed to collect his thoughts away from the motel room. Hopping uneasily to the diner across the street, he was able to carry the suitcase in his left hand. In the umbrella holder near the door was a worn oak cane. Reuben looked around and couldn't find anybody that would need it, so it became his second leg as he switched the suitcase handle to what was left of his right hand. He made his way to a table. A waiter tossed a menu to him, barely acknowledging his presence.

Across at the next table, he could see two older couples arguing and pointing at a map spread across the formica tabletop. They spoke so fast, Reuben could barely make out what they were discussing, but at several points, the men would pick up small L-shaped pieces of colored metal, slamming them onto the map before the women would swipe them away and restart.

A surly waiter took his order. Reuben opened the suitcase. There was so little left to do. A few signatures. A small amount of measurements. He'd stay for the next few hours before buying an early ticket from the station and leaving that day instead of at the end of the week.

The waiter returned with his eggs and sausage and a cup of lukewarm black coffee. "Eat fast and leave." One of the men at the next table turned to look at Reuben. The man stared at him,

sizing him up, before he turned back. He spoke in a low tone to the woman with him, who pulled out more of the small pieces from a pouch on her lap, slamming them down.

Reuben struggled to put the food down. Everything will be okay, he told himself. There are fixers for these kinds of things. Standing on his right leg and his arm against the coat rack at the end of the booth, he glanced at the map on the table. All the maps he'd looked over in the past days had given him an intimate knowledge of the road layout and building blocks of Pigeon Bend. As he stood there, he could see that the map was an enlarged portion of the downtown, the plots in the town green located dead in the center.

Scribbles in many styles and colors decorated the precise hand of the draftsman who'd laid out the map originally. He could see that generations had used the vellum as a ledger and title instrument. The L-shaped pieces were scattered around, used somehow to assess ownership of certain blocks—the longer main body of the piece seeming to confer majority ownership while the crossbar at the bottom indicated a kind of linkage between plots. The man again turned to Reuben and caught him staring. He gave Reuben the crinkled face of someone disgusted and embarrassed for another human.

Slowly working his way down the avenue of X-marked buildings, Reuben paused as the town square opened up before him. Everything had been clearcut to the ground. Gone was the emerald overgrowth that he'd seen the past two days, replaced by a scorched and dusty layer of red clay, and beyond, looming over what was left, stood the town hall. A chill went up his spine. He needed to leave yesterday.

Just get the papers signed and get out, he thought to himself. Everything was so close. Making his way towards the building, he saw faces appear in the windows of the shops and the apartments above them. Children watched from the protection of ancient trees. Larger bodies hid in the shadows of alleys. Reuben moved as fast as he could, but it seemed that the eyes were all around him, moving closer.

As he rounded the corner of the town square to approach

the marble steps and massive tapered columns of the building, a rock flew from the crowd, hitting him in the back of the head. Darkness came as he stared up at the chiseled lotus leaves of the cornice, the concave lip overhanging the world below, but offering no protection from above.

The sun was straight above when he awoke, blinding and white as he opened his eyes. Struggling to gain his vision, he could see forms all around him. The ground beneath him was rough, rocks poking up through his shirt. He rubbed his face and felt the dust of the red clay on his skin.

Beneath him lay the entrances to the terrible mines of valuable ore, the pock-marked catacombs that ranged underneath the town, holding the secrets of countless spiral universes, loops of creation and disintegration, the path to ending all life or restarting a distant sun. Blazing atoms hidden below Reuben decayed just as the town found its own method of destruction.

“His body is across three parcels,” came a voice somewhere above his head. “We’ve crofted for all of them, so he’s ours.”

“No, no, no,” came another voice. “You crofted for the destination plots, but we must also look at the originators and the mother tracts before them and then towards the original mine claims. We must take our time.”

A woman Reuben recognized from the Land Records Department came towards him with a map. She spread it on the ground as others crowded around, shouting and pointing. They barely noticed that he was awake. He pushed himself up on his elbows and looked at his body. A huge swoop of his right hip was gone, a concave hollow that allowed him to look down at the red clay beneath him, the basic building material of all that now seemed wrong in the small town.

A man stepped towards Reuben and tried to hold him down, but he swatted the stranger away with the cane that had been left beside him. The rest of the townspeople came into view. They watched him warily, but lasciviously, knowing a bloodletting would soon be coming. He stood up, but nobody approached him, the townspeople proscribed by a strict set of

rules. Their eyes watched him momentarily, but they looked through him, separating out all possible futures for each moment, deciding the best course of action.

The angry man from the diner stepped through the crowd. It looked like he was going to attempt to smooth the emerging chaos, but he only approached the map holder. "He should be apportioned like this," he said, and placed the L-shaped pieces onto the map. Others chimed in, jockeying for a spot to view the diagram.

Reuben slipped out through the crowd, hobbling up the main street. His briefcase was gone, absorbed by the terrible town. It didn't matter. It couldn't. No matter what his superiors would do, he had to get away.

He ran his right forearm along the brick fronts of the buildings, the shops that would soon be razed into the vile earth, pushed into the irradiated tunnels and shafts that had once been the lifeblood of the village. A whole community had sat atop contaminated earth, the dandelion leaves and aster petals growing atop a union of blight, their flora dried and kept as secret extracts.

He fell forward into the edge of a municipal garbage can, tipping it into the street. His forearm was gone. Amidst the trash that had spilled onto the sidewalk, Reuben turned himself over, anger overtaking him. He grabbed a bottle, throwing it towards the brick wall of one of the buildings set for demolition. The glass exploded, the shattering sound causing the townspeople to turn back towards him.

"Damn this town," he yelled, tossing another bottle down the row of storefronts. The glass caught onto the front window of the barbershop and both the pane and the bottle splintered into a thousand pieces. "Damn all of you!"

The crowd began to inch closer to him, never taking their eyes off of the man.

He pulled himself up, ready to walk away from the town if he had to, no matter the pain and exhaustion, but couldn't help himself. He turned back. "If it wasn't me coming in here," he yelled, "it would just be some other representative. You're just like the paperwork said, a relict population that hasn't caught up

with the rest of the world, a bunch of backwater hinterlanders unable to—”

A young girl screamed, her shrill voice echoing off the canyon of storefronts on the main street. The adults turned away, covering their eyes and pulling down their hats. Even the newspaper photographer couldn't bring herself to document what was left of Reuben Kent, the young agent sent into a forgotten town, an obscure world older than he could fathom that sat atop a subterranean realm, the secrets of which the citizens could just barely comprehend and exploit. What had once held interminable secrets on the ocean's floor had been thrust up and joined with barely-understanding settlers and passed down through blood and bargain and obscure rituals.

All that was left of the man was dust.

The rain came that night and washed it away and the next week, as the first train pulled in, the entire town came out to welcome the new surveyor, a fresh-faced young dynamo from the coast.

Chorus Waves

The dream broke off and Rose awoke, face down, her nose crushed into the pillow. The dream began to slip away, pausing for a moment and tricking her into thinking she had it, but it was gone. She felt the wetness of the bed. Rolling out from the covers, she stood up, felt the shorts she'd gone to bed in. "Damn it, damn it," she said softly, not wanting to wake the dogs because then they'd try to get an early walk out of her.

She crept softly to the bathroom, stepping over the one floorboard near the corner that would send a loud squeak into the quiet morning. She sat down on the toilet, stood up, flushed, and walked back to bed. Her heart beat crazily. How was she going to explain this? Pull it like a bandage, she thought.

"Honey." She shook Russell. "Honey." He rolled over, looking up at her through the daze of the early dawn. "I don't know why, but I wet the bed."

It barely registered with the man. "OK, OK." He rubbed his eyes. "Do you feel sick?" he asked her as he got up and started to pull the blankets off of the bed.

"No, I feel fine."

"I'm sure nothing's wrong." He folded the giant ball of sheets and tossed them into the hamper in the corner of the open closet.

"At least it didn't go through the mattress pad."

Russell made a grunt, but was already back under the covers. Rose changed her shorts and returned to bed. She'd never wet the bed as a kid. Her brother had, but she couldn't remember a single time doing it or even remember her parents mentioning her doing it. Why would it happen now?

Without the sheets on, she worried about falling asleep and ruining the mattress. After a few minutes, she got up, showered, and took the dogs out. The morning was cool, much nicer than the

recent string of hot days. It was strange how light out it was. She hadn't realized how close to the equinox they had gotten.

There was a sharp pain in her side. *Do you feel sick?* she heard Russell ask in her head. She rubbed the side of her stomach. It was less a pain than a difference in how it had been before. She felt unsettled, the interior pieces of her body fitting together differently. There seemed to be a void beside her stomach. The dogs, oblivious to her discomfort, tugged and she was off, but each time she paused for them to smell a patch of grass, she could feel it, the needling inside of her, the roiling beneath the skin.

The morning passed as usual except for the extra load of laundry, yet she kept watching the clock, marking how long it had been since she'd last gone to the bathroom. There was the bus ride into work and she was afraid of losing control in front of all those people, but the day passed uneventfully, except in the quiet moments on the elevator or at her desk or waiting at the microwave. In those fleeting seconds of external peace, she could again feel the twinge, the unease, the vague disturbance in her interior space.

Russell was already home when she returned and they made the bed, tucking the sheets around the corners of the mattress. "Should I put a towel under my side?" she asked.

"I think you'll be fine. It was probably just a fluke."

She nodded, but the word fluke hung around inside her head. He'd meant it as a chance occurrence, but all she could think of was the parasite. What could cause such a change in her body but some outside influence? An invader using her as a host? A thing living inside of her, destroying her. She thought of sex ed class and all the diseases that floated around in the vast cesspool of human desire. They'd been to the beach the weekend before and she wondered if that was how she'd become infected. *If* she was infected, she was quick to correct herself. *If*.

Three nights passed, all dry sheets and heavy sleep, until the fourth night her eyes opened near midnight. She'd taken to getting up whenever she awoke during her sleep, just to be sure and empty herself. Stepping over the dogs, she made her way to the bathroom, the streetlights flooding through the front room that

was now an office, but would perhaps someday be a child's room. Stanley's room, after her grandfather or Leona's room, after Russell's sister. He'd been pushing so hard for a baby, but she just wasn't sure yet. She crossed the threshold of the bathroom and the cold tile floor gave her a jolt.

Leaving the bathroom, she felt a pain in her abdomen, just below the bottom of her ribcage. What now? she thought. What more could go wrong? Beside her, one of the cats had awoken and was scratching on the carpeted post near the door. She bent down to pet him and, standing up, the pain was gone.

Lying in bed, it all seemed overly psychosomatic. Her job was pleasant. Her extended family was healthy. They were a little too far away, but altogether fine. Her marriage could be a little better, a little closer, but she certainly didn't dwell on it, not so much that it would affect her. Only the estate gave her any stress. Her mind slowed. The neighborhood's barred owls were letting out their warbled mating calls from the maple and oak trees in the backyard. *Hoo, hoo, hoo, hu-hoo*. Drifting off to the rhythmic hooting, Rose fell asleep. *Hoo, hoo, hoo, hu-hoo*.

In the morning as her alarm rang, she swung her arm in a wide arc to shut it off, but there was no finer control in the muscles. Her fingers twisted and grabbed at nothing as her arm jerked uselessly. A vision of an ocean crashing against red bluffs crossed her mind. Compelled to feel moving water, she focused and was able to gain influence over her limbs and made her way to the shower, her legs kicking and jerking at every opportunity.

She climbed into the glass and marble enclosure, letting the water spill over her from the stainless steel head. She could feel every drop, every rivulet, every puddle on the grey tile floor. She instinctively reached for the shampoo bottle and her fingers and arms returned to normal, deftly clutching and squeezing the dark blue plastic. It seemed an hour passed as the water ran over her, switching from the blistering hot she preferred to ice cold as the water heater struggled to keep up. Russell yelled from the hallway to stop wasting water.

Stepping out, she reached for the towel, her fingers spreading perfectly, digging easily into the soft cotton as she dried

her body. Getting dressed was even easier, but her mind drifted as she sat at the table with coffee. She saw waves crashing somewhere far away.

“What the hell happened in the shower?” Russell said standing at the refrigerator. He walked towards her. “Honey?”

Rose had been staring at the baseboard of the kitchen’s walls. “Huh, what?” she asked, unable to focus. Russell repeated it, but Rose couldn’t answer, couldn’t find the right words. His lips were moving, but she couldn’t even hear him anymore. All she heard was a dull roar like the jet engines that flew overhead in the morning, but muffled, as if they were just at the edge of sensing.

All of a sudden, he was picking her up and carrying her to the bedroom, but each time he opened his mouth, it was just the thundering tumult of a faraway ocean. Russell held the phone on his shoulder as he looked on at her worried.

There was a ringing in her left ear, the kind that she got when she walked into a house and knew a television was on somewhere inside, but more intense, like a space satellite was focusing the energy of the universe into her temples. There was a burst of pressure inside her head, just behind her right eye.

“I’m fine,” Rose said, sitting up and throwing her legs over the side of the bed. “I don’t know what came over me.”

Russell hung up the phone before he’d had a chance to connect. “You were gone, honey. Real gone.” He sat beside her, felt her head and chest. “I’ll call the office for you.”

She nodded, drinking water from a glass on the nightstand. She could feel each individual molecule of water as it entered her body. Russell came and checked on her before leaving. He said he would call every few hours. She thanked him, knowing he was too trusting, and he left, the brass bell on the handle of the front door chiming as he pulled it shut.

Rose reached for the remote and turned on the television. Scanning the channels, she found most of them unwatchable due to the breakup of the digital picture. She missed the way TV used to be when she was a kid, how she’d been able to pick up stations from nearby cities, and sometimes even farther out, seeing movies

and shows that they never aired in her town. Even during a storm, she'd been able to watch grappling from some other territory and shows like *Prime Artificer* and *The True Faith*. Now, on a beautiful and clear summer day, she could barely pick up the local news.

Analog had been so great, she told herself, the smooth wave of information and experiences always accessible compared to the corrupted packets of digital data. Her records could still play with a scratch, while a disc became useless. Enlarging photographs from film negatives gave a much better picture than the bits on her new camera. The videotapes in the basement still warbled and fluttered, but would probably last forever. A calm came over her as she envisioned the various media waves floating onward throughout the universe until the great heat death.

She felt a twinge in her body, deep inside her being. She couldn't be pregnant, she knew that. But she imagined that's what a kick might feel like. Russell wanted a child, an immortality that had been denied him in other pursuits. But she wanted to make a name for her own self first, not spend her productive years caring for a child. Most of the last ten years had been taken from her by all the headaches of being an only child with irresponsible parents. Now it was her time to truly embrace her art. The feeling passed and her mind cleared.

Swinging her legs off of the bed, she stood up. She felt fine. She wasn't even sure what Russell had said happened actually had. But now she had a free day, the roads open with everyone at work, the world calling to her, a beautiful version of itself which she was only ever able to see the dark twin of on the crowded and bustling weekends.

The highway felt clean and expansive as the car careened over the smooth black asphalt. She switched lanes at high speeds, feeling the transmission shift, every bump in the road relayed up through the steel frame. She felt the car jump at the concrete lip of the bridge. The sun was glittering through the suspension wires, a cat's cradle of support held by the massive stone and concrete pylons.

The river flowed beneath the swaying bridge, bounding

the city, wide and powerful, but yet somehow still a husk of its former self. Upriver, they'd taken what they wanted, sent the little that was left down to the coast, but it was unceasing in its flow, mesmerizing in its drive to its parent, the mother ocean. She looked out at the river and shore below. Along the sides where the downtown flowed almost all the way to the water, the giant granite blocks of the seawall still stood perfect, forever unchanged since her childhood, a massive beautification project that would never even be contemplated during her own adulthood of budget cuts and widespread layoffs. The previous generations just knew how to make a mark.

In her aimless driving, she realized she'd been inexorably pulled to her parents' house, the monolith of parental unaccountability that towered over her life. Sighing, she realized she might as well stop in to clean out a few more things. She saw the carved wooden sign for Buckeye Glen and entered the development.

Turning onto the cul-de-sac, her parent's house sat low-slung on the hill, cantilevering out in the back with a view onto the river. She parked the car and climbed out, the swaths of sage and lemon verbena along the path scenting the air with spice and citrus. She opened the door and the must of age and neglect hit her. Her father had lost focus after her mother's death, never regaining the spark for adventure he'd had in her childhood. Then the fracturing had come. But he'd never given up the house, spending his last days there as Rose tended to him.

Now the vast expanse had been left to her, another chore, another thankless task from beyond the grave. It seemed to take forever to go through everything. She grabbed a box of photographs from the hall closet, tossing it onto the kitchen counter as she poured a glass of water. She hadn't realized how much she had needed the liquid, gulping it down, feeling the water move down her throat and settling in her stomach, cool and solid, intruding on the warmth of her body.

She walked out onto the deck, staring down at the water and rocks and the world far below her. She leaned back on a lounge chair and stared up at the sun with closed eyes, letting the

rippling brightness burn into her skull, waves of pastel blues and pinks swimming across her eyelids. She turned onto her side as the neon explosions continued in the darkness of her mind.

Sleep came and the bright sun was translated into the glow of a movie marquee. The theater loomed over her, the golden light from the sign beckoning her in. She walked through the red carpeted entrance, the mahogany-lined archways leading to the screen. She stepped into a brilliantly white bathroom and sat on the toilet. No, no, no, she thought. The top of the bathroom ripped away into the infinite blackness of the sky above. She was swimming through the void, the water surrounding her. *No, no, no.* Her eyes opened and she felt her shorts clinging to her, soaked.

The pain returned. Deeper, like it ran from just behind her belly button all the way to the bottom of her spine and out her back, connecting the world in front and the world behind, her future and her past. She remembered coming home once to find her mother sprawled on the couch, immobile, staring up and waiting for death. It had only been her gall bladder, but she'd said it had felt like a heart attack. Rose's mind leaped to various maladies, but she suppressed them as she swung her legs to the deck. *Fluke fluke fluke*, she could hear somewhere far away in her mind.

Downing another glass of water, she felt the pain subside, but a vision rose in her mind of the churning river, breaking up just before reaching the dam outside of the city. Her feet stumbled on the carpet leading to the bedrooms. A shock flew from the door handle as she touched it. She cursed. There was an old pair of gym shorts and an oversized sweater in the closet of her childhood bedroom. She tossed the wet clothes into a plastic bag and grabbed a few boxes of things along with some of her early works—kaleidoscopic yarn run through burlap—before locking the door and walking out to the car.

Leaving the manicured housing development, she swung underneath the bridge and to the parking lot that was obscured from above by a stand of cedar trees. The gravel crunched under her tires as she pulled into the reserve.

The thermal gardens stretched down both shores, the

collection of strange plants forming a jagged raft of roots that reached down into the water, cleaning the river and drawing nutrients from the waste. Some of the plants were ancient, hewn by the world for the job; others had been created, filling the voids left by the natural ones, exuding minerals and other resources that the world so desperately needed.

The manicured parkland at the edge of the thermal gardens was empty. Rose sat on a bench and stared at the strange interface between the human world and the curious, watery world beyond. She could dimly see that there was so much more to the planet than what she was aware of. She crossed her hands, running her right index finger over the skin in between the finger joints on her left hand. A tingling ran up her throat before turning backward and working its way into her left ear drum. Goosebumps spread up her arms.

She tried to make sense of any of the plants that were part of the garden, but they all seemed so foreign. Some were dense clusters of short leaves with rings of small yellow flowers running along their tops. Others were tall stalks that rose ten feet or more and swayed in the soft breeze that came down from the city. There were trees composed mainly of gnarled roots and others that rose on thick trunks before exploding in foliage above her head. Several different kinds of water lilies dappled the surface, their pads coming in myriad shapes and sizes. Liverworts in a rainbow of colors inched along the seawall while free-floating ferns moved gently with the tide, untethered to anything.

She could see dragonflies cutting through the water and groups of metallic beetles drifting along the surface beside various other water bugs. Everything in the thermal garden existed in a world where the union of water and air was essential to life. She knew how the ancient plants had come about through evolutionary trial and error, but she had no idea of the genesis for the ones created by man. Maybe they had dabbled too much, she thought.

A heron called downstream from her. She jumped at the sound. Shoot, she thought, Russell will be calling soon. She got back in the car and sped home.

A week passed. The tremors and weakness in her limbs

continued, but she could control it with water; touching it, drinking it, showering. She kept it a secret, thinking it would pass in time. Nobody got a weird infection from beach water, she told herself. It's just a passing thing. Waves crashed in her dreams. Rushing rivers filled the space behind her eyelids when she closed them. She crossed the bridge twice daily on the bus and looked down at the glassy, undulating surface. There are secrets there, she thought.

Saturday came and Russell was out the door before the sun rose. She'd forgotten his work trip. After taking the dogs out, she thought about what to do with her weekend when the mountain range crossed her mind. She hadn't hiked it since her university days, but the compulsion grew. It would be a good way to clear her mind.

Packing a bottle of water to control her body, she set out, parking in the shaded lot at the base of the ridge and depositing a dollar in the slotted, wooden admission box on the information board. She studied the different routes, choosing a medium difficulty trail to take her to the top.

Time fell away as she took to the path, her feet quickly falling into lockstep. Her eyes darted between the ground and the trees. Whenever she felt a shaking coming on, she stopped and sipped from the water. The oaks and pines and cedars of the mount thinned as she rose into the air. She was higher than she imagined she'd be. Circling the shoulder of the ridge, she surveyed the expanse of city and country below her and knew that it was nothing to the great ocean beyond.

A final path between massive boulders led up to the peak. She raced forward. The wind hit her as she emerged from the narrow chasm, knocking her to the stone surface. Pushing herself up onto her hands and knees, she saw small, spiral shells embedded in the grey surface. Running her hand over them, she tried to imagine the time and energy expended to move the earth from some lost ocean to where she was in the clouds. She sat down and took a small sip to keep the tremors at bay as her fingers ran over the rippled fossil surface. The mountains held the secrets of the oceans' past, she thought. The world's past.

The shaking got worse as the weeks passed. She wet the bed a few times, but hid it from Russell. Focusing on normal things became more difficult. At night, she ordered hiking gear from dusty newsprint catalogs. Wool socks, 60/40 jackets, chunky boots that laced all the way down to the toe, clothes in duck canvas and leather. She required more water than before, every few minutes taking a small sip, letting it sit between her lips, feeling it pass over her teeth, holding it in the back of her throat. Each Saturday she would take to the ridge, running her hands along the primal seabed risen. It amazed her how the earth had been compressed and folded, sunken down and lifted up again, exposing the ancient ocean floor to the majestic firmament above.

After she descended from the peaks, she'd drive to the thermal gardens and slip into the water from a disused corner of the park. She could feel the roots and vines moving softly through the water, caressing her warm skin. She'd close her eyes and float and could feel the uneasiness inside her body. She could focus deeper and just almost grab what was wrong inside of her before it would slip away. A mosquito landed on the water beside her. She blinked. Diseases flowed inside the insect's gut. Infections. Parasites. *Flukes*.

She shook in disgust and righted herself. The sun was setting. She pulled herself up onto the granite seawall. Her feet skipped across the water's surface. A fog clouded the front of her head. Her eyes felt heavy. Her head dropped causing her body to slip and twist into the water. Plunging back into the river, her body went slack. She could feel the water pressing in around her, enveloping her body. She hit the bottom and felt rocks jutting into her back, but couldn't move. She thought the roots around her were starting to close in. The mud beneath her began to conform to her body. The watery tomb was comforting.

She let out one last bubble of air as a vision of Russell crossed her mind. She shook, waking up from her stupor. Her chest felt like it had collapsed. She swung her arms upward, pulling her body up against the water, her fingers clamoring for the cracks in the seawall. As her lips breached the surface of the water, she sucked in air, sputtering in the moonlight. She couldn't

tell how long she'd been underwater, but it seemed that some time had passed. Pulling herself out, she rushed to her car.

Russell was waiting for her when she got home. She didn't know what to say, couldn't explain what was going on inside her body and mind. There was something there, she knew it. But she didn't know what it wanted. She couldn't tell if it was good or bad or just didn't care. He hugged her. She realized he must think they were over, but it wasn't that. She kissed him.

He went to bed, but she couldn't sleep. Her mind raced. The ancient ocean, the mountain, the fossils, the thermal garden. Her first vision from so long ago, a riotous ocean crashing into crumbling red bluffs, overwhelmed her mind's eye. The universe pulled at her, tugging her shoulder. Her feet stumbled to the door. She held her arms against the frame, but an uneasiness welled inside of her the longer she held back from the pull.

Rose blinked and was in the car. Another blink and she was at the park. A sole light hung from a pole in the far corner of the lot, its golden light lost and absorbed by the full moon. She was so thirsty. She swallowed and could feel her throat clench, dry and cracking. She blinked and was sitting on the seawall. Turning, she climbed down the granite blocks. Her toe broke the surface of the water and every molecule of liquid surrounding her sang out. She could follow each one's journey, passing from the clouds to the mountains to the rivers to the fish to the plants of the thermal garden, all to the moment where it met the threshold of her skin.

She pushed on. Irregular rocks reached up jaggedly from the river's bottom. They tore at her bare feet, but she could no longer feel them, the pain registering beneath the soft caress of the wind on her cheeks and the water on her legs.

As her body slipped beneath the surface, she shuddered for a fraction of a moment, the exterior of her body acclimating, the alien insides perfectly at peace with the chill of the water. She walked out, keeping her head above the small waves lapping against the wall behind her, and paused. The uneasy twinge returned. It hadn't gone, only paused. It began to grow in discomfort, crossing into pain.

She stared at the moon and closed her eyes. The phantom dot transformed into the sun and she saw the wild waves crash into the bluffs, the red rocks falling away revealing massive fossils encased in the earth. She tried to trace their shapes, imagining how skin and muscle would fill them out, but they looked like nothing she'd ever seen before.

A wave slapped her chest and pulled her back. The water slid down her face. She licked her lips and tasted the thermal garden. A step farther and she was completely underwater, swallowed by the darkness and cold. The pain became overpowering. The river's bottom fell away and she rose up, floating towards the surface. A root grazed her arm. She spun and turned her face towards the open air. The moon was gone, blocked by an errant branch. The plants surrounded her. The water told her which ones were real and which ones were created by human hands.

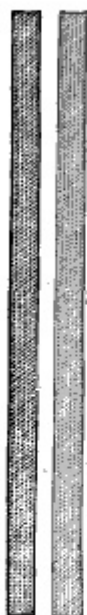
She swallowed a mouthful of water and blinked once. There was a final second of pain before she could feel the bodies begin to slide out from between the cells of her skin. They found seams and spaces in her boundaries, fighting for the water, driven by instinct. She couldn't tell how many, but then they were gone.

After they'd left, she began to swim, far out into channel. The current was strong and it pulled her along, her body following the white thread of the moon's reflection. On the shore, the leaves of the cottonwoods clicked in the wind and a great bullfrog croaked into the clear night.

The channel opened up as other tributaries joined to meet the ocean. Rose spun a few times in the cold night air, the movements natural and nourishing. She rested on her back and let her body go with the current. Farther on she went, unsure of the passage of time and distance. Her old world was gone.

Shaking her stupor, she felt the twinge again, stronger than it had been even when they had left her. Spinning her body, she righted herself in the water and paddled against the current to steady herself. The pain subsided and was replaced by a deep longing for an ancient and quiet world, a time and a place she never knew and, perhaps, had never existed. Farther out, into the

deep and black ocean, she knew the great ring ruins survived, waiting for her. She took one last breath and dove beneath the waves.



HAVEN

Alchise and Neighboring Regions

The mist hung heavy and never lifted, even after we'd crossed the mountains. Ranging along the top, we looked for clear rock paths to lead us down, never wanting the trees ahead to cross above us. We slid down the granite uplifts and pushed through the dense fog, the temperature warming degree by degree until the river opened up to our right.

I bent and felt the water with my fingertips. It was cold and pure. Ahead of us on our own shore, we could see that the downslope forest retook its stance, thick and braided, heavy with the swell of boughs. My companions looked back at me—somehow I'd been chosen leader, although I'd made no speech for the position—and I chose the only proper course. We brooked the frigid water.

Single file we moved, eyes on each other so as not to allow us to fall, but also eyes above, watching for anything that might be leaning over, connecting with another, finding a ground. We crossed diagonally to the other shore, the numbness moving up from my feet to my ankles and calves and resting in my thighs. Reaching the shore, we lay on the large rocks that preceded a soft beach. The trees were thick and we could move no closer. I'd been harboring suspicions over the past several nights that we were being followed and I felt relieved to put a distance of water between us. I couldn't let an animal of all things bring our end.

Although the sun barely cut through the mist that clung to the land, I slid off my wet socks and lay them upon the stone surface. I placed my pack to my side and, stretching backward, I could feel my spine settle. Sleep had come well the previous two nights atop the lifeless mountain, open to the universe above, but in the weeks before that minor respite, a dull weariness had fallen over us in the regular lands. It was difficult always being on edge. Besides the obvious portals, anything could be made into a

doorway—a flutter of vines, the wires strung between telephone poles, two trees crossing in a soft breeze. We wore buttoned shirts and avoided covering our heads. Navigating the detritus of the modern world was difficult and harrowing, our minds divining where openings and closings were that had once simply been life. We ached for the open lands, the fields and plains that would allow us to relax.

With my feet drying in the soft wind, I pulled out a pair of wool socks, the only thing left from Sayer's pack. We'd made it so far for him to have been reduced by a clothesline between two apartment buildings. We hadn't even been in the city proper at that point. Who would have expected apartments so far away? But the two brick walls connected by the near-invisible cord was all it took. On the ground afterwards was a corner of his rucksack, the socks bundled up into a ball. A hole had been cleanly cut from the heel of the right sock, the small bit of excised wool going wherever it was that they—everyone, everything that mattered—went once they disappeared.

Behind us, there was a crack in the woods. I peered through the fog at the edge of the forest. My companions were already up, awaiting my orders. I slid on my old socks and boots. Looking up the soft slope for an unobstructed skyline, I was able to quietly make my way a few yards into the wooded expanse. There was a scurrying to my right and, as I turned, I saw a raccoon make off into the wilderness. My eyes adjusted and the bulldozer presented itself as my confederates came up behind me.

Rusted and tilting in the soft soil, the roof had been crudely cut off at its posts to allow the driver to carve a clear path through the new world. We looked at each other as a group. How could someone have made it safely through the current dominion this long and then chanced an excursion that in all likelihood would have brought two trees together high above in the canopy? The earthmover had engineered its own destruction, forming a doorway over itself, trapping the lumbering hulk in the dense woods forever. Careful not to make the same mistake as the driver, I moved cautiously toward the machine. The trees to my right and left looked dangerous in their arching, so I climbed atop

from the front of the machine to inspect what was left.

The leather of the seat was chewed and torn, exposed to the elements. A knife on the floor of the compartment was still sheathed. I tucked the blade into my waistband. A gust of wind blew and I could see a corner of a plastic bag flapping against the underside of the controls. Reaching under, I pulled and the bag tore open, sending several folded pieces of paper falling to the ground.

The wind shot hard across the woods again and I feared the trees all around me connecting, even if only for a moment, so made my way back to the shore, waving for the others to go ahead of me. We spread the papers out on one of the rocks. In a soft pastel hand, the world around us had been mapped—the mountains, the streams, the roadways that lay below us—all carefully delineated in gold and periwinkle and cyclamen, a crude legend for the land. Atop all of this was a darker network of emerald strokes, rumblines delineating pathways through the new world.

We studied it. I found our spot on the map. Our worlds were inverse. The Navigator had mapped everything before us, all the promise that the world held, but knew nothing of the lands behind, the dead terrain that we'd just escaped. The lines seemed to end not far from our present location. Had there been some reason for the excursion? Or just a continual pushing on? Nothing on the map led me to believe that the world ahead of us showed any larger danger than where we'd been before.

Weighing it all, we moved on after filling our canteens, returning to the water to pick up a clear path shown on the map that opened up a bit farther downriver. The hard ground welcomed us eventually and the vast sky above lead us deeper into the valley. The hope of free movement through an open land drove almost all other thought from my mind, but I couldn't help but wonder about what had driven the Navigator to leave what appeared to be relative safety. Food, water, knowledge? Too few people? Too many?

As we rested for a moment on a rock outcropping, a black bear passed by us, sniffing the air, but appeared uninterested in

such meaningless prey. We could see that the world continued on without us, better even, humans shuffled to the background, scraping out an existence no different than elk or field mice. It had become easy to be quiet, too comforting to drift into silence, wasting away as the world attempted to close in above us and, yet, I watched in awe as the bear continued on, unaffected by the crossed branches and closing aspen trees.

We pushed on. Time, which had come to such a crawl during the previous weeks, exploded now, tumbling over itself as the Navigator's maps quickly lead us down the correct paths. Where we'd once spent hours and days retracing our steps to attack forward progress under the open sky, now we carried on little different than in the old world. Our backs straightened and our thighs grew taut as we felt a new energy.

Several miles on, a cache marked with a light triangle on the map came into a view. The hinged pine box was wedged between two boulders. The keys were gone with the Navigator. A chisel and hammer made quick work of the lock.

Inside we found cocoa and dried meat, although I couldn't be sure what kind of animal it had come from. It didn't matter. We ate ravenously, our jaws working on the muscle fibers, our mouths salivating as they hadn't in days. We drank the cocoa with our water, cold, feeling the sugar move through our veins. Nobody spoke, but we were all reminded of better days. Night was coming and we could feel content.

Pressing on into the dusk, we separated from the map for a detour to a ledge of rock that hung out over a small depression in the earth. We could check the sky above against the map during the day, but at night it would be safer to settle into an open space and the granite face would hopefully protect us from any creatures of the dark. The following presence still nagged at me, but I figured that at that point we had to have put a great distance between anything that had been with us since the river crossing.

With my padded wool bag spread out on the hard surface, I looked out across the land below us. The fog had finally lifted as twilight descended. Ribbons of magenta and violet rippled in the distance through the throat of the valley. Far off, I could see the

break in the tree line that indicated the train tracks marked on the Navigator's map. The iron rails could take us almost anywhere, a solid fifteen feet of open path if no wires crossed above.

We ate more of the meat and let the rocks warm our body as they radiated out the heat of the day. Staring up into the firmament, I wondered what the Navigator had thought of as the world disappeared in that brief and eternal moment. It must have been a release at some level, for it seemed there was no going back to what once was. The world that was gone—that beautiful place of forgotten mythical music, abundant food, stories told inside during a rainstorm—was irretrievable. We'd be unable to recreate any of it. Stone floors, open hearths, low walls to protect from the wind, that was all we had to look forward to.

And yet, we still existed. The sun and the moon and—I hoped—the sea, still existed. The swath of stars above were unchanged, glittering as they had for millennia on the now quiet world. I slid off my wet socks and put on the pair I'd taken from Sayer's pack. I realized they should be used for all of the beautiful moments that my friend would have wanted to see. Two owls carried on in the night, unencumbered by the swaying trees, and I found sleep.

The next morning we threaded our way down the face of the mountain led by the ghost of the Navigator. I again struggled to think of reasons for leaving what appeared to be a pleasant location. We ourselves had previously run out of food and had heard rumors from passing compatriots to head west, that there was farmland still being cultivated in open-air camps. Our leader had led us on, but gave no indication that she believed the tales we'd heard. Days later, she'd climbed a telephone pole to clear a path and slipped, the wind catching the copper wire and twirling it until it connected with a branch above her, closing the portal. Her reason for pushing west, if there'd been one at all, went with her to the other place. The Navigator's maps fulfilled her prophecy of apparent safety in the setting sun, yet still I struggled with what might lay ahead.

We passed rows of short balsam firs before settling into a wide expanse of white birch, the ringed trunks staggered

throughout the golden vista as the morning fog burned off of the land. Ancient switchbacks showed the old way through the wilderness. I looked at the group ahead and wondered if I could even remember their names or faces if they disappeared, but only Sayer stayed with me. It hardly seemed worth getting to know each other with how quickly we could all be taken.

The sun reached its zenith as the valley opened up before us and presented a small town nestling itself along the banks of a mighty river. Brightly colored houses ran in zigs and zags up the slopes, small squares of amaranth and celadon, carmine and aqua. The train tracks I'd seen the night before crossed the river on a majestic bridge through the center of town, two smaller bridges flanking it across the cerulean surface below.

I paused on the wide path that ringed the town, the soft grass reaching up to my sides and running up against the treeline behind me. I was safe. I studied the town, watching for movement on the streets, listening for any sounds, but found nothing. It seemed as dead as where we'd left.

We continued on and reached the real beginning of the town, the place where the sidewalks began. Someone had climbed the telephone and power poles and cut all of the lines, allowing a freedom of movement we hadn't felt in other abandoned places. Brick buildings ran right up to the sidewalk, their windows and doors sealed to prevent accidental intrusions. Several homes on each block were torn into, presumably from the bulldozer, exposing their innards to the sky above. This was how the survivors had extracted the goods inside.

Without words, everyone broke off, partially interested in exploration, but also needing time alone, the close quarters forced on us by the new world taking its toll on our minds. The four other bodies melted into the streets and buildings, a pair together and two singles. I took to the town slowly, cautiously exploring each turn and expanse. The Navigator had left for some reason and I still feared what might lie ahead.

As I drew closer to the river, the asphalt of the newer streets gave way to smoothed cobblestones and the buildings grew older and more ornate. I walked up to one that had been caved in.

Rubble spilled out from the front. Climbing up the pile, I could see into the back of the home, the kitchen and dining room ravaged by the elements, but still there, an image of the world that was gone. Turning from atop the mound, I could see into a bedroom, the space cleaved by the collapsed roof. A brass bed stood against the wall, the fox and geese-patterned quilt atop it signalling a more perfect sleep than any I'd known in months. A beautiful frame above the headboard held a print of a riverboat etching. It was simple and clean, made from a bright wormy chestnut. I'd made thousands, tens of thousands, of frames in my life. I wanted to hold it in my hands and study it, connect with the old ways and everything lost, but the roof was still above the section of room. I thought about using a stick to knock it off of the wall, but realized the absurdity of it. Forcing the wooden grid from my mind, I climbed back down to the street.

Although the town hadn't been named on the map, the sign proclaiming it as Orcaria was firmly planted at the park that abutted the river. Nearby placards showed where an old mill had stood, churning out wool blankets and clothing for a young nation. Orcaria—an old town that had tried its best to keep alive even as the world had moved away to the stars—at that moment seemed to be the finest place in all the universe.

In the center of the park stood a ring of standing stones, the megaliths placed not long before as evidenced by the fresh dirt at the bases. I ran my hand along the rough golden surface of one. Old superstitions had come back quickly after the change. Over the past months, we'd found clusters of herbs and roots drying on wooden frames at the intersections of footpaths, sticks and twigs lashed together into bizarre structures near fallow fields, and what appeared to be interlocking circles of blood on concrete and stone pads that seemed to serve as resting places. Others had turned to darker and older religions, worshipping sun gods and gusts of wind.

None of it ever seemed to do anything. The world just kept getting smaller and quieter and lonelier and more gone.

I slid off my pack and walked to the water. Two ducks were dipping under for food, their orange legs dangling in the

warm air, oblivious to me. I heard a voice and turned. My companions began to reconvene, bringing their spoils. The sound of laughter was strange and distant, the smiles even harder to reconcile with the world.

There was a jug of wine, more dried meat, a clutch of fresh apples, and a box of forgotten crackers. I started a fire and we ate, stripping down to our underwear and enjoying the warm sun. I was looking across to the other side of the river, wondering what lie in the homes on the other side, almost dozing off, when I saw a dark spot moving along the upper struts of the railroad bridge. My mind flashed to what had been following us, the eternal predator waiting to strike. I stood up and squinted, straining to see, before realizing it was a woman climbing across the top of the metal span.

We dressed and formed a united front. She smiled as she climbed down. Her hands out, she yelled across the gap between us. “My name is Dhava. May I come closer?”

I nodded.

The sun was on its downward arc, but I could make out every detail of her clothing. Her boots were creased and scuffed, her jeans torn, her dark green jacket frayed on the cuffs. “What are your names?”

“No names.” I stuck out my hand.

She took it. “Why no names?”

“Maybe that’s how it gets you. Everybody whose name I know is gone.”

“Well, that puts me at a distinct risk of disappearing.”

“Here, eat.”

Dhava sat with us. She told us stories of the north, where she’d come from. It all seemed the same. Pockets of people holding on. The south had beckoned to her as the seasons began to change and brought questions of another year of survival without a roof. She thought Orcaria was ours, but I showed her the map and told her of the Navigator. I explained the futility of the east.

The sun had begun to set. One of our group called over to the rest of us. She’d found a patio with soft chairs and a firepit, a low brick wall surrounding the concrete to protect us from the wind of the valley. We moved there and set up our things in what

had once been a carport before the roof was removed. At the rear was a beam spanning between two brick columns at the corners. This would be a hard edge for us.

I slipped my socks off and laid them along the top course of brick on the wall. I stretched my toes and closed my eyes, letting the air move across my skin. The moon was already visible in the heavens despite the light of the day still hanging on. The face of it seemed transparent, an apparition of a time when we'd left the earth and traveled there and beyond, a joke taunting us as we grew weaker without our things.

We'd gotten a new fire started as Dhava told us more of what she'd seen on her travels. Larger settlements than we'd imagined possible, communes of younger people that were more adaptable. The old world seemed a dream to them. All they knew was the sky above, eternally open, the weight of the free air pulling up on their skulls and delivering a cranial bliss. They worshipped it, she said. It seemed easy to find divine right in the unfettered sky when the only other option lead to death, or something beyond death.

Dhava drank freely of the wine. She'd been by herself for some time, making her way down abandoned highways and cracked streets. She knew much of the train network, but seemed guarded about its secrets, as if we'd steal them and beat her to a paradise some far ways off. I let it pass knowing we could figure it out.

Alone in her journey south, she'd had much more time to think without any of the pushback we had given each other about what right or wrong decisions we'd made in our escapes. She passed the bottle to me, picking up a loose thought she'd started a moment before. "But what even is a doorway? A portal, an aperture. An opening, an exit." She paused. "Egress, ingress."

I stared off at the stars. Two of our group sat near each other on the low wall, arms intertwined. I handed back the bottle.

"What gateway only works in one direction? What threshold bears only forward motion?" she asked.

"No, don't speak of it. You'll draw them," one our group

never encountered them. Our old leader felt they were somehow keyed into groups, working off the energy of people in close contact since the group that was attacked always knew the one that had returned. Dhava speaking of it—the other world, the doorways, the mechanics of it all—even obliquely, made me nervous. My other socks had blown off the wall. I grabbed Sayer's pair and put on my boots.

“What is it?” she asked. She knew something, intimated what we'd experienced from looking into our eyes.

The pair on the wall stood. Just in the corner of my eye, I saw them, hand in hand, making for the long wooden beam at the far end of the patio. One of the team yelled. I turned fully and caught them just as they crossed beneath it. There was a flash and they were gone. Another person began to yell, “No, no, no, no, no!”

Dhava leapt. I knew that the forces of the universe, of chaos, of all the terrible other things were growing too great. “Everybody out!” I yelled to the remaining group. The one who'd first yelled was too slow. In the rippling orange of the fire, the body of the hunter moved out of the house we were beside, grabbing and tearing at the flesh of our companion, oblivious to the roof it had just left from under. It walked through the fire as twinkling embers floated up through the night air, catching on the clothes of the monster and crackling up into the firmament. The beast moved so slow that it seemed impossible that it could catch us, but we knew they always got somebody. Everyday we dealt with possible predators, but the ones that looked like the people we'd loved, those always caught us off guard.

I grabbed my pack as Dhava tore off behind me. Combined with the full moon, the light of the spreading fire illuminated the face of the creature for just a moment as I froze to watch it. Sayer's face turned to me, but it was different. It seemed grey and blurred, a poor copy cast as a joke. I could hardly focus on it, the image indistinct, as if it occupied many positions, many worlds, at one moment. The horror staggered toward me. This was not my friend.

Calmly, the other member of our original group stood up

and fired one bullet through the back of the false Sayer's skull. As the monster fell, the man turned the gun on himself. I felt my stomach well up inside of me. I was no leader. The second shot rattled off the walls of the valley.

I caught Dhava just as she made it to the bridge she'd used to cross over and meet us. She scrambled up to the top of the steel beams, the rivetheads catching the moonlight, mimicking the strings of lights from a world we'd never see again. We locked eyes. The true fear had gripped her.

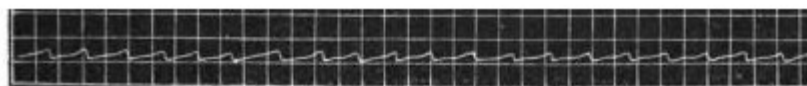
I thought of going with her, but couldn't. There'd be no more group for me for now. Being with people didn't enhance the journey, only distorted it. Everyone would be taken, brightly and intensely and only in a moment, and it was better to go alone, an inner world all my own. As the stars held eternally behind Dhava's eyes—a casement holding what could have been—she turned and was swallowed by the darkness.

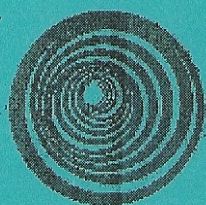
There was a roar behind me and I turned back toward the chaos. More of the hunters. I ran, only turning back for a moment to hear Dhava's knees and palms slapping the cold metal as she rushed to safety, the sounds growing weaker as she reached the far shore.

I knew that eventually the hunters would recede, flitting through the cracks in our world back to their own, but still I held tightly onto the Navigator's knife. Circling the town, I waited until Orcaria grew silent. Curling my toes in my boots, I felt the warm wool of the socks that had almost gone with my friend. My protector. There'd be other beautiful moments, I knew that, but they were in the future.

I found a bench in the park and stretched out, a blanket atop me. The Navigator's maps played in my mind as I stared up at the night sky, superimposing the various lines and markers on the network of stars that, in another time, offered their own salvation. The worlds and the galaxies beyond faded from my vision. There'd be no deliverance from above.

I closed my eyes and saw the maps. There was a path south marked in the notes, fragmentary and apocryphal. That was where I would go. That was where I would find the open lands that offered safe quarter.





BETA DECAY HOUSE