

RULES OF THE RUN: NINE STORIES AND A NOVELLA

by

Katrina Smith
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Committee:

Susan Stevens-Wright Director

C. [Signature]

William [Signature]

Deborah [Signature]

Jamie S. Cooper

Department Chairperson

Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

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Rules of the Run: Nine Stories and a Novella

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Katrina Smith
Bachelor of Arts
George Mason University, 1987

Director: Susan Shreve, Professor
Department of Creative Writing

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DEDICATION

For Ethan.

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Many thanks to family, friends, and the creative writing department at George Mason University.

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ABSTRACT

RULES OF THE RUN: NINE STORIES AND A NOVELLA

Katrina Smith, M.F.A.

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Thesis Director: Susan Shreve

This creative thesis consists of nine stories and a novella set in a postapocalyptic landscape. It follows a group of pre-teen to teenaged survivors as they attempt to survive, and thrive, in adverse conditions.

GHOST STORIES

Guys. Guys. Did you hear that?

I didn't hear anything. What was it?

--There ain't nothing out there. Go back to sleep.

A voice, maybe. Kind of? Like, screaming.

--Jesus, Rodgers. Shut up. You're scaring Ronnie.

Well, I heard it. It happened.

I'm not scared. I'm not scared!

There it is again.

--That wasn't nothing but the wind.

Like I don't know what the wind sounds like. That wasn't the wind. No way that was wind. That was a woman.

...

Or aliens landing, maybe.

--For fuck's sake.

You don't know.

--I do know, Rodgers. I know very well that it ain't aliens because I know what a windstorm sounds like.

Oh, yeah? Then why did it sound like howling?

...

It sounds...cold, anyway. Kind of makes me shiver.

...

Hey, Joshua. Wonder what they're doing in the girls' room, hey? Bet they're all in one big, soft bed together, naked--

Somnolent, Rodgers. Blissfully asleep on pristine white featherbeds, dreaming beautiful dreams about you. Really living the fantasy.

What, you never think about girls, Weasel?

Right now I'm thinking about sleep.

--Shut your mouth, Rodgers, before I shut it for you.

You want to give it--

Shh! Patrol.

...

...

God, what is that? There it is again. Like some crazy animal... what's that word, Weasel?

Ululating?

Yeah. that's it. Undulating. You're good with words, you know?

Thanks.

--You two trying for a trip to the closet? You're lucky that Walker kept going by as is.

They won't be back for an hour. Not until midnight.

Three sparks in the darkness bring sight. A candle gutters to life, a halo of light struggling to carve a circle out of the black, in the hands of a towheaded boy of five or six. Two identical boys stir, rising upwards from the depths of their dreams, and in seconds three sets of sleep-clouded eyes focus on where Weasel, Joshua, and Rodgers lay propped on their elbows.

What you guys doing?

Is it dawn?

--No. Go back to sleep.

Can't. You and Rodgers woke us up.

Good job, Rodgers.

It wasn't me. It was the aliens. Right, One-Two-Three? singing, or whatever that is.

--For the last time, Rodgers, there ain't no aliens. Three, put out the light and all of you shut your eyes. You ain't even supposed to have a candle.

We need a story.

Story! Story! Story!

Uncy Josh will tell you a story. Won't you, Uncy?

--I will kill you, Rodgers.

Anytime you want to give it a go, Josh.

--I am not telling--

STORY! STORY! STORY!

--Fine! Here's your story: There were once three boys. They were stupid and made noise when they were supposed to be sleeping, and a monster bang bang banged on the door until it found its way in and ate their faces--

Alive?

--Yes, alive. Anyway the monster ate their faces until nothing was left but their eyeballs, and the monster saved those to peel like boiled eggs for breakfast. The end.

Did it hurt?

--Yes, it hurt. Of course it hurt. You want me to try eating your face, see if it hurts? Jesus. Go to sleep.

That isn't even a good ghost story.

--No one said anything about good. Blow out the damn candle before we all end up caught.

We can't sleep.

We need another story.

Tell us about the voices in the wind!

Yeah, the wind! The wind!

--There ain't nothing in the wind.

Give them a real story before they wake the whole dorm up, Josh.

Yeah. That lame ass story before was, like, cheating.

--I wasn't cheating nothing. I told them a story like I said I would.

Please, Mr. Josh? Tell us a real scary story--

We can handle it! We're five--

Practically *grown*.

Hush down, littles. You can't hear Josh tell you a story if you're talking.

...

--Fine. Ok. You want scary?... hand over that candle.

...

--Okay. Once upon this earth there was a shining city by the shore, right? With long avenues like arteries, and buildings with tall spires for bones, and all kinds of fun things like movie theaters and roller coasters. Beautiful gardens filled with flowers and statues and food. Squares filled with people. It was built by people and people lived there so much that the city kind of got... what is it? That thing where it comes alive?

Sentient?

--Nah. Less alive than that.

Embodied?

--Yeah, I guess. Yeah. It was embodied with the hopes and dreams of the people who lived there. It became like, the extended body and blood of everyone who lived in the shining city. And the city needed the people to stay alive, too, because all its arteries and bones had to be tended. Birds couldn't do it, dogs couldn't do it. Only humans could. Because of... because of love. The people loved their city.

Joshua stares past the thin light connecting them, past the rows and rows of barely visible bodies sleeping all around, into the dark. Next to him One-Two-Three sit piled on each other, a tangle of limbs and rapt faces. Just inside the circle of light Ronnie

rests his head against Weasel's leg and Rodgers sits with his shoulders hunched over something he holds in his hands.

--The city was the best place on the entire earth to live, because people took care of the city and each other. And they were happy. The people were. Sometimes they didn't know it, but they were. For a long time, the city beside the ocean prospered season after season. New people traveled from their own places to visit the shining city's streets and float in the ocean. To witness how the people who lived in the city were made happy by caring for the city's heart, rising and falling with the measure of the city's days, living symba....symbo...

Symbiotically.

--Symbiotically. Yes.

...

--But this poet said this thing once, he said, nothing gold can stay, and I guess that's true. It must be, because of what happened to the city next.

Ronnie stares down at his hands on the blanket. Rodgers has drawn back into the darkness so that only his body remains, a rigid shape underneath the drape of his blanket. At Joshua's feet the three wide-eyed boys barely breathe.

--A stranger came to the city, wearing a smile as a mask. Hiding behind it so no one could see inside. He walked right in the front door, pretending he loved the city just like everyone else did. And the people in the city got sick. Not just a few of them, but all of them. The only ones who weren't sick were the kids, the ones who didn't know how to

tend anything yet. Everyone who knew how to love the city already-- all the people who kept the city shining-- the sickness cut them down, laughing and smiling as it came.

...

--The people fought back every way they knew how. With containment suits and medicines and masks long and pointed like the beaks of birds. With hand sanitizer and with graves. With love and shovels and fear and hope. They fought the hardest they could to save the city and each other. They looked everywhere for the stranger's red hands and his smiling face. He was always hiding right where they'd just looked.

Somewhere beyond the candle there is the deep rasp of a snore. Someone else turns over, the scratch of a blanket shockingly loud in the quiet room. None of those listening seem to notice.

--Ultimately it didn't matter. Antibiotics didn't save the city. Neither did hope. Before long the stranger opened his arms and walked through empty streets, and everywhere you could hear him laughing while he reaped the dead, filling his empty insides with suffering.

--Only just the children heard him laughing, because that's all there was. Just kids left in the ruined city, alone. They didn't know how to make the city better. They couldn't tend each other. They couldn't even tend themselves. It was like the world was breaking, to see the city fall. Around them, the city burned. Falling to ash, rust and decay. Spires smashing to dust on the roads below. Everything crooked. Nothing shining. And all the dead--

...

...

Joshua turns away from the others and coughs. In the fractured light there is the impression of staggered movement. His hand rises to the level of his eyes. The silence stretches on. Weasel begins to speak.

But all the dead, the city's caretakers, they hadn't really gone anywhere. They stayed with the city they'd loved, walking the streets in their new, ghostly forms whispering in the ears of their beloved. They watched their children fighting to do right, forging a new path in this crooked city. And the ghosts stayed because of love, too, but also because the shadow the stranger cast was so big the kids couldn't help but live inside it, and the kids grew heavy carrying around all that sadness. The dead saw this and they linked hands, one with another. Above the city they traced a spinning circle until their voices carried on the wind, sending all their lost messages to the flesh and blood below. Burning away the stranger's shadow so the Lost could see again. They're still up there. Doing their best to protect everyone left in the crooked city. On nights when the wind weeps over the world as is, you can hear their voices guiding those left behind. Reminding them that bodies leave, but love stays.

...

...

--I... I got something in my throat before.

It's okay. We all know the ending.

One, Two and Three fling themselves from their bedrolls and onto Joshua, the candle wobble-wobbling heedlessly, shadows expanding against the light thrown

everywhere, Joshua's eyes opening wide. Gradually he hugs them back, rocks them. After a moment they fall back into their sleeping bags. Their eyes slip closed almost before they finish lying down. In moments they are breathing deep.

Light seeps from between Joshua's fingers as he cups a hand around the candle. Captured in the glow's last moment, Weasel stares upwards through the cloudy skylight overhead, towards the screaming wind and the night sky. Rodgers yawns and scratches himself underneath his blankets. Ronnie is curled up close to Weasel. Joshua looks at each of them in turn, purses his lips, and blows everything to darkness.

WHAT IS MEANT BY MERCY

The men showed up two days after the quarantine began. Two long days after the walls grew in translucent arcs from the earth to the sky, clouded mercury glass swirling like a living thing. The scratching voice on her emergency radio said this technology was made to protect them. Lucy imagined the announcer, pale and sweating, leaning against his microphone to make the words hum like so many distant bees. *We are not the only ones*, he said. He said, *the quarantine will keep everyone safe, inside the walls and outside, until this disease has run its full course. Stay with us. Promised updates are forthcoming from the authority. Stay.* The emergency signal's three tones cut the announcer's voice in half until only static remained.

Lucy watched the first man vault over the back fence and run across her yard. He looked at her whole outside world, from one side of the fence to another, the same way she used to look for the best places to stay silent and still when the neighborhood played hide and go seek. When he found the deep, empty grave she'd dug yesterday he slid laughing across the grass. She watched him climb into the grave through the slot left between two crooked boards nailed over the broken windowpane. From the bottom of the hole she thought he must be able to see a piece of blue sky and nothing else. Then the curious thing happened: he melted into the ground like a magician, transmuting cloth and flesh. He became one with the earth.

The space where he had been was nothing but the same viscous mud filling the bottom of the hole. The same mud still caked against her nail beds. Shock, and then

panic, because how would she be able to plant what needed to be planted, next to the hydrangea and the rhododendron and the small Japanese maple, if a man were already there?

Her mother taught her every planting has a place. Lavender and yarrow in sunlight and sand, irises and daylilies in full light, cucumbers and pole beans pulled into a hill. Lettuces worked well in shade, her mother said. You can find a place for just about anything, if you prepare the soil right, but how did you prepare it for something like this?

Lucy closed her eyes and leaned her head against the board, two ragged French braids leaning with her. She rubbed the ends of her braids with her thumb and forefinger and tried not to breathe. The airless house festered. One week without electricity now and the last four days of it stifling with the smell of rot as everything organic decayed. One week without electricity, two days since the water worked. She thought vaguely of pumps, of pipes running through the walls, cushioned next to electric cables in nests of pink insulation, of the subtle magic of indoor plumbing. Her lips were dry and hot. The one beam of sunlight allowed by the crack stretched behind her as she walked through the pin-neat living room, past her nest of blankets and pillows on the landing at the bottom of the stairs, and into the kitchen.

Terrible. Who knew what the man's hands would do under the earth. She became vaguely aware that this was not the kind of response she should be having. She should be asking how he had disappeared. She should be calling the police—were there still police? How had the man disappeared? But how had the walls risen? Impossible things were happening everywhere. Past the town's limits liquid silver hummed, bisecting her sky. In

the garden a man turned to clay and ash and melted into the earth, slipping out of the world almost before she knew he existed. Upstairs a red and black thing slept in her mother's dressing gown, swelling and stinking as it transformed into the unthinkable.

She turned the tap. Clean water rushed out like nothing was wrong. She almost cried at this. She pressed her face against a cut crystal goblet stolen from the china hutch—the last clean glass in the house—and drank the cold water standing at the sink, her feet sunk into her mother's yellow and blue rag rug.

If she made a kind of fort with the thinnest blanket the stairway wouldn't loom above her while she slept in the nest. Otherwise the way upstairs was a solid blackness possessed by the breathless, motionless thing in the bed. Mr. the Rabbit suggested just blocking the upstairs out of their world as if it had never been, and Mr. the Rabbit was an expert thinker. You could tell from his bowtie and his high, aquiline nose and the way his one remaining glass eye reflected the sunlight. At thirteen, Lucy thought she had outgrown Mr. the Rabbit, but when she'd gone to look for the shovel there he was, sitting on a shelf in the garage next to her lacrosse stick with his long ears drooping against a bottle of antifreeze, and now he lived in the nest with her. He was most useful at night, when it was very dark and very quiet.

She was pushing a tack into the wall when someone shouted outside. Someone with an ugly voice, and she knew she shouldn't look—this had been one of her last promises, because what good was there left to see—but what if the man had turned from earth back into skin and bone, leaving her the hole it had taken all night to prepare?

When Lucy pressed her eye to the sliver of sunlight a second man stood at her gate, his head twisting side to side like a hissing serpent. He had coarse black hair and the hopeless look in his eye that she knew came with the last stages of the sickness. A flushed red haze stretched across the surface of his face. The man stumbled and coughed, and as his limbs twisted involuntarily together she realized he had a gun, a pistol maybe, held in one trembling hand. He looked as if he would sleep soon, though his eyes hadn't bled. As she watched, his head rose and he coughed again, and as he coughed he pulled the handle on one of the two swinging doors to her wooden garden gate.

The mud shifted in the grave.

The sick man's voice was the thin scrape of a broken reed. He tried to shout but could barely speak. The cough covered everything, big, sucking coughs. A kind of subsuming cough. You could get lost inside that cough, she thought, and no one would find you again.

She lost sight of him for a second as he doubled over in pain. When he reappeared confusion and anger warred in the long lines of his narrow body. He leaned against the gate to catch his breath.

I forgot to lock the gate. His gaze raked the side of the house. She found herself pulling away, her chest constricting in answer to the look in his eyes, or maybe because, underneath the pale, yellow-sick skin and the racking cough, he looked like her friend Jaycen Noice's dad.

She ran for the nest, her socks slipping over the floor, and threw herself face down on top of the comforters and pillows. She curled around Mr. the Rabbit. The gate

creaked. The man's cough barked. There was a splintering concussion of sound, like a massive branch cracking, that seemed to go on and on, and then, layered behind the first sound, a second crack.

Lucy tried to remember what Mr. Noice had said to her the last time things had been normal. Probably *how's school? How's your mother? Does she need help with anything around the house?* He had brown eyes, not red ones. One Sunday on the front porch her unsmiling mother called them *storybook eyes*. That Sunday she was a pale ghost in her slippers and sundress, flipping tips of ash from her cigarette while Mr. Noice and Jaycen fixed the pothole in the driveway. She sounded as if his kind eyes were a trick she couldn't believe in. Lucy was never sure if this was she couldn't stand being on the receiving end of the church's mercy or if it was something more troubling with the widowed Mr. Noice and his model son. Filling a pothole, making a dinner, keeping her lipstick red and perfect while she ladled out soup to the homeless—this was the kind of thing she and Lucy would have done together in the name of mercy once. Her mother's continued presence on Sundays had become more habit than faith. Mr. Noice and Jaycen started coming over after church a few months after her father left. They'd clean the gutters, retille the bathroom. They stayed for dinner every week. Used to. Used to come over every Sunday.

Silence. The television didn't work. She couldn't start the radio. It was almost dead and Lucy couldn't remember where the batteries were kept. Everything outside was silence. She looked against the wall and tried not to care where Jaycen's dad might be. She practiced holding her breath in increments of ten. She recited the poem they were

learning in English class and tried to remember the trumpet fingerings for the John Phillip Sousa march they should be playing in band at just this moment.

Everything silence. When she couldn't remember the Sousa she started over. She held her breath in increments of ten. Halfway through reciting the poem for the third time she found herself drawn forward by some invisible urgency, and there she was, in front of the gap in the boards.

The man who looked like Adam Noice was gone and the back gate hung with one side closed and the other open. The grave in the far corner lay empty. The man from the hole stood leaning against the half-opened gate holding Mr. Noice's gun in his hand. Thick mud covered him completely. His clean white teeth glowed against the darkness on his face and he coughed blood. As he spat it out next to the hydrangea she realized there was more of it dripping blackly onto the ground beside him.

"That could have gone better," the man said aloud. His head dropped down against his arm and he breathed audibly in and out and in and out, big, jagged breaths.

"God damn," the man said. He stared past the gate, towards where Mr. Noice had stood with his red-pink eyes. "God damn it." He looked like a living statue. Lucy saw a man like that covered in paint at a festival once. He moved as if made of clockwork and string every time you dropped a penny in the box. She hadn't screamed the first time he did that, even though she wanted to. Her mother had called her brave and squeezed her hand as she laughed.

He unbuttoned his coat one button at a time, breathing heavily all the while, before he pulled himself up onto two feet and opened the closed side of the gate. It swung

inwards, spilling the ruin of a man down in front of him, a body with coarse black hair and red watery stars for eyes. Lucy saw the eyes first and then a concave, stringy hole where a jaw and cheek should have been. Someone was screaming, high and thin, screaming and screaming, and somehow it was her, and somehow she was against the far wall of the living room, as far away as she could get from the window.

She ran out of sound. The sunlight dropped against the floor in one small beam and she watched it from the motionless living room.

“Girl,” she heard the man call from outside. “Are you alone in there, girl?”

There was dust in the bit of sunlight and on the coffee table next to the magazines. She would have to dust before the day was out with a soft white cloth and a can of polish.

“Girl,” he said again. “I’m a nice guy. I’m not sick, I promise. I won’t shoot you.”

A cheetah stretched full length on the cover of the travel magazine, lounging against an African savannah. She wondered if things were okay there, where the cheetah was. If the kids on safari were always on safari now and if it was all nights of big purple diamond skies and flat places without walls and sitting next to their parents holding hands when the lions roared.

She heard him hack up more blood and his voice was breathless and tired when he spoke again. “Come to the window if you don’t believe me.” He made a sound like laughter, but dry. “I couldn’t hurt a god damn thing right now. Least of all a strong girl like you.”

The dust continued to sink in the sunlight. It was incrementally closer, her one beam. The setting sun dispatched a shadow vanguard, deepening pools of darkness

preparing for the night. She crept towards the window. She stood with her eye closed against the crack for a long time. The man didn't speak.

"I had a girl once," he said eventually. "Pigtails. Wore socks with ruffles. Do you have pigtails, girl?" He coughed again.

"Do you really have a little girl?" she asked, through the window, before she could stop herself.

"No. But I could have, before this."

He lay a few feet away, propped up against the fence between the body and the hole. He wore a kind of uniform in dark navy with silver accents and a badge with a three drawn over a pyramid on his heart, the jacket open to reveal a white undershirt. She could see the shirt was sopping wet from here, black with blood at the center and lightening to red at the edges, down near his stomach where the bullet punctured him. His head drooped to one side and he looked pale, but not yellow-gray like Mr. Noice had been, and his eyes were still clear. He was the first living thing she had seen in three days.

"Nice grave you dug," he said. "Convenient."

"It's not for you," she said, angry. "You leave it alone. It's not yours."

"It's not for me?" he said. His lips trembled. She was reminded of the way her grandfather's mouth slipped up and down when he tried to hide a smile. "Whose grave is it then, sweetie?"

"Don't call me sweetie," she said, tough, but she sniffled at the end and ruined it. She rubbed the wet away from her face. "Don't call me that."

“What should I call you?” the man said. He pulled off his gloves and started feeling at the edge of the wound in his side.

“You shouldn’t do that. You could get an infection and die.”

The man laughed, a phlegmy, joyless sound morphing into the hiss of suppressed pain. “You’re funny,” he said, when he had his breath back. “That is happening sooner rather than later anyway.”

“Why?” she said.

“Well, little girl,” he said, “When someone shoots you with a great big gun, it tends to put a damper on living your life.”

“No,” she said, “I mean, why did he attack you?”

His face grew serious and he looked up, above himself, at the red maple tree motionless in the afternoon sky. “It’s hard to say. Lots of people attacking other people these days.” His hands trembled. Sweat sheened across his face in the orange dusk of fall.

She thought of Mr. Noice spreading gravel in the driveway, his narrow shoulders hunched over a shovel. She felt numb. “I knew him. He was nice.”

“Lots of people are nice when it doesn’t count. Christ, I wish this nice man of yours had killed me with his kindness.”

What did you do in times like this? What did Mother do? Recite the litany of the past. “Do you want to pray?” she asked.

“No.”

A moment later he asked, “What are you doing in there?”

“Praying,” she said. *Our Father.*

“Waiting for some savior,” he said, “Someone to marshal humanity’s lingering scraps against the darkness.” He laughed in a cold, metallic way. “Kid, that’s not a thing happens in real life.”

Her hands knit together tightly. *Hallowed be thy name.*

“Don’t pray for me. I never had religion before,” he said. “I don’t see taking it up as a hobby now.”

Help us to live. All of us. Amen.

“You got a favorite animal?” he said.

“I like bees,” she said after a moment, her hands dropping to her sides. “bees are always talking in one voice and they help each other. And they dance,” she said. *They are never alone.*

“Might as well pray to your bees,” he said, and coughed and coughed and spat. “It’ll do you as much good.”

“Bees are helpers,” she said. “They help each other and they aren’t selfish or afraid.”

“Girl,” he said, “I would like to take this opportunity to tell your god this is a prime time to do some saving. Matter of fact, if he would extend his magnanimous mercy and resurrect my burgeoning corpse, I’ll use my voice to do His work until the end of days. Hear me?” he yelled. A flock of birds startled out of the nearest crabapple tree, thin black vees slicing against the dusk.

“God doesn’t work that way,” she said, although this is not something she believes herself so much as it is something her mother believes. “God doesn’t negotiate.”

“Yeah,” the man said. “I don’t negotiate with terrorists either.”

He looked around the yard at the Japanese maple and the small path made from river stones and the pagoda-shaped bird feeder and began to talk to himself. “Won’t be spending that easy hazard pay now.” He spit the words out one by one and laughed again.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

He closed and opened his eyes. “I was working security for the Wall rising. Supposed to be secret,” he said. “Only the thing no one was supposed to know was the thing everyone knew. There were riots. I got left behind.”

“Left by who?” Lucy asked.

The man looked up at her window and twisted his mouth into a mocking smile. He put one hand over the patch on his left breast. “GIDEON,” he said.

“I don’t know who they are,” she said.

He laughed, a sharp bark of sound. “They build walls,” he said.

“The people who are keeping us safe,” she said, slowly.

“Tell that to your friend here.” His manic eyes rattled in their casings and he began to breathe rapidly, his chest heaving up and down. His blood transfused the earth beneath. “Not that he’s wrong, is he?”

“I don’t know,” she said, confused.

“No one does,” he said. “No one knows a damn thing at this point, other than death.”

The man fumbled with an inner pocket and pulled out four round, powdery tablets, the same cheery brightness of sweet and sour candies, crushing them one at a time between his teeth.

“What’s that?” she asked.

The man rubbed his temples and shifted irritably against the fence, his hand jerking shut protectively around the last one. She could see a round, pink spot on the top of his head where his brown hair thinned. “Has anyone ever told you that you ask too many questions, kid? Jesus. Your parents never taught you nothing?”

The wind blew some leaves across the back yard and into his lap. She stood silently at the window biting the inside of her cheek. She watched the wind move the leaves around and the hydrangea shiver and the man’s blood transfuse the ground. He breathed in and out and in and out, big, thick breaths.

“It’s called Lazarus. Might as well be magic beans,” he said, after a while. He shuddered again, this time with something like pleasure. “Fairytale pills. Second chances for times like this. Probably a placebo to get us in the goddamn door of this place to begin with, but you got to do as you’re told. Right? Am I right, little bee?”

He laughed again. “What I am is dead, little bee,” he said. Lucy said nothing. She should have said nothing from the beginning, the way she’d promised her mother when it all began. *You forget about being helpful. You stop trusting strangers.* And here he was, this man with his uniform and his fleshy, pale face and his killing gun, and kind, good Mr. Noice, who she could have talked to, was dead.

“You’re still there. Where else you going to go?” the man said. He looked overhead, the sun already behind him, distorted and stretched by the silver Wall. He coughed and spat and twitched, watching everywhere as the shadows drew closer. “Getting dark. Cold.”

She watched him start to shiver as the temperature dropped and said nothing. He took a flask out of a pocket and pulled on it, tucking his other arm into his armpit for warmth. She waited and watched as he sang to himself and laughed and punched the ground, waited and watched until his face was nothing but a pale negative against the black.

“You probably deserved it,” she said, loud enough for him to hear, and left him alone in the dark.

Lucy stood in the middle of the nest, both arms around Mr. the Rabbit and her favorite quilt, the one with yellow and blue rosebuds, around them both. Three tall birthday candles stuck in a piece of play dough burned on the lowest stair, throwing a concentric halo against the wall. Lucy leaned in towards the rainbow-striped pillars.

The way upstairs stretched open above them like the mouth of a patient beast.

“What do you think?” she asked, and Mr. the Rabbit whispered in her ear.

“No, I don’t want to,” she said. “I don’t. So you can just stop that.” She threw Mr. the Rabbit down into the nest and carefully turned the red dial on the emergency radio, the announcer’s voice crackling as it fought against the interference.

“Manpower short... ference from... Wall... main calm... ot forgot. ..bless.” Her fingers shook as they twisted the dial in incremental movements, the voice halting and fading, never clear. She heard the first few bars of the national anthem, one note and another note and buzzing radio waves in between before nothing but static, worse, somehow, than the silence.

She pushed a few greasy hairs out of her face and turned the radio off. Mr. the Rabbit’s missing eye stared up at her, a pocked, sightless hole. She unbraided her hair. She sat in her blankets and let the candles gutter down to nothing while she poked her finger into the eye socket and felt all the way into the middle of his head, down to the end of his soft stuffing.

“Fine,” she whispered to him when the last candle died. “You were right.” She pushed the bits of his fluff back into his head and tucked him under her arm. She turned on her precious princess flashlight and headed up the stairs, stopping on each one to shine the image of a crown against the wall and the stair and the ceiling, up into the smell.

The stairs creaked in the darkness almost as soon as her bare feet slipped against the wood. She never moved around the house once night fell. The darkness breathed around her, waiting until her weak, shrinking light passed to cover and possess all things. The closer she came to the room at the top of the stairs the stronger the smell became, blood and pus and pain, and something else. Offal. She remembered her homonyms and giggled. *Awful offal.*

She stopped in her mother’s doorway, the beam cutting at her own feet, and didn’t breathe. Without looking she could see the swollen thing on the bed, the red stars for

eyes, the flesh purple and green like a fading bruise as it decayed. A tube of rose scented lotion still stood on the bedside table and Lucy caught the phantom scent of it, a slow tide rising underneath everything else.

“Mama, there’s a man outside,” she said, and waited.

There was no answer from the bed. Lucy pushed the flashlight across the floor and towards the middle of the room. First the white bedskirt, then the silver comforter and the white sheets, her mother’s arms folded peacefully the way Lucy had left them four days ago. She stopped, the light shaking as it focused on the praying hands, waxen and still, folded on her arched chest.

“There is a man outside,” she said, “and he killed Mr. Noice. But Mr. Noice was sick anyway and also he shot this man and the man is dying now too and I don’t know what to do.”

“I know we are supposed to have mercy for the unfortunate,” she said, “but what about strangers. What do I do about strangers?”

“Mama,” she said. “Please just tell me what to do.” The flashlight shook harder, the crown dancing up and down over her mother’s body until her hand moved it of its own volition towards the pillow.

The face was nothing like a face at all. Whatever this was, it was not something that belonged above the earth. It was impossible for Lucy to process. There was an impression of blackness, greenness, blood, trapped gases, bloat. A distended tongue lashing the air. A slice of glassy eye in a slick of red-brown.

Lucy watched the unrecognizable thing for the space of two trapped breaths before she turned, the flashlight swinging across the floor and ceiling and wall. She slid and tripped on the stairs and did not stop until she was inside the nest. She told herself bedtime stories. She sat and rocked and hummed, licking the salt from her lips, until her own eyes started to swell.

Goodnight, nobody, she thought. *Goodnight, room*.

When the first light turned black to grey she pushed the blankets and Mr. the Rabbit away and went to her window.

The man's body sagged against the fence at a wrong angle, a boneless, floppy angle. She felt a new fear rising. She pushed her mouth to the broken glass and willed him alive.

"Hey," she said. "Hey. Please." She beat on the boards with her fists. She had three splinters digging underneath her skin before the man groaned and winced, his head rolling heedlessly on his neck.

"Thank you," she said. "Oh, thank you," as the man's head shrugged. Beneath the mud she could see the mark of an ending written on his skin. The man stared into the weak sun of his last day.

"Why did he kill you, really? Lucy asked.

The man pulled his head upright and laughed, wiping a bit of blood from his lip with a palsied hand. “Sure,” he said hoarsely. “Sure. Why not? He killed me to avenge his son.”

“Jayden was sick with the virus,” she said, watching him. His locker at school, in the section with the other seniors, unopened. His stand in the percussion section without sheet music. He hadn’t been the only one sick, but he’d been one of the first to walk the halls coughing into napkins and crumpled up notebook paper, and then one of the first to stop coming at all.

“Figured that was it.”

“You couldn’t have killed him.” She put one hand on either side of the gap in the boards and pushed her forehead against the board until the pressure against her head blossomed into a dull ache.

His eyes inched sideways until they found her window. “Someone did,” he said. “Do you think for a father it matters who, so much as it matters that he has someone to blame?” He looked with effort at Adam Noice’s corpse. “If that someone wears a company patch, so much the better. No one wants to blame management. Anyway, once the Walls rose, what he did me was a mercy.”

“The Walls are coming back down soon,” she said. “That’s what the radio is saying. Once everyone is better.”

“Sure, kid,” the man said.

“They are,” she said. “They can’t leave us here forever.”

“It’s nice you believe that.” The man’s lips turned purple against his round, bloodless cheeks. “Where are your parents, little bee?”

She thought of the thing upstairs. “Nowhere,” she said, for the first time, the words jumbling and garbled and running together as she began to cry. “Nowhere anymore.”

“That’s the way,” he said, and closed his eyes. Without him looking through her—at the house, not her, she reminded herself—without his eyes looking, he was older than she’d thought, the whiskered lines around his mouth sunken like a man who could have had a girl her age. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” she said.

His eyelids rolled open in surprise, two slits of grey ocean. “For everything,” he said, and died.

She stood at the window on this, the second day, and watched his body cooling and the birds flying and falling from the sky above the backyard and the wind rolling against the very tops of the yellow and orange leaves. The man on the emergency radio had nothing to say.

Later, when the day’s indian summer turned into a cool autumn night and the stars came out one by one over the house, brighter and clearer than she’d ever seen, she found the hammer and pulled out the boards, one by one, and climbed through the broken window. She knelt next to him in the mud and sat for a moment with a dark flashlight in her hand. She felt the rough wool of his company coat and the flat, empty pockets of his pants. His skin held an echo of the afternoon sunlight: he was not as cold as she expected.

The puckered wound in his side was red with newness and she wondered that something so small and fresh-seeming could kill. She drew the lids of his eyes down, one by one, so that he was sleeping before she rolled him into the hole she had meant for her mother's grave and promised him to the earth.

ORIGIN

This story is in process. It will explain the way the Marshal enticed most of the Lost to join him, some indications of his identity, and the presence of Lucy, from the second story, as the Marshal's first Sister. Louisa, Turtle, and Flea will also make appearances.

LANGUAGE OF THE GULLS

Louisa Mae quotes the scripture: “The earth was formless and empty.”

We’re walking on the beach and Louisa Mae is moving slipshod through the sand, her ankles bowing and creaking, arms askew like a scarecrow girl. The hem of her skirt is snapping against the sea air and she looks back over her shoulder, but not at me.

“Louie,” I say. “Look around, not up.”

She smiles her face in two and keeps staring at the sky overhead. “I’m going to swim in the clouds, Turtle. That’s what the Lord’s Marshal says, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Whatever you do, stay close,” I tell her. She’s no good at standing still.

She stops to hug me like I am the one who needs looking after. She’s burning up inside. There’s a hot, unfocused look in her eyes. She’s like this a lot lately.

“I’ll be with the gulls, Charlie Turtle.” She bends dream-like at the waist and her hands flutter as she pushes herself out over the sand, the blonde hair we share hanging behind her like a comet. It doesn’t take her long before she’s a ways ahead.

I follow, wishing she wasn’t so far away and knowing I can’t catch her when she wants to run. We’re alone out here. We’re probably safe. We need food. I tell myself all the reasons we are here, and then, I tell myself a story:

There was once a boy with a sister. The boy and the sister took care of each other and they protected each other and walked on the beach where nothing hurt them, ever, and things were okay even though the word okay meant something it hadn’t before.

The sun hasn't been out in three weeks and when the sea rolls it gives off a weird, glistening shine, part liquid metal and green algae mixed with brown from the seaweed it leaves in little piles all over the shore. The beach curves in around itself from one end to another. There's a striped lighthouse on the point behind us and a narrow spit of rocks heading out into the ocean on the other end of the crescent. The stretch of beach closest to the water is covered with layer upon layer of yellow sand but past that, towards the boardwalk with the FUN IN THE SUN! store and the place where we used to buy French fries it becomes all tumbled sharp rocks thrown down without a pattern and left out to dry. The rocks look like a bunch of rejects, from stones big enough to hide behind to smooth round pebbles, but the sand is the thing that doesn't belong. They used to bring it in truck by truck, filling the beach back up every summer until now, the sea sucking it back down every winter. Now the rocks are winning, swollen stone molars poking up through the sand everywhere, sometimes in the middle of the beach. Louisa likes them.

We are almost in the middle of the crescent where the sand is still fat. Louisa is heading, I think, for the rocky point, where she can stand on the warm rocks and be her happiest. She goes screaming off, so far ahead of me that she is half her normal size, after a pile of seaweed I am sure she wants to wear as a crown.

You can live off the seaweed, it turns out. It doesn't taste as bad as you think especially if you get lucky enough to find a couple of crabs or a gull that hasn't been dead too long. Not something I ever thought I would need to know. Last week two kids fought over who got to claim some seaweed half that size. Louisa and I, we don't fight. We run.

The seaweed streams down past Louisa's shoulders as she walks in stately figure eights and laughs at the ocean. The rip in one of the three skirts she wears, one over the other, is so big I can see a piece of the sky and a piece of the ocean through the same hole, but she walks like a queen should walk. She's as much a queen as anyone else is, I guess. All of us left here are Kings and Queens of the Nothing.

She's graciously extended a hand for the air to kiss when there's movement from behind the rock closest to her.

I let her go too far. Too far away to get to in time, but I have to try. All I can see is my unknowing sister offering her hand to the Drifter who will kill her or worse, and then there will be just me. I can see her face in my mind, all wide open in surprise and fear, and that's how I miss the pile of driftwood and twisted rocks piled high.

"Louisa! Louie--"

The driftwood catches me right in the shins. I am weightless for a second before I drop, the sand spraying out around my legs on impact. The rocks break my fall and what feels like my shoulder. I can hear her screaming in the high, mocking language of the gulls but I can't see her from where I fell. My shoulder throbs and I shut my eyes tight against the pain and the sound of her voice and reach for the will to stand.

One day the boy and his sister went to the beach. They took their places as kings and queens of the world. At first, they were afraid. They peered down from the distant peaks of their seaside mountains at the empty beach. They crept timidly across the sand. But when nothing drew forth to meet them, they became careless. Soon they leapt from the snowy tips of the mountains into the surf and danced with nymphs clad in seaweed

dresses and were happy. But Evil can't stand happiness, and when it heard their joy echoing across the land it came, lusting after the queen's seaweed crown and her ready laughter, and the king-- the stupid king was too far away to help her. All he could do was fall down the mountain to end broken by the shore. Luckily the queen was stronger than anyone knew. She turned her laughter into a sonic scream and shattered the world over.

I throw myself over the rock pile and back onto my feet. Louisa is twirling, a scrap of newspaper from behind the rock caught in her whirlwind, twisting from the ground to her waist to the sky and away towards the water. There is no man. No Drifter, no Walker, no gang of Lost. Just newspaper and Louisa being Louisa. Just the usual danger there. I want to call her back and tell her we are going home, that leaving the safety of the others and the Marshal's complex was a mistake, when she laughs and kicks the ocean. She glows so bright here, all lit up inside. Her hands echo birds floating on air as she walks the brine. She always did love the water and here, especially, it looks closest to the shadow of how things used to be. Mama used to say Louisa was born looking too deep inside herself to ever notice what was outside, anyway. That's why I look ahead for her.

Besides, it would be nice to have something other than seaweed for dinner.

We'll stay. My shoulder feels a little better already, but it's going to bruise.

Louisa will wrap it in scraps of old sheets and put on our mother's face while she tends it as seriously as she does anything, but it's not broken, just sore.

Louisa comes up short against a tide pool and bends over, the sky about to crack itself open behind her. I slow down, shuffling against the sand and feeling happy no one

saw me fall and happy no one was behind the rock and happy Louisa stopped running, at least for now. My heart starts beating more like normal and I can feel the flush draining from my cheeks as I merge with the beach, pushing against the sand until the ragged hem of my pants drags along the ground and my legs end in imported sand. It smells like brine and rain, the swells rolling and crashing one on another. A line of bright orange buoys disappears and resurfaces like diving birds riding the undertow.

I rumble and churn down towards the water. My feet are bulldozers digging trenches through the sand, two furrows from the top of the dry beach down to the wet until I can't push forward and the sand turns heavy, almost like cement. I have to pull my feet out and walk along the crust.

I walk the edge, feeling out the white lacy bubbles. The ocean rolls over me, leaving an ache in my toes, soaking past my ankles. When it hisses back away it leaves some seaweed behind. The leaves are rubbery, heavy with sand. The seaweed twists and vibrates as I pick it up and hidden between the rippled leaves is a fat fish as long as my hand, silver and striped, one clouded eye searching the sky and finding nothing. I almost drop it.

The sun glows dull behind the cloud cover. This is as bright as it ever gets lately and right now, what with the breeze coming in off the water and the sky the color of burnt cement and my sister running on ahead of things, this fish feels like an omen.

The fish opens and closes his mouth. I hold it as gently as I can without letting it fall, but my hands are shaking. Fish are one thing we can still find sometimes but there aren't enough of them to feed everyone and Louisa and I are never chosen to receive. It's

funny. I never used to like fish, but now I can't wait to taste it. I haven't had one since since before the plague happened and the Walls trapped us here. I stroke his fins and the black stripe running down his side. He quivers and shines, even without the sun. His gills lift towards the sky and fold back down, and every time they rise I can see the glint of a treasure hiding inside him.

I turn the fish over. On the other side of his mouth is a hook, punched clean through his lip. Tied up in the seaweed is a length of clear fishing line. When he swallows I can see the metallic green hook sunk deep and against the end of it a thin gold chain stretching down the crimson hollow of his mouth. I try to remember the last time I went fishing for real, in sunlight, with a line and a pole and a full lunch waiting for us in a paper bag my mother packed—apples and boxes of milk and thick slabs of roasted turkey on bread. I don't remember how my father pulled the shining metal out of the mouth of the one rainbow trout we caught that day but I can remember everything about the way that lunch looked. I squeeze the fish a little and work the hook back and forth. It's not coming out.

The fish's teeth curve light like funhouse glass. I push my finger past them, feeling around the hook until I touch the soft drape of gold. After two more tries I have it looped around my fingertip and when the fish gasps and swallows I pull the long length of it up through him until there's a round locket in my hands.

The salt water turned the edges brown with rust, and I really have to work at the catch where the sides lock around whatever secret is inside. I wonder if it is hiding a grandmother or a sister or a mother, because it is exactly the kind of thing that is made to

carry the person you need to carry around forever inside. There's a smiling sun on one side of the case and a rose on the other. I split two fingernails picking at the catch, and I'm just about to give up when the locket flips open and slips out of my hands onto the sand. I'm on my hands and knees almost before it finishes falling.

Two white gulls are floating above me, another is standing on stick legs next to me with a bright eye watching. Something in their voices changes as they call to each other, *on on on*, and before I know exactly why I am flipping the seaweed back around the fish and the locket and doing my one magic trick, everything vanishing, even though all I really want to do is look at that necklace.

"*Hey. Hey you Turtle,*" someone behind me yells and there's Flea, grinning ear to ear, coming down the beach. I stumble back up on to my feet, careful not to shift around too much.

"What are you doing, Turtle," he yells again, waving so hard he jerks to one side and stumbles. I put both hands in my pockets and watch him kick the sand all over as he runs towards me.

He grins and never stops grinning, Flea.

"I'm just walking on the beach," I say.

Flea blinks a few times and twitches, the brim of his mesh hat trembling. The hat reads 'DURNWELL'S FLEA AND TICK SUPPLIES' but Flea can't remember where it came from, or why he has it, and asking about it is only a great idea if you feel like getting beat. Flea is over six feet and wide as the horizon but he's only three or four years older than me. Thirteen or fourteen.

“You looking for fish?”

“I found some seaweed,” I say. I can feel the gills of the fish against the tangled wrapper, pushing against my hand, tiring. Pulsing and fading, pulsing and fading. The movement I’m feeling could be memory. He could already have died, my magic fish.

Flea’s eyes slide along the sand and he laughs. His hands buzz staccato patterns against his worn jeans and he shifts an old plastic shopping bag against his back.

“Is Louie with you, Turtle?” The bag catches the sound of wind coming in from the ocean and rubs against it. I shift sideways to find my sister. Flea finds her first, all the way down the beach, and looks from her to me and back. She started shaking when the wind picked up and now she’s running again, her bare feet flashing like silver knives at the edge of the surf. “She okay?”

I shrug. “Sure. Same as she always is.” Flea’s eyes follow her as she waltzes in zigzags across the beach, his chin tightening underneath that hat. He shuffles in place like they’re dancing together even though there’s a whole beach between them. He’s always looking at Louisa but she’s never looked back.

“Flea,” I say, to bring him back here. “What’s in the bag?”

“What?” he says. His head whips around and the bag almost leaps out of his hands to land at his feet. We look down at it. “I guess firewood,” he says, the same joyful, inexhaustible wonder in his voice I always hear in Louisa’s. “That’s what I’m doing out here. I am a Walker now because I am such a good faithful believer, Turtle, so God’s Marshal sent me out to gather everything I can for us Chosen. Blessed be the Marshal,” he says formally, the way we’ve been taught.

“I found some more wood back behind us,” I say. “Huge pile. I tripped over it and hurt my shoulder. It was near that old boat just down from the boardwalk.” I should stop talking. The wind blows against Flea’s bag and Louisa’s skirt, lifting it so that she twirls, laughing. She is so happy underneath that sky. The ocean comes and recedes, comes and recedes, and I want nothing more than for Flea to move on and leave us alone.

“You found anything else?” Flea says. He’s watching Louisa with a longing I don’t understand, but I know I don’t like it.

“Only some seaweed,” I lie. The ocean hisses and falls against us, the tide rising underfoot and eating away the sand we’re standing on. I’m too busy trying to watch Louisa and keep my giving fish secret from Flea to feel the ground dropping away. As I fall the fish flies out of my pocket, twisting his tail as he burns furiously towards the ocean. I throw myself after it but Flea is already there, his large hands ready, and the fish leaps straight into them. The gulls are screaming, white wings slapping the sky above us.

“That’s too bad. You and Louie could sure use one of those fish like was in your pocket, Turtle.” His broad face is full of an unspoken apology.

“Yeah,” I say, “We could.” The gray sky and the beach stretch on forever. Flea’s eyes are fixed on the smooth gold oval swinging like a pendulum over the ground. The locket is hooked around the fish again, like they couldn’t bear to be apart, wrapped twice around his shining head.

“Hey,” Flea says. “Did you see this locket, Turtle?”

I turn away from the ocean, look towards the boardwalk where the old amusements sit rusting. The ferris wheel creaks and sways, red and yellow cars flaking

paint into the wind. I imagine people walking and laughing, their hands filled with cotton candy and ticket stubs, or maybe their hands are full with the hands of other people.

“Yeah, Flea,” I say.

“I saw a locket like this once,” Flea says. He lifts the locket to his face and puts it against his eye, squinting to hold it there so that all he sees is gold. “Lookit.”

“So what?” I shove my cold hands into the front pocket of my sweatshirt and kick against the sand.

“The Marshal will love this, Turtle,” Flea says. “Blessed be. You know what it reminds me of? It reminds me of my mom, Turtle. Did you have a mom? I was so lucky that I got to have three different moms. First I lived with Miss Betty,” he said, “and then I lived with Miss Angela and then Miss Lucy and then the Marshal after Miss Lucy went to heaven with everyone. Miss Angela wore a locket every day, which I was not to touch or she would slap my hands.” He frowns in shame and looks down at himself, the human mountain. Miss Angela must have been something. “I did not like it when she slapped my hands, Turtle. It made me cry.”

“I’m sure the Marshal will wear it every day, too.” The ocean lifts against the horizon, metal on metal, and my voice is rising. The gulls are gathering on the wind and calling one to another.

“Blessed be the Marshal,” Flea says.

“No.” *There once was a boy and his sister.*

His hat twitches as he works it out. “Were you going to keep this, Turtle? The fish and the locket?”

An itch starts building in the back of my throat and I tug uselessly at the orange scarf around my neck. *The boy and his sister lived on the edge of a grey world.*

“Give it back,” I say, only I don’t really know where this is coming from. It’s just a locket, an empty locket. It’s not special like the fish. “And then you and me and Louie can split the fish, Flea. One third of a fish for each of us.” The fish is bent parabolic by the rigors of death, bowed and sightless in Flea’s hands. Its clouded eyes reflect the world above, grey on endless grey. *On the edge of a grey world where they lived together there was also a shining necklace made from yesterday’s sun and the last giving fish in the Endless Sea. The Endless Sea sent the boy a gift of the fish and the necklace, washing them against his feet in the delicate foam. But the evil Golem, a manmade creature of immeasurable strength, coveted the gifts of the giving fish and took them for his own, leaving the boy empty with grief.*

He swallows, his throat constricting around the thought of the fish. “What about that locket, Turtle?” Behind him and to the side, past the end of the boardwalk, the old grand hotels stand watching us through broken windows filled with empty spaces like missing teeth. I imagine shadows standing in each of the rooms and remember that I used to just be afraid of the dark.

The boy told himself the necklace was not a magical necklace. It was not special at all. The fish was probably delicious and in a grey world delicious is better than magical anyway.

“He doesn’t need this locket. What does it matter if we turn it in?” Down the beach my sister is swaying back and forth, pretending to be a willow tree or a bird or a shoelace, for all I know.

“You know something this beautiful belongs to everyone, Turtle.” He lifts the necklace over his head, his eyes following the twist of it against the clouds. He looks down the beach, to Louisa, again and I get mad.

Except the necklace was beautiful and beautiful is almost as good as magical or delicious, and the boy wanted it even though he tried very hard not to, and that made the boy forget his promise to his sister, the promise they made each other to run.

He looks down at me from underneath the shadow of his hat. “You know you is supposed to turn this kind of stuff in, Turtle. You know you can’t go keeping all that for yourself,” he says. The words build one on another until he is shouting. One big hand pushes against my chest, holding me where he wants me without even trying. “You know we have to stick together and the Marshal says that means pooling resources and that means he decides what to do with all things because we have to stay alive and he is the one who kept us alive, Turtle. In the time after.”

I shove away his hand and back up towards the ocean, breathing hard. His face constricts, all narrow lines, teeth ground together as if he’d like to spit them out, and I think I have gone too far, I think he is about to hit me and I think, he wants Louisa, he won’t hurt Louisa before I see that he is crying.

His hat quivers, and I take a step away, and then back. “Stop it,” I say. “Stop being a big baby.” He cradles the necklace against himself as he keens, his hands opening

and closing in prayer. His hands, thick with callouses, running up and down the scales of the fish, rubbing at the gold chain and the oval locket. “Stop,” I scream. “Just stop,” and I kick the sand until it sprays across his face and he still doesn’t flinch. He is one of the stones pushed back up through the earth, immovable, an abscessed tooth with a gold locket dangling from one hand and the silver fish shining in the other.

The boy thought, I can take this necklace from the hand of the weeping golem, and when I do the world will turn from grey to golden and my sister will be well and the golem will crumble to dust because what will there be left to cry over when the world is golden peace?

I should turn and walk away.

He is big, but I am quick and Flea is a weeping stone. The sea curls around my ankles and booms behind me as I lift and twist, reaching out to pluck the locket from his hand, quick as I can. In and out like the fish must have darted in and out of the waves this morning until he’d found himself a seaweed shroud. The necklace leaps up to kiss Flea’s hat as I whirl away and the hat goes tumbling off behind him and then I am standing with the ocean at my back and the locket in my hand, watching Flea slapping at the top of his bare head.

His face screws up and he looks around in a panic. By now the wind has carried his stupid hat halfway back up the beach and I think he might start crying again when he finally sees it. His small eyes light up with an animal intelligence and blood darkens his face.

The boy slipped forward like a thief and he took the necklace. The guardian woke, the mark of the necklace burning against his stone face until all that was within the guardian was rage. The boy didn't notice. He had always wanted to hold the sun.

“Hey,” Flea roars. “HEY.” He drops his head like a charging bull, and quick as I am I don’t have time to move before his shoulder catches me in the stomach. I am breathless and we are end over end together in the waves the wind has been building. We are ten feet from shore and traveling fast within seconds.

I feel Flea’s chest contract when the cold water hits and he pushes down in panic, scrabbling against my shoulders for leverage. He gains his footing before the next wave comes and knocks him over again, white faced and trembling. It’ll take all his strength to claw his way back up on the beach.

I’m not as lucky.

The water is a turbine, a sucking vortex. The waves are massive foam tipped tunnels. I’m getting sucked farther out with each wave. I’m getting tumbled like one of those smooth pebbles back up on the beach only I think there will not even be a nub of me left to wash back up on shore when the ocean is done.

I fight, though. When I can get my face above the surface long enough to inhale I can hear Flea. “Turtle!” I can hear him moaning. “Turtle Turtle Turtle Turtle.”

The waves have to be ten feet high now, or a hundred feet high, or a thousand. It doesn’t matter. I can’t get through them. I am weightless and terrified. There is nothing here to hold on to. On the beach my sister is shrinking, the birds flocking. Who will explain this to her if not me?

The current is dragging me down and away and black seawater is pouring into my lungs. There isn't time to cry. There isn't time for fear or regret. Far away on the very edge of the beach stretching on like forever I saw someone I think is my sister, wearing a torn skirt fluttering on the air the way our laundry used to flutter on a clothesline. She bent at the waist and launched towards the sky. I can't follow her. The gulls are screaming over my head, calling *on on on* to one another, black tips riding the wind. The ocean brought me the places Louisa's feet touched and I follow them instead, straight on to the swallowed sun.

The sister danced on the beach in the grey dawn and the grey noon and at the close of the grey day she yawned and said I love my brother, my baby brother, and she curled up inside herself at the edge of the shore. She slept there with the gulls as the boy drifted on cold waves, the taste of metal on his tongue. Oh, he said, and On. On, the boy said, on, on, on.

BAR HIVE BEEKEEPING

The voice of the bees hangs everywhere in the golden afternoon. So do the bees. They move in and out of their hives between the flowers and their queen, intent on an instinctive alchemy. A rare burst of sunlight glows through the translucent membranes of their veined wings. They settle on red blooms and star-shaped squash flowers with equal enmity. Now and then they dart around one of the many white-clad girls working in the Garden.

The Sisters Penitent all wear their voluminous white dresses, their gloves. Their masked faces hide inside the deep wells of their cowls. They are anonymous even here, in their walled garden, though their faces tilt upwards in longing at the afternoon sun, and the thick plastic of their blank white masks hides the slope of noses and cheekbones. Most of them are going about the business of weeding the raised garden beds full of tomatoes, cucumbers, corn, squashes. The plants are scrawny and weak, but growing. Still alive. All of the girls sing as they work. Their hands dip down into the earth to mete out the justice of the gardener, removing encroaching grasses and offending beetles alike.

One Sister holds a smudge stick made of dried pine needles, another a lighter. Together they smoke the bees into drowsing peace until they fly in sleepy circles around the sunflowers. A third girl waits to extract the honey from the long, rectangular box the wild bees chose for their hive. Her knife slices long sections of honeycomb off the bar into pieces. Another Sister drops the comb into a cloth filter bag and hands it to the next girl in line, who hands it to the next, all of their hands smashing the fragile wax until the

bag is heavy with extracted honey. The last Sister hangs the dripping bag inside a tall glass jar and screws on the lid until there are four jars lined up in a row. They sing St. Lucy's Gramercy for the victory of a good harvest, harmonizing as their unified steps send them lining up in front of a steaming bucket of water and a bar of soap. One by one they scrub their white gloves clean and leave them to drip over the top of the pea fence. They turn away from the color of each others' naked hands, tucking their own safely inside wide sleeves.

The blade of the knife glows a sticky amber in the sunlight. The girl hesitates when the time comes to slide it into the water. Behind the mask her eyes dart, scanning one side of the Garden and then the other, taking in the singing Sisters with their hidden hands and the girls bent over the vegetable beds. She flicks her mask off, the knife darting in to get licked clean by a curling pink tongue. Her small, square face blinks at the feeling of the afternoon sun. A curl of red hair is stuck to her forehead and there is a shock of freckles across the bridge of her short nose. She closes her eyes for a long minute, savoring the honey on her tongue and the sensation of being revealed, however briefly, to the sky.

The Sister next to her gasps and is gone, running through a small door into the Sanctuary. One by one the Sisters drop out of song until only the irritation of the bees sounds inside the garden.

The knife reflects the echo of her face as it falls. The girl drops it into the bucket, strips off her gloves, works the bar into lather up and down the shining metal before she realizes they are all watching her.

Her hands shake. She pulls the mask back down over her face and looks up at them from behind a molded smile.

This is a bunch of crap, she says, so low only the girl nearest can hear her.

They stand watching her and not speaking. The weeding Sisters sense a new vibration threading through the Garden and leave the dirt, gathering in around her until she is ringed by them. White sunlight gleams everywhere, too brilliant to see.

She finishes washing the knife clean and lays it on the green grass. Her head bowed, she scrubs her gloves in the tepid water. The others watch everything and say nothing. She hangs her gloves but keeps the knife, sinking back down onto her knees next to it in the grass. She does not tuck her hands into her sleeves like the others do.

I'm sorry, she says loudly. She challenges them with her eyes. Her voice cracks the silence between them so that they whisper to each other, their voices the dry rub of autumn leaves. Forgive me, Sisters. I forgot the meaning of service.

Thank you for your honesty, little Sister. A deep voice, new to the Garden. The whispers crescendo and die to nothing.

The Marshal rests against the door wearing his thick soled combat boots, his black cargo pants. His lean shoulders slump under the weight of a wearying exhaustion. The pistol in its holster is as much a part of him as his hands or legs. His eyes are ringed in dark circles and crows feet, but they are kind.

What an example, Sister, of why we are all here. Like these gloves-- he pulls her gloves off of the pea fence, showing them to all-- like these gloves, sometimes we look cleansed, suited for a new purpose, when we're not.

The Marshal tosses the gloves, one by one, back into the bucket. They settle almost gently upon the water, a single ring floating outwards.

I'm sorry, she says again. She is rigid, the knife next to her hand flashing in the sun.

Don't be, he says. He smiles at her. Don't be sorry for being what you are. Strive to be more than that.

It's not for all of us to know where we belong in the new world, he says. He takes three long strides into the garden, his silver hair glowing in the sunlight.

Remind me, Sister: how did you come to be assigned here?

She looks down at her feet.

Sister?

I stole.

Louder?

I stole food. A lot of food. From the storeroom.

And?

She looks down at her reflection in the bucket.

Answer me, Sister.

The Marshal grows stern. If I remember correctly, he says, you were the one who beat the storeroom guard-- one of our most devoted Walkers-- until his blood stained the wall.

He looks out over the gathering. You have all had your moments of sin, he says. Who can tell your Sister why you wear the mask?

A Sister steps forward. Her eyes glitter with fervor behind the half-mask. She says, For our redemption, Marshal.

For redemption, Sister?

Yes, Marshal. The mask reminds us that we are one of many. We are faceless so that we learn to strip away selfishness and raise others above ourselves while we do our penance. The mask reminds us that we are less than our service and through our service we find redemption.

And your song?

The song links us, Marshal, so that we learn to move as one body and speak with one voice.

What is your name, Sister?

Sisters have no names, Marshal.

Very good, the Marshal says. Do you find the loss of your identities to be a harsh punishment, Sisters?

No, Marshal, they say. They speak as one, each individual voice buzzing against the other. Together their voice rings against the Garden walls. Only the girl kneeling in front of the bucket is silent.

The Marshal extends a hand.

Stand, Marilyn, he says. The Sisters' collective gasp sweeps through the garden, drowning out the sound of the bees.

Marilyn's hand brushes against the knife next to her. In one motion it is in her white hand, flashing sunlight at her side. She stares into his face. The suggestion of violence mingles with shame in her eyes.

Hand me that knife, he says, and his voice is so warm and confident in command that she finds herself pressing the wooden handle into his palm instead of pressing the blade into his stomach. She tightens her grip reflexively.

Release, he says, and her hand pulls away, drops to her side.

Don't worry, girl. I'll help you. He smiles down at her. At this, the fight goes out of her. She is led away without looking back.

And now, you good, just Sisters of Penitence-- you girls. For your sober duty and dedication to others, for knowing what is right and what is necessary, for your righteousness-- he pauses to drop a fatherly hand on the shoulder of the girl next to him-- for all of that, you should be rewarded.

Go ahead, Sisters. Take off your masks. Feel the sun, he says. I trust in you.

The sisters look at each other uncertainly.

Go, he says, a trace of irritation in his voice. His hand flips forward to urge them on. Enjoy yourselves. Back to your tasks in one hour, little bees.

One by one the Sisters drop their cowls and free themselves, blinking into the afternoon sun. They sneak looks at each other's faces and rub self-consciously at the spaces where their masks should sit. They retreat back inside their hoods. Even confronted by their own reflections they find they are unable to share their names. The heat of the sun is enjoyable enough, even with these few disappointments. In small

groups they lounge and sun themselves, nestling against the apple tree and the containers, stealing time.

Over the garden wall comes Louisa with her dirty knees and her smile. The sisters crowd around her. Her hair is golden-brown in the sunlight. She winds her arms here and there around the shoulders of the Sisters, kissing their pale, unmasked cheeks, linking hands so that she may walk among them.

We are here, she says, and smiles upwards into the sky.

PUNCH

Saturday mornings deserved to be washed in the flicker and glow of animation, spent with pajamas and balanced bowls of cereal slopped full of milk—milk was getting harder to remember lately, but Joshua kept trying. He shut his eyes and leaned against the cement wall and thought about milk and cereal, milk so cold it would hurt your teeth, milk sopping through the sugar varnish, mixing with the dust from the bottom of the bag, speckled yellow and red and orange and blue. He held the sensation of it in his mind until he could almost feel the weight of the bowl in one hand, the other hand reaching out to turn on the television because that was what you did on Saturdays.

But there were no more Saturdays. There was only one day, followed by another day, followed by a day distinguishable from those preceding it only by the reality of breath. He was not in his old living room eating breakfast, with the light from the tv washing against his face as he sat inches away, keeping the volume low to not wake his sister or his father, extending this moment where the house remained hushed and perfect. He was not sinking against a pillow, milk dripping into a bowl as he raised his spoon, the only sounds the scrape of metal on porcelain and his own breath and faint canned laughter low and comforting as a blanket.

A chair screeched against the hard linoleum floor and someone screamed and then choked on it, high and delirious. Joshua opened his eyes.

These were his cartoons now: idiot Flea grinning and swaying in the old school lunchroom on a tiny three-legged stool, his fat ass hanging over both sides. His knees

jerked up and down against the pair of orphan babies he held in his lap, one in each huge hand. One of the little pisspots started to snivel and a line of green snot dripped out of its nose and down on to Flea's meaty arm. Flea's dirty mesh hat quivered with each turn of the girl in front of him. He sat watching her—Louisa, Joshua realized, who else—confused by the hunger she set gnawing at his insides.

Louisa scribbled words on the walls with the ends of her blonde hair. She drew a line between the two names she'd written on the wall and then straight down, dipping the tip of her braid in a cup of black paint. Flea furrowed his brow and tried to read what she'd written on the wall in yellows, reds, and blues before the black subsumed everything. He spoke the words aloud, his lips smacking together and fumbling over the syllables as he stuttered, the snot from the baby oozing down his arm. Stupid fuck. Sky would fall down around him and if Louisa was there he wouldn't look up to watch it bash his head in.

"You see that guy?" Joshua pushed off from the wall and hit Weasel on the shoulder. "You seen anyone stupider?"

Weasel sat crosslegged in the middle of a square of dim light sewing a wool coat. The windowpanes sunk high into the cinderblock walls cast a shadowed cross against the floor, the half-light catching the dust hanging suspended in the air, then spreading across the cots and beds of rags pushed against each wall and finally across the hard tile floor to where Weasel and his needle flashed in and out of an engraved brass button. The light clouded Weasel's glasses and he blinked his nervous, watery eyes twice as he looked up

at Joshua. "He may be terminally unintelligent, but the Marshal made him part of God's Walkers last week. Better hope he doesn't start looking for your stash."

"Whack Walkers, you mean." Weasel snorted with laughter and pushed the glasses back up his nose.

"Speaking of stashes, you got any food?" Joshua asked.

Weasel shifted the coat against his lap, his thin, delicate wrists sticking out past the edge of his cuffs. "All you gotta do is go to the sermon, Josh. It's not all that bad."

"Like I wanna listen to some fat perv. Sermon's for guys who tug each other's limp worms."

Weasel ignored this and rethreaded his needle. "Food's food. You don't even have to half listen." The needle rose up into the faded light and back down against the fabric in his lap. Joshua watched the thread tighten and slack and Weasel watched Joshua, Weasel's hands feeling out the right places, remembering where to make a hole and when to draw thread.

"That ain't food. I can remember what food was like and that ain't it."

"What do you miss the most?" Weasel said, his quiet voice nearly lost in the sound of the babies so that Joshua leaned forward to listen. "I miss hot dogs. With ketchup and mustard and relish."

"That's it?" Joshua said. "Figured you for something fancier."

"Hot dogs can be fancy," he said. "I got one from a truck outside the library that cost ten dollars once."

Joshua pulled a blue rubber ball from his pocket and began to bounce it off the floor and onto the wall.

Thump. “What we need to do is find where Marshal is getting all that food at. Not the crap but the real stuff he’s giving the askissers at the first table.”

“Uh huh.” Weasel smoothed down the collar of the coat with careful, deft hands.

Thump. “Then we don’t have to listen to him no more.”

“Uh huh.”

Thump. “I bet there’s no reason for us to even stay where he says. You ever even seen a drifter?” *Thump.* “No, because there ain’t no drifters killing and eating no one. There ain’t no one but us left inside the Walls.”

“One of the Walkers said he saw a man by the north Wall.”

Joshua caught the ball, paused. “Which one?”

“Ricky.”

“Ricky,” Joshua scoffed. *Thump.* “Ricky don’t know nothing. Ricky thought he saw a man in the dorm and it was only his coat.”

“Uh huh.”

Thump. “If Marshal ever did find a way out of this box he wouldn’t tell us anyway.”

“Uh huh.”

Thump. “You think they got real food outside still? Outside the walls, I mean.”

Weasel looked up, chewing on his lower lip. “I don’t know. I did hear Marshal gave everyone at the first table a sip of fruit punch today. Nobody knows where he got it from.”

“The red kind?” The ball rested in Joshua’s hand where he had caught it and he stared at the wall.

“He made them say it was the blood of Christ, Our Red Lord, and said if they took it, they were forever saved. One of the older kids actually cried.”

“Shit.” They sat in silence. Joshua watched dust move around inside the dull rectangles of light sinking onto the floor and remembered red mouths and sunshine and the sensation of thirst. Weasel’s needle flashed in the light as he twisted it around on the end of the thread.

Joshua turned restlessly and kicked the coat out of Weasel’s slight hands. The needle leapt towards Weasel’s eyes and then folded to the floor, Weasel’s whippet-thin shoulders hunching over the space where the coat had been. The button dropped the length of the thread and rattled past the needle.

“Perfect,” Weasel said. “It took me three weeks to find that button.” The button rolled on its edge in and out of the light and the shadows towards Flea.

“Shut up,” Joshua said, watching Flea’s eyes squeeze shut as he laughed. Louisa twirled, slapping her black-tipped braid against the brick wall as she redacted the names she’d written there. The button rang against the tile. It rolled past one of Flea’s feet and close enough to the other that a twitch of his leg would sweep the button into his possession.

“I don’t want to get it back from the Marshal, Josh. Last time he made me copy out the Company Testament four times. My hand cramped.”

“Your own fault for having girl’s handwriting.”

Louisa was arch-backed and spinning, Flea watching the way her tits pointed out towards the room. Joshua flushed as she twisted towards him, hair sweeping back behind her. “Go get it,” he said.

“Maybe Flea will give it to me. He gave Louisa all that paint,” Weasel said. “He could have got extra food if he turned it in. Front table food.”

“You ain’t her. He’ll turn it in,” Joshua said. “He don’t even have his own stash.”

“Except for when *she* wants something,” Weasel said, and rubbed his hands through his shorn scalp with rough, nervous hands.

“Something about her,” Joshua said. “I dunno.”

They watched the scene before them silently.

“Do you think it’s true,” Weasel asked. “Turtle getting lost like that.”

Joshua shrugged. “Alls I know is, I seen Louisa and Turtle heading to the beach and then Ronnie seen Flea heading out there.”

“But maybe Turtle got out.”

Joshua looked at Weasel. “She’s his sister. Weren’t no way he left her here.”

“Maybe they won’t find my button,” Weasel said.

“All he sees is her anyway,” Joshua said. The button rested next to Flea and Louisa and shone, Joshua thought, like he used to think treasure must shine, back when he was reading books about pirates and desert islands and hairy men with scars, shining

like it sucked up every wavelength of light the room had to offer. Golden even without the sun. Louisa froze, her face pointed downwards towards the button. Flea's hands slapped together in a sonic boom. The children, now crawling enthusiastically into the dirtiest corners of the room, shrieked with joy.

"She found it. Thanks," Weasel said. "You are an incredibly bad person. Why am I friends with bad people? What is inherently wrong with me?"

"What, you scared of that?" The babies giggled, shrieking at Louisa's bare feet pointed in a v against the floor, the tips of her toes brushing the tile. She wasn't watching the button, now she was watching them, deciding--

"I'm disinterested in conflict. Especially with a Walker who has something to prove."

"Uh huh." Louisa bowed to the floor with one fluid motion and came back up, kissing the button with the tip of her nose. She looked at Weasel and Joshua, her hair cascading onto the floor, and smiled. She hiked the hem of her skirt past her knees as the babies clapped and howled. Flea began to rock back and forth, singing. A high whine grew deep in his chest.

And underneath this, underneath Louisa's feet blurring against the floor and the ragged edge of her skirts snapping against Flea's thighs and Flea's primal sound Joshua could hear the button ringing in his ears, thin as rain on corrugated tin, and building.

Before his body knew his own movements Joshua was walking towards it, his feet keeping time with Louisa's slapping against the floor. He bent down, his blood running in

his ears, and silenced the button with a single sweep of his hand just as Flea's hat quivered and turned.

"You got a bunch of boogers on your arm," Joshua said, "you know that?" and as Flea looked down, his mouth open, Joshua walked back towards Weasel, his back stiff with pride and the button locked in his fist.

"Yeah," he said, before Weasel could speak. "I got balls. You want to see what that looks like?"

"No thanks," Weasel said, but he grinned as Joshua flicked the button into his palm.

"Fuck *him*," Joshua spat against the wall.

Louisa's mad dance ended. She collapsed against the wall, arms outstretched, pressing her face against the family tree she'd written in primary colors and covered in black. The paint coating her hair and her cheeks dried flaky and matte. She looked straight at Joshua with bright, clear eyes.

Joshua sent the ball singing staccato against the wall. *Thunkthunkthunk*.

"Where's Ronnie?"

They went out the back way, past the makeshift chapel and the Marshal's quarters, crossing through two linked classrooms with chairs stacked in neat piles and whiteboards still covered in math to come out in front of a small altar set in the middle of a long hallway. There were four or five closed doors stretching on either side of the altar. They could just see the world outside at the end of the hallway.

“There,” Joshua said, heading towards the weak, sullen light filtering in through the door’s window.

“Wait.” Weasel hissed, pulling him against the rough brick of the schoolhouse wall.

Joshua turned his head to question and then heard it: the thin harmony of voices humming mixed with three delicate, clinking bells.

His head dropped as in prayer.

The Sisters Penitent came down the hallway single file, light from the back window shining through the billowing white they wore from crown to heel, hands folded together inside the wide sleeves so that nothing, not a slip of skin or a hangnail, slipped free. Their thin slippers slid across the wax floor like graceful dancers’ feet, the bells falling on cords at their waists chiming. Beside him Joshua felt Weasel shrinking back against the wall. The song swelled around them. The Sisters Penitent passed, so many gliding, faceless ghosts, a legion collective linked by the incessant harmony of one thrumming song.

Joshua watched them move sedately through the hallway, the vibrations in their throats dying to a whisper. The last white-robed Sister hesitated as she reached the steel door they were passing through. Her faceless façade turned and she reached out, fingers cupped around an empty palm. From the other hand dangled a stuffed rabbit with just one eye.

Weasel dropped to his knees before the crucifix on the wall, sweating and mumbling in prayer.

She watched them pray for the space of two moments. The hand dropped to her side. Grace and an inhuman serenity guided her to the other side of the threshold. The door clicked shut behind her and Weasel gasped.

“Weasel,” Joshua said, Weasel’s hands pushed white and trembling together at the altar, and Joshua had to speak three times before Weasel found Joshua there, anchoring him.

“We can go now,” Joshua said. Weasel climbed to his feet and together they found the doorway and the light.

They found Ronnie on the playground sorting through scrap. Ronnie was pulling the nails out of wood and stacking it in piles by size. Ten minutes later Joshua had a nervous, thin-haired girl smiling at him and five minutes after that she and Josh were slipping behind the storage shed and when she came back she started stacking wood for Ronnie without looking at any of them. By half past the three of them were walking casually towards the soccer field. A gap in the bottom of the chain link fence let them slip underneath. They left one by one, walking downriver through the long grass until the school was behind them and the sidewalk began. Joshua led and Weasel followed. Ronnie, still carrying the echo of baby fat in his cheeks and rounded belly, struggled to catch up. Joshua stopped underneath a dead oak once they were out of sight to watch Weasel cross the last stretch of field towards him, seeds from the weeds gripping and pulling at his legs.

“Where are we going, Josh? I have plans.”

“What plans you got? You got the plans I give you.” Joshua turned to scan the broken street. By now the Walkers had stripped down the area, and what they hadn’t taken the other kids had—metal from the cars, the mailboxes. Anything that could be repurposed. Waist high grass billowed in the square patchy lawns, all browns and greens except for one flash of light that, for one brilliant second, Joshua thought might be from a man lying prone with his glasses catching the sun. The wind blew and the grass parted to show an old glass bottle. Dead trees draped against the dark sky. In the window of the house across the street he could see what might have been the top of a four poster bed rising against the white wall, framed between two unmoving curtains yellowed by the weak sun as if waiting for someone to fall down into it and sleep.

No one would. The fronts of the houses were boarded up to keep them out. The Marshal had done that himself, in the first days, with the first of the Lost Company. These were tombs now, bodies shut inside to rot alongside all their worldly possessions.

He wondered if there were bodies in that bed. Some of them had died watching the sky, Joshua knew, holding on to things they had loved. Two streets over, at sunset when the bad light turned worse, there was the illusion of someone sitting up in a window as if alive and watching, blank eyes tracing the sidewalk. No one went that way anymore.

Joshua turned towards Weasel, eyes shining. “We’re going to find the last fruit punch in the world, my friend.”

“Uh.”

“He’s got to get it from somewhere,” Joshua said. “You know? Like, it doesn’t come from nowhere.”

“It doesn’t come from anywhere anymore, Josh. It’s all gone.” Weasel hunched down, kicking at the grass.

Joshua barked a laugh. “What happened to all that faith Marshal and the rest are always going on about, Weasel?” He pushed Weasel on the shoulder.

“That was awesome, Josh,” Ronnie caught them and leaned against the tree, out of breath. His soft face looked at Joshua with adoration. “How did you do that?”

Joshua straightened. “You got to understand girls, Ronnie my man.”

“You know what I understand, Josh?” Weasel rubbed his glasses, squinting up and down the street. “I understand that if we get caught out here, by Drifters or one of the Walkers--”

“Walkers ain’t patrolling this way. That’s why we went out the back. Nobody but us knows ‘bout the back.” He glared at Ronnie and Weasel. “Unless one of you tattled.”

“I didn’t tell, Josh! I never tell,” Ronnie said.

“This could be bad,” Weasel said.

“Better than you think,” Joshua said. He pushed his shirt up just enough to let them see three handcrank flashlights tucked in the hollow between his stomach and the waistband of his jeans.

“Josh,” Weasel said.

“They ain’t going to find out.” He tossed one of the flashlights to Ronnie. He fumbled and caught it just before it hit the ground.

“Whatever you slipped her in the storage shed won’t be enough if the Marshal asks.” Weasel’s shoulders hunched over the flashlight. It turned over and over in his hands.

“You remember that gas station over on Thompson?” Joshua stepped over the arch of a root pushing through the buckled sidewalk.

“That’s close to the red zone,” Weasel said. “And the Wall.”

“You want some fruit punch or not?” Joshua said.

“Walkers burned through that area three times that I know of,” Weasel said, but he shoved the flashlight into his waistband and let Ronnie walk in the middle, Joshua ahead and Weasel behind.

The landscape shifted as they walked. Only the objects and the colors of the objects changed. Everything was monotonous and unmoving and their movement, entering the silence of these forbidden spaces, granted them boldness they hadn’t felt since their childlike days on the playground or in the street after school. Everywhere there was dead grass and the small dried husks of birds that had fallen from the sky. Too many to poke with sticks and they were all too well acquainted with death by now, anyway, to poke at anything at all unless it was to eat.

These were streets they had known as waystations on the way to other places—the beach, diners, theaters where they had ground popcorn into the floor and spilled sodas as they laughed and indulged lives that were about to change. These were streets they had never really known and were not supposed to know now, and the trip had some of the

sensation of a forbidden holiday. They tripped over places where the cracked sidewalk gaped or strolled down the center of the street but mostly, without speaking of it, they skirted the edge of things, running when they passed exposed windows and caught the sight of rot inside. At an intersection where cars sat in strangely clean, ordered lines at the light Ronnie paused as if waiting for a walk signal from the broken sign and Joshua, who had never waited for one in the world before, laughed at him. They pretended to check their hair in the side mirrors of the cars or pushed their feet against sunken tires like interested buyers but never looked inside the windows. There was no benefit to corpses or memories.

They threw Joshua's ball back and forth as they ran through the middle of the street and Ronnie ran into the side of a car trying to catch it. "Watch this," Weasel said. His thin arms made a stone the size of his fist sing in the air and the crack of it breaking the car's window slapped past them, pushing up the street and through the quiet, lifeless houses. The boys drew back together, breaths hitching in their chests, watching to see what could wake. When nothing did they swaggered, punching each other and whooping underneath the steel sky.

Ronnie was the first one to spot the gas station's orange oval sign hanging over the dead trees like a rising moon. They began to run, Joshua first, with Ronnie and Weasel behind.

It was more of a truck stop than a gas station. A long building stretching out beyond the pumps advertised hot food, showers, and a small convenience store. Some of the signs had fallen down and the door had been bashed open but where the windows still

had glass the spaces shone in the light. A row of coffee mugs filled with dust on the windowsill.

“Stop,” Joshua said once they reached the pumps, and put his hand up like he had once seen a soldier do in the movies. He turned to Weasel and threw his head sharply to the side. “We gotta figure out the best way to search this place, right? Let’s not be whatchacallit. Premature.”

“I gotta go pee, Joshua,” Ronnie said.

“So go. I’m not gonna watch. Weasel ain’t either. You ain’t got nothing we haven’t seen.”

“I can’t go with you guys here.” Ronnie crossed his legs and whimpered.

“Just do it. I’m thinking.”

“I can’t just go anywhere.” His neck began to flush red with embarrassment and he stared at his feet. “Nothing will come out.”

“Piss yourself or find a bathroom, I don’t care. Just shut up and don’t go too far.”

“Jesus,” Weasel said, watching Ronnie run past the convenience store towards the blocky Restroom sign. He sunk against a pump, hunching down against the wind that sliced against them and rattled the nozzles in their casings. “Why does everything have to be a thing, Josh?”

“You want to go in there without any plan? Everyone knows you need a plan. I’m trying to be professional here.” Joshua looked out past Weasel towards the trees shaking in the wind.

Weasel unfolded himself from around the gas pump and pulled out his flashlight. "It's cold. We need to get this done and get out of here before someone finds us out here where we don't belong. You know we aren't supposed to go this far." He looked behind them, back the way they'd come. "Anybody could see us."

"Like who?" Joshua said. "Ricky's coat?" He laughed harder. "Your mom live around here, maybe?"

Weasel threw himself forward, his glasses a pair of eyeless ovals flashing in the lowlight, controlled rage and cold fury. His fists swung upwards towards Joshua's face once, twice, a third time.

Before Joshua could react he was on the ground, the right side of his face throbbing.

"At least I have a mother," Weasel said, throwing the rock he'd held in his fist next to Joshua. "And you don't get to talk about her."

Above them the sky stretched on, motionless, as if made from a single cut of dingy paper. Here or there blocky, square shapes like hanging stones cut blackly against the vaulting sky, dark clouds printed against the lighter grey with an obscurity and a heaviness that defied gravity. From this angle Joshua could see where the sky and the clouds warped as they intersected the Wall. Ten miles from here it stretched up to merge almost seamlessly with the colorlessness of the sky so that homogeneity wrapped around them from one side to the other. The beam from Weasel's flashlight snapped on by the door of the gas station and swung left and right and left and right and was gone.

The skin on his face stretched and began to swell purple. The trees knocked against each other and he looked up, at the gas station sign glowing orange and the grey sky and the wall reflecting it all back to him. Eventually he walked into the store.

Empty aisles stretched out in front of Joshua, filled with dust and wrappers and detritus. He pointed his own flashlight into the corners, leaving it in each space for a few seconds, waiting to see what might move. Nothing.

He walked towards the back, kicking empty bags aside as he went. There was no point in checking the shelves. This was one of those places everyone had gone, once the grocery stores had run out of things like water and milk. In those early days it was civil: people waiting in even lines, edging towards the counter, standing a foot between one another wearing blue masks and white gloves and talking in hushed tones like some race of mouthless, expressionless creatures. His father had gone out like this once and it had taken him four hours to wait in line for two juice boxes and a jar of peanut butter they ate by the spoonful.

Soon after that there had been fewer people wearing the masks but those who came out were young and wild-eyed and hopeless, moving in groups of two or three and working together. No one bothered waiting anymore. When the dead were stacked like cordwood at the corners of the streets and the walls went up at night while the town slept they began to understand the truth of what was happening. They broke down the doors and took what they wanted. They walked out of the stores carrying bags of potato chips and cookies and jugs of softening ice cream. Free to eat what they wanted without influence. He thought back on this now with condescension. He should have taken the

beef jerky, the cigarettes, the beer. Soap and toothpaste. Things that would have lasted. Things he could have traded.

He checked the bank of coolers out of habit but they stood dark and powerless at the back of the store. An empty water bottle sat in a pile of dust and ash. He stared at it for a moment before bending down to pick it up.

It had taken a series of processes he only vaguely understood to bring this bottle to his hand. There was a bottling plant not too far from here and they had visited it once on a field trip. There had been a man in a green polo shirt with a thick bristly walrus of a mustache, and other than this man he remembered only a series of gleaming machines moving restlessly with hunger, quick-stamping and hissing with steam. The machine was still there, probably. Maybe. Silent now that there were no men to fuel it, and now that the arcane knowledge those men had carried belonged to the dead. This simple thing, this plastic bottle he held in one hand, was endangered and he could feel that. The bottle was a part of something that had surged and receded, leaving Joshua and those like him behind to endure without the benefit of understanding. He turned the bottle over and listened to the dust sift inside it.

There had been the bottling and then it had traveled in a large white truck. Up and down, vibrating across the highways and toll roads until it had found its way here to this gas station, through the door in a shining lot of bottles nestling against one another. When having a drink was as simple as having money someone had bought it. Or someone had taken it when the looting started, stopping in the middle of the fires and the panic and the

swollen corpses to let the water run rivers down his chin, the dregs of the bottle spilling against the floor.

His stomach tightened in on itself. He put his hand on the ridged lip where the white plastic seal met transparency, right where his pulse beat through the thin flesh between his thumb and finger. He tried to remember what that had been like, the casual power of the everyday.

He threw the bottle against the wall, the sound echoing in the small, unmoving space. His head began to ache.

Maybe Weasel had gone to the back, where deliveries were made. Maybe he had found something. Weasel was clever. Weasel would think of these things, things he, Joshua, would not. He'd survived longer on his own, coming to the Company a month or two after Joshua himself. Joshua wondered if he had really come from miles and miles further south, near the far Wall, where the city elites had lived in their gated houses with their wide, green lawns. Weasel didn't even have a picture of who he'd come from in his pocket. Weasel didn't seem to have anything, Joshua realized, but that didn't make him weak. The cut throbbed. Not weak, just easy to overlook.

A sign overhead pointed towards the showers. He looked down the hallway, wondering if the plumbing might still be working and if he could stand to shower in the dark if it was, when the sound of something falling at the other end of the hallway choked the breath in him. His heart hammered *caughtcaughtcaughtcaught* in his chest. He shut the flashlight off, hoping the light hadn't bled around the corner. He should move. He

should definitely move. He should pick his feet up—feet, at the end of his legs—and he should use them carefully, making no sound, to move somewhere he couldn't be seen.

He could feel someone waiting behind the corner. He inhaled quietly and saw nothing. There was no sound, but something in the texture of the darkness told him the man stood just behind the corner. It couldn't be Drifters because Drifters don't exist. Drifters are made up to keep you where you are, he thought at himself scornfully. Maybe there were a few, right after everything really started to fall, but there are no more men sticking silver knives in each other, no one breaking and cooking soft bones. No one has seen one in ages. Except maybe no one sees them because they don't like to be looked at, Joshua thought. Maybe I will see one and then I'll never see again.

From the other end of the hallway he could just hear the rattle of a man's inhalation. Fear mushroomed to fill the distance between them. Joshua held his breath and choked on it.

The silence stretched. In the dimness he thought he could almost see the very edge of an inky blackness shifting around the corner. His feet began to move, but not away, like he wanted them to: he seemed to be moving up the hallway towards this shadow one inch at a time. He became acutely aware of his own breath and the texture of the painted cinderblock wall running underneath his hand. His sneakers edging along the linoleum. Quiet. Quiet.

He thought, *what am I going to do when I get there*, unsurprised to find there was no answer waiting to congeal from the air around him.

Close now. Two feet, maybe three. The corner seemed the jutting edge of another world, the abutment of the known and the unknown. He took a careful breath. Found the button on his flashlight. Flipped it on.

The Drifter struck, all teeth and nails and desperate fury, shrieking into his ears with the high voice of someone already lost. The flashlight went skittering across the floor. Joshua shoved but the thing held on, wrapping its legs around his waist and riding him to the ground with the attack's forward momentum. His head slammed, hard, against the floor, spots of light flicking here and there against the inside of his eyelids. He twisted, bit at the air, connected with a soft tissue and tasted the blood of the thing in his mouth, let go when pain blossomed in his groin. The fear and the absurdity of it all built up inside him and he started to laugh, breathless, hysterical laughter, laughing at the two greedy hands wrapping tighter and tighter around his neck. He struck out blindly with his fists to grab and tear and hold on to anything he could, anything to stay in this abandoned, rotting gas station for one minute longer.

His hand connected with the thing's smooth face, and there was a sharp hiss of surprise. The hands around his throat loosened: he lashed out, found fabric, pulled until it tore in his hands. The weight on his chest shifted and then vanished, relief rising in its place.

"Josh?" the Drifter said, and here was something strange: Weasel's voice, high and panicked. "Josh?"

Weasel knelt next to him, shirt half torn off. Underneath the u of a faded white tank top Joshua could see bandages winding back and forth across Weasel's chest in crisscrossed lines.

"What happened?" Joshua said, confused. "That Drifter get you before I got here? You got hurt?"

Weasel looked down at his chest. "Um, yeah."

"How'd you tend it so quick?" Joshua sat up, his head swimming, and blinked his eyes. "Wait, where did the Drifter go?"

"I don't know. Let's just get out of here, okay? Before it comes back."

"Give me a minute," Joshua said, rubbing his bruised throat.

"No. Come on, Josh. Let's go," Weasel said, gripping Joshua's arm. A warm, red drip fell from Weasel's hand. Joshua looked down at the gouges in the hand from his own teeth and back up again at Weasel's face.

"Fuck," Weasel said, and shook his head, exhaling one long, shaky breath.

"You swore," Joshua said. "You don't swear. You read."

"Yeah, well. You swear too much."

"There wasn't a Drifter." Not a question. His head spun dizzily.

"No."

"That was you."

Silence. Weasel slumped onto his heels, his narrow body hunched into a c. He took his glasses off, rubbed the short, curling stubble on his head. He refused to look at Joshua.

“What the hell, man? You attacked me!”

“I thought you were a Drifter,” Weasel said defensively. “I had to attack first. Otherwise I had no chance.”

“Fucking Drifters,” Joshua said. “You read too much. Listen to too many stories. They aren’t a real thing, Drifters.”

“Like you weren’t scared,” Weasel said. He turned sideways, away from Joshua, and pulled the tattered remains of his ripped shirt around himself.

“No,” Joshua said, looking at the place where his teeth had caught Weasel’s hand, right at the fleshy part between the thumb and the first finger. “I mean, you lied. There weren’t nobody here but us.”

“I was scared,” Weasel said. “Anyway, you ruined my shirt.”

Weasel sat silhouetted in the weird half-light of the dropped flashlight. Joshua studied his friend’s outline, the light passing through the thin fabric as Weasel sat holding the ripped portions together over a dingy tank top, with his wrapped torso underneath all of that. The body thin at the waist, swelling ever so slightly at the chest. The bandage clean and unbloodied.

“You ain’t a Drifter,” Joshua said. “You’re a girl.”

“Sure,” Weasel said. He rummaged through the backpack he’d discarded next to the wall before the fight. “I hit like a girl. I got it, Josh. Funny, since you still ended up on the floor.” Weasel pulled a bottle of water out of the pack.

“No,” Joshua said, watching a pair of thin, high cheekbones cut the air as Weasel’s head threw backwards to drink. “I mean, you’re an actual girl, aren’t you?”

Weasel swallowed, rested the bottle on one knee, one hand wiping the back of the mouth. Weasel looked to the far wall. “No.”

“You are,” Joshua said, thinking of Weasel’s legs wrapped around him, the smooth vacancy where Weasel’s legs pressed hotly against his stomach, the register of the war cry.

“That’s why you don’t go in front of no one,” Joshua continued. “And why you don’t ever swim when the rest of us do.”

“I told you,” Weasel mumbled, pulling a second shirt out of the backpack and holding it defensively over his chest. “I’m shy, that’s all. And I don’t know how to swim.” He unzipped the pack and put the water bottle back in, quick and irritated.

“Wait till I tell the others,” Joshua grinned.

Weasel slammed the bag against the ground and turned back to Joshua. His mouth opened and he looked at Joshua and Joshua looked back. Weasel looked away, sunk back down next to the bag, looked back at Joshua.

“Screw you,” Weasel said.

“Weasel,” Joshua said. He leaned over so that she couldn’t avoid looking at him. “You know I ain’t telling no one unless you want me to.”

Weasel shrugged. “I’m kind of tired of hiding, to tell you the truth.” She—Joshua thought, deliberately—she, she, she, Weasel his friend, Weasel the girl—let the torn shirt hang loose against her frame, liberated from a weight he hadn’t even seen her carrying. Undisguised.

“Why?” he said, watching her.

She shrugged, shoved her glasses up her nose, hugged the shirt tight. “I don’t know. My mom was out of town for work when the Walls happened and I was alone. It felt safer, being someone else. Someone who could be brave and quick and sneaky, like a weasel. And then when I got here I just didn’t stop, because...”

Joshua thought of the Sisters Penitent filing past them from one cloistered room to another, humming underneath their white masks. Their smell sweet and sad, somehow, when the hem of their dresses lifted just off the floor. Most of those girls hadn’t had a choice. Not a real one.

“Yeah,” he said. “I get it.”

“Do you mean it?” she said, after a moment.

He thought about this and was surprised to find this was true. “You still got my back?”

“What kind of question is that?” she asked, annoyed. “Of course I do.”

“Then ain’t nothing important changed,” he said. “You’re still you, I’m still me.” He cleared his throat. “Nothing has to change.”

“Thanks. I don’t think it’s going to be that easy, though.” She pulled off the old shirt and buttoned on the new one.

“Wait a minute.” Joshua said. His face grew hot. “You let me piss in front of you!”

Weasel grinned at Joshua. “Like I was looking.”

He shook his head, disturbed. “And you went and sat on the beach when we all was swimming.”

She threw her head back and laughed, the flashlight turning a face he'd known into something new. "I was looking then," she confessed.

"That ain't right," he said, and then he was laughing too.

They quieted. The wind gusted through the door and blew the trash in the hallway around, scratching against the linoleum. They jumped.

"We should get out of here, Josh," she said, and he climbed to his feet. His headache kept time with his throbbing ribs.

"You got any punch?" he asked.

"There's nothing left," Weasel said. She swung the flashlight back and forth before them as they walked back to the front of the store. "I told you there was nothing here."

"You seen Ronnie?" Joshua asked.

"I bet he's waiting outside."

"He'll be shaking and pissing his pants, this close to dark."

"Probably." They stood in the dark store not looking at each other, trash and husks rasping as the wind blew through the door. They were right next to a souvenir display and Joshua picked up one of the snow globes. Weasel cleared her throat.

"Why do you want this punch so bad, anyway? It isn't like Marshal said."

Joshua used his thumb to rub some dust off of a water globe. The snow shifted against the miniature gas station inside. "I just want to see if it's like I remember it, is all."

"Punch?"

“Summer.” He shook the globe and watched the glitter spin, around the station, past the identical orange sign, back down to the ground. They stood in silence.

“My mother was outside when the Walls went up,” Weasel said. “She’s outside right now, waiting for me to find my way out.”

“Sure,” Joshua said. He gently tipped the globe back into the clean space on the shelf it had come from. “Sure she is.”

“She was pretty well known. An entertainer. She could have protected herself. She survived. I’m smart,” Weasel said. “I’m a smart girl. I can figure it out. She always said that. My mom did.”

Joshua looked at Weasel trembling in the dark and said, “You want to go outside first?” because there was nothing left to say.

Weasel sniffed and moved to the door, her head tilting sideways around the frame to check outside the building. After three long seconds, she looked back at Joshua and nodded, her narrow, angular face serious. Now that he knew, Joshua could see it clearly: the slope of the cheekbones, the high arch of the eyebrows. A face that could easily pass for as long as he chose to keep her secret.

The sky was changing from slate to black and the wind picked up, hissing against them as they stepped through the broken doorway. They took up positions next to the gas pump where Ronnie had seen them last, arms crossed.

They watched the night moving towards them, moving over the top of the silver Wall and sending the nearest trees creaking against the wind. Weasel cranked her

flashlight, the gears inside it churning. After several minutes Joshua spoke. “We all right?”

She watched him warily. “I don’t know, Josh,” she said. “Are we?”

“Fuck,” Joshua said. “I probably deserved it anyway.” He spat. “I scared you inside?”

“I thought you were one of the freaks Marshal talks about.”

“Call it even,” Joshua said, and grinned. “I’m the boogeyman. Bluuueargh.”

Weasel’s thin lips cracked a smile. She opened her mouth to speak but her eyes moved behind Joshua towards the garage and what came out wasn’t a word but a breathless cough. Her pointing finger was his only warning. He turned, flashlight shining, and there was Ronnie.

Ronnie stood askew, his eyes closed and the bottle rising against the sky, bubbles from the carbonation curving helixes in the punch he was drinking. A drop of red balanced at the corner of his lips.

The last trickle ran into Ronnie’s throat. The empty bottle descended uncertainly and Ronnie looked back and forth from Weasel to Joshua. The wind blew between them.

“What?” Ronnie said.

“He didn’t know?” Weasel said.

“I found it in the garage,” Ronnie said. “In the breakroom. Underneath the sink.” He clutched the bottle. “You told me to pee anywhere I wanted.”

“This whole trip out here,” Weasel said, “The flashlights, Drifters, everything. And you didn’t bother to tell him what we were looking for?”

“It’s empty,” Ronnie said weakly.

“Look at me, Ronnie,” Weasel said, and Ronnie dropped the empty bottle into Joshua’s hands. Joshua looked down at it.

“Were there more?” Weasel asked. She was standing up straight now, her hands fists against her sides.

Ronnie shook his head. “I was thirsty,” he said. “And I found it so I got to keep it.” He looked back and forth, frightened. “That was okay, right? That’s the rule of the Run, right? We’re not Walkers, we keep what we want?”

“Ronnie,” Weasel said.

“That’s right,” Joshua said. “Yeah, that’s the rule. That’s the rule, Ronnie.” The night had come on fully now, and behind the clouds piled one on another, Joshua knew, there had been stars, the last time he had been able to see the sky.

“It was yours,” Weasel said. “What you were looking for.”

“Yeah,” Joshua said. He looked at the boy standing in front of him, Ronnie with his wet brown eyes, his lip red stained and trembling, and Joshua smiled in the kindest way he could still remember. He stood on the cracked cement with this, his family, and for a moment the autumn night bled into brilliance, into the scent of a summer afternoon before the thunderstorm.

“You found it, Ronnie. You did it. You did,” Joshua said.

The bottle dropped from his hand. He turned and walked away, the others following one after another, following each other into a night without stars.

HALLOWED

Welcome, my friends and Sanctum's chosen. Welcome to another glorious day of opportunity and perseverance under the watchful eye of the Lord above.

Some announcements: firstly, following our prayerful interlude today, the Sisters Penitent, so named for their exemplary service and redemption through salvation here in Sanctum, will be performing their hymn What Is Faith But Obedience before we break our fast.

Second, our gardens are in increasing danger from God's wild creatures and several of you will be diverted from your normal tasks to implement new measures. Please check with the Hands for your assignments before you head out into our world. Remember our buddy system unless you have been cleared for solitude. Please also note that the red zones have been extended through Johnson Avenue and 22nd Street due to the Drifter threat. Remember, children, that these Drifters are no more than animals and it is our Christian duty to put them down with extreme prejudice. Please notify your Walkers of any unidentified persons if you yourself are not cleared to carry an instrument of justice. We apply violence only in the pursuit of safety, friends. Thank you.

The subject of today's sermon is hunger.

Hunger! I see it sunken on the faces and the hearts of those assembled here today. Hunger! I see it gnawing, not at the inside of your stomachs, but at the vaults of your secret, your most private faith. Hunger that cannot be sated without submission.

Witness, friends, the story of the Hallowed Man:

In the time before our own there lived a man—as so many were—untouched by true faith.

This man surrounded himself with all the wonders of that age: he traveled great distances physically in the airplanes and cars currently rotting in our own streets; he traveled great distances with his mind, using computers to touch the minds of thousands; he surrounded himself with every bauble and trinket money afforded him. The man obtained everything he was told to obtain. The man listened to the unyielding scream of popular rule. The man had some skill in the judicial application of violence, and he did this in service of things he felt were just, and he was surely happy and fulfilled.

But on his darkest nights, despite all he had and all he had done, the man's soft bed felt as if it were made of a thousand pricking daggers. The man tossed. The man turned. The man felt only a hollow, empty ache at his inside. A kind of hunger all his possessions couldn't fill. Can you guess—you can! This hunger was the Lord calling the man. How obvious is this to the faithful?

But the man was deaf. The man was prideful. The man walked stubbornly down his sinful path, thinning and thinning still, the hollowness rattling inside his bones.

The man drugged himself to sleep. The man took pleasure in his violent job. He protected the assets of wealthy benefactors and of the march of progress, and the man was well pleased with his menial place inside history's long recounting. He walked down his narrow path with his eyes straight ahead of him and he ignored the growling in his belly. He was already a cog in the machine of higher purpose, he thought, and all machines need cogs.

But we can't outrun our destinies, friends. When we are called, we must listen, even to spite our own selves.

The man's path led him to strife. He did battle against a great evil in the service of another evil. As we teach and are taught, one evil cannot wash away another. Sin cannot be applied to the service of good. Our strength and training can only thrive in service to the Highest.

For his sins the man was rewarded with a grave wound. He sat bleeding and weary, here at the end of all things. He felt the blood soaking the ground and felt the thin stretching of his own emptiness flexing and growing. For a full night and a full day the man suffered his wounds in silence and emptiness, attended by the Saint Lucy in her pain, She whose wisdom brought so many to true service as our Sisters Penitent. Under her watchful grace the man wept and begged for what he had so foolishly rejected. And on the second day, as the dawn crested, he repented of his sins and passed from this material world of pain.

Only to wake, friends, no longer hollowed but hallowed.

Only to wake in the grave dirt with the stars wheeling overhead and the Lord's benediction raining down on him.

A new man for a new age: born again into a world primordial. Dedicated and filled with the Lord's truth and his message. Blessed with a miracle so that he might carry out his destiny with a clean, shining slate.

From the Hollow Man we learn that we are all worthy of rebirth. Never doubt that for you worthy your own salvation is at hand. Faith!

We are chosen and reborn like the Hallowed Man, and in this new world we are building there is no room left for doubt. Doubt is a creeping shadow slithering around the door of our resolve and I see you, my friends, watching it from behind the glass. Considering letting it into our Garden.

But those who fall to doubt do so in sorrow, friends. Those who fall to doubt find themselves walking in solitude, without the support and the love of our brothers and sisters. Those who choose a path outside the Lord's design do so with blindness and in hunger.

And this doubt is the hunger they succumb to. It is borne from memories of a world lost to us all.

Their hunger cannot be sated by fellowship and sacrifice and our love. This is a hunger for things that have passed from us, for the evils of the world we left behind.

Some of you are thinking, Marshal, no! This hunger is for the ones we loved who have fallen. And this can be true. But this hunger is also selfish and cold: for the worthy we loved are held in the bosom of God and in His trust, having walked through twin shadows of pain and fear to reach His side. This hunger for them we must struggle against, that we might be worthy enough to walk with our beloved in the fullness of time. That our hunger may be sated in due course by supping in Heaven.

The ones we loved are lost to us unless we, the new chosen, strive through service, faith, and security to mark ourselves worthy of their presence. Arm yourselves against doubt and fear! I am here for you, children. I am here to shepherd you to Heaven

as your Marshal of God. Your Captain. I am here to arm you against the terrors of the night.

Though you are soundless and afraid I can hear you, children, crying out. Even as the year has passed, I hear you crying in the quiet spaces you find for yourselves: Why were my family, my friends, smote with the sickness? Why were they chosen for the Harvest? Why was I spared?

And my answer, children: You were not spared, but reborn! Your ties to a sinful world severed that you might start anew as tender green shoots at the beginning of a new spring. Your innocence marked you all as the chosen of this new, beautiful world. Even as the sickness moved in the men and women of the old life, even as their lungs coughed up the devil's red, you remained. Even as God's vengeance manifested in the world, even as the four high walls of man rose around our city, the injustice of our captivity turned to blessing: we were not imprisoned. Truly, in these Walls we were freed.

AT DELPHI

Collective memory told them the oldest lived in a camp on the east end of the boardwalk. He lived in a house with no walls or ceiling. He lived between a fading red door and a concrete retaining wall, the shifting sand rearranging the soft grasses he slept on, covering his notebook and the twelve shining yellow pencils he kept sharpened with the stub of a knife. He sat crosslegged between the door and the wall. He watched the clouds passing overhead as night fell and again first thing in the morning, reading the future in the rolling grey. He chronicled skeins of time on his cracked concrete. His eyes saw all things in the sky above. Everything he owned fit in one plastic backpack and when it rained he placed his things in the backpack and placed the backpack on his back, and between the red door and the crumbling cement he sat in the rain and endured. These things that in the world before marked him invisible made him here, in this world, a master of portents.

The others called him a madman. When the shadows crept over the town and they stood huddled around the night fires or underneath stacks of blankets in the dormitory he became something else: a truthsayer, an oracle. No, what he said wasn't truth; you just found a way to make it true like a, whatchamacallit, Joshua said, like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This was a truth: the oldest lived alone behind the red door. The others came to him often but did not often speak. They named him Crazy, and sometimes, when they were alone and without bravado, they named him the Prophet. When they did come with

words, alone or in pairs, the words formed questions that they whispered at the red door's arched keyhole. They waited on the other side of the Prophet's door, breath moving in and out, while the Prophet watched the rhythmic clouds battering one another across the sky. He measured the secrets they brought him with their questions and they measured his silence, sounding the depths where his voice should have been. They left him things—sometimes food, but more often bits of string or the feathers of birds, and once the picture of a mother smiling into the sun.

Some came because he presented them with the sensation of remembering the way things had been but mostly they came because of the way things had become. They came when the wind blew hardest across the sand, drawing the dying sea into a living scent that curled around them. They came on what passed for sunny days. There was nothing of sun in the way there used to be sun. Light as a living thing was only found now in the stubs of old crayons littering former schoolrooms. But every third or fourth month a day would come when the sky turned from slate to silver and the smell of salt reinforced the air everywhere. On those days he opened the red door, stepping into the outside world to stand frail and wild on the end of the boardwalk. Far behind him the rotting Ferris wheel spun flecks of paint into the wind while the prophet spoke in a voice rusted from disuse of the things they had forgotten and the things to come. Below him they stood in groups of three and four on the dry sand and witnessed, mouthing the words he spoke as insurance against forgetting. Later, when the rain shattered against the ground and drove the others to shelter, the prophet traced the form of these days into the wall with the lead of his pencils. Silver, he found, was the new color of wealth.

The red door stood against the sky in front of Ronnie and Joshua, the only color on the rise above Riley's Run. It was far enough away to look like the door to a child's dollhouse and Joshua held the door between his thumb and finger and squashed it. The oncoming wind flung stinging sand at their eyes. Joshua, lanky and defiant, planted his black boots in the sand and leaned in to every gust with his eyes wide open as if this were a challenge, the wind screaming against his open coat and the fraying sweater he wore layered underneath. He laughed breathlessly each time the wind died, shaking the sand loose from his coarse black hair. Ronnie stumbled behind him in a torn yellow raincoat, his red galoshes flopping up and down. His face and head were wrapped in so many overlapping scarves only his small, bright eyes showed and those watered constantly. The ends of his scarves trailed along behind him, slowly unraveling as they marched ever onwards.

The boys walked up a towering dune, all sand and black rock and sawgrass. Joshua made the summit first in a series of stretching leaps to stand silhouetted against the sky. The wind ballooned his long overcoat behind him, his thin frame a black slice cutting against the horizon.

His dune was the tallest anywhere. From here he could see everything. The ocean's arterial currents ran underneath a pair of black-tipped birds tracing slow circles below galvanized clouds. Water the color of whiskey muddied with snarls of seaweed surged against the bare rock of the disappearing beach, shading to peacoat next to the lighthouse on the far point and fading away, out as far as Joshua could see, the surface of the water lifting and falling as breath against the distant horizon. From here only a few

smaller dunes pushed against one another. The beach's veneer eroded bit by bit. The disappearing sand was nothing more than urban makeup conceived by extinct urban planners. They used to ship sand in by the ton every summer in the days before, and now in this new world the shore's bedrock reasserted itself as the beach slipped on an older, more comfortable face. The wind gusted and everything stood flat and grey. The red door stood close and also far, dewy in the half-light. Salt everywhere, but especially on his skin.

It was Ronnie who had found the paint in the ruined convenience store on Thompson Street, tucked in the garage next to a bottle of fruit punch, and it was Ronnie who carried it back through the absolute darkness of their unlit streets after sundown. By one set of rules it should have ended there, with the Marshal locking the paint away in a storage cupboard with the other synthetics, the paint placed in the untouchable hoard by the grace of a ring of shining silver keys that clacked and turned every lock that mattered. But there were the Marshal's rules and there were the rules of the Run, and it was the rule of the Run that Ronnie, as possessor, could do what he wanted with it, so long as he didn't get caught. Ronnie did what Joshua told him to.

The door stayed the same size until it didn't, until it appeared in the near distance suddenly closer than it was before, and Ronnie felt a peculiar uneasiness move around in the pit of his stomach every time this happened. Every second brought them closer to the place where the Prophet spoke on days like today. Just this morning, at Soldier's Sermon, The Marshal's white, even teeth almost split his face in two when he told the congregation how prophecies were read by the damned in the entrails of the lost. As far

as Ronnie could tell they were all lost. He felt certain that his insides weren't carrying around the future, but how would the Prophet know without checking?

Behind them the wind filled in the divots their feet left in the sand. In a moment it would smooth out every mark. It would be like they had flown over the sand without their feet touching the ground, Ronnie thought, or like they had never come at all. Behind them the sand rearranged the appearance of time and space. Ahead was the Prophet.

Ronnie's legs ached. He crawled the last few feet to the top with the can dredging against the dune. He stopped every few feet to rest, pushing his small, plump body against the sand. His scarves slid down his body and off his head as he levered up the incline inch by inch. The slap of sawed beachgrass stung his hands and he bit his lip against the pain. When he dragged himself to the top Joshua stood, King of the Mountain, against the hitching sea.

"Sorry," Ronnie said, and then he tripped on the long tail of his green scarf and fell, rolling end over end over end, down the front side of the dune. The world fractured kaleidoscopically, beige and gray and slate blue. The clouds above or below him or above him or below him.

He lay at the bottom of the hill, his empty lungs burning and not breathing, panic surging and receding with his own confusion. He choked and panicked, choked on nothing at all, panicked. Frozen moments. His breath wheezed when he managed to suck it down. The spinning world settled on a shadow and then the shadow became the sharp angles of Joshua's sardonic face.

“Jesus, Ronnie. Keep up,” the face said, then disappeared. In the negative space where Joshua had been the granite clouds collided as they were battered by the wind tides far above. Someone—Joshua?—tugged on the paint can and Ronnie let the metal handle slip from his palm. He lay there on the cold sand until the clouds swirled into a recognizable pattern.

Ronnie stumbled to his feet, his raincoat crinkling. Ahead was the shining door, and Joshua: Joshua, swaggering towards the Prophet. Ronnie shivered. The wind howled behind him. He shivered. Joshua was moving farther away every second and Ronnie began to feel the peculiar pricking sensation between his shoulder blades that came when he wasn’t alone. He looked in all directions for danger, stretched his small, round body, threw his head upwards.

Above him the clouds parted and in the space between them slept the impossible. A machine’s gaze, the eye focused on where Ronnie stood. The cold omnipotence of a red eye winking on high.

He looked up at the machine.

It hung motionless, defying gravity, above him. It hung in the vault between two windswept clouds for the space of two heartbeats.

He looked up at the machine.

Gleaming metal. Cylindrical, with the illusion of wings turning although it remained motionless. Ronnie thought he saw the machine tilt downwards in the wind as the clouds crashed over it, the building storm swallowing it whole.

He threw himself kicking wildly across the sand, tripping and falling just as his burning lungs brought him to Joshua. Joshua staggered under Ronnie's unexpected weight, the can of paint slipping from his hands and thunking into the sand.

Joshua scowled and shook Ronnie off. "What the hell? Get off me."

"I just saw," Ronnie said breathlessly, and stopped, because what had he seen, exactly? The shine of grey metal arms. Dragonfly wings coasting. A red light. Impossible things watching from on high. Something seen while his head ached from the fall down the hill and his eyes still swarmed with dizzy, pricking stars. The others would think—he knew what the others would think.

Bitty Baby Ronnie telling his stories and his lies. Stop being such a kid, Ronnie. You're six and there ain't no one here to cry on.

"What was it, Ron?" Joshua asked. He turned sideways, watching Ronnie red-faced and sweating on the sand.

"Nothing. Never mind."

Joshua frowned. "Go ahead. Say what you were going to say." Without taking his eyes off of Ronnie, Joshua knelt in the sand and checked the seal around the can's lid, tracing dried tributaries of paint with deft fingers. Sweat gleamed on Ronnie's flushed cheeks and darkened the wisps of blonde hair plastered to his forehead. Ronnie curled into himself. His round face still carried innocence, an echo of the baby he'd been when they'd all had mothers who loved them. Joshua loved and hated this. Ronnie blinked rapidly and sank backwards into the depths of his raincoat. He dug the toe of his galoshes

into the sand until the entire meaning of the world became just this, his boot rising and falling against the sand.

They would line up to taunt him, he thought. Even Joshua. Joshua might even be the one to start it. They would line up to taunt him for his lies and they would say every mean thing he had ever heard and every mean thing he had yet to hear, and they would trip him and call him clumsy and maybe hit him and there would be no one to stop them until it was too late. Joshua wouldn't, now that his moments of generosity were so few. Now that Weasel was gone, maybe drowned and washed out to sea. Leaving Ronnie and Joshua behind.

“What are we going to do with that anyway,” Ronnie said, muffled. “The paint.”

The smell of bloat and decay grew stronger. The ocean pushed against the lip of the shore very close to here and Joshua looked out at the water swelling against the horizon. A gull cried somewhere above them. Neither boy turned to look.

“What do you think we’re gonna do with it, Ronnie?” Joshua unwound a length of braided rope from his wrist and attached it to the paint can.

“Watch this,” Joshua said, his face lighting up with a manic grin. Joshua backed up and started whipping the can in circles at the end of the rope.

“Uh,” Ronnie said, and thought of the things he knew about Joshua. He watched Joshua spinning the can. It rushed against the dark sky and left the image of itself hanging on the air long after.

“I think you’re gonna dump the paint on the Prophet.”

“Well, he probably deserves it,” Joshua said, and laughed. Tension broke into sudden camaraderie. Joshua slowed the spinning pail until it twisted at the end of the rope.

They walked towards the Prophet’s red door on the near horizon, and Ronnie thought, isn’t it strange how small it looks now and how much bigger it’s growing, even though it looks like nothing else is changing, but he couldn’t say that to Joshua, who would, he knew, find a way to make this a joke about Ronnie’s sexual predilections. Or his mother’s. This was Joshua’s kind of joke about everything.

There were others once they crossed from the dunes. Letters written by stones stretched across the flat beach, HELLO THERE spelled out in letters six feet high. Crazy Louisa had dragged the stones there and set them next to each other months ago and she was standing there now with a broom and a dustpan brushing sand off of each one and smiling at the sky. Now and then she would dance and shout. Sometimes she adjusted the angle of her punctuation, turning exclamation to query. Her way of signaling to heaven and her lost brother, perhaps. This was Louisa. Anything was possible.

Mostly they traveled solo, but some of them came in groups of two or three, stealing across the sand and the encroaching rocks towards the Prophet’s door. The same people who sat just this morning at sermon denouncing the devil’s false servants and taking the Marshal’s sacraments now crept through the stinging wind to the Prophet, bits of memory in hand.

Ronnie caught a flash of Walter Rodgers' trademark orange coat walking near the water and his hand shot up to wave the older boy over. Joshua slammed Ronnie's arm back down to his side and held it there, furious.

"What," Joshua said between gritted teeth, "are you doing?"

"It's just Rodgers," Ronnie said, wounded. "I know Rodgers."

"Now ain't the time or place to *know* anyone," Joshua said. "God, you are a baby, you know that? You don't know *anything*."

The others spread randomly across the beach, a string of isolated islands advancing slowly and with one unified, deliberate pace towards the red door.

"What?" Ronnie said.

Joshua shook his head, irritated. "You got to learn these things, Ronnie," he said. "I ain't always going to be here. Look."

Ronnie looked. He watched his friends and sometimes his enemies. Not only those but faces he didn't recognize, people he hadn't seen before lurking behind upturned collars and thick wool hats. "Who are those guys? And why isn't—ain't—anybody talking with each other? Ricky and Lissa aren't even walking together and they been sharing skin for months."

The wind spat sand into their faces. Ronnie held his breath against it as it covered them both in grit. Joshua spat as it passed. "Ron," he said, his eyes startlingly bright against the sand on his face. "What happens if the Marshal learns we been talking to the Prophet?"

"I don't know," he said.

“Last kid he caught didn’t eat for a week,” Joshua said. “Seven days in the closet of His Penitence, no food, just enough water to get by.” Joshua shifted the paint from one hand to another and walked forward. “That’s why you don’t know no one here. You don’t know no one, you can’t tell on no one.”

“I wouldn’t tell,” Ronnie said.

Joshua laughed. “You would tell,” he said. “He would make you tell.”

“Okay,” Ronnie said. He blinked his small brown eyes and frowned. “But I still know he’s here, right. Even if I was going to tell, *which I never would*,” his voice rose, “Even without him saying hello to me I know he’s here because I seen him.”

Joshua gaped at him. “Look. It’s easy, right? Plausible deniability, my dad said. You don’t talk to Rodgers, you don’t look at him, you don’t know him for sure. Maybe it’s not him, right? Maybe somebody just stole his coat or his hat or whatever. Maybe it ain’t really Rodgers in there. Maybe just a coat the wind carried here. You talk to him,” he said, “you have to know. And knowing and not telling are sins to the Marshal, and the Marshal always finds a sin. You don’t know for sure who is here, so you can’t tell him when he asks,” he said, “there ain’t no sin. There ain’t no sin, there can’t be no closet.” He shook his head side to side to clear it, looking up at the sky brightening above them. Down on the beach several of the boys yelled and pointed, not at each other—they were careful not to meet each other’s eyes—but at a cone shaped sand auger twisting along behind them. “He don’t like the Prophet.”

“Josh,” Ronnie said. “But who are those guys?”

Joshua looked down at Ronnie.

“Do you even know what sharing skin means?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Ronnie said defensively. “It means they drink out of the same glass and sometimes they hold hands under the table.”

Joshua laughed. He looked down at Ronnie with affection. “Sure, Ron. Hands.” The can swung evenly between them, a clockwork pendulum, as they walked. “Where did you hear that?”

“Rodgers,” he said.

“He the one who told you that about the water glass?”

“No,” Ronnie said. “I heard him tell Peter at Ablutions the other night when we brushed our teeth that they were sharing skins and Marshal wouldn’t be happy. He said Marshal might even send Lissa to the Sisters if he found out.”

“The Marshal ain’t here for anyone’s happiness,” Joshua said. “I didn’t know that, though.” He stopped and looked at Ronnie, his eyes narrowing. “You’re hiding everywhere someone is talking, aren’t you, Ron? Nobody ever paying you heed.”

“I guess,” Ronnie said, uncomfortable. “I just listen.”

“Well, how about you follow. It’s about time for the start and I don’t want to sit in the back.”

But in front of the door the others were already waiting, row on row of ragged coats and upturned faces ready for the Prophet to emerge and, when the time was right, for him to speak. Up close the red door was striped red and grey and white: weathered, rotting wood, peels and ashy flakes and bubbles of crimson, a delicate natural color where the paint flaked away to reveal the dewy grain underneath. The cracked wood

behind the missing sheets of color had grown swollen with rain. The door stood now shabby and swaybacked before them.

Two kids in their close-fitting black hats stood shoulder to shoulder in the back of the group. One of them, an angular, hungry-looking girl barely ten years old, caught Ronnie looking at her and smiled, showing all her sharpest teeth. Ronnie slid away from her before their eyes met, his hands on the back hem of Joshua's coat.

"Don't be a baby," Joshua said. "Nobody is gonna fight until after the Prophet speaks."

Ronnie swallowed. "Is that when we're going to do it?" he asked.

"What?" Joshua said. He appraised the strangers down the bridge of his nose and sneered. The largest, a muscled boy old enough to have sprouted a beard, stared back at him.

Joshua broke eye contact first, turning away to scan the area behind the Door. Beard Boy smirked and knocked the girl on her shoulder with the back of his hand. She yelped with laughter, her dark eyes crinkling shut as she fell into an unsteady squat. There was dirt on both of her cheeks, the black silt of the clam beds and layers of accumulated filth stiffening her clothes.

"I bet she never even heard of Ablutions," Ronnie whispered to Joshua, outraged.

"Quiet," Joshua said, leaning forward. The red door was opening now, the old brass handle grinding against the salt and rust. Red paint spiraling down, hinges creaking open, breath inhaled and then sighed out, collectively, as one: there stood the Prophet.

He stood taller than anyone else there, thin sticklike arms protruding from an oversized sweatshirt. Dark eyes, mournful and innocent, above a full nose. A thin arch of lip hidden in the depths of the ratty hood. His long fingers scratched compulsively at the thick black mats on his head, knots and whorls struck through with bright bits of plastic, silver bolts, the slick detritus of the time before.

He looked beyond all of them, at the horizon and the lighthouse on the far point and, past that, the danger buoy slashing an orange scar across the surface of the restless water. His brown farseeing eyes were laced with a certain madness. The black skirt he wore over a pair of jeans flapped against his knees, a thwop-thwop-thwop the only sound rising above the ocean. Wave and wind and silence screaming, the tension between them all spooling outward until--

“Remember? We had:

Sunshine, soda in aluminum cans, cellphones, music, snow days, school days. We were kings and queens of the sportsplex. We ruled.

“We had:

Games, movie theaters, stolen cigarettes, parties under the bridge, girls with silky hair and silky underwear and lips sticky with our secrets. Boyfriends and girlfriends and friends who understood the things we kept hidden. Lust and longing fighting inside us, rising up against the walls we lived inside. Liminal moments. Standing on the threshold.

“We had:

Parents who knew and understood nothing. We told them what was what. We said, *You don't control me*. We went with who we wanted and we wore what we wanted.

We said, *I don't answer to you*. We cruised the streets in borrowed cars or on our feet. We said, *You don't know what it's like*. We had fire. We didn't care. We loved them and we hated them and we told them to go to hell. We were busy living and living forever. "And then our worlds barked out our names, lying prone on a sickbed,, and after that:

"Nothing.

"Nothing but the sound of our own words. Nothing but the sound of our own indignant infancies. Nothing we could take back before it was too late and now we're here, no more time for summer or stolen cigarettes or dishes passed clockwise at the dinner table. Left alone after the red eyes and the sound of a wracking cough took them all away until there was only us few left to live.

"Living and living forever.

"We fought against the walls that made our houses homes, and now we have no fight left when we need it most. Now all we can do is accept or forget. Now we have silver walls standing sentinel and witness, walls without doors, and inside them we wither and die. If we had a door, where could we go? Inside or outside what's left us is the wasteland of our own ambitions and the wasteland of our own potentials and the wasteland of our own combined prayers. There is no backwards way to travel forward. Now we are headed wild, wild into the unknown west, like wild geese flying feathery vees. Shedding feathers as we go, transforming into something wrinkled and trembling in the cold. Something short lived, something new. Only now, only ourselves, without the burden of our yesterdays. Without *Goodnight, father*. Without phones and photos. Without text. Feather pillows white and smooth as snow, snow like Christmas falling.

The prancing and pawing of each little hoof overhead.” The last words hissed out and his mouth screwed up into a knob, the words held in by his own violent fists pounding against his chest.

“Shh,” he pleaded. “Someone is listening, just shut up, would you, shut up shut up.”

Silence between them all. The wind tore against his clothes and the Prophet opened his arms and stood with his eyes closed to meet them. “Red eyes tracing through the sky,” he said. “Falling, fading, closer and far. What a lot of stars there are.”

He opened dark, bewildered eyes and looked out at the gathering before him, the children rank on rank underneath a sky the color of steel wool or dirty cotton or something else he couldn’t quite remember, and he told them this in a new voice, a voice hoarse and breathless and as normal as any they had ever heard echo down a hall:

“Where did the first fire burn the lungs? Earth, sky, or deep inside our own city—where did it culture? Where did it begin the march of progress, never stopping until our threads linked one on one on one and we were left holding hands or holding nothing? Natural or manmade, does it matter? We are left to survive what came with no more than a watcher to witness our fall. Stargazers and lowdwellers: the outside made us all outsiders, and inside these four walls we wither.”

His hands ran expertly over a bundle of dirty string even as his eyes searched the cloudbank above them. At the other end of the string was a tattered yellow kite. Strips of clear cellophane tape crisscrossed one another over rips in the cheap plastic, a sad stub of a tail drooping onto the sand at his feet. They watched the kite rise, unsteadily at first,

halting and dropping in a pocket of dead air before the wind gusted and tried to rip it from his hands.

He laughed at the kite dancing above all of them, the tiny tail snapping like a conquering flag, and at the clouds dancing above that.

“We’re in the cycle now. Our lives rise and fall, our green messages trailing from earth to sky, carrying our recorded chords up to the vault of heaven, shattering against our hearts and our heads and our hungers. Everything connected with this beautiful silver thread transmitting our pain outside. Only the storm never washes us all clean.”

His fingers fretted the string. His eyes watched relentless thunderheads building one on another, atmospheric currents slipping overhead faster and faster still, the cracks between them liquid silver and shining like the smile the Prophet wore on his unlined face.

“I like songs,” he said. “I like messages from water.”

His hands on the string began to shake. His head twitched towards one shoulder. The crowd stood fallow before him and breathed with one breath.

He focused with great seriousness on the dancing kite. “The eyes rise above us all, watching and waiting, cataloguing horror and recording pain. Receiving, never believing. Is anyone left watching us die? Do they care?” The last word wobbling with a new fear, the voice whining high and uncertain.

The prophet wept. His hands trembled and twisted here and there until the kite slipped free and spiraled overhead. In seconds it was a bright yellow fleck against the gathering dark. The Prophet’s body twitched an answer to the dwindling kitetail as it

spun from side to side. Each spasm brought an indescribable pain and with it, an equal joy.

Two indistinguishable attendants stood up, their heads completely wound in anonymous yellow scarves. They slipped their hands behind the Prophet's elbows with an aching tenderness, guiding him step by trembling step through the red door. The second pulled the pitted brass knob behind them. The door swung shut without a sound.

At this the rest of them blinked and shook their heads as if rising upwards from green, shadowy depths towards clearer waters. One or two of them laughed breathlessly and several of them stretched. Conversations began anew, the indistinguishable hum of overlapping voices.

Half of them left, talking with each other and throwing stones at seagulls when the birds ventured too low. Those who had sacrifices to leave behind lined up at the bottom of the hill, their offerings clutched in sweaty hands.

Ronnie turned to follow the group headed back home and Joshua said, "Wait." Ronnie's stomach lurched with the familiar helpless terror. The paint, forgotten during the electric atmosphere of the Prophet's speech, swung in Joshua's hand. They joined those waiting single file at the door, hanging back until they were last in line.

"Funny thing, ain't it," Joshua said. "End of the world and we're still standing in lines."

"I don't want to do this," Ronnie said. "I like him. He was nice."

"Nice," Joshua scoffed. "If you like them damaged, maybe."

Ronnie looked at the paint hanging in Joshua's hands.

“I don’t want to do this,” he said again.

Joshua watched the other kids moving down the beach, laughing and talking, until they were nothing but smudged dots in the distance. He watched the seagulls moving overhead and the four or five people in front of them shuffle their gifts from hand to hand, pressing against the cracks in the door to whisper into the brass keyhole.

“Josh,” Ronnie said, pleading.

“Don’t worry about it, Ronnie,” Joshua said. “We’re doing what we came to do.”

The top of the paint can popped off with a wet, sucking sound.

The boy in front of them, a pale wisp of a kid who still sniffled into his bedroll every night, slid an envelope underneath the door and rose from penitent knees.

They were the last.

Joshua watched the kid moving down the beach until he shrank against the horizon like all the others. The door cracked open and an imperious gesture urged them forward. He waited until the gesture was followed by the head and shoulders of one of the indistinguishable masked attendants, serene facelessness belied by an irritated tension.

“We’re up,” he said. He swung the open can and the paint became a hundred shining, relentless projectiles.

The door shut just as the first drops concussed against the door. Ronnie flinched at the impact: red smashing against the wood, running across all the bumps and grooves, coloring everything it touched before soaking the sand by the threshold.

The door cracked open a second time, one of the two yellow-scarved attendants passing through to stand in front of them.

“Come on, Josh,” the attendant said. “You promised.”

“Weasel?” Ronnie said. His small, dark eyes blinked rapidly at Weasel, concealed behind the inscrutable serenity of the scarf. “What are you doing here?”

Weasel watched Joshua. “I was helping Janus out—the Prophet. Joshua said he’d bring some of that paint we found to clean the door up some—I missed you too, Ron.” Without waiting for Weasel to finish, Ronnie threw himself forward and wrapped both arms around Weasel’s midsection. Weasel stroked the younger boy’s hair with affection.

“And I did,” Joshua said, laughing. “I brought the paint.”

Weasel pried Ronnie off and pushed an ancient, swaybacked paintbrush in his hand, a second brush hitting Joshua in the chest.

Joshua shrugged and spread the paint on the door. His brush moved gently and precisely side to side, up and down, pushing the color into the cracks and stripes. He worked without sound, with focus, guiding the paint with an unexpected gentleness. Ronnie stood clutching his own paintbrush and watched openmouthed as Joshua and Weasel worked together, transforming the broken door into a solid sheet of shining crimson.

Joshua looked up at Ronnie from the bottom panel of the door. “What the hell are you looking at?”

“I’m confused,” Ronnie said.

“Nothing new there,” Joshua said.

Weasel rested a hand on Ronnie's shoulder. "Ronnie," Weasel said. "I'm not Weasel anymore. I'm gone. You didn't see me here and you have no idea where I went. I drowned, Ronnie. I drowned like Turtle did, in the ocean. Got it?"

Ronnie opened his mouth, shut it, nodded mutely.

"Okay. Thanks, Ronnie. Thank you for helping." Weasel guided the younger boy gently to the door and pushed his arm up and down once or twice until Ronnie started painting automatically.

"Unbelievable," Weasel said, arms outstretched. The empty beach stretched out below them, tracks in the sand in every direction. "Did you hear? Did you hear it?"

"Huh," Joshua said. "You starving out here? Looks like you're starving out here."

"We do okay," Weasel said.

"You did better back with us." The brush flipped faster against the door.

"You don't even like God's Marshal anyway. What do you care where I am?"

"What does like have to do with it? It's not safe alone."

"I'm not by myself. Janus is out here too. And others."

"Janus," Joshua said. "All that talk about the sky watching us makes him seem like a real stable partner for the apocalypse."

"It's not bad. I have books to read and no one is harassing me all the time."

Joshua focused on the brush running up the side of the door, working the everyday magic of transformation with the passage of a few bristles and a can of paint.

"He don't even have a roof."

"He doesn't live behind the door anymore."

“Some prophet. Where is the sky watching us from, is what I want to know.”

“I believe him,” Ronnie said, dripping paint everywhere.

Both heads swiveled to look at Ronnie.

“I believe the sky is watching us,” Ronnie said. “On our way over here I saw something in the sky with a red light blinking. Like an eye.”

“You didn’t say anything to me,” Joshua said.

Ronnie looked down at the ground. “I was afraid you’d make fun of me. But then the Prophet said it, and I knew what I seen. Saw.” A drop of water hit his face and he flinched.

Weasel looked out over the stormcaps building on the surface of the water and then up at the sky, scanning the dark rainclouds that jockeyed against one another high above them. One fat drop, and then another, soaked against the sand.

The old library sat a block and a half away, out of sight of the sea. Ronnie, Joshua and Weasel slipped past the small stone lions and through the cracked library doors just as the hail started, marble sized chunks of ice bouncing off the pavement to clatter against the old windowpanes.

They shuffled against a dirty, threadbare carpet. Everywhere books faded into the shadows at the edges of the room: books lining the walls in neat rows, books covering wheeled trays, books spread open two or three deep on two long tables that might have been wooden underneath the piles. Half-burned candles dripped into puddles of wax here and there across the center of the table. One table was covered with what looked like

engineering books, piles of scrap metal, LED lights and radio parts. Next to a fireplace with a flat marble hearthstone sunk into one wall sat a pair of heavy leather wingback chairs scrounged from the cigar bar on Wilson, wine red masterpieces rising up out of the trash surrounding them. Two more chairs sat at the end of the table. In one of those chairs lounged the other attendant: a beautiful boy with carefully disheveled blonde hair and yellow scarves wound around his neck, one leg swinging back and forth over one riveted leather arm. The boy glanced up absently from a thick hardcover as they entered, smiling first at some private textual secret and then at Weasel.

“You didn’t tell me we were entertaining,” he said to Weasel. “I could have cleaned up.”

Weasel snorted and shook free from the scarves. “Could, but wouldn’t.”

The boy nodded agreeably. “You’re right. I wouldn’t.” He marked his place with a finger and propped his chin up on one hand. Hail shot against the windows. The light outside dimmed to near black as the largest of the clouds rolled overhead. “Nice of you to come home to me, but you could have left the strays outside.”

“This is Earwig,” Weasel said. “Ronnie, Joshua.” Weasel waved a hand at the quiet library, the flicking candles, the books and chairs. “This is home.”

“That’s a funny name,” Ronnie said. “Earwig.”

“My name is Irwing. That’s just Weasel’s pet name for me when she’s angry.” The boy yawned and stretched, his sleepy eyes drooping. “Call me what you want. I doubt I’ll see you again. You may leave.” He flipped a hand at them and reopened the book in front of his face.

“Wig,” Weasel said. “Your hair looks flat.”

“That is not funny,” Irwing said, slamming the book shut and climbing to his feet.

Joshua snickered. Irwing appraised him coldly from underneath a raised eyebrow.

“Where’s Janus?” Weasel said, interrupting whatever Irwing had been about to say. Irwing’s eyes filled with light and he smiled at Weasel.

“He’s resting in the back room.” Irwing said. “It wasn’t easy to get him back here by myself, woman. You owe me.”

“Is that what made your hair fall?” Weasel said, smiling back at him. “I had to fix the door. We have an image to maintain.”

“You’re not,” Irwing said, “but I forgive you. You know I can’t resist your charms. Come. I’ll take you to him.” He stood up, taller than Joshua had expected him to be, muscular despite the fact that they were all starving out here. Irwing ran his hand lightly down Weasel’s arm. Her arm wrapped around Irwing’s waist with an intimate, familiar grace.

Joshua watched them moving between the stacks, fading in and out of shadow in the dim stormlight as they headed to the door on the far side of the long room.

“Joshua?” Ronnie said, barely audible over the ice ricocheting outside. “Why did that Earwing call Weasel *she*?”

The old fireplace wasn’t broken like he’d thought at first. Just disabled. Joshua stretched up into the dark recesses with an old bottle of sweet strawberry hand lotion and

fiddled with the rusted flue damper until it creaked open and shut again. He twisted up some old newspapers and lit them over a pile of broken chair legs, feeding the fire until it roared over the storm outside and reflected onto the pale marble. Ronnie found a package of old tea in the librarian's desk next to the lotion, the brittle leaves crumbled almost to dust, and they brewed it over the fire in a ceramic mug. They sat gathered around the fire in the wingback chairs watching the flames.

Uncontrolled laughter cut the silence open. Joshua looked up from the steaming cup just as the door at the back of the room flung outwards, Irwing and Weasel tumbling through it. Weasel's head twisted to look behind her at Irwing as she laughed, the long lines of her neck and the curl in her short hair drawn luminous by twilight.

"I know." Irwing said as they walked towards the others, close enough to brush against each other. "I told him, next time you are on your own."

"You're a girl," Ronnie said. He stood in front of Weasel with his trembling fists clenched together. "You lied to me."

"Ronnie," she said, and stopped at the sight of the fire behind him. "You got the fireplace working. We've been trying to do that for weeks."

"You could have told me," Ronnie said, tearful. "I would have kept your secret, Weasel. I am the best at secrets. Everyone says so." She opened her mouth to speak.

"Leave me alone." He shoved against her with a surprising violence and ran into the stacks, rows and rows of books stretching upwards and vanishing in the dark.

"Just leave him," Joshua said. "He'll get over it."

An awkward silence settled between the three of them. Irwing stood watching Joshua drink his tea from down the full length of his nose, the heavy leather book still in one hand. Weasel picked at the fray on one of her cuffs and cleared her throat.

“Wig?” Weasel said, looking over at him.

“Sure. I’ll go find Ronnie a bed,” Irwing said. “What do you think, love, will he be in Children’s?”

“Reference or Nonfiction. Check the beanbag chairs.”

“Interesting choices.” Irwing looked at Weasel for a long moment before heading off to find where Ronnie sat crying against the dark.

“Thanks for the fire,” Weasel said, moving closer to the flickering heat. “If there were dinner, it would be on me.”

Joshua looked down at the soot on the front of his jacket and tried not to think of the others, all lined up at the Marshal’s table, filling their dishes with watery rice and beans.

“Yeah. It wasn’t exactly hard.” He listened to the wind rattling the old windows. The edges and corners of the room were now completely swallowed by felted darkness and other than the candles on the table it was as if this small patch of nervous fire lit the only solid reality there was, as if he could open the heavy library doors and step off into a nothingness so thick and eternal that there would be no need for regret. He looked at the light flashing here and there as Weasel turned her head to regard him and felt his legs give way, glad for the grip of the leather against his hands.

Weasel slouched into the other chair, swinging her legs over the arm. “I didn’t realize he was going to be so upset about it.”

“You know Ronnie,” Joshua said. “He don’t want to be left out of nothing, especially if there’s a secret to keep. He’ll get over it. He looks up to you, is all.”

She snorted. “Careful. That almost sounded like a compliment.”

“He does,” Joshua said, staring into the fire. “You leaving took him hard, especially Marshal putting the word out you were dead. He thought you were gone for good.”

“I am,” she said, watching him. “Dead and gone.”

“He misses you.” Joshua threw another piece of scrap on the fire.

“There’s no place for me where he is. No room. What he needs now is you to stop being an asshole--please pardon my language-- and to start being an example.” She stretched both arms upwards, her back arching against the chair as she yawned.

“Besides,” she said, “What kind of choice did I have?”

“You might not have been a Sister,” Joshua said. “Not everyone is.”

“Especially not cross-dressing blasphemers, I bet. The Marshal loves those. Probably gives them extra rations.”

“We’ll never know now,” Joshua said.

“I have no options,” she said, “I can’t stay here.”

She didn’t mean the library. “Still running?”

“What else is there?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “What’s with you and this Earwig, anyway?”

She looked at him, firelight reflecting in the twin frames of her glasses. “What are you asking?” she said.

“I was just wondering. You seem close.”

“Close enough.”

“Nothing,” Joshua said. “Forget I said anything.”

They allowed the sound of the fire to grow between them until it blanketed everything.

“You shouldn’t have brought Ronnie. This is trouble.”

“I’ll figure out how to sneak him back in tomorrow.”

“Marshal will notice,” she said. “You could still make it in the secret way tonight. Through the soccer field.”

“Nah,” Joshua said. “He fixed the hole in the back fence. He’s got Walkers patrolling past dark now, with weapons.”

“Protection from all the rabid raccoons,” she said. “Naturally.”

“And the deer,” Joshua said. “You know it’s not for us. You know we’re all one big happy family. We brush our teeth and go to bed like little angels. You should see us at sermon. Flea and those other asshole Walkers lined up at the front table hugging their rifles and slingshots.”

“Regimented and shining with earnestness,” she said.

“At least he’s consistent,” Joshua said. “And we have food now, more often than not. The Sisters are in charge of Company Agriculture and the garden is actually producing. And someone learned how to shoot straight enough to bring down deer.”

“How’s...Rhona? Rhonda?”

“Who?”

“That girl from Supply and Demand you were always screwing around with.”

“Oh. Fine, I guess.” He cleared his throat and shrugged awkwardly. “I haven’t seen her in a while. Actually, she’s the one who shot the deer.”

Joshua watched the fire licking at the scrapwood. “We could go live on our own,” he said. “You and me and Ronnie. We could raid the tomb-houses for anything that’s left and live down by the water in the old arcade until the walls fall.”

“You want to play Peter Pan? Honestly, how old are you?”

“Fuck you,” Joshua said. “That was a genuine offer.”

Weasel laughed. Sparks from the fire reflected orange in her glasses. “You know the walls are never going to fall.”

“I’m okay with never,” he said. “I’ll be your Peter Pan. I’ll be fifteen forever.”

She looked at him. “Why would you tell me that?”

He shifted in the chair. “You ain’t going to tell anyone my age. I’m sixteen at Christmastime.”

“No one tells their real age,” Weasel said, watching him. “That’s secret. Just like our names.”

He looked into the fire. “Not like it matters anyway. Why we keeping so many secrets? Nothing to keep them from.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Information is power,” she said. “We’ve already given up everything else.”

“Age only mattered when we still had years ahead to fill,” Joshua said. “It don’t matter now. Being seventeen don’t mean anything now.”

“Doesn’t it?” she said, her voice tight.

He looked at her and said nothing.

She took her glasses off and rubbed at the bridge of her nose, her hair falling down over her eyes. “If you follow me, I can show you something. Two somethings. One you’ve seen. Ronnie has, anyway. The other...” She spent several minutes looking into the flickering flames and sighed. “Janus won’t like it, but I’ll show you,” she said. “Tomorrow.”

Eventually he slept, there next to the coals of their fire, and woke with a sore back and a dry throat. Weak sunlight lit the room. He swore, stretched, worked the kinks out of his body.

He was alone. The books untouched, the candles in piles of wax, the windows looking out on a new morning, silence like hanging mist over everything. He heated some water in the smoldering heart of the fire and dropped yesterday’s teabag into the tepid cup. He knew hunger. It was strange how quickly you accepted some things. Hunger was a constant. Full stomachs were another relic of the old days. Somewhere he had become accustomed, though, to the daily feed: the sliver of bread, or rice, or mealy potato, sometimes even venison or honey from the Sisters’ bees, while the Marshal hummed promises and disgraces into every ear. All of them filing in to the tables, sitting shoulder

to shoulder with each other. He missed this almost more than the honey and the old bread.

He was sipping more weak tea and staring at the back door when it slammed open.

“...stupid!” Irwing said. “Unbelievably stupid.” His pale cheeks were flushed and he stared at Joshua with something like hatred. Weasel pushed past him through the doorway, Ronnie trailing her.

“Not your decision,” Weasel said. “I’m going.”

“No,” Irwing said. “It was Janus’ decision, and he made it. You are not going.”

Weasel swung around to face him. “I didn’t come out here to take orders,” she said. “I am not going to be told what I can and can’t do.” Joshua put the mug down on the table with an audible clink.

“Ronnie,” he said, and the younger boy crossed the room in a series of uncertain steps to stand with him. He threw a condescending look at Weasel and Irwing. “We going or what? I don’t have all day for you to get your permission slip signed.”

He crossed through the room without waiting for her answer. Dust mushroomed up from the old carpet in his wake and he stopped only to pull the heavy handle on the huge wooden door. With Ronnie behind him he stepped out into a pearlescent morning, the sun a white disc in the thin clouds somewhere above them. Across the empty street a flock of birds startled upwards from their roosts on top of an old brick apartment building. The day had an aura, a kind of glow about it. A kind of possibility.

He slouched against one of the stone lions, crossed his arms and closed his eyes and listened to the sound of the trees clacking their branches. Ronnie knew better than to speak. They waited.

The door opened.

“Ronnie,” Weasel said. “I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you my secret. I was scared, but I should have shared it with you. I do trust you, and I have a job for you, if you want me to prove it.”

“I missed you,” he said, and sniffled.

“I missed you too. Every day.”

The wind blew around them. A bird called, high and insistent. “What’s the job?” he said finally.

“Can you stay here today with the Prophet while Wig goes gathering? Can you do everything he asks? This is a very important job, Ron.”

“You’re mad at Josh,” Ronnie said.

“I’m not mad at you,” she said. “I’m happy. Seeing you makes me happy.”

Another long silence. Joshua waited in the darkness behind his eyelids, tracing the flight of the birds in his mind. A sniffle—Ronnie was probably nodding and drying his eyes. He’d do anything for Weasel. The door groaned open. It needed oiling. Who was going to do it? Not Irwing. Useless symmetry. All show, no go. He probably didn’t even know what a garage was. Two weeks and he couldn’t fix a fireplace? What was he that Joshua wasn’t, exactly?

He became aware that Weasel was in front of him, close enough to feel her breath heat his cheek.

“This is my place,” she said in his ear in a low voice. “If you can’t follow my lead, you can leave right now.”

He opened his eyes to find her there. Behind the glasses her eyes were the same deep, concentrated green they’d been outside the gas station the last time he’d made her angry. “Okay,” he said. “Sorry.”

There were three bikes on the library bike rack in various states of disrepair. She pedaled away without looking back, turning the first corner before he even pulled the other bike off the rack.

Joshua was pretty sure they were going to the old subway station on Belmont and First. The whole rail system was off limits to the Company per the Marshal of God’s orders but once in a while the Lost would dare each other to creep down the stairs of one entrance or another anyway. Most of them were still boarded up from the days pre- Wall just after public transportation was closed down during the early days but this made the powerless, subterranean caverns no less terrifying. Rodgers had leaned against one of the plywood barriers once and swore he felt something breathing and moving on the other side. Most kids never got past the first four stairs.

They were riding down the middle of the street in broad daylight, and Joshua tried to elicit a vague thrill from what had been a denied pleasure. Without rules such transgressions were meaningless. If anyone was going to leap out at them, it wouldn’t be

in warning. He kept a sharp eye out anyway. The roving Drifters were gone, but keeping lookout gave you something to do while you were riding. Otherwise you spent too much time thinking about how many things were broken. There was always the chance that some emaciated zoo escapee had made a home here, formed a ragtag pride of carnivores, stalked the streets. Killing time.

Probably the tigers and lions died off years ago, when the Drifters had. Of the monsters of the old world only the Marshal remained.

Weasel took a sharp turn around a charred bus at the intersection of Quincy and Belmont to head down Porter Street and he had to pedal hard to keep up with her. Bikes weren't a great choice in the city anymore unless you were on one of the few paths the Gatherers and the Watchers kept tamed. This wasn't one of those paths: Quincy had two or three saplings growing through the cracked asphalt and a small river welling up to stay where the water mains were busted. Port was all hill, maybe the steepest in the city, and more meadow now than suburban street. Tall weeds and flat grasses sprouted from the asphalt in irregular patterns, spreading and bending in the wind, so that between the running water and the verge the path they took to stay on bare road bent crookedly here and there. On both sides of the street the old houses squatted behind dirty windows and watched the new river wash away the old road. Weasel slipped confidently into the empty spaces where the asphalt remained with an ease Joshua couldn't emulate. Weeds caught at his spokes and he had to pedal hard to yank free. Before long his wheels and chain were clogged.

Joshua stopped next to a towering wild rosebush to clean the wheels. He didn't call for her. He was still sure they were headed to the subway and wanted to see her face when she realized she'd lost him, standing underneath the subway sign and looking small. Except maybe she didn't care so much about being alone out here anymore. Not like she had when they were all running together, she and Ronnie and Joshua. He took his time cleaning the wheels and breathing in the peach tea roses. They had stems the size of his thumb. Funny. He was pretty sure they used to breed thorns out of roses and here was this domesticated flower growing daggers an inch long.

He looked out over the ruined street and the piles of human treasure flaking bit by bit into nothing. Four or five deer stepped out from what had been someone's garage and looked straight at him with wide, liquid eyes. There were packs of animals everywhere now-- deer, feral cats, raccoons. It hadn't taken them long to realize this was their world again.

Weasel was waiting for him at the intersection at the top of the hill, standing next to a spreading patch of dying daisies and what used to be someone's mailbox. She tossed two small green apples at him. "Eat," she said. He thought about tossing it away, but his stomach groaned. He watched the juice run down her chin. He hadn't eaten since lunch the day before, in the cafeteria with the other Lost.

"There's a tree over there," she said, between bites. "The deer get most of them."

He ate five apples, core and all, crushing the seeds between his teeth, as fast as he dared and stood there sucking the last bit of juice from his fingers.

“You’re slower than I remember. Quieter, too,” Weasel said, and she watched him, wearing that slipping smile of hers. He found himself echoing it before he remembered they were supposed to be fighting. And then he did remember, and it didn’t seem to matter.

“Only because I’m stuck behind you,” he said, not capable of anger right then, and bent over his handlebars like he had when they were young.

He raced recklessly down the steep slope on First—miraculously pretty nature-free, though there was still plenty of trash in the road for him to bite it on. He swerved wildly around an indecipherable pile of rusted metal, around a second pile of what looked like compost—best not to look too close—felt like he was flying, knew he was going too fast to see what was in front of him, too fast to stop, fast enough that if he struck something in the road he was going to inadvertently eject off this barely functional piece of crap bike and onto his face. A delicious, inevitable kind of panic slid around in his stomach and he leaned into instinct, leaned in to the realization that there was nothing to do but go forward faster and harder and blinder than before. He thrust both hands into the air and whooped in joy, pedaling furiously and without direction.

It would have been more impressive if he had slid to a stop next to the newspaper dispenser, rather than on top of it. Weasel followed, pulling up between him and the mouth of the subway. “Okay,” she said, a smile lighting her face. “Showoff.”

He grinned, his eyes crinkling up at the corners. “Like you weren’t, moving through that mess on Port.”

She propped the bike up against the rusting newspaper box and laughed into the sky. “I never show off. I can’t help it if I’m naturally superior to you. Faster reflexes, more brains.”

“Since you’re so superior,” Joshua said, “maybe you want to use those enormous brains and tell me how we’re getting inside the old subway? The door ain’t working.”

“Isn’t it?” she said, feigning surprise, and started towards the stairs.

“Oh,” she said, before she vanished completely, “leave the bike. And don’t wander.”

There was a mechanism, as it turned out. A pulley stuck high up in the small gap between the top of the subway arch and the plywood door. It wasn’t exactly hidden, but no one really came down here and if they did it was only to stand, trembling, on the third step. None of them would look up. Never underestimate the power of oblivion, Joshua thought. Of hiding in plain sight.

Weasel stood in the doorway, barely visible in the light filtered from the street. Behind her could have been the mouth of a well, black and impenetrable. Velvet sky without the prick of stars.

“In here,” she said, holding the end of the rope in one hand and a flashlight in the other. “I have a light. Don’t worry.”

“The hell is this?” Joshua said, stepping forward to meet her.

She lowered the door behind them. “This is where the Drifters live,” she said, and blocked out the sun.

He waited for his eyes to adjust, but there was no light to adjust to. He edged toward where he'd seen her standing. She cursed.

"The flashlight broke. Hold on." He heard the sharp smack of her hand slapping against the body of the cylinder, the void around them directionless, all encompassing, final. An aching isolation rose in him. He forced air in and out of his lungs in regular rhythms. He might as well have been walking on nothing at all. He might as well have been formless in the deep well of the void without legs or arms or body or brain. He held on to the sound of Weasel fixing the flashlight, following the rattle of the batteries in the plastic casing and the muffled curses underneath her breath that seemed to come from everywhere until his hand parted the heavy darkness and found the soft curve of her waist, the fabric of her worn brown coat, the heat of her body underneath all of that. He put his shoulders against hers, leaning in so that they stood together back to back against the dark while she tried to make the light. He could smell her, the sweet-salty-strange of her, and mixed with that the scent of the deodorant and shampoo she shared with Wig. He wondered when they shared it, and how, climbing out of their beds (or bed?) tousled and clinging to the last vestiges of sleep (or each other?), the intimacies of their every day. He flushed.

They stood that way for what felt like hours. The flashlight clattered out of Weasel's hands and onto the floor and then the sound of more objects hitting concrete, the staccato crack of panic. She knelt down, breathing fast, her hand sliding down the length of his leg--her lifeline-- and then back up. A light rolled open the black and revealed their place inside it.

“Sorry,” she said, a different flashlight in her hand. “I had to dig the other one out of my bag. That one was working before. Stupid.” She flicked the light from side to side.

“You had to get dramatic,” he said. “Should’ve turned it on first.”

They stood at the narrow bend in the L shaped station, a thin space at ninety degrees to the turnstiles and the train platform. They were alone. In the narrow glow Joshua thought he saw piles of things—shoes, books, broken trinkets—pushed into heaps against the side of the wall. She leaned against him, her side pressing into his. He took comfort from this, and from the sound of her breath in the dark.

“This is where they keep the things that aren’t food,” she said, bending down to gather up the things she’d dropped. “A kind of supply station.”

“Who are we actually here for?” Joshua said.

He could feel her tilt her head to the side in the darkness. “Drifters,” she said. “What’s left of them, anyway. The kids who joined them before the adults all died off.”

“Since when have there been others?”

“Since the beginning. It’s perfectly safe,” she said. “No, really. I mean that. They aren’t that different than us, other than...”

“Other than the cannibalism,” Joshua said. “Other than that, you mean.”

“They know me,” Weasel said. “I mean, they know Janus. They respect Janus and they know I’m with him and Wig, so we should be okay. They have a kind of understanding.”

“Yeah. Your boy sounded like he was real supportive of you coming here.”

She went quiet.

“You have to see,” she said. “You won’t believe me if you don’t. But if you really don’t want to go, we can go back.”

Silence and darkness breathed between them. “Do you have another flashlight?” he said, and he could almost hear her smile slicing against the black. At his feet, the flashlight she’d dropped guttered on, corroded connections sparking momentarily to life, and faded away.

Joshua wasn’t sure who had reached out first, but Weasel’s hand felt cool and solid in his. They walked hand in hand for nearly an hour through the musty, vaulted tunnel in absolute darkness before they found the light. A thin glow around the corner. Not firelight, Joshua thought, at least not mostly. Too regular for that. Not enough in the way of caveman flickers, and too blue.

“They use a lot of batteries,” Weasel said. “And those big camping lanterns with high-efficiency bulbs. I don’t know where they’re even still getting the batteries from.”

“They go places we won’t,” Joshua said.

Weasel nodded. “No red zones.” She let go of his hand and rubbed her glasses on the end of the yellow scarf she wore coiled around her neck, a kind of standard.

Weasel looked up from the tunnel at the light glowing at the far end of the platform, and then back at him. “Don’t say anything stupid.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know what that means. Be nice. Or be quiet, maybe.” She hesitated. “Don’t mention their dietary choices, okay? They don’t all like to be reminded of the past.”

He grinned. “You don’t have to tell me to be nice to a bunch of cannibals, Weasel.”

She rolled her eyes and straightened the scarf. “It’s your skin. Follow me in a minute.”

“Funny,” he said, but she was already pulling her body up onto the lip of the platform, the muscles standing out in her thin arms, her long legs swinging in one strong, sure arc, and she was gone. Weasel’s feet shuffled against the heavy tile floor. After the warm silence of their trip down the rails this felt intrusive. She coughed before she turned the corner. He waited for her to look back at him. She didn’t.

“Hey,” he heard her say to someone out of sight. “It’s just me. It’s Weasel. Don’t freak out, but I brought someone.”

He pulled himself up onto the platform and followed her into the light.

“Who the hell is he?”

Joshua wasn’t exactly sure what he expected them to look like, but there was a surprising lack of the qualities he’d been told were associated with the unclean consumption of flesh. Not a cloven hoof, gimlet eye or hunchback so far. This was disappointing, but also not disappointing from a survival perspective. He was pretty sure he could take on these two weak-looking kids if he had to, but the other one was built like a concrete retaining wall and a pair of sweeping horns was a complication he didn’t need.

A big kid, holding a big stick. Pale skin, dark hair, small dark eyes in a flat, sagging face. Meaty hands rubbing a smooth stick a full head taller than him. He'd probably stripped the staff himself, meticulously smoothing the knots and whorls in the wood until they shone.

This was the perfect opportunity to keep his mouth shut.

"Ugh. You all been down here so long you look like a bunch of pimply blind moles," Joshua said. "What do you call them, the pink ones? Weasel?"

The fat face turned crimson, Joshua noted with satisfaction, the manicured hands around that stick—hands that were thicker than they had any right being with limited rations—whitening around the knuckles. He stepped forward. Weasel spoke.

"Holland," she said. "This is Weasel. He deserves to be beaten for that comment, but please don't."

"Don't see the reason not to," Holland said, his small eyes squinting. "Ain't had nothing but rat in months."

"Mole rats!" Joshua snapped his fingers. "That's it. Like naked mole rats. Ever seen them?"

"You can't eat him. I'd have to haul his corpse back with me if you knock him out."

"I can eat what I want," Holland said, his shoulders slumping. "I could eat you."

"The Prophet," Weasel began.

"—Ain't here," Holland finished. He hunched over the stick, pushing his ugly face closer to Weasel's until he towered over her. "Here, I do what I want." His

fingernails clicked against the staff and he wet his lips. “If I want to crush your skull, I’ll crush it.” His eyes fixed on Weasel’s for one long second.

“My brother and sister don’t like the sight of white meat,” Holland said, and yawned. “Or I would be feeding the worst of your bits to the rats right now, and saving the best for me.”

The camping lantern took up the center of the room, nearly two feet tall and throwing out a constant watery light. Two interchangeable kids of indeterminable age sat tangled together on an ancient, tattered ur-couch. Their gaunt faces tipped heavenwards, their whispering mouths opening and closing in the occasional soundless moan. They read the nothing: their eyes flicking back and forth and back and forth over the darkness above them. If they knew Weasel and Joshua were there, they didn’t show it.

“Sorry,” Weasel said. She looked at Joshua for the first time since the train tracks, the muscles tight around her mouth. “He doesn’t know what’s good for him.”

Holland grunted. “Whatever,” he said, his dark eyes suspicious, and sunk down into a camp chair next to the large battery-powered camping lantern. He watched Joshua. “What do you want?”

“I thought I’d come to see how you all are,” Weasel said. “A kind of neighbor visit.”

Holland closed his eyes. “Neighbors,” he said. “We’re not neighbors. We never been neighbors. If you’re here for more rats I don’t have any. They hain’t been breeding so well here lately.”

A low scratching ebbed from everywhere and nowhere. Joshua dug into his ears in irritation. Past the row of chairs sat a few piles of lit candles, their wicks almost drowning in liquid wax. Just beyond the weak candlelight thin, white cages reached for the vaulted dome like the ribs of a vanished beast.

“What is that sound?” he said.

“Me rats,” Holland said, and gestured behind him, towards the cages. “Can’t hardly hear them, can you? Not like the old days. I only got a couple hundred now.”

Joshua walked through the circle of light from the camping lantern and through the darkness to where candles guttered blue against the soot. Here and there a red eye glinted as the seething mass of fur and teeth packed into each cage parted long enough for the dim light to flare against an iris. They were so many different colors: white, brown, black, grey. He stared at a massive white rat lying motionless in its own private enclosure.

“Nice rat,” Joshua said.

“What you doing over there?” Holland said, a trace of panic in his voice. His staff ticked against the floor. “You leave my prize stud alone.”

“Stud?” Joshua said. “That why he has his own cage?”

Holland nodded in pride. “Makes the fattest baby rats you ever did see. Delicious little fuckers. Eat them like popcorn. He needs his space, see. To rest up.” Holland unlatched the door and stuck his hand in, ruffling the hair on the rat’s back. “His name is Rex, see? Like a king.”

“The ladies keep him busy, I bet,” Joshua said. “Fine specimen like him. King of Ratville.”

Holland threw his head backwards, the interior of his mouth on display-- enormous teeth jutting up, molars set in a moist, cavernous cave, a pink tongue rolling. He roared with laughter and clapped Joshua on the shoulder. “Yeh.”

“Ratville,” Holland said, still laughing. Joshua reached above to rap his fist against a white cage door. The rats in the cages shrieked and ran against the metal bars, the sound echoing in the unseen space far above. Joshua watched the white rat twitch and rub against Holland’s hand.

“Hey,” Joshua said suddenly. “I got something he might like. Rex, I mean.” He pulled a small plastic ball out of his pocket. A bell chimed softly as he shook it side to side.

“I had a cat once,” he said, by way of explanation.

“Cat,” Holland said, shaking his head back and forth. “Good if you can get it. Sneaky fucks, though, cats. Hard to catch.” He reached a hand out to take the ball from Joshua, Rex sitting up to sniff where it lay in Holland’s hand.

“You’re all right, Joshua,” Holland said, and clapped him on the shoulder hard enough to send Joshua reeling against the cages.

“Thanks,” Joshua said.

A sound built behind them. Breathless, hacking thunder building deep inside the lungs and exploding outward, on and on and on.

Weasel bent over the two kids on the couch. The cough came from one of them, eyes still moving back and forth overhead. A set of twitching arms shuddered inadvertently here and there as the cough rolled on and on.

“Are you okay?” Weasel said. Her lips set in a thin line as she held down the spasming boy.

“He’s faking,” Holland said, stroking the rat. “He does it all the time. Remembers it, like. From before.”

The cough stopped abruptly, the boy giggling as he snapped at Weasel’s hand. She recoiled. The boy’s head flopped back down onto his sister’s shoulder, their long hair tangling together.

“You came for the dead,” the girl said, the whites of her eyes dropping from the ceiling to Weasel.

“Maybe,” Weasel said, flustered. “What do you know about it?”

“Hey,” Holland rumbled, pointing the small end of his stick at Weasel. “You treat them nice. Polite. Or it’ll be your skin.”

Joshua laughed.

“Shut up,” Weasel said.

The girl’s delicate sigh rose above the scratching, squealing mass of rats. “I know where they are, and what they are, and when they are.” She flipped the end of a scarf at Weasel’s face, dropping her voice to intone, “I know what will happen to them all.”

“What’s up with her?” Joshua asked Holland.

He grunted. “She read this book, right. About oracles. And then I took her to see that damn Prophet and ever since she been sitting there spouting nonsense and using Our Brother for a prop.”

“That’s offensive, Holland. He’s not a prop. He’s my assistant.”

“S’what I mean, Bella.”

“It’s Sibyl.” She began to stroke her twin’s hair. The boy moaned and rubbed against her hand.

“Thought you hated Sibyl.”

“Mother had the gift, Holland. She knew I was destined to pluck all of our destinies from the great ether that is the universe. It’s time I embraced that.”

“Embrace all you want, just leave Our Brother out of it.”

“You have an interesting family,” Joshua said. Holland bellowed another laugh.

“Josh!” Weasel said, her voice echoing *Joshoshosh* against the high ceilings above them.

“It’s all right. Interesting ain’t the word,” Holland said, showing all of those wide, straight teeth in some approximation of a smile. “The Weird Twins, I call ‘em. Hain’t been right since the Wall, either of ‘em.”

The twins hummed and swayed on the couch. Weasel watched them, twisting her scarf around her neck. “None of us have.”

Holland seemed to consider this. “Might be the protein. They won’t eat my rats on the regular. Always wanting me to find cans of *Chef Boyardee*. As if that’s a thing we could just find, since Your Marshal stockpiled all the food.”

“Stockpiled?” Weasel said.

Holland continued on like he hadn’t heard her speaking. “Protein is protein. Father knew the wisdom of that. Necessary for life, see. Mother was a vegan till Wall and it didn’t take long before we was eating meat again. Once you go animal protein, what’s it matter which? She knew things, Mother. ‘Swwhy we ended up here, with the Drifters, eating so well.” He smacked his stomach and spat, phlegm tinging impressively against the far rail. “These two. Not like logic goes any kind of way with them. Brainless.”

The boy’s mouth screwed shut and he began to keen, rubbing his cheek back and forth against the couch.

“He doesn’t mean it, baby.” Sibyl stroked the boy’s head, rocking him back and forth.

“Was something wrong with him before?” Joshua said, stretching out in one of the chairs.

The camping lantern dug hollows into their cheeks. Holland tilted his head to look down at them, shadows menacing his face, but he watched the Weird Twins with affection. “They’re not my biologicals,” he said. “I dunno about before. What’s before mean now, anyway?” He spat again, his knuckles cracking as they tightened against the stick.

“Holland is the family Brother and I were born for,” Sibyl said.

“Yeah. You really got a lot of choices these days, don’t you?” Holland shook his head and crashed into the chair next to Joshua. The fabric strained against his weight and

he pulled a pack of cards out of his pocket, impeccable inside a broken, ragged box. “A game, Joshua?”

“That’s right,” Weasel said, her eyes shining. She walked to the couch and dropped to one knee next to Sibyl. “You said you see things. What kind of things?”

“Don’t encourage her,” Holland said. He shuffled the cards, pristine and mesmeric in his ample hands. “Poker? Blackjack? Whass’yer favorite?”

Sibyl raised a thin hand to bridge her forehead and temple, draping her other hand on her twin’s head. She sat there in a pile of rags for a moment looking like nothing more than a delicate girl. Farther away she’d seemed ethereal: from here Joshua could see the bones in her arms light and brittle as a bird’s, eyes the purple-bruised of the sleepless. Skin translucent enough that he thought he could see the blood jumping against her wrist, just there, as it ran through the concourse of her veins. Her head dropped forward and then snapped upwards, the omnipresent smoke from the candles licking at her feet and climbing her legs. Her eyes locked on Weasel, glassy and remote.

“Time rises and falls with the red tide,” she said, her voice rough with strangeness. “Time’s cycles will free us.”

“Free? Do you mean the Walls will fall?” Weasel said, her voice trembling.

Sibyl’s mouth crooked upwards with scorn. She looked at Weasel from across the windy highlands of her oracular vision and said, “The tide is rising. As they bear witness the cycle repeats our trapped past, again and again, as what lives should die and what dies should live. The only way out is through the watcher’s eye. Beware those who wait in the dark.”

Sibyl collapsed against her brother's chest. Joshua saw her peer out from underneath the fringe of her coarse black hair.

"Well, that was nonsense," Joshua said.

Holland scowled at Sibyl and moved the cards between his hands. "You could just tell them where we keep the sick," he said. "Down the line, there. That's what you came for, eh? She may be crazy, but she ain't usually wrong."

Sibyl sat upright. "I read the future," she said. "Of course I'm not wrong."

"You read people," Holland said. "You got good at it and now you can con them, is what."

"I am offended," Sibyl said, her lower lip trembling. "I am shocked. Appalled. Other big words."

Holland sighed, his jowls sagging, and gestured down the track. "You might as well go. Clinic is about halfway to the next station. Service tunnel to the platform on 8th Avenue, down the tracks and left at the first bend. You'll know when you get there. Careful. Some of these bastards will kill you soon as look." He tossed the little plastic ball Joshua had given him into the air and caught it.

"Assassinated," Sibyl said, her voice rising. "That's what you've done to my character."

Weasel and Joshua watched as Sibyl stood up from the couch and advanced menacingly on Holland. She jabbed a thin stick of a finger into his ribs. He didn't flinch at that or the abuse she rained on him. Weasel took Holland's proffered hand, shook it,

and unhooked the flashlight hanging at her hip before she jumped off the platform onto the tracks.

“Go fish, Holland. That’s my favorite,” Joshua said. Holland roared with laughter and crossed his thick arms over his chest.

“We’ll get a game on next time,” Holland shouted, his voice rising over Sibyl’s screeching litany of curses.

Joshua raised a hand in farewell. Weasel stood where the last of the light spilled off the platform and the tunnel took over, half in and half out of a darkness as thick as the one they had traveled through to get here.

Her hand was there when he reached the edge of it and so he took it, not knowing what else to do. She looked at him just before they stepped into the blindness and began to walk, but she didn’t pull away.

They walked for perhaps half a mile in silence and darkness. Here and there they avoided the objects swimming into focus by the beam of their light, but more often they tripped, necessitating slow movement through the narrow tunnel. Discarded items, bits of old aluminum, signs from the subway crew, broken glass, old bones. In the pressurized hush around them it felt like they were underwater explorers, delving the depths in search of something new. The surface of the world he knew existed an infinite distance away.

“Holland lives on the farthest edge,” Weasel said. “We should be getting close soon. Also, he liked you. That was...”

“My natural charm at work,” Joshua said.

“I was going to go with unexpected.”

“Not what I expected either. Thought they’d be more...”

“Broken?” Weasel’s hand slid from his. “Most of them are a lot like us.”

“What’s Holland, anyway? Some sort of gatekeeper?”

“More like the others can’t stand the smell of his rat farm,” Weasel said, the words echoing back towards him as they moved into a larger space. She stopped at an open doorway where the service tunnel connected at the platform and motioned for him to do the same. Weasel trained her flashlight above them, revealing the support beams for a major station, the hollowing out of an entrance. “But they need the meat. Most of them are like the weird twins-- never have been cannibals-- but reality doesn’t matter so much. Morality aside, they can’t come out or the Marshal will retaliate. And they aren’t welcome in the Company.”

All the Marshal would have to do, Joshua thought, was speak a few of the right words. His smile would slice the sky above the pulpit and he would whip them all to righteous fury and to vengeance, and for once it might even be for the right reasons. Walkers with their guns trained on the Drifters, firing and firing, knives wielded to slice open empty bellies, war justified. “They stay hidden because they can’t afford the consequences.”

“Or his clemency,” Weasel said. “They’re only useful to him as villains. I think we need to jump off the platform and back onto the tracks here. That’s the left Holland mentioned.”

She brushed against him unexpectedly, leaning close with the flashlight to expose a towering pile of scrap wood on the abandoned platform ahead, and he was sufficiently

distracted by this for the realization that they were underground, sightless, and confined to come to him all at once. Joshua pushed back at the panic that had been hitching underneath the surface of his breath since the moment he and Weasel had stepped foot into this darkness what felt like days ago, in a different world, but had been only a few hours in this same inescapable place.

“Josh?” Weasel said. “Look at me. I’m here. I’m right here.” She turned her back to the platform, pulling the light back to her own face, her hand warm with concern on the thin muscles of his arm. Her grip became his anchor. This was okay. It was okay. Weasel was here, he was here, there were exits and flashlights. This was okay. His breath slowed. The panic began a slow descent down his stomach. He envisioned trapping it in a jar and tightening the lid, locking it away. He closed his eyes and breathed in the light. “I’m okay,” he said. There was a soft, wet thunk. Weasel’s hand tightened and went abruptly slack, the flashlight clattering on the ground.

Joshua caught her underneath the arms, dragging her back across the platform and through the service door. They collapsed against the wall. The flashlight had blinded him, burning away what little adjustment his eyes had made to the dark. He felt for Weasel’s pulse, the faint hammering of her heart jumping against his fingers. At the back of her head his hand slipped in something warm. He cursed.

“Weasel?” he whispered. “Come on. Wake up. Come on.” Was it good or bad when head wounds bled? He couldn’t remember. He found the throbbing lump on her head. A cut near the base of it was slick with blood. She groaned and sagged against his shoulder. Good. Dazed, not unconscious.

His hands shook. He could feel the panic knocking against the inside of its jar. To keep it at bay he thought back to the flashlight shining overhead when they'd entered. The projectile hadn't come from the ceiling.

Someone was in the other room.

He thought about pulling her back up the tunnel with him, and then remembered their only functional flashlight falling from Weasel's slack fingers onto the floor. Stupid. How had he been so stupid?

Weasel's breath stirred the skin on his neck to goosebumps. She tried to sit up. Joshua held her body against him, his mouth against her ear. He spoke just above the level of breath.

"Shh," he said. "Someone is here. Don't talk."

He let her go and felt her body stiffen in understanding. Weasel inhaled and nodded slowly. He could feel the movement of her face against his chest. His face hot in the darkness, Joshua followed the lines of her arm with his fingertips until he found her hand and pulled it onto his chest. *I*. He drew an arrow pointing towards the platform on the skin of her palm, waited a moment, and then tapped her hand twice. *Go. Back in two*. He pushed Weasel's unresisting hand against her own chest and held it there, acutely aware of her proximity. *You stay*. She hesitated before squeezing his hand. He hoped she'd deciphered the message. Some bold impulse drew him to touch her face, feeling the soft skin of her cheek. Nothing spoken. He pulled his own useless flashlight from his waistband and gave it to her. Heavy enough, he hoped, for what might come.

Joshua pulled away from Weasel and crept towards the platform. The room waited, the flashlight's yellow oasis burning away their batteries and, with it, their escape. It looked as if he could pick it up from here, close his hand around the brilliance, let it glow orange through the gaps in his fingers. Steal away with the gift of fire in his hand. It was farther away than that, he knew. Perspective was the first thing to go in the black.

He felt the rough concrete underneath his hand become the smooth metal lip of the doorway. He watched the light and listened to the room over the frenzy of his own heart.

This wasn't going to get easier. Take a breath. Let go of the doorway. Move towards the flashlight, one slow step at a time.

His ears couldn't be trusted. That could be the faint echo of feet sliding behind him, or it could be nothing. That could be a muffled laugh rising from the scrap wood on the platform or his mind feeding the fear. He felt the oppressive weight of potential eyes on him in the dark. Joshua thought of Weasel with the broken flashlight. Why had he given away his only weapon? He sprinted, his breath so loud and jagged he was sure everyone between the Walls could hear. Nothing stopped him.

He swept up the smooth metal canister.

He turned. The flashlight swung with him, revealing the floor, the scrap wood, the edge of the platform. He moved the light towards the service tunnel where he knew Weasel should be waiting.

The Drifter stood two feet away, mouth locked in a grinning rictus, a pair of green goggles like the eyes of an insect staring madly into his. Joshua had one shocked moment to comprehend. Instinct sent him backing up towards the tracks and whipped the flashlight at the white, painted smirk on the Drifter's face. A handmade club hammered down on the arm Joshua thrust up in blind defense. His forearm absorbed the bulk of the blow, pain exploding in him as his head slammed against the tile. The club raised to strike a second time just as the thrown flashlight, yellow beam spinning end over end, struck the Drifter in the face. The blow snapped its head to one side. It staggered, unbalanced by the impact, and just as it began to right itself a second force struck it, maybe by divine intervention or one of luck's capricious miracles. Joshua didn't know or care. The Drifter staggered and fell over the edge of the platform into the stygian black.

Someone picked up the flashlight. Joshua edged away and felt around for anything he could use as a weapon. The light caught and pinned him, blinking, inside it.

"It's me," Weasel said. "I hit it, per your plan."

Joshua gaped blindly up at the light, one hand shielding his eyes. "That weren't the plan."

"Yes, it was. You said you were going in first, and for me to wait two minutes, follow you, and hit it in the face."

Joshua stood, cradling his injured arm. Weasel propped the light up between them on the pile of scrap. It shot across the room, towards the door they'd come through, just catching both of them in the bleeding edges. "I didn't say that."

“Yes, you did. Let me see your arm.” She bent over the bruises and slid her hands down his swollen forearm.

“Ow. No. I did not. What I said was for you to wait behind the door and I’d back in two-”

She dropped down on one knee to rummage in the backpack irritably, their shadows stretching and melding. “I don’t need you to protect--”

“You were injured!” he shouted. “Remember? You were bleeding in my arms. Right over there.”

They looked away from each other into the suffocating darkness. The sterile light shot between them and cast black pools in the hollows of their eyes. Weasel cleared her throat and stood up with an ace bandage in her hand.

“You want this for your arm?”

“Thanks,” he mumbled. He took it and angled into the light so that he could see. He began to wrap it awkwardly around his own forearm while she watched his shadow stretching across the floor. “How’s your head?”

“Sore,” she said. After a moment she said, “You touched my face. What else was it supposed to mean?”

He finished wrapping the bandage around his arm in silence and didn’t answer. She knotted a thin piece of cloth for a sling. Joshua needed her help to lift it around his shoulders, her arms closing around him. He thought of Weasel and Irwing laughing arm in arm while Joshua had sipped tea in front of a fire. “Thanks,” he said, while she was still standing close. She turned her head away and nodded.

Weasel stepped back to pick up the flashlight. “We probably scared him off.”

“You want to check, go ahead. I ain’t going looking.”

Weasel trained the light onto the tracks and leaned over the edge of the platform. Joshua watched the flashlight paint the rails from one side to the other and yawned, his head feeling thick and sleepy.

“There’s nothing... here,” he heard Weasel say, the tone of her voice shifting. The flashlight beam focused on one narrow strip of track.

“Josh,” Weasel said. Her voice wobbled and nearly broke on his name. He walked over to where the flashlight trembled against the ground. He took her hand. Together, they looked at what it illuminated in silence.

“Jesus,” Joshua said finally. “May Our Red Lord keep him.”

“Show some respect,” Weasel said.

“I am,” Joshua said. “I mean, a god for the dead-- maybe that’s the only thing the Marshal got right.” His own hands were shaking in time with the light. She held him very tightly.

The Drifter’s body lay illuminated in the glow of the flashlight. The green goggles were twisted awkwardly to one side, exposing a single luminous, accusatory eye. Larger than it had seemed in the dark but less supernatural now that it lay spread out before them on the tracks. The head lay twisted at a hard angle to the rest of the body. There was no need to check closely but Weasel took a deep, shuddering breath and jumped down onto the tracks anyway.

Joshua watched her fingers press into the Drifter's neck. She looked up at him and shook her head. "He's gone," Joshua said.

"You mean we killed him. That's what you mean." Weasel tugged at the goggles, trying to move them back down over the eye.

"Weasel," Joshua said. "Stay with me, right? He attacked us. He did this, not us. He'd a killed me. You know he would."

"This is where he lives. This is his home. We came into it."

"He ain't protecting his territory any more than a hungry lion protects his from a...a antelope."

"You don't know that he was going to eat you."

"Attacking you with that rock and me with that club was a clue. You seen my arm?" Joshua stabbed at the club next to the Drifter with the beam of the flashlight. The light caught the silver edge of a blade pushed through the baseball bat's head to form a crude, gleaming sickle. "Holland warned us."

Weasel sat staring at the body they had made. Joshua watched her and spoke. When he ran out of things to say about self-defense and the way of their world he kept talking, this time about the immediacy of danger and then about how Ronnie would feel if they were both to die here and then the way Joshua had seen good people die in the first, ugliest days, hadn't Weasel?-- and then about her dreams, about the Marshal and the Wall and finally about nothing of consequence until he could only sit in silence and wait for what was coming undone in her. Underneath all of this ran the unspoken plea that she not allow herself to be broken. After a long time she stood up. She turned on the Drifter's

flashlight, the end of it covered in red plastic wrap so it wouldn't compromise low light vision. Weasel? Joshua said. She walked away, leaving Joshua and his wounded arm to climb awkwardly after her.

They saw signs for the clinic station around the same time they started smelling drifts of smoke. Do Not Enter tape draped here and there. Big yellow signs urging them to use caution. They went forward anyway, of course. This was what everything had been done for.

The platform illumination was bright enough to bleed out over onto the tracks and it flickered, casting a capricious orange-red light everywhere. Thick plumes of smoke curled down the rails to eddy around their ankles.

"Must be real fire," Joshua said, and coughed at the smoke. Weasel nodded, pale and focused. She hadn't met his eyes once since the Drifter. Not once. Joshua stopped to watch the platform for a few minutes in case there were guards. Weasel pushed past him without hesitation. They climbed the crumbling exit stairs to the platform.

Makeshift beds, cots, nests of blankets spread out in concentric rings around a huge, smoldering fire pit. A sort of metal funnel drew smoke up and away. The heat was almost unbearable but those closest to the fire still shivered in their blankets. Everywhere there was not a sick person there were piles of bandages, bottles of cough syrup, neat rows of kidney-shaped basins. They must have raided a dozen drugstores for a stash this size. Joshua looked around for someone who might be in charge but saw no one. Weasel bent over a wrapped girl just as she started to cough, her diaphragm contracting.

Weasel gave the girl some water from the cup sitting next to her and began speaking in a low voice. “It started a year ago. The oldest among them got sick first. They thought it was just the cold, a lingering flu virus, something new sprouting up. Anything but what it is.

“It started the way the first one had, with blinding headaches. Then came the brain swelling, the erratic behavior, the bloodshot eyes, the coughing. The first few died before they were willing to admit it, even among themselves. They don’t exactly have a leader,” Weasel said, lowering the cup. The sick girl looked at Joshua and saw nothing. “It’s more like a series of smaller camps, like Holland’s, with a couple of neutral common areas. It took them a while to put it together as anything more than rumor.”

There were dozens of people all fever-dreaming and delirious. Some of them were sitting up now, marginally aware of Weasel and Joshua’s presence. They watched Weasel tend the sick with glittering eyes.

“Once they did, they created this place. Stocked it. They take turns leaving firewood, food and water down track but only the young kids come to help when they can, and you know how the littles are. It’s not that they don’t care, more like it’s a game to them. If they get bored they don’t come. Sometimes no one comes for a week at a time, except for Louisa.” she pauses.

“Louisa? Crazy Louisa, from the Lost?”

Weasel nods, her eyes focusing on the entrance near the far Wall. They watch Louisa Louisa steps out of the darkness, silent as a deer. She walks around the sick, her torn skirts grazing the ground. She smiles at Weasel and Joshua, puts some milk jugs

filled with water down next to the other supplies, and drops a pile of clean rags into the boiling pot suspended over the fire. Weasel waves at her.

“She just started showing up here a few weeks ago, tending the sick and singing to them. Sometimes she even talks to me. The older Drifters are too afraid to help. Superstition and fear, mostly. They should know from before that nothing will stop it.” Weasel moved on to help the next in line.

“Weasel,” Joshua said, a realization blooming into ice at his center. “What’re you saying?”

The fire cracked behind her as a branch splintered. “I am saying it’s back. The virus is back. And since we all lived through it last time--”

“It’s mutated,” Joshua said. “Jesus.”

“Mostly the eldest are dying again,” she said. “The young kids seem okay no matter how much exposure they get.”

Joshua stared at the fire.

“Once they’re over the age of seventeen they catch it, without exception. And then they die.”

“But where are they putting the bodies?” Joshua asked.

Weasel peeled back the blanket tucked around another patient. “Why do you think there’s a new red zone?”

“That means the Marshal knows,” Joshua said.

Weasel nodded. “We think he knows about the eyes in the sky, too. He might even have contact with the outside. But all he does is keep running drills and practicing

speeches.” She watched the sick wheeze for breath and pulled the blanket back around him. “And I know if we stay here, we’re all dead as soon as we grow old enough to contract it.”

“This is where Irwing is from, isn’t it?” Joshua asked. He looked across the sea of the nearly dead, emotion rising in him. “He was one of them. A Drifter. And he left them all behind.”

“He left to find the Prophet, the same way I left the Lost.”

“He abandoned his people,” Joshua said.

“Is that what you think? You think I left you and Ronnie behind?” Weasel spoke so quietly it was almost a whisper, her hands trembling as they tucked the blanket back in around the emaciated man.

Weasel stood up. “I left the Lost because I didn’t want to die here. I left the Lost because I don’t want anyone else to die either. The only thing I can think of is finding a way out.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Joshua said. He walked away from her to stand at the edge of the platform, the dark blooming behind him.

They walked the long length of their underworld journey in reverse, traveling on the northbound tracks by unspoken agreement. Joshua felt himself grow tense as they neared the station where they’d been ambushed. When Joshua turned towards the service tunnel Weasel walked away from him to stand staring down at the body on the other side of the platform. “I’m okay,” Weasel told him. “I’m okay.”

Together they walked through the dark until the air freshened and was made new. A barren dusk hung at the top of the subway stairs. Joshua thought of the Company gardens, bees pollinating the vegetable patch in the final hours of the day. A meal in his belly paid for with nothing more than simulated attention and a day's labor. Rhona from the supply shed with her hunter's eyes and the endless chaos of the dormitory ringing always about him. The peace of domesticated ignorance. And he could have all of this again. He could ignore the Sisters, the armed Walkers, the red zones, sky eyes, the Drifters, the plague. All he had to do was forget. All he had to do was close his eyes and pray.

"Are you coming?" Weasel said, silhouetted against the crowning sky above them.

"Yeah," Joshua said. "I am."

SUNDAY FUNDAY

The Marshal has them playing games again.

Parcheesi. Pictionary. Yahtzee. Sitting in groups like normal families, tattered boys and worn girls, all cheekbones you could sharpen a knife on. Rattling the dice with their hands, one-two, one-two. Tossing them onto the boards. Moving little plastic pieces clockwise. Topics verging on the anachronistic are sketched on little pieces of paper. As if anyone still practices cartography, measures in kilograms or knows how to render *exponential*. They guess anyway. That's the game.

Hang Ten is the next card. The boy with the pencil draws ten stick figures, ten gallows. That one they get almost immediately, hands choking their own necks, eyes bugging out, laughter dissolving. Good Clean Fun.

A girl with shining yellow hair rolls a six and lands her yellow pawn on the same space as someone else's blue one. The blue pawn slides back to the beginning, all time lost.

The Marshal walks among them all, whippet thin and constant motion. Eyes watching everything. Smile hanging everywhere. He reaches out here and there to squeeze a shoulder, slap a back. Their regimented shoulders snap to attention. They sit up straighter when he walks by. After he passes their spines regress from lines to curves. Back to the game, though all of them hesitate, their hands fumbling over the dice, before they roll. All of them watch him moving away.

Someone spells *exculpate* on a triple word score.

Even the Sisters are playing. They sit lined against the walls in the upper left corner of the room, graceful behind cowls and masks. The others watch them sidelong, hoping to witness breaking, to see them laugh or cough or move like girls. Instead the Sisters sit ramrod straight against the pitted cement blocks and play cat's cradle in a single sinuous line, their chests rising and falling with one communal breath.

The Marshal stalks back and forth, back and forth, across the room. He checks his watch with each revolution.

A girl with shining yellow hair rolls a four and lands a different yellow pawn on the same space as a different blue pawn. The blue pawn's owner pins a bottom lip between her teeth as the yellow girl smiles in satisfaction. Sorry! She laughs and sends another of her yellow pawns to the finish line.

Exculpate is followed by *cloven* is followed by *oxen*. The game is already won.

Tonight started like every other social, sitting like to like, friend to friend, arranged into the castes of their own devising just as they are every day. Walkers together, Watchers together, and the rest broken down even further: the clever kids, the pious kids, the outsiders, the brave and bold and cowardly. Even here at the end of their worlds they embrace categorization. Now they are grouped according to some strange metric devised by the Marshal. In the beginning laughter burst, grenade-like, from one table or another as they cupped their secrets around the game boards and gossiped, but now there is silence and, underneath that, anger. Every now and then the Marshal taps a boy or girl on the shoulder and moves them to a different table. Sometimes this is met with pleasure.

Even split out into the public you can tell the Walkers by their compulsions: the constant itch to finger the makeshift slingshots, the clubs, the homemade bows and arrows. A lucky few have the cold, smooth glint of a rifle barrel next to them. They are the ones lighting up with love when the Marshal walks by. Love, or fear, or more like both together: worship. They worship him, Giver of Tools, just as they worship the tools at their sides. They are winning almost every game, and the ones they are losing, they don't care to win.

A girl with shining yellow hair rolls a two and sends the final blue pawn back to Start. The blue pawn's owner shakes her head and bangs her fists on each side of the board, no-no-no-no, her head whipping back and forth. The girl with shining yellow hair preens.

Across the room's low hum his steps click and turn, click and turn. Laughter has faded into the heat of determined silence, friend to enemy.

Every now and then the Marshal stops at the side of a game and marks a victor with a note from his little red book, and he does this now for the girl with the yellow hair, raising her hand high above her head as if instead of winning a single game of Sorry! she's won the world's heavyweight boxing championship, as if she has won the Olympics, as if she is the most special because she is chosen for victory. The others stop to watch and cheer. The girl moves over to the victors, who sit spelling words around a Scrabble set, gathered in to the fold and a place by his side. He takes a bag of candies from his pocket and, with every hungry eye upon him, places one round disc in each winning hand. Sweetness. The winners suck the chocolate pieces, licking their palms

afterwards. They sit drunk on their success, young and bold. They flirt with each other, with luck's chosen. The girl with the yellow hair smiles beautifully at everyone.

The Marshal hands something else out to the losers, checking their names in his red book. Lists. The losers fold boards, slipping pieces back into thin plastic bags. Breaking words into composite parts. Packing up the trash. When they look at their friends in the winner's circle it is with contempt for those cheater with their ill-gotten gains and their purchased affection. Their stomachs turn. All camaraderie is broken. They came in talking to one another. Now they talk to no one.

SWEET NOTHING/SWEET DREAMS

Viewed from above Sanctum is nothing so much as a bottomless well. Layered blackness, dark and darker still at the center, lightest where these new territories intersect with the precise silver boundaries burned in place by the Wall. The Wall slashes a vivid square around Sanctum, crackling with intensity. This square is declarative and final. Everything inside it is Here. Everything outside it is There.

Woolen clouds spin across the sky above. The full moon soaks in the cloud cover so that only the thinnest, weakest light filters through. The battered Sky Eye floats motionless. There is nothing to see or hear but a lazy, drowsing wind and the absence of light, except--

There. Somewhere near the western wall a night fire blooms. Brighter than moonlight, it is the only color inside Sanctum's powerless limits.

The fire is built in the remnants of a burned house standing open to the sky. Two remaining walls intersect to block the wind. The roof long ago surrendered to the limitations of time and physics. Four shapes hunch around the center of a former living room, their faces hollowed by the light's contrast. One of them pumps his fist in the air and begins to dance, a thin wrist extending past the cuff of his too-small jacket, crowing an affirmation of victory.

"We get it, Joshua," Irwing says. His breath underneath the shock of his hair condenses into a cloud in the cold air and he shivers his way closer to the fire, hands tucked underneath his armpits for warmth. "You did it. You started the fire like a good

little cro-magnon.”

“You want to learn? I’ll teach you,” Joshua grins, then begins to jump up and down, forcing the blood to circulate through his half-frozen legs. “Smart kid like you, it shouldn’t take long. Except you probably need a book for that.”

Weasel looks from one to the other. She rubs her short, dark hair with both hands, too tired to make them stop sniping each other. Behind her battered glasses her eyes are weary. Her cheeks are thinner than they were last summer. Winter has not been easy on the Lost. All of them bear signs of greater decay. Even the Prophet’s tenuous connection to reality--all of his realities-- is fraying. He is more ethereal, less substantial, folded in thirds. He wears an old quilt for a cloak and broods into the fire. The ripped calico squares flap in the wind, exposing gray, dirty batting underneath.

“What’s for dinner?” Weasel asks.

“Impossible to foresee,” Irwing says. He tugs his yellow scarf back up over the bottom half of his face and leans towards Weasel.

“Lot of faith you have in your Lord and Master there,” Joshua says. Fire reflects in the Prophet’s eyes. He is somewhere too far from here to register the insult.

“The only cans we have left are the ones without labels.” Irwing untucks his hands long enough to sling his backpack onto the ground at Joshua’s feet. “It’s your turn to cook, anyway.”

Joshua rattles around the inside of the bag, running his hand over each can. They

flash in the firelight as he turns them over and over in his hands. He punches two holes in their tops with a utility tool and pushes them into the fire with the end of a pronged stick.

“Four?” Weasel says, roused momentarily from the black landscape of her thoughts by the sight of Joshua with the last of their food supply.

“We ain’t going to need it later,” Joshua says. “Either way. So let’s feast.”

Weasel looks at him for a long moment and nods. She pulls on a woolen hat and stretches out on the decayed carpet as if she can stare through the cloudy sky above and into tomorrow. Her breath mists upwards.

For a time there is only the sound of the fire cracking the branches as it burns and the movement of dark clouds over the moon high above them.

Joshua starts to hum tunelessly-- one of the Marshal’s old battle hymns-- and paces at the edge of the firelight. He swings the forked stick here and there. He prowls, staring out into a darkness that conceals piles of rubble, leveled houses, a gray landscape familiar and remote as the surface of the moon.

He turns his attention to the inner limits of the camp. Near their one intact corner he stops to rub the soot and mildew on the discolored wall with the edge of his cuff. A faint pattern of interlocking lilies ghosts through the decay. Above them a pair of ornate picture frames hangs on the wall. The glass was shattered in some indeterminate past violence, and the faces in the photographs are reduced to nebulous white shades, insubstantial impressions even their former owners would not recognize. In the corner a

tall copper floor lamp bearing the patina of age and weather lists over the remains of an armchair.

“Why did we camp here?”

“You had somewhere else in mind?” Irwing says. His brilliant blue eyes narrow as Joshua paces around the shelter. “Could you sit down and stop freaking out?”

“I dunno. Somewhere less creepy, maybe.” Joshua slaps a pile of rotten wood and stone with his stick, sending it crashing to the ground.

“Everywhere else is practically leveled. This breaks the wind. And besides, Ronnie doesn’t know the Red Zones. We had to camp somewhere close to the path so he can find us.” Weasel says. Her eyes are closed, her hands folded underneath the rise and fall of her chest.

“He ought to be here.” Joshua stares out at the dark, casting upwards to find the moon.

“He’ll be here.”

“He’ll be here,” Irwing echoes, “As long as you left the note in the right place.”

“I did.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“You questioning me?” Joshua turns on his heel towards Irwing, the stick whipping back and forth in the air at his side.

“I don’t think I asked any questions.” Irwing tosses a small piece of wood in the fire and stands up.

“He’s like my kid brother. You think I would screw that up?”

“Screwing things up is a specialty of yours.”

“What are you trying to say?” They stand eye to eye and pulled to their tallest heights, Joshua as wiry and quick as Irwing is solid and golden. Before Irwing can answer Joshua has an arm thrown around his neck. They fall, rolling end over end as they wrestle. Irwing’s leg kicks a pile of rubble over. The fire collapses around their dinner cooking inside, sparks shooting high up into the night air.

“Some of us are trying to sleep here, for the love of God,” Weasel says. She sits up, folds her arms around her knees, glares at them. The Prophet watches them from the other side. A cinder smolders next to his foot.

Irwing’s face is purple inside Joshua’s chokehold.

“Just killing time,” Joshua says, and lets go of Irwing. Irwing scrambles to his feet first, kicking Joshua in the side on the way up. Joshua laughs.

“Philistine,” Irwing says, furious. “Ignoramus. Jerk. You ripped my scarf!” He flips the fabric over, examining the long tear in the firelight.

“I thought you said you grew up with brothers.” Joshua bends over the cans still cooking in the fire.

“Brother. Singular. Mostly he taught me how to bruise.”

Joshua uses the pronged end of his stick to pull the bubbling cans towards him through the ash. “You need to learn how to duck.”

“I’m a man of science. I prefer to solve things with words and deeds, not with violence.”

“Yeah? Okay. Hey, not much soot in here.” Joshua pries the top off the first, blackened can with the end of his pocketknife and wraps it in a rag. The smell of hot peaches must be everywhere. They close their eyes and breathe it in. Joshua pulls out a spoon and hands the can to Weasel, who scoops out one perfect, yellow moon. She closes her mouth around the fruit and passes the can. Irwing slides a peach onto his spoon and holds the can while the Prophet’s shaking hand fishes out his own peach and soon they are all sitting around the fire breathing the scent of hot syrup while their tongues cloud with sugar. The can goes around and around until the fruit is gone and they each take turns drinking the sweetness.

When the can is licked clean Joshua fills it with water and pushes it back into the edge of the fire to boil. He opens the second and third cans—a gray corned beef hash none of them would have considered edible years before is now a beautiful windfall and they moan around the food filling their mouths, digging their spoons deep into the homogenous mass of meat and potato.

“Save some,” Irwing says, and Joshua nods, leaving half a can of hash warming

next to the fire. The final, largest can is full of unsalted green beans. They reach in with their fingers, pulling out steaming handfuls to eat one by one.

“I don’t remember the last time I was this full. This is nice,” Irwing says, stretching out on the ground next to Weasel.

“He’ll be here,” Weasel says again. She pushes upright and spreads her arms behind her. The smoke shapes itself into curls above them.

“He’s on his way to us now,” The Prophet speaks. He tosses a handful of wet sand into the fire to make it hiss. “He will find the way.”

“Yeah,” Joshua says. “I know.” He saves a handful of green beans to go with Ronnie’s corned beef hash and drops a tea bag into the boiling water.

“What are you all looking forward to?” Irwing’s question drops quietly between them all.

“You mean...outside?”

“Outside.”

The fire writhes in Weasel’s glasses. Joshua pokes the burning logs with his pronged stick and clears his throat.

“My brother,” Irwing says. “If he’s still alive.”

“Cotton candy.”

“Movies. I’m going to the movies and I’m watching all of them, one after another.”

“I’m going to the closest store and I’m buying a suit, and then I’m going to the fanciest restaurant I can find and I’m buying the biggest roast chicken you ever saw.” Joshua pulls a thick wad of money out of his pocket and fans the bills out around the fire. The crumpled money, worn and dirty, seems strange to all of them now and they pass it from person to person, rubbing the sueded texture of the green bills between each finger and marveling at the softness.

“I forgot about money,” the Prophet says, breathing it in. “I think they must still use it, in the Outside.”

“It’s only been two years. Of course they do.”

“Take some,” Joshua says generously. “I gathered it from the tomb houses. I thought we were going to need it.”

“My mom,” Weasel says, the first time she’s spoken, and nothing more. They all fall silent at this, thinking of the pleasures, large and small, waiting just over the Wall. Each of them looks towards the shining boundary dominating their southern sky. Irwing clears his throat.

“I’d better look over my calculations again,” he says, pulling a battered notebook out of his pack. His lips move soundlessly as he bends over the numbers.

“I’ll take first watch,” Joshua says. “I want to be awake when Ronnie gets here.”

“It’s going to work,” Weasel says, only there is a flatness in her voice, a distance, and Irwing nods without looking up. They are close to the Wall, an electric wash of light covering them all. She rolls over and pulls the blanket they share away but hours pass before she is drawn down to sleep.

At the end of his watch Irwing wakes Weasel and leads her around the corner of camp, where it is dark and private. The others are unmoving mounds around the fire, now nothing more than smudged orange embers and some smoke. Ronnie is still not here and they walk a perimeter, looking out into the early hours of the new day and listening for any sound of him.

Beneath a rotted tree trunk scarred by fire Weasel kisses Irwing. He puts his hand on her narrow hips, draws her closer. She is warm and soft in his hands and he remembers the heat of her in the middle of their dark nights, the black panic of their world softened always by her breath rising and falling next to him. He remembers the strange awkwardness the first time they kissed—he is attractive, he knows he is attractive, he had learned enough about women before everything changed to know how they felt when he smiled. His confidence came from this accident of biology combined with a quick intellect. Born charmed, he had never had to explain more than this. He had never been afraid. It had been different, with Weasel. She had seen through the façade of him. She had made him work to be understood, and to understand her. To want someone to know him as more than this.

He had lost his virginity early and had continued, from there, to revisit the losing of it regularly with whomever he wished. This was not a power he had asked for, but it was something he learned to wield with the selfish obsessions of the young and limitless. When you are young and everything around you is dying or dead impulse is more important than any depth of meaning. He had not expected this to change. When she stood there in front of the Prophet's red door, her hair shorn, her eyes cool and appraising behind ridiculous wire-framed glasses, he had instantly disliked her. Even so he had found her drawing him in. Even so. She had won him over arguing in the library stacks where they lived and researched and this was the place where he had bent to kiss her first, his palms actually sweating, never knowing until the last moment whether she was going to accept him. She is the most beautiful always, but always the most beautiful when she thinks he is not looking. This has nothing to do with her biology. She is unlike every other woman he has known. She is the key in the lock of him.

He tells her all of these things, his hands light as birds on the hollow of her waist. In the pre-dawn light he can see her smile brightening the dark.

"And," she says. She waits for him to finish. He breathes deep, before she is gone.

"I don't think this is going to work," he says.

"You said you could make it work," she says. "You said with enough batteries and enough wire you could do anything."

"Even if my theory is solid—and it is solid, you were there when I did the math,

you know it is—even so, I don't think it can make a hole big enough, for long enough,” Irwing says. “Because it wouldn't be much of a wall if a teenager with a ham radio and a cd player could bring it down.” A smile ghosts on his face. “Even a genius like myself.”

“Then why are we here?” Weasel says. There is an undertow beneath the calm river of her voice.

He looks down at her. “I think I might be able to get one person through. Not more than that. My vote is for you.”

She is already shaking her head.

“Yes. You're the only one who makes any sense. Your mother is out there somewhere. Your stepfather, too. You remember how people were about musicians on the outside. People will still remember her music and you can use that as leverage. She'll be easy to find. She had money. She'll have been all right. She'll help you speak. I know you're not going to forget about us. I know you're going to find a way to bring the Wall down and I will be here, waiting for you, when you do.”

“What about you? What about Joshua? You're the same age I am, both of you. You could die just as easily.”

“I want to go,” Irwing says. “I want to walk this with you. But I don't think that's a choice we have. I think it's something we have to do alone.”

“Right,” Weasel says. “Idealism will protect you. The plague will ignore you. It won't care that you're seventeen now because you'll be waiting for me. Our love will

protect all. How foolish I was to not realize that earlier.” She is crying now, and hating herself for crying, and so is he.

“You can’t hesitate. There may only be a few seconds to get through the Wall in. That is, if it works at all.”

“We’ll draw straws,” she says finally. Her jaw locks into stubbornness and he knows this is all she will hear. “So we all have a chance.”

“Fine,” he says, after a moment. “But if I draw it, you’re going.”

“I’ll think about it,” she says. “Since you’re so determined to throw your life away.”

“Mary,” he says, calling her by her secret name, and even though she turns and walks towards the predawn light without speaking it’s all right. Everything is all right.

They are all awake in the half-darkness when he returns, Joshua heating some more tea in the rejuvenated fire. “Where’s Weasel?” he asks.

“Out,” Irwing says, and sits down. Next to him the Prophet looks deep into his eyes, the bolts on the end of his hair clacking. He squeezes Irwing’s shoulder.

Weasel shows up when they are almost done with breakfast. Ronnie is with her, white-faced and trembling, and following along behind them Louisa is a brilliant smear of color picking her delicate way across the ruins, leaping from brick to brick like a

mountain goat.

“Ronnie,” Joshua grins, hugging him roughly. “You made it.”

“We got lost last night,” Ronnie says, his lip quivering. “I got lost. I couldn’t find you anywhere and just as I was going to give up and go back to the Company, Louisa was there. I was so scared,” he said. “But she just showed up and started walking, and I followed her. She led me right to Weasel.”

Joshua looks over to where Louisa is sitting on a half-wall near their campsite, looking up into the sky and telling the clouds about finding Ronnie sobbing in the darkness.

“I’ve seen her out here before,” Irwing said. “She wanders the red zones all the time. Exploring. She paints crazy paintings and draws in chalk on everything.” He looks at Weasel, who does not look back.

“Louisa goes where she wants,” Joshua says. “Mostly because she’s crazy.”

“Or she wants us to think she is,” Irwing says, watching her through narrow eyes.

“Flea didn’t follow her?” Joshua asks Ronnie. “He ain’t hardly one to leave her alone by choice.”

Ronnie shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“He’s the Marshal’s First Son. We don’t need the Marshal’s squad around here, so you think real hard on that, Ronnie. You didn’t hear nothing behind you?”

“The Marshal is sick,” Ronnie says. “He was coughing at morning sermon and he didn’t show up at noon blessing. I snuck into the storeroom for food before I left because no one was guarding it.”

“Where were they?” Joshua asked.

Ronnie shrugs and nestles against Weasel. “They had the Marshal laying out on a piece of board in the cafeteria, all still and white, with the Sisters Penitent all around him. Everyone was on their knees crying, and all the Walkers were gathered around Flea.”

“So the old bastard is dead.”

“Not the first time, I hasten to remind you,” Irwing says. “He’s died and come back from death before, if you believe his stories.”

“I don’t,” Joshua says. “Plenty of good people didn’t come back to life. Only way he did is if he cheated somehow the first time.”

“She moves like a ghost,” Weasel says, watching Louisa drift aimlessly amongst the debris. “She was coming and going in the Sisters’ Garden before I left, even. With all that commotion I doubt anyone followed her.”

“That don’t mean--”

“Just leave it, Joshua.” Weasel pushes herself upright and starts walking towards the Wall, Louisa following behind.

In the last hour before the dawn they stand as close to the Wall as they can without fear of injury. Irwing holds the machine. It looks something like an old boombox radio, modified with an assortment of wires, tubes, dials. He turns each of these last carefully, a look of intense concentration on his face, watching numbers change and flicker across the front of a second machine he keeps pointed towards the Wall's silver energy.

"Where'd you get all this stuff?" Ronnie asks curiously.

"China, originally." Irwing's hands dance across the dials, making incremental adjustments as he goes.

"Is this really going to work?" Joshua asks.

Irwing shrugs. "We'll have to wait and see. I'm fairly intelligent, and I think I put it together right, but this has never been done before. Obviously. And I can't read the future." At this the Prophet's mouth opens wide in soundless laughter.

"We know the Wall operates on some kind of frequency," Irwing says. "That's why things like cellphones, handheld transceivers, CB radios had all that interference right after it went up. No matter what you couldn't keep a stable connection going. It very much hindered our ability to communicate, and still does," he says. "Unless you're a satellite or a Sky Eye, you're not sending or receiving anything from here." He pulls a small screwdriver out of his pocket and tightens one of the tubes.

"You might remember how the wall would flicker and vibrate sometimes. It

happened a few times with people close enough to witness what was happening. They threw themselves into the temporary holes in the wall,” Irwing continues.

“And they burned up,” Joshua says. “No one made it through before the Wall came back on. They all died.”

“Right,” Irwing says. “But that tells us the Wall is responsive to sound wave resonance. I think that was from the radio interference. Before too much longer there wasn’t power to run anything with—cellphones, radios-- and all those holes stopped happening. Lately, for some reason, the Walls have seemed...I don’t know. Thinner than they used to be. So we might be able to punch through if we try hard enough. This should make some kind of hole. Maybe just a small one. Maybe not enough to get through, I don’t know.” Irwing shrugs uncomfortably. There are two high spots of color in his face. He is sweating. Weasel watches him from afar and says nothing.

Irwing sets the machine down. The Wall hums, the pitch cycling high to low in regular increments. Tendrils of silver drift off the Wall here and there, spouts that arch back onto themselves like diverted lava subverting the path of flow. Irwing is right: it seems somehow threadbare, worn at the edges. The Wall itself stretches so high it must touch the ether of the world. They are all hidden in its shadow. The throbbing hum is constant everywhere.

Irwing clears his throat. “Before I try,” he says, “I’m not sure it’s going to work at all. But if it does work, I think it might only work for long enough to get one person through. I think the Wall cycles frequencies—I think it won’t let me try this more than

once before it adapts, so even if it works once that frequency will lock and we won't get to try again. I think it knows how to maintain itself, the Wall. My research has shown it to be reactive, reflexively reactive, almost as if it's protecting itself."

Joshua yawns, stretching his arms out in an exaggerated way. Irwing rolls his eyes.

"Fine. I won't bore you with any more knowledge, not that your head can hold it anyway. To make it fair, we're going to draw thread, since I don't have straws. Longest thread gets passage through, if there is any. You can also, of course, use the winning pull to nominate someone else as your emissary, should you be insane enough to want to stay here."

Weasel looks around to find the rest of them unsurprised, unmoving. Joshua shrugs and grins, leaning casually against a ruined wall decorated in one of Louisa's mad drawings, as at home here as he is everywhere. He is nothing if not adaptable, Joshua. Ronnie's hand in hers is cold but not anxious. The Prophet is never taken unaware by anything. They must have known this was a possibility. Must have talked it over amongst themselves while she was wandering the ruins looking for Ronnie or maybe before they'd even left.

"Alright," Joshua says, speaking for all of them, and with that they draw threads.

They each take one—Ronnie first, then Joshua, then Weasel and the Prophet.

"Here," Irwing says, offering his fist to Louisa, who cocks her head to one side.

Her hair is a cascade of dirty mats, lice moving sluggishly on the scalp visible between her accidental dreads. When Turtle was alive he used to brush her hair a thousand brushstrokes at a time while she leaned against him with half-closed eyes purring like a kitten but now there is only Flea, and the Sisters, and she will let no one near it.

She looks confused, scared for a moment to find herself here, and then smiles beautifully as she pulls one of the last two ends from Irwing's hand. She pulls and pulls, the long red thread spooling out from the inside of his fist, and by the time the end has shaken free it is clear she is the winner. She laughs and twirls in circles until her skirts dance around her, the thread winding crisscross around her thin, flat body.

"Well, shit," Joshua says, exchanging a look with Irwing, but before more can be said Louisa is drifting from person to person and plucking the string from each of their hands, her fingers knotting them one after another to her own thread, and then she is next to Weasel. She spins again, unwinding the whole length of red. Louisa loops it around Weasel's ring finger, drawing the string snug and passing it over and around until it has grown into a thick band of color on Weasel's hand. The final end loops into a bow, the length of red string transformed into a braided ring on her finger. Marking her as the emissary.

Louisa smiles at Weasel, her eyes crinkling shut, and wraps her arms around the other girl's waist. Weasel stares at the thread circling her finger, this physical reminder of their interconnectedness.

"But you could go," Weasel says, not understanding. "You could be free." Louisa

is already too far off inside of her own head to hear this. She pulls a long stick of charcoal out of her pocket and begins sketching madly on the enormous slab of broken concrete closest to them.

“If you have someone you want to get a message to, on the outside, Weasel can carry it. Now is our chance to send the truth out there. We have half an hour until daybreak.”

The Prophet hands her a worn folder stuffed with the scraps of his chronicles and kisses her, once, on the forehead.

“Everyone I knew was right here,” Joshua says. “I got nothing else to say.”

Irwing pulls a pair of envelopes out of his jacket and hands them to Weasel. “One of them is for everyone. The other is for you,” he says. He holds the envelope inside her hands. “Open it later.” She nods and draws close, tipping upwards towards him. Joshua looks away from them and walks up the humming Wall, where Louisa is drawing a shaded figure floating inside a long hallway, dark and light combined. “Hey, that’s cool,” he says, and Louisa smiles up at him. He finds himself smiling back.

“Weasel,” Ronnie says, tugging on Weasel’s shirt, and she disconnects from Irwing for long enough to take his letter, too—a pictorial, three figures in blue crayon. “It’s me, you, and Joshua,” Ronnie says. Weasel folds it carefully in thirds and places it inside her jacket. She hugs him for a long time, her hand stroking the hair at the top of his head.

“I’ll see you soon,” she says finally. “On the other side.”

Irwing has been tinkering madly with the machine set next to the Wall. Weasel walks to where Joshua throws bits of rock into the Wall, watching them flash into nothingness. He says nothing, just picks up another rock and tosses it into the field.

“Thanks,” Weasel says. “For everything.”

“Yeah, well,” Joshua says. “I told you I always had your back.”

“I’ll miss that,” Weasel says. Joshua hugs her, roughly, wiping at his eyes with the side of his hand.

“Weasel,” Irwing calls down the Wall, and it is time. She stands ready, breathes deep. The metallic sheen casts a gray pallor over them, harsher than the dawn’s light beginning to wash over the top of the Wall.

Irwing holds her eyes with his own. She nods. He flips the switch on, discordance screaming from the speakers. They grab their ears, shake their heads side to side. The Wall tolls like a giant bell.

For a few painful seconds nothing happens, and then, almost imperceptibly, the wall jumps and stutters, the reflexive surface responding to invisible auditory tides blasting from the machine. A crack starts to shiver open, the slow opening of a primordial door. Weasel steps tall into the opening, the light from the Wall surrounding her. They watch her walking through the split Wall, growing less defined, composed of light and the impression of darkness as she plumbs the depths. By the time she reaches the middle

she is waving back at them all, an insubstantial shadow sketched from memory, and then she is gone, merged into the known and the unknown until only the ripples from her passage are left to leave them all staring into themselves, reflected.

EPILOGUE

“What do you think we’re going to find there?” Irwing asks the Prophet. The dawn light is rolling over the hill, insubstantial and laced with possibility, and stepping through it Louisa comes bearing a strange thrumming song in her throat. At the front of the dozens following behind her the Sisters Penitent walk in one sinuous line, their hands tucked inside their sleeves. Irwing’s hands tweak the dials on his machine as the Sisters step up to the front of the Wall, their faces hidden behind their masks, and begin to sing. Drifters, Lost Company—there is Holland with his white rat, there are the Weird Twins, there is Rodgers in his coat talking to Ronnie—all of them walking, singing, towards the Wall, adding their own resonant modes to Irwing’s machine. Liquid silver trembles and Louisa sings a new note, a high note, shattering her reflection into a thousand serene fragments. A doorway forms. One by one, the line of survivors steps singing and laughing through the light, moving through the long night’s passage into tomorrow’s white shores.

Next to Irwing the Prophet smiles his inscrutable smile. “Come,” he says. “On the other side of the door, she is waiting in our new world.”