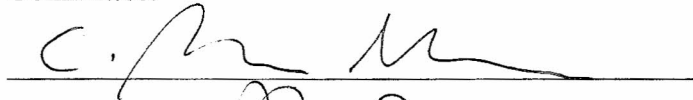


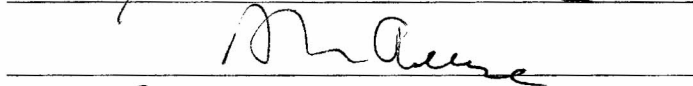
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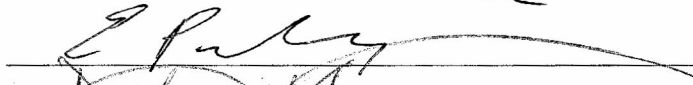
by

Spencer Seward
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
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Master of Fine Arts
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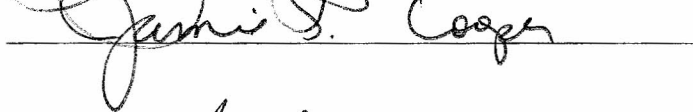
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and Social Sciences

Date: April 30, 2014

Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Travelers of The Great Spaces

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

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Masters of Fine Arts
George Mason University, 2014
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Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
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ABSTRACT

TRAVELERS OF THE GREAT SPACES

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George Mason University, 2014

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This thesis is the first section of a novel-in-progress, and follows the machinations of the Governor of X and his assistant as they try to deal with the burgeoning crisis of a plague as it spreads through the city.

CHAPTER I

(In which our lowly official fails to convince anyone of anything at all)

Though he did not then know it, the Governor's troubles began when, on the first spring day after a long winter, a middle-aged cobbler ran shouting from the port slums to the city square, halted in front of the burbling fountain, shouted he'd always wanted to be a dancer, and fell dead on the cobblestones. The café-goers over looking the square and the children at play near the fountain (there were people everywhere, it was a lovely day, the sun like a shout on the streets) gathered to stare down at the body. The cobbler was in poor shape: a thick froth had dribbled from his mouth into the curve of his neck; his eyes, wide-open, were jaundiced and blood shot; though clearly dead, his limbs and lips remained twitching. A few of the children present began to cry and were quickly ushered away from the scene by concerned matrons who assured the children that the cobbler was only joking. In the crowd, rumors immediately circulated (the source, though no one knew it, was a mousy, shrill-voiced widow who had never before seen the man) that the cobbler had been a bit strange in the head all along. Others echoed these sentiments (though this, too, was the first time they'd seen the cobbler) and the crowd quickly concluded that this death was the logical outcome of the cobbler's sad, strange existence. It is my professional opinion, said a pot-bellied man clutching an oily handful of sardines, that this man has thought himself to death. There were murmurs of assent. When

someone claimed that they'd seen the cobbler dressed in strange, colorful clothing dancing his way across the city, a thick-bearded man swilled his beer, wiped his moustache and (speaking for the crowd) said, Well that explains all of it then. Satisfied that nothing reality-disturbing was afoot, the crowd hung around simply because the body still did. A few pamphleteers arrived, interviewed witnesses, and, bored by the scene (a dull dead cobbler that no one cared about is hardly pamphlet-worthy, they thought), they returned to their quills and parchment. The next day, the story would appear as a short, rushed piece mentioning, in the most disinterested of tones, only the bare facts of the incident. Along with the pamphleteers, city officials soon arrived to transport the body and interview the witnesses. Though perturbed by the limb twitching, they determined nothing about the case and, after ordering the body burned, filed their reports as usual.

With that, the city of X might have resumed enjoying the first spring day, the whole incident having been forgotten, if it had not been for one lowly city official whose responsibility it was to organize incident reports. Having taken an interest in medicine in his spare time and fancying in his idle moments that he might one day make a great advance in the field, he had made a habit of reading any medical report that crossed his desk. He was skimming the report on the cobbler's death when he noticed the unusual fact that the corpse's limbs remained twitching. He stared at the words. In the many hours he'd spent at the library poring over the latest parchments, folios, and scrolls reporting cases and studies, he had not once come across anything like it. Agitated, he approached his superior, but was disappointed to find the man uninterested. Twitching, the superior said between sips of tea. I heard that, yes. Thinking his superior

misunderstood, our lowly official stressed the highly unusual nature of this. Yes, said his superior, indicating that he'd already understood. Highly unusual. Our lowly official explained he thought it would be best if they called for further investigation, but his superior dismissed this on the grounds that it would create unnecessary paperwork. Our official repeated himself, and the superior, this time pinker in the face, repeated his answer. Our lowly official (frustrated) then risked mentioning his view that this was a medical discovery of the highest order. A medical discovery? said his superior, now distracted by thoughts of his third cousin with whom he was carrying on a sordid and aching affair. Sounds intriguing... He turned and looked the sad sight of our official up and down.

Fine, he said. But you'll do the paperwork.

Later that afternoon, a coroner and priest were called to reexamine the body. They poked and prodded at the poor cobbler, peeling back his eyelids, sniffing at the mouth froth, holding his limbs still to see if the twitching would cease. It did not. Together they determined they'd never seen anything like it. Most unusual, said the coroner. Outside the bounds of God, said the priest. What should we do? said the head medical official. The priest shrugged. It's out of our hands, he said. The head official nodded and turned to the coroner who stroked his beard and considered the corpse. Then he shrugged too. The possibilities are almost too numerous to imagine, he said. We should burn it. The three men nodded, began to talk of other things, and soon forgot about the cobbler and his corpse completely.

When, before leaving for the day, our lowly official asked after the inquiry, he was told that nothing out of the ordinary had been found. The case was closed. But his limbs were twitching, our lowly official reminded him. Yes, said his superior. And you don't find that strange? said our lowly official. I do, said the superior. But I'm not a doctor and nor are you. Your job is simply to file the reports. Why are you even reading them? It's useless to read them. I order you to stop reading them.

Our lowly official replied that he would not stop reading them.

But sometimes when we read things, we misunderstand them, explained the superior. It was near the closing hour and the church bells would soon ring. It's important you understand official policy, he added, when our lowly official did not reply. It's one death among many deaths, he said. An infinitesimal drop in the most massive of seas. Nothing notable about it.

But his limbs were twitching, our lowly official said.

We've covered this, said his superior.

And what about the rest? His wild exclamations? The mouth froth?

The superior waved his hand dismissively as the church bells rang. He began to tidy the parchments scattered across his desk in preparation to leave. It's the same as all the sick in all the universes, he said. The kind that kills you.

He ushered our lowly official to the door.

I think you're making a mistake, our lowly official said.

So we agree to disagree, he said and then shoved our official out the door. He stood there in shock for a moment, blinking, then turned and made his way home, lost

amongst the crowd and the lamps, the noise and the bodies, feeling like the dirt on the heel of a gypsy's slipper he was certain he always had been and always would be.

Then, early the next morning, a blacksmith in the port slums streaked from his forge as if on fire, while, on the North Hill, a quiet seamstress, who officials later gathered was known to be demure and faithful, tossed her handkerchief into the air, shouted that she found her husband to be insufferable, stupid, and a dunce of the most epic proportions, and died where she stood. Like the cobbler, the blacksmith had no family or friends and so his death too was duly noted and forgotten. The seamstress, however, was found with her limbs still twitching, her husband weeping over her body, seeming as if he wished to ask the deceased to repeat herself. The reporting official asked if he had noticed any unusual behavior from the deceased in the last week or so. What? said the husband, who the official would later write moved as if suspended in viscous water. Strange? he said. Yes. Much that was strange. He explained that his wife had complained of heat in the body after their meal the night before and had lain down to rest. The fever had rapidly progressed, the husband reported, and, as it did so, his wife had begun to toss and turn in her bed, then shout uncontrollably, beginning at long intervals that gradually shrank until, one after the other after the other, the most disturbing secrets and truths flew out of her mouth, revelations of self that the husband (the reporting official would later write) seemed to stammer at the thought of. When asked what kinds of disturbing secrets and truths, however, the husband grew embarrassed, ashamed, then angry. Then he began to cry. Right, said the reporting official, wishing to remove himself from the presence of the

husband as quickly as possible. Final question. Would you say the afflicted became... ah... rampantly honest? The husband of the seamstress nodded. Precisely, he said, nodding and sniffing simultaneously. Rampantly honest.

The reporting official noted this dutifully.

After a review of the evidence quietly conducted in his chambers surrounded by his staff, the head medical official concluded that there might be a connection between these deaths and the death of the now nearly-forgotten cobbler, but decided they were lost, in the dark, and, as no one had loved the cobbler and thus there was no one to ask about the days leading up to his death, they could only feebly speculate. No further move was taken on the matter and the bodies, like the cobbler's, were ordered burned.

When this report crossed our lowly official's desk, he read the first few lines and nearly leapt from his chair. Here, more of the strange same! Now, surely, they would notice, now they would have to listen, and so thinking stood, intending to run and rub his superior's nose in it, when he caught sight of the report's conclusion. He read them quickly. Then he sat back down and stayed that way for several minutes, chewing his lip and gazing at the drab, ill-lit walls of his cramped chambers. He felt ill, and so decided to go for a walk. At the corner of the bottom of the North Hill, he purchased a few pamphlets and walked whistling to the city square, where he found a place along the fountain to read them. It was only a few sentences before he set them down again. He shook his head. He found the stories reporting the deaths, like his superior's reaction, woefully off the mark. While the pamphlets did ostensibly focus on the unusual nature of

the affliction, they failed (in our lowly official's view) to recognize the import the nature of the deaths suggested. Instead, they had transformed the details of the incidents (describing the mouth froth as blood-flecked and seething, for example, or describing the husband's grief in great, caricaturized detail) to titillate and shock the citizens of X who, our lowly official felt, were only too pleased to be titillated and shocked. This impression of the attitude of his fellow citizens was confirmed when our lowly official spent the evening wandering between various cafes and taverns along the main street in the West End, eavesdropping (as was his habit) on the conversations of his fellow citizens. What he found appalled him. The citizens of X discussed the deaths, though without concluding much at all and, as he'd expected, focused on the gruesome details of the stories in tones of horrified glee, marveling at the limbs or the drool or the sudden ceasing of the heart, replaying them again and again for the dark pleasure they provided. How embarrassing to die that way, he overheard a housewife say. Yes, said her friend, yes. But if some sad sack of a cobbler or a lonely bone bag of a seamstress wants to come down with a fever, drool on herself, and tell the world how she likes it beneath the burlap, so be it. It isn't my problem and it's not yours either, she said. The housewife agreed and, like the rest of the citizens of X, the two friends turned to rumors that the city of Y was funding Balboa's latest expedition or, perhaps, the latest squabbling, hair-pulling, and in-fighting between the members of the city council.

Our lowly official returned to his rooms, convinced he was utterly alone in the world.

The next day, he arrived at the palace feeling low and only a few reports in, found cause to feel worse. The coroner and the priest had been called to examine the seamstress and the blacksmith without prompting, but their conclusions were the same as before. He stared at the reports, stifling the impulse to fling the whole stack into the dead air of the palace basement. Then, against his better judgment, he decided to approach his superior once more, intending make a forceful argument for a pattern based on the very obvious similarities these new cases shared with the cobbler's case. But he found his superior as unsympathetic as before.

You're looking for signs and symbols where there is only a great void, he said. Perhaps you need a vacation. Too much time sorting the parchments.

Our lowly official countered that his health was just fine, thank-you-very-much, and it was his belief that in this particular case, the void was asserting a meaning, an order and logic that he found, if he could speak frankly, *greatly disturbing* and as a man of medicine (he here wagged his finger in his superior's face) he could not allow such an assertion, such a gathering of so potent a force, to go unnoticed. Eyes narrowed, his superior asked him what he meant.

I mean they died of the same thing, our official said.

His superior balked at this. Many people, he countered, died of similar or seemingly identical causes everyday and this was no reason to go running around advancing conspiracy theories. Our lowly official countered that it was scientifically impossible that they had *not* died of the same thing.

One need only examine the evidence..., he began.

Three deaths is not evidence, the superior interjected.

How many deaths is evidence? our lowly official asked.

More than three, said the superior.

Our lowly official stared at him.

There will be more deaths, he said. And then more after that.

Well then we'll have to wait and see. He gestured our official toward the door.

You won't stop it this way, our official said.

Then, appalled and dejected, he left. He did not go home. Instead, he wandered the streets of X as evening fell, passing taverns and dance floors one by one, walking without thinking, imagining that the smeared clouds and dusky sky were a projection of the deep melancholy he felt in his soul. He found himself outside the palace in the deep dark of early morning, listening to the last tavern-goers spill onto the streets, and the sea slapping the stays; entering the palace basement, he paused to observe the simple beauty of the lamps lining the great length of the chamber halls. Then he found his chambers, hoping to lose himself in his work. But he could not. So he sat there, in the half-lit dark, fuming at everyone everywhere in the world for a slight he could not properly name.

Wearying himself this way, he fell asleep at his desk near dawn, unaware that while he'd stared at the wall, cursing every human being he could conjure up from his memory, cursing the very idea of human beings and himself for being one, the husband of the seamstress, who, his servant would later report, had complained of heat in the blood, and whose neighbors (they would later report) had heard exclamations of increasing volume and distress coming from his rooms, suddenly shouted that he'd loved his wife

with every fiber in his being, with all of his blood and marrow. It didn't matter what she said before she went. His love was untouchable, he said. Then, mouth frothing, limbs electric, he dropped the bundle he was carrying and fell dead to his kitchen floor. The reporting official would later write that his limbs remained twitching.

Over the next two days, more died: first, a fishmonger, a butcher, and the husband of the seamstress (who, it turned out, was a moneylender) all died identically, each shouting some last revelation of self before they went; then, on the second day, two more blacksmiths, a butcher, a housewife, and a gypsy did the same. Our official read the reports on the second day near despair. It seemed so obvious and yet... He hung his head. Desperate for some evidence that life was not useless, he decided to go for a walk again and made his way to the city square. As usual, it was busy at the late afternoon hour. At the far end, near the main avenue ascending the North Hill, he spotted lute player and a fiddler who were stomping their feet and singing as a slowly expanding crowd, enraptured, clapped along. He crossed the square, joined the back of the gathering, and found himself standing next to two North Hill women: both wore orbicular dresses that ballooned from their narrow waists. Their hands were gloved, parasols twirling idly on their shoulders, and their faces were pale and powdered, after the fashion of the day. They were not clapping along. He decided to amuse himself by listening. He leaned in. If my husband ever said what the husband of that seamstress said..., our lowly official overheard heard the closest say to her friend. Tell me about it, her friend said. Like an actor in a play! You could not have written a better ending.

Romance, said the first one, sometimes comes where you least expect it. Her friend wrinkled her nose. I wouldn't call it romance, she said. No? said the first one. How would you describe it? The song ended. The two women did not clap. Neither did our lowly official. I don't know, said the first one. But it's sweet, don't you think? By all accounts his wife was a terrible, unrepentant... well, you know. And yet he remained steadfast in his love. Then she sighed dreamily. And to the end, she said. Our official leaned closer. The lute player and the fiddler began a new song and the crowd once again began to clap and holler. Our lowly official expected her friend to giggle or simply agree without thinking, but he was surprised when she did not reply and instead, folded her parasol, leaned it against her leg, and began to clap along. He was a fool, she said plainly. A fool through and through.

Our lowly official stared open mouthed. He had not noticed before how beautiful the woman was, and it occurred to him suddenly that he might speak to her in the silence of the next break, perhaps even discuss his findings and their import with her, a sensible woman who would surely understand, a beautiful, sensible woman; he imagined a confirmation of intellect, a few laughs, perhaps some duck or pheasant at one of the cafes over looking the city square, then, thought our lowly official, who knows? The band, however, played and played and the woman and her friend soon grew bored and disappeared into the bustling center of the city before our lowly official could gather the necessary courage. Torn by indecision, he clapped along for a few more bars, glancing over his shoulder, hoping that the woman might be milling at the square's edge. He still had his chance, he thought, it was not too late. Then it was too late. He hung his head,

then abandoned the crowd, joining the flow of people heading down the main avenue into the West End. As he walked, he comforted himself that he still had his folio to think about. He imagined the passages, rich and long, the discovery's transformative impact on science... Perhaps, he thought as he neared his street, if he were to be successful the woman would be so moved by his findings that she might seek him out and (newly famous, decorated, and adored) find him not only fascinating and desirable... Then he stopped himself. He entered his rooms. He cooked, but did not eat, and when night fell, he lay in the scratch of his unmade bed, listening to the springtime evening revel beneath his windows. He decided finally that the woman was likely a North Hill imbecile anyway. Whoever heard of it? he thought. A North Hill woman understanding the complexities of human nature... He shook his head. Preposterous!

Then, on the fourth day, three more died in the same fashion (one in the city square, the other two in the market on the West End), each surrounded by citizens of X engaged in the rush of their everyday. Terrified witnesses reported half-nude, sweat-drenched men and women streaking past, screaming and shouting sentence after sentence at the top of their lungs. When asked about the content of these sentences, the witnesses described them variously as disturbing, embarrassing, or simply stated that they would rather not talk about it. This new information made its way to the head medical official's chambers where it was carefully considered, and then carefully dismissed. Let's wait and see, the head medical official said, as he had often said before. He ordered a public announcement that the deaths were unfortunate, tragic, but in no way yet considered

Then, unsettled by what he privately felt was a trend and made nervous by the persistent, public-agitating speculation of the pamphleteers, he issued an announcement describing the deaths as unfortunate and tragic, but not worthy of major public concern. This did not help, however, and instead led the pamphlets to volley more questions, which were dodged from the palace steps with empty answers in taciturn tones that betrayed nothing, leading the pamphlets to report anyway, filling in the necessary sections with speculation that, in the end, turned out to be perfectly accurate.

Together, the head official's decided to bar all in palace employ from speaking with the pamphlets.

When news of this announcement reached our lowly official, he held his aching head in his hands. As the new reports emerged, he had begun to hope he was wrong, and that soon the whole incident would be, as the officials hoped, forgotten. He was uninterested in further confirmation of his pointless isolation. He had tried, he thought, and it was really his superior's fault and then the officials above him and of course one could not forget his fellow citizens, culpable to the last, and so convincing himself, he turned to file the announcement away when he thought of the woman. He froze, the parchment still in his hand. She seemed to be accusing him, calling him out. He held her image very still in his mind. He had not stopped thinking about her, and in fact was finding it impossible to let her go. When he thought of the deaths, he thought of her and each time he was filled with the hope that his folio might find its way into her hands, and (thinking of her now) he realized that if she, the woman of his dreams, were faced with the dilemma, she would surely choose justice. She would march down to the office and

demand that the truth live. He stood up. His heart was raging. It seemed now or never. He made his way through the halls to his superior's office, the announcement still clutched in his hand. You've lied to them, he said, bursting in and waving the parchment indignantly. You've covered up the evidence and you've lied. The superior (in the middle of lunch, wiping crumbs from his face, forcing our official to please sit down) told the official he was out of line and said no, they had not lied, simply interpreted the evidence for the public's benefit. Besides, he said, as he resumed eating, it was no longer a question of evidence. Our lowly official asked him what he meant. The superior explained it was the head official's position that numbers were, for the moment, not to be relied upon.

Numbers are capable of betrayal, just like anything else, his superior said. One follows them blindly, enthusiastically even, only to discover their treachery far too late. We do not want to wander down dark alleys with no light.

Our lowly official asked what they expected to happen if they did nothing.

We expect life to carry on as usual, said the superior.

Our lowly official shook his head. I do not understand.

The superior stood from his chair. You suggest something monstrous, beyond comprehension and, we believe, fallacious, he said. Where you see order, we see chaos. Where you see meaning, we see only scattered disarray. Now, the superior said, signaling the end of the conversation. I beg you. Please. Stop reading the reports.

Our lowly official stared at him. He had failed her. It was over now. There was only the folio to save him and yet even that seemed impossible. How could he begin? And who would listen even if he did? He spent the rest of the day wandering again, from the

port slums to the West End to the merchant district and back around. At nightfall, he returned to his rooms, exhausted. What's the use? he thought. Then he stumbled into bed, and fell asleep.

The deaths continued: on the fifth day, six more died; on the sixth day, eight; on the seventh, ten. Our lowly official read each new report in more pain than the last. Previously a sterling worker, he began to misfile, dazed off for hours at a time, was taciturn, irritable, could hardly hold a conversation; his fellow filers often found him standing in the middle of the hall, clutching a haphazard stack of parchments, unconsciously murmuring various women's names, as if he were searching for the right one. At night, he wandered the streets, hoping he might find her, hoping he might unburden himself. But everything depressed him, just the same as before. He even attempted to begin the folio twice, but fell asleep each time, awaking to find himself frozen, dread-filled and dazed, the quill hovering just above the parchment, caught in the flickering shadows cast by the low candlelight. He stopped eating, forgot to bathe. Later, his fellow filers would recall that he seemed to disappear from view.

Then, on the eighth day, when twelve more died, our lowly official awoke and knew he had to tell the pamphlets. But he did not run shouting the news right away. He was a proud citizen of X and had served as a filer for most of his life, and in spite of his current hatred of his superior and in spite of his belief in the persistent ignorance of everyone that was not himself and the North Hill woman, he maintained a sense of loyalty to his duty. He had been ordered not to speak to the pamphleteers and he was

loath to disobey. But there was science to consider. There was the woman, and the necessity of truth. On the ninth day, seventeen more died and our lowly official passed a sleepless, agonized night, tossing and turning as the night winds of spring whistled past. Then, on the morning of the tenth day, when the death count passed twenty for the first time, he woke clear-headed, firm in his decision, as if there had been nothing else along. He approached the first pamphleteer he could find and told him everything. He concluded his theory by saying that the city of X was facing a chain of linked events that meant something profound and unutterable. The pamphleteer (made uncomfortable by our lowly official's thin, exceedingly pale, and narrow-eyed presence: he seemed to be ill, sweat copiously, dabbed at his forehead compulsively with a soiled handkerchief, requested several successive cups of water) asked if he meant there was a plague in X and our lowly official (imagining that he might one day replace the head medical official, imagining a crowd of fellow citizens cheering and weeping in gratitude and awe, imagining the joyful reunion of himself and the North Hill woman) drew himself up proudly, dabbed at his forehead, and looked the pamphleteer dead in the eyes. A plague, he said, testing out the shape of the word on his tongue. A plague, yes. He watched the pamphleteer note the word with a thrill. He asked when the story would appear. Tomorrow, said the pamphleteer distractedly, wishing to get away from our lowly official as quickly as possible. Or the next day.

That night, flooded with delirium unlike any he had felt before, our lowly official celebrated his accomplishments with several pints of ale at the tavern near his room, availing anyone who sat next to him that he was X's great savior, that they had him to

thank for the continuation of their lives, and asked them to please not worry: he would allow everyone the chance to touch the medal he was certain receive from the palace as a reward for his efforts. At closing time, he had to be dragged from his barstool by a fishmonger and a dockhand who later reported he was mumbling complaints about heat in the blood. Attempting to fit his key in the wrong door and shouting incomprehensibly to himself, he woke the landlady who led him, slurred and tottering, to the correct room. She would later report she heard shouts coming from his room throughout the night, shouts that increased in rapidity and volume until she could no longer sleep. She told officials she sat up all night listening. She shook her head. Couldn't tear my ears away, she said.

When asked what the content was, however, she (like the rest of the witnesses) averted her eyes and refused to talk about it.

The next morning, as dawn rose and the citizens of X stirred, loath to leave the warmth of their beds, our lowly official woke convulsing and wild-eyed. Bolting straight up, he ran from his room on the West End to the long avenue of the North Hill towards the Governor's palace, shouting he knew the secret, he knew the secret, he knew the secret, it was— as if struck by lightning, his body stiffened and he fell dead as starlight on the still cold street. North Hill was silent, half in shadow. The sun rose from the plains in the east, warming the high windows of the merchant district, glinting on the spires of the Governor's palace, thawing the night frost from the church bells. It was the last hour before the movement and the living. The one witness to the scene, a matron suffering from confusion of the mind who often wandered among the houses lining the slope of the

North Hill, making pleasant, empty conversation with passers-by, paused to hover over his body. Our lowly official's shouting had piqued her curiosity. What have you got? she asked his still-twitching corpse. What's your big secret? She poked at his body with a foot. White froth spilled from his mouth as swaths of swallows flitted overhead. But the woman did not seem to notice. C'mon, she said. It's only a secret. She poked him once more. Then, receiving no answer, she shrugged and continued on. When she'd disappeared around the bend, the pamphlet sellers emerged, the light warming the streets as they each took to their corners to cry the headlines. X began to awake. The chorus of the pamphlet sellers echoed off the cobblestones, the high walls, the parapets, the balustrades. They were shouting his story, his relief, his burdens—

At last! our lowly official might have cried were he alive to hear it. At last!

CHAPTER II

*(In which the Governor considers his
newfound— and most unwelcome—predicament)*

Like the rest of the citizens of X, the Governor had ignored the first several days of reports describing the deaths, so when his assistant ascended the fourteen flights of winding stairs from the palace basement to the Governor's chambers and reluctantly handed him his daily stack of pamphlets, the Governor read the headlines reporting our lowly official's confessions and nearly choked on a duck bone. He turned to his assistant.

Who is this man? he said.

I have no idea, his assistant said. He was slight and reserved, with white hair and overly round eyeglasses. To the Governor, he was an added limb. He sometimes stammered when he spoke.

We must find him, the Governor said.

His assistant took the pamphlet the Governor was holding, turned it to a later page, and pointed to a headline. The Governor read quickly, his lips forming the words. Dead? he said.

His assistant nodded. The Governor wiped his fingers on the bib tucked neatly into his ruffled white collar. Do you believe it? he said. This about the plague, I mean.

I don't know. People are dying. That much is clear.

People are always dying.

There are rumors it could destroy the city.

Rumors, the Governor said. I see. He turned back to the front page and reread the headlines. Then he handed the pamphlet back to the assistant, and removed his bib. This is going to make the public very unhappy.

The dying?

Yes. But the fear too. The panic and despair... this despicable man has taken away their reasons to hope. The magnitude of the situation seemed to dawn on him and in an instant, he'd buried his face in his hands. They'll hate me again, he cried and then began to sob, softly at first, then louder, the sound ascending, reminding the assistant as it always did of a delicate animal wheeze, rather like (he thought, as he reached out to lay two fingers on the Governor's trembling shoulder) a cross between an upset child and a dying mongoose.

They won't hate you, his assistant said. He'd known the wail was coming, but still he rushed to contain it. But the Governor remained unconvinced.

They will, he said, his voice muffled by his hands. They'll hate me and they'll tell me they hate me. All at once. Like a damned devil's chorus.

The Governor began to wheeze more forcefully. He could not imagine another protest, nor was he a man who weathered them lightly, but they'd come anyway: there'd been the waste crisis (shit, the pamphlets wrote, rushing through the streets) and the accounting debacle (a misplaced number in the records revealing that X, in fact, had no

money at all) and, most recently, massive protests over the encroachment of the gypsy population into the city.

Night after night, he had peered a mortified eye around the corner of his balcony to stare down at the swath of torch-bearing citizens spilling from the North Hill through the city square into the four districts, and night after night the Governor's distress continued to grow, ballooning so hideously and to such outsized proportions that he felt (pacing his chambers, chewing his lip, calling at wild intervals for the comfort of his concubines) he carried behind him a floating stone, buoyant and burden, that threatened to both crush and carry him away at any moment, and when he thought of standing on the balcony now, his bowels began to scamper, so (to still them) he imagined hanging by a noose from the church spires, resting like a lamb in infinite peace.

He removed a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. It seemed to him now no longer a matter of choice.

If this is true, he said at last, we must give them something else.

Something else? the assistant said. The wheezing seemed to have stopped.

Something to distract them.

Distract them?

The Governor nodded. I cannot have more protests, he said.

His assistant waited. The Governor dabbed at his eyes with the corner of his bib.

People hate dying, he explained.

Yes, his assistant said, but—

They'll want a scapegoat, you see.

A scapegoat?

Someone to pin it on.

But you didn't start the plague.

What does it matter? They'll loathe me. Think of the headlines! *Governor of X Ushers in the Plague of Honesty*. My God. Do you remember the last crisis? The pamphlets? The things they said about me? Corrupt, inept, greedy, foolish, empty-headed, arrogant, fat-assed, a pear on sticks, revolting, oily, squash-headed, libidinous, and fuck-faced. All because of the gypsies. I resented that. I resented that very much.

They don't mean it, his assistant said.

They mean it, said the Governor. Or they think do. There is no difference.

They have short memories.

They have no memory at all. That's precisely the problem. As soon as they remember, they forget again.

The assistant paused. He had no interest in riding the same waves again, and yet to him too it seemed inevitable. What do you intend?

Something grand, something massive, something utterly unexpected.

Something joyful?

Yes, said the Governor, excessively so. Something like a miracle. Or something like hope.

The Governor and his assistant thought about this. Outside, the wind whispered.

Perhaps a speech, his assistant said. To reassure them. Let them know we're working on it, there's no reason to be alarmed. Nothing like a little oratory...

But the Governor shook his head. I hate speeches, he said, and besides, the scale is much too small.

Right, said the assistant. He looked thoughtful. Together, the two men hung their heads.

What about Y and Z? said the Governor suddenly.

What about them?

How do they do it?

Do what?

The Governor thought about this. I don't know, he said. He waved his hand, searching for a word. Morale, he said finally. What do they do for morale?

His assistant did not know what to say. The pamphlets, he knew, would say that these Governors were simply governing. But he could not tell the Governor this. So he closed his eyes and thought deeply and when he opened them again, he had the answer. It was a gift, he thought, for a man in his station to be capable of bending the truth in this way, just slightly, so that it became a kind of mirror, trick glass in which the listener saw their reflection burnished, their posture perked, their head held just a bit higher...

He did this so often he was no longer sure where the truth ended and his bending began.

Their conquerors, he said.

Their conquerors! the Governor said. Of course. The public loves them. And it has been a long time since X funded one...

Then his face fell.

But Y has Cortes, he said. And Z will soon have Balboa. There is no one else.

His assistant's mind raced. There was no one else. Then an impossible answer came. He hesitated, then plunged forward. What about Pizarro? he said.

The Governor stared at him. Who? he said.

His assistant reminded him. It took the Governor another moment to remember. Pizarro, he said at last, as if the name were dusty, or difficult to say. But I thought he was dead.

He's not dead. He lives here, in the city.

In the city?

Yes. In the port slums, I believe.

I had no idea.

Not many do, said his assistant. From what I understand, he's a private man...

The Governor chewed on his lip, considering this news. After a moment his assistant said, Perhaps he would be available.

But he failed, said the Governor, hazily recalling, as any citizen of X would, the apocryphal desolation and ruin of Pizarro's previous two journeys. I don't associate with failures.

The assistant shook his head. I read the archives, he said. He was not a failure.

A laughing stock, then, said the Governor. He was imagining the crowd again. I don't associate with laughing stocks.

Perhaps you might find common ground.

I very much doubt that.

Consider that you are both misunderstood.

Is he misunderstood?

Terribly.

The Governor rubbed his round chin. Did they protest him? he said.

His assistant nodded. They drew and quartered his name.

But again, the Governor shook his head. Still! he said. Think of the pamphlets!

*Governor of X Resuscitates Pizarro's Rasping, Dusty Corpse? Journey of Damnation and Doom
Planned?*

The assistant shrugged. It's outside of our control.

But this is what I mean to change, the Governor said. He stood, and began to pace. You underestimate, I think, the power of a nuanced calculation. The public has clamored at the steps of this palace several times over. They've tasted the bronze of my blood on their tongues. And the pamphlets are head-hunters. It's a game, don't you see? You must outwit them, out guess them, out plan them. So the question is, which is worse? The shame of dragging this Pizarro from whatever cobwebbed hole he's disappeared into, or facing a terrified public with no concession to offer them? What can I say then? We're working on it? Please carry on as normal? And avoid dying? No, no. They need distraction. And I plan to be the one to give it to them. But Pizarro...

The Governor ceased pacing, and shook his head.

Call it a comeback, the assistant said.

A comeback? said the Governor.

Yes. A triumphant return.

The Governor thought about this.

It can't hurt to talk, the assistant said.

Slowly, the Governor nodded. It can't hurt, no. And it seems as good as idea as any... Yes, he said, nodding more vigorously now. Yes. Send a pigeon immediately. Tell him we want to talk. Don't say why. We can't tip our hands. And then the Governor smiled and put his hand on the assistant's shoulder. The assistant exhaled.

The council will be difficult, the Governor said.

The pamphlets will be worse.

But the people...

The Governor shook his head. Two hours of consciousness and already it was a murderous day. He wished to forget all about it. He ordered his assistant fill the bath (the claw-footed tub sat at the ready in the middle of his chambers), then spent the rest of the day in his concubine's embrace (refusing several visitors, including the head medical official, who left moustache quivering each time), occasionally breaking to nap, eat, bathe, and (he could not help himself) lean over the balcony's edge to glance warily at the city where that day thirty-two more died, including a child, who, in the end, the pamphlets reported, did not have very much to say.

CHAPTER III

(in which the Governor, as usual, has doubts)

Pizarro's pigeon-in-reply landed on the ledge of the Governor's balcony late the following morning, its feathers ruffled, its beak jaundiced, the message it carried scrawled on the back of a torn piece of used parchment. After meeting it halfway (pausing for a moment to marvel at the bedraggled look of the thing, and to glance, briefly, at the sun hazy in the fog bank muffling the port), the Governor's assistant stepped back inside and read the message aloud to the Governor. It did not take long. *Intriguing*, it read. *Expect me this afternoon. Signed, P.*

Does he mean today? said the Governor. He sloshed bathwater as he straightened. He lay in the tub, a pamphlet clutched in his hand, his monocle (steam-sheened from the rising heat of the water) dangling at his chest, the several pamphlets the Governor had already read floating around him, ink bleeding into the water. Several more had died yesterday, each the same as the last, and the Governor read story after story like a man reading his death sentence. He had not truly considered the plague until now, and what he read horrified him. He'd hardly heard his assistant.

It would seem so, the assistant said.

The Governor cursed, then requested his robe, which the assistant crossed the room to fetch, averting his eyes from the Governor's water-sheened bulk as he returned.

We're not ready, the Governor said, when he was covered. We have nothing to propose, no collateral with which to bargain, no idea, precisely, what it is we're asking for. It's madness. The plan is madness.

That's not what you said yesterday.

Yesterday has vanished into eternity. God knows what's changed since then. Wait. I'll tell you: everything. What's prudent one day turns foolish the next. How is it that some men are so sure? This is what keeps me up at night. Decisiveness.

Perhaps—, his assistant said

No perhaps.

I was only going to say...

The Governor crossed the room and stepped into the shade of the balcony. His assistant followed. The Governor sat on one of the lounges and motioned for his assistant to do the same. When his assistant had sat, the Governor looked him squarely in the eyes.

The assistant considered the flat bulge of the Governor's nose, his narrow eyes, his cropped hair, his bulging cheeks.

Last night, the Governor began, I had a dream.

His assistant waited.

In that dream I was standing on the steps of the palace, announcing to our beloved citizens that Pizarro would sail in the name of X, flying our flag, hunting treasure, killing, maiming, pillaging in our name.

He took his assistant's hand.

It was a marvelous speech, he said.

I could not imagine otherwise, the assistant said.

Pizarro was standing next to me, the Governor continued, but when I turned to present him to the public, he had transformed into me. But a much older me. An elderly me. Perhaps a dying me. I looked terrible.

Dreams are deceptive.

I was naked. Stark, raving, wrinkled. A pile of decaying flesh with a face.

What happened?

The Governor clutched his hands. The people! he said. They began to boo.

It was only a dream, his assistant said.

But the pain was real.

His assistant nodded, understanding. They were silent for a moment. Below, the clatter of carriages up and down the North Hill, the wind, the fog, the sea.

This Pizarro, the Governor said. He's not a young man?

He was once, but now, no, I don't imagine he is. I met him only once.

When?

Years ago.

What was he like?

His assistant considered this. Determined, he said finally.

They're all determined.

His assistant shook his head. The others are arrogant, impulsive, rash. He is disciplined, pragmatic, unwavering.

Is he hungry?

Voracious.

Does he lust?

As if chained.

Is he brutal?

They're all brutal.

Tell me something. Something he's done.

His assistant thought about it. Once he set a jungle on fire simply to find a soldier's ring, he said.

The Governor's eyes lit up. Go on, go on.

Well, his assistant said, gaining momentum (he could not help himself, he loved history, and here was the Governor, trailing right along), they were chasing natives through the jungle when the soldier in question looked down to find that his ring was gone. He did not go back for it, however, and instead, finished the battle and then followed Pizarro miles inland to camp. Later, Pizarro noticed the man weeping away from the fire where the rest of the men drank and sang. He asked him what was wrong. The soldier told him. The ring was a gift. Or perhaps it wasn't. The archives don't say.

Let's say a gift, the Governor said.

The assistant nodded. A superior story, he said. The next morning he roused everyone early, marched them miles back to the jungle, ordered a torch lit, flung it into the canopy, ordered the men to camp and wait. He explained nothing to the soldier, nothing to the men. Two days later the canopy was ash, so he ordered the men to comb

the plot for the ring. One half hour later one of the men spots a gold glint. Pizarro takes it, returns it to the soldier, and then orders the march back inland.

My God, said the Governor, shaking his head in admiration and awe. How ever did the soldier thank him?

He died before he could. The archives say a native leapt onto his horse and slit his throat just a few steps away from the burned jungle.

The Governor was silent for a moment, shaking his head. So what happened? he said finally. If he was capable of that, how could he, in the end, fail so completely?

The archives don't say.

What?

It goes blank.

No more story.

His assistant nodded. One minute he's crossing a verdant valley toward a purported kingdom and the next, nothing. It's like he falls off the map.

Who wrote his story?

A priest acting as his notary.

Do you know the man?

No.

One wonders if he died. Perhaps no one else on the journey could read or write.

This would be the most practical explanation, said his assistant. But he is, as far as I know, alive and well. I've never met the man. I've heard he's still practicing.

Has anyone asked him? About what happened I mean.

His assistant shrugged. No one will talk about it, he said. All we know is Pizarro returned with just the priest. Everyone else was dead. And he had no money. His ship was nearly sunk. He'd squandered all of his funding and was nearly a year late. And he owed money on several previous debts, upon which he'd been counting on the treasure to mitigate. When he did not pay, well. They tried to kill him.

It's to be expected, the Governor said.

This is why he has bodyguards.

Bodyguards?

Yes. Two of them.

Surely his debtors have forgotten by now, the Governor said.

These are men with long memories.

This does not explain the public's derision.

His assistant shrugged. He was the mud and they were the pigs.

Ah, said the Governor with understanding, yes, the mud and the pigs... He turned to look at the city. And what it must be to be a pig! he cried. And the helpless purgatory of the mud. Passive, inert, there to be used...

The Governor shook his head. And you reek, as mud. The pigs sniff you out. They find you. He stood, and crossed the width of the balcony over the divide of shade into sun. Leaning on the rail's lip, he pulled a slender golden spyglass from his robe pocket, placed the looking end to his right eye, and aimed the whole apparatus at the city below. A rippling wind rose. Noontime was approaching, the sun burning through the fog shrouding the city, giving the Governor a clear view of the four districts, including the city

square. He focused on the fountain at its middle and observed at random a slim, box-jawed young man in cream ruffles and a purple smock sitting on the fountain's edge, speaking (with some volume and force, the Governor noticed) to no one in particular. The Governor looked to the man's immediate left and right. No one else sat on the fountain's edge, which the Governor found unusual: it was midday and the sun was emerging. The fountain was normally overrun with citizens.

You trust Pizarro then?

I don't know. I'm not sure it matters.

What do you mean?

His assistant paused. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose, he said.

I have much to lose.

But you stand to lose it either way.

The Governor adjusted the spyglass and watched as the purple-smocked, cream-ruffled man began to trot (a jerky trot, a step, then fall, step, then fall) around the fountain's edge, driving the citizens that remained towards the outer square. This is an interesting point, said the Governor. He fought back panic, then readjusted the spyglass, hopeful that it had deceived him.

You risk their wrath either way.

Do I not double it if Pizarro fails?

No, said his assistant. You've succeeded.

How?

They are distracted.

Yet still they hate me. You seem to misunderstand—

The Governor paused.

What is it?

He's twitching, the Governor said.

Who's twitching?

The man, the Governor said. He pointed toward the city square as his assistant rose to join him. The Governor returned to his spyglass and watched the purple-smocked man pull at his ruffles, unbuckle his shoes, and shout (it could only be shouting, the Governor thought, why else would the mouth move like that?) before he leapt into the fountain (not into it, the Governor moaned to himself, my God, not into it!) and reared his head back to scream. He was frothing at the mouth, his limbs invaded by an invisible force— then (this so startled the Governor that he nearly exclaimed aloud) he stiffened, like a board, and fell dead where he stood. Fountain-water rushed over his body. Unable to speak, the Governor peered closer. He nearly recoiled. It could not be. But it was: tendrils of blood trickled from his eyes down the man's pale face.

The citizens of X who'd been driven away by the man's shouting now slowly approached the fountain, their hands clasped over their mouths.

I'm ruined, the Governor said.

What now? said his assistant.

In the fountain. He died.

Who did?

And his eyes are bleeding. The pamphlets. The people. They'll have a field day.

I don't understand.

The Governor began to pace. That fountain, he said. That beautiful, pure fountain. The children drink from it in the summer. And now they'll have found a body in it. There were witnesses. Who didn't see that? I saw that. And I'm up here.

His assistant, recognizing the beginnings of another wobbling descent into an inner abyss, began to suggest that the Governor might benefit from a long bath when there was a knock at the double doors marking the entrance to the Governor's chambers. The Governor removed his pocket watch from his robe and donned his monocle to read it. It's not even noon, he said. Surely it can't be him.

Surely not, his assistant said. But perhaps you should get dressed.

The Governor let out a groan. Where should I sit?

At the desk.

I hate the desk.

Yes, his assistant said. But what Governor conducts his business from the bath?

Nodding (dead, in the fountain! he thought, imagining the headlines), the Governor turned to rush to his armoire when he thought he spotted some commotion below. He paused, adjusted the sight, and centered the glass on the fountain. More people had gathered around the place where the body had fallen. But they were no longer looking at the man in the purple smock. The Governor nearly dropped his spyglass over the balcony's edge: they had turned and were looking upwards across the slope of the North Hill to the heights of the palace, whispering to one another, each with their

arms raised, shaking their heads, and (he was sure of it) fingers pointed, no, no! But it was.

They were pointing straight at him.

CHAPTER IV

(in which it is not Pizarro)

Rattled by the death in the fountain and the glimpse of the guillotine he was sure hung gleaming above him, it was several tries before the Governor settled on the position behind the desk that appeared most gubernatorial: staring impassively toward the balcony, hands clasped over his ample middle. He looked to his assistant for approval and when the man nodded, the Governor inclined his head as his assistant cracked the double doors. Each man inhaled in anticipation. Then the assistant blinked twice. Before him was no conqueror, but the head medical official, face sour and long, his manner as drab and serious as ever. Without being invited, he pushed past the assistant and strode across the chambers, instinctively headed toward the Governor's bath. When he did not find him there, he looked around, confused. Then he spotted the Governor who, terrified that it might be Pizarro and not wanting in any way to disrupt the statuesque vision of governance he had so hastily cultivated, did not turn away from the balcony to see who it was.

You're at the desk, the head medical official said. Is the bath not working? I have some knowledge of tubs, I might be of assistance...

The Governor turned. My God. It's you. Do you see? he said to his assistant. It's him.

His assistant nodded.

What is it? said the Governor.

I've been trying to reach you.

And you seem to have failed. What is your business?

We have an emergency, began the head medical official.

What now?

You've been informed of the plague.

Quite unfortunately, yes.

Thirty-five more have died this morning.

My God, said the Governor and his assistant together.

Precisely. The public has grown uneasy and the pamphleteers have questions.

I see no difference between this and any other day, the Governor said.

The head medical official stared at him. We have composed some estimates, he said, and believe that at this rate, X will not last very long.

This is good news for no one, said the Governor. Most especially me.

I thought you'd feel that way, said the head medical official.

Is there not a cure? There must be a cure. Simply cure them. These are my orders.

There is no cure. We have called in plague doctors, but they're coming from the country and won't arrive until at least a few days from now.

Plague doctors? the Governor said. He thought of his childhood: bodies tossed from balconies into rank piles, hooded men in black robes and beaked masks rapping knuckles against oaken doors...

In the meantime, said the official, it is our belief that we must quarantine the bodies.

The Governor nodded, still thinking of the plague doctors. As you know, I have been a staunch supporter of all manner of quarantine since my time in the council.

And I have always commended your wisdom. But our needs this time are different. The nature of the disease is such that we must quarantine them en masse, out of reach of the unafflicted. And yet the public will protest if their loved ones are removed to where they cannot be seen. History tell us that was our mistake in the last plague...

He paused. But most of all, he said, we need to silence them.

Silence them?

The official nodded. You've read about the truth telling?

The rampant honesty?

Again, the official nodded. It is... unpleasant. Of all aspects, this appears to be the most upsetting to the citizens. It seems one spills one's guts.

Has anyone tried covering their mouths?

The official shook his head. It is a persistent, even stubborn symptom. The truth is expelled. A kind of forced ejection.

The Governor thought of the purple-smocked man rearing his head back to scream.

What do they say?

The official shrugged. The witnesses give general answers. Deep secrets, they say. Inner desires. But in the end, they'd prefer to avoid the subject completely.

One wonders what they're hiding.

They seem to be afraid.

Afraid? Of what?

The truth.

But why?

Well, the official said, as if the answer were obvious. There's terror in the truth.

Terror in the truth, the Governor repeated, suddenly dazed, thinking of the many women who handed him hope or scorn: the broomsweep who kept clean the council's floorboards (he'd wept, then hated her), the North Hill woman with the light condensed and bright in her eyes (afterwards she'd always poked his belly and called him a child), and the one, of course, the only one, the one he'd come so close to loving... Then he thought of what was worse: what he longed for and what he feared; what was rotten, vile, and clutched the keys to his heart. He stood and began to pace the room. Then he stopped.

How? he said. How will we stop it?

That is why I have come, said the head medical official. We must devise a way.

The Governor clasped his hands behind his back and resumed his pacing. He tried to imagine quarantines, but all he could see in his mind was an image of himself twitching on his balcony, secrets leaping from him like bodies from burning buildings, while below, the citizens of X jeered, and devoured his shame. He wished it would stop. But he could not make it stop. They went on jeering as the Governor unburdened himself, blood pooling at the corner's of his eyes— in an instant he forced his mind silent

and heard the sweet ringing of his ears. Relief flooded him. He smiled. Silence. The loneliest sound. And of course, it was none other than silence that must be achieved. In silence, the Governor thought, there was living; there was peace. He relished joy and could abide it as long it lasted (gorging himself until he was supine and reeling), but contentment? True contentment? This was silence incarnate, pure as the richest gold.

He stopped pacing and looked around him. Why else did he relish his chambers? Why else, but for such a coveted absence? He tilted his head back, framed by a shaft of dusty sunlight. He closed his eyes. He pictured a glass cube. The shape was exquisite, the glass divine—gleaming, gloaming, hardly there at all. He imagined the entire citizenry of X—every laborer, artist, broomsweep, servant, seamstress, dockhand, doctor, priest, singer, fiddler, merchant, bookkeep, carpenter, milner, haberdasher, fishmonger, cobbler, scholar, butcher, gambler, and sailor; every stone-faced official, from the depths of the palace basements to its sun-stroked upper floors; and every yammering councilor from every district—trapped inside a massive glass cube. Near delirium, he imagined their lips moving uselessly.

He opened his eyes.

What of cubes? he said. Constructed of glass?

Cubes? said his assistant and the head medical official together.

Yes, said the Governor, to quarantine them.

The head medical official looked between the Governor and his assistant, waiting for someone to continue. But the Governor simply smiled at him, so pleased did he seem to be with himself. Explain, said the head medical official finally.

The Governor listed his reasons one by one, ticking off each with the unfurling of a pudgy finger.

They can seen by their loved ones and their fellow citizens, he said, thus keeping the loved ones reasonably happy while also reminding their fellow citizens that they should not, under any circumstances, contract the plague and—here the Governor closed his eyes again and inhaled, imagining, as if they contained a kind of nirvana, glass cubes littering the city— their incessant noise-making and honesty will be muted, thus insuring that this rampant truth-telling is stopped dead in its tracks before— the Governor swallowed, his throat creaking— it can consume the whole of the city.

The head medical official looked between the Governor and his assistant. Then he began to clap. Bravo, he said. Bravo indeed.

The assistant fought back beaming at the Governor.

You'll need council approval, of course, the official said.

Damn, the Governor said, having forgotten. He took his chin in his hand.

Perhaps you can achieve it in one fell swoop, his assistant said. Propose the cubes and the journey simultaneously. Together, they suggest prudence and action.

Journey? the head medical official said.

The Governor and his assistant looked at each other.

We have approached Pizarro..., began the Governor.

...concerning a journey..., said his assistant.

... on behalf of X.

Pizarro..., said the head medical official, clearly not, at first, remembering. He repeated his name. Then: Oh yes. Wait. Him? Whatever for?

The Governor explained his intention to distract the public.

The head medical laughed. You won't do it with Pizarro, I can tell you that right now. Anyway, I thought he was dead.

He's very much alive.

What pit of doom does he plan to drag himself to this time?

We have no idea. Perhaps where we tell him to go.

Wherever it is likely will not matter. The man is cursed, through and through.

The Governor swallowed. He hated the head medical official, and this moment only confirmed it. First he comes with bad news, he thought, then he questions my carefully belabored plans... He steadied his voice. What do you mean? he said.

Everywhere he goes he brings destruction with him, said the official. Everyone dies. And he returns empty-handed. No apology, no shame... it's embarrassing for us. We deserve something in return.

Perhaps you take it in hating him, the assistant said.

The head medical official shrugged. Succeed and you will not be hated.

The public wants a conqueror.

The head medical official nodded. Yes, he said. A conqueror. But who is Pizarro? His beard is grey and the only thing he's conquered is his own abysmal self. The head medical official pointed towards the balcony, indicating the city. They want results from their murder and mayhem. They don't want a clown.

He is not a clown, the assistant said.

Then why is everyone laughing? the official said.

How quickly can we build the cubes? the Governor said.

The head medical official bowed his head, muttering to himself as he performed a few quick mental calculations. Two days, he said. Barring council approval.

I'll convene an emergency session this evening, the Governor said and ordered his assistant pass along the announcement to the council. The head medical official turned to leave, then paused.

Have you met Pizarro? he said.

The Governor imagined eviscerating the head medical official with his bare hands. No, he said. I've yet to have the pleasure.

The head medical official smiled. Yes, he said. Pleasure.

With that, he left.

CHAPTER V

(in which it is Pizarro)

It was not twenty minutes after the head medical official departed that there was another knock at the door. The Governor fumbled with his pocket-watch and monocle, unsure of which to set in position first. Finally, he placed the monocle over his eye, nearly dropping the pocket-watch. He discovered his hands were shaking. He steadied himself and peered down at his newly-enlarged watch. The hands stood still. He shook it, cursed, then returned to the desk and (summoning the last of the rapidly dissipating vapors of his self-worth) resumed his previous pose, this time deciding to rest his upturned chin on one hand, with his other supporting the elbow resting on his middle. He concentrated his gaze on the far corner of his chambers where dusty bookshelves (the book's pages moth-eaten, unread, disused) lined the walls. His assistant crossed the room, intending to open the doors, but before he could do so, the Governor waved frantically for him to stop.

What is it? his assistant said.

The bath! hissed the Governor. Cover the bath!

The knocking repeated itself, then repeated again. His assistant cast-around, but, finding nothing obvious, began to dance around room before finally in his haste tearing down one of the silk curtains marking the entrance to the balcony. Early afternoon light (and with it, the soft exhalations of X) spilled through the now empty space.

With that? cried the Governor as his assistant dashed across the room.

No time! he said as he flung the curtain over the bath and returned to the door. With his hand at the ready, he looked at the Governor. Regret filled him. Ready? he whispered, to which the Governor, reeling, responded with an almost imperceptible nod.

His assistant swung wide the doors.

In all of his now middle-lengthed life, the Governor had never before seen a conqueror. Once, as a boy, his father had taken him to Y to see Balboa's first return, but they had been unable to maneuver close enough to see above the crowd as the conqueror and his men, triumphantly burdened with gold by the chest and fistful, descended the docked ship's gangway to the crowd's persistent roar. All the Governor could remember were vague flashes of noise and sweat, the sweet stink of spilled wine, the faces above him leering and strange. Later, as a young man, he'd attempted to join the crowd lining the streets of X for the parade celebrating the beginning of the second journey of Cortes, but just as the procession was passing, a very drunk young woman pressed against the Governor's back spilled wine down the length of what was (at the time) his best smock and ruffled collar. He turned as she apologized (giggling, a sound the Governor would hear for weeks after) and then, becoming entangled in the confusion, they both slipped in the wine and tumbled to the cobblestones, lingering there for a disordered moment before righting themselves breathlessly and sharing a brief eye-lock the Governor would (having pursued her hand much too fervently, never realizing she saw him only as a grubby plaything) misinterpret and later call upon as evidence that in spite of her claims to the contrary, there *had* once been something between them. When the Governor turned back to the parade, Cortes and his procession were gone—all he could see were the buildings

narrowing toward the low, orange sun, the last straggling horses (their riders lowly soldiers flinging seed toward the crowd's clamoring hands) shadowed and small in the distance of the street.

This had been his last opportunity to see a conqueror (he had always felt thwarted, denied a childhood dream of every citizen of X, Y, and Z) and so it was difficult now (he found to hold perfectly still he could not allow himself to regularly breathe, and instead alternately held his breath and inhaled, sucking in little thimblefuls of air through his teeth) to resist the temptation to turn his head and watch as Pizarro, followed by his two bodyguards (first the taller, then the shorter), and a brisk-stepped, white-haired priest entered the room. The bodyguards took posts opposite each other at the doors without a word, while the priest followed Pizarro further into the room before stopping to his observe his surroundings. Pizarro kept walking toward the balcony. When he crossed the Governor's field of vision, the Governor turned to face him without breaking his assumed pose.

There's a seat here, if you'd like, he said.

Pizarro kept walking without acknowledging that he'd heard the Governor. The Governor glanced at his assistant, who shrugged. The Governor tried again. Please sit down, he said, trying his best to sound gubernatorial. When Pizarro did not reply to this either, he repeated his request and offered to open a bottle.

Still, Pizarro did not answer. Instead, he wandered the edges of the expansive chamber, fingering the dust on the books, observing the hanging lamps (quiet in the afternoon hour), the half-used candles, his scabbard swinging slightly to mark his lanky

steps. The Governor observed him. He was a tall man, his limbs long. His beard was not grey, but black with streaks of grey, and though it was clear he had aged (weather-wized skin, lines near the eyes), he strode (the Governor decided there was no other word for it) with a definitive purpose at which the Governor could only guess. The hilt of his sword was gilded with gold, and he wore gleaming black boots, a black smock, a steel chest plate, and a steel helmet at the apex of which extended a matching yellow plume. The Governor looked at the bodyguards and saw they wore the same. Pizarro continued to follow the circumference of the room (the priest had not stopped moving and was simply watching Pizarro, just as the Governor and his assistant and Pizarro's bodyguards were), then turned to explore the chamber's expansive middle. It was then that he spotted the strange shape made by the silk the Governor's assistant had hastily thrown over the tub. He stopped.

What's this? he said, pointing at the shape.

It's nothing, said the Governor.

It's not nothing, said Pizarro. Nothing would not have form or obvious weight.

It's nothing you need to know about it, the Governor said.

Pizarro began to circle the shape. A coffin, perhaps? he said.

As I said, it's nothing. Now if you would just sit down, we can...

Or perhaps an unfinished sculpture...?

No, said the Governor. It's truly nothing. Less than nothing even.

Then, to his mortified surprise, Pizarro stepped forward and kicked the tub. The thick porcelain resounded with a muffled clang. Ah, Pizarro said, stepping back. My first suspicion. It's a tub.

It's not a tub, the Governor said, nearly squeaking.

Do you often bathe?

The Governor drew himself up. I bathe no more and no less than what is considered normal, he said.

Pizarro shrugged. There are worse compulsions than incessant bathing. You have soft skin. It isn't accidental.

Pizarro crossed the room and took a seat opposite the Governor. He crossed one long leg over the other. Behind him, the Governor's assistant offered the priest a chair. They locked eyes.

I have many women who visit..., the Governor began.

...and they too need to bathe, yes, Pizarro said. Perhaps more than anyone else. It's large enough for two I presume?

And then some, said the Governor.

You're a man of adventure, I see.

I'm not sure I follow.

It takes imagination to construct a sanctuary, Pizarro said, indicating the full extent of the Governor's chambers. And it takes more imagination to exist happily in it. Congratulations. I envy you.

It seemed a compliment, but the Governor was not sure. Who says I exist happily?
he said.

Let's call it an earnest and good-faith hope.

The Governor nodded, still unsure what he meant. He looked down at his crotch. He was beginning to sweat in his most dreaded places. He returned his eyes to Pizarro. Port? he said.

When Pizarro nodded (a brief incline of the head exposing the length of his thin, straight nose), the Governor motioned to his assistant, who stepped away from the priest and, glaring back at him in his mind, crossed the room to serve them. Across the desk, Pizarro and the Governor raised their glasses.

What to? said the Governor.

To us, I suppose.

They drank.

Have you lived here long? said Pizarro, looking into his glass where a dark liquid spun. The curtains lifted as the wind fluttered then fell. Pizarro glanced at them before again resting his eyes on the Governor.

I was elected last winter, the Governor said. He looked down again and saw a grease stain marring the crotch of his pantaloons. A horrifying image of the vision he presented flashed through rough his mind—stained smock, flaccid ruffles, rump-sweat spreading, pants tattered, cheeks puffed and red. He rushed to continue. Not long, he said. No, I guess not very long.

One has to start somewhere, said Pizarro.

Yes, said the Governor.

Do you enjoy it? Pizarro said.

Enjoy it?

This work you do. Is it pleasurable?

The Governor had never before considered this question. It seems I do it because I have to, he said.

Like the bath?

The Governor hastened to correct himself. Nothing like the bath, he said. I love it, is what I meant. I cannot imagine doing anything else.

It is necessary, Pizarro said.

Perhaps, said the Governor, feeling several times punched, unsteady on his feet as Pizarro circled him, calm. He longed for a concubine and the warmth of his bath. I've called you here today for a reason, he said suddenly. He adjusted in his seat, hoping to check the extent of the crotch stain before standing again.

I would not have imagined otherwise, Pizarro said.

Would you like to know the reason?

You pigeoned, I rang.

Yes, said the Governor. Well— I have for you a proposal of the most delicate nature.

This is very interesting, said Pizarro.

Is it?

Yes, Pizarro said. Because I also have a proposal for you.

The Governor leaned back into his chair, settling into the cold sweat pooled in the recesses of his rump. He felt fecund, ill, a wagon bell ringing clamorously in his chest. He glanced to his left and noticed the bodyguards whispering to each other, snickering. When they saw the Governor, they stopped and drew themselves up, neither looking at the other, as if, the Governor thought, he had imagined the whole thing. He turned back to Pizarro.

What kind of proposal? he said.

A modest journey, Pizarro said.

The Governor's ears perked. He leaned forward. Across the sea?

Where else?

With men?

Pizarro nodded.

And ships?

Pizarro nodded.

The Governor leaned back. He looked between his assistant and Pizarro with what the assistant concluded was glee. This is most wondrous news, he said. He glanced down at the grease stain. It seemed to be fading. Light returned to the room. Outside he heard the bright burst of children's laughter, faint, then trailing. He turned to his assistant. Did you hear him?

I did, said his assistant.

Most wondrous news, the Governor repeated. Simply extraordinary.

You seem enthused, Pizarro said.

You infer correctly, the Governor said.

Yet you've heard nothing, Pizarro said.

Tell me, the Governor said. Where do you plan to go?

West, said Pizarro.

And to what end?

Destruction, said Pizarro.

Wonderful! said the Governor, applauding lightly. And do you expect murder and mayhem?

Of course.

And exploits that will boggle the mind?

I can't see why not.

The Governor's mind was reeling with hope. He leaned forward again, as if he believed Pizarro were confiding something to him. What do you intend to destroy? he said.

Pizarro stared at the Governor. Myself, he said.

The Governor paused, uncertain if he'd heard correctly. I'm sorry? he said.

Myself, Pizarro repeated.

The Governor opened and closed his mouth. I was hoping for a guaranteed return, he said.

There is no such thing.

The Governor leaned back. This certainly ruins my plan for the parades, he said. He felt his hope shriveling as a darkness crept into the edges of his vision. The journey

was nothing without the necessary pomp and circumstance. If the public were to be distracted from the plague, they would of course have to revel in it, believe it was their journey too, find solace in his errand or at least (the Governor was willing to settle for this, so desperate was he to avoid the wrath that was, he felt—now that our lowly official had revealed his damned secrets—a perfect certainty) jeer at his foolishness, his missteps and tragic misfortune. Perhaps this was better, the Governor thought. The public might find comfort in the absurd death of someone other than themselves. And perhaps they would blame it on... Then he thought of the purple-smocked man, the blood dribbling from his eyes. He thought of himself on the balcony, the terror in the truth... He shook his head clear. It must be triumph, he thought, they must be lifted away from their mortality—

I despise parades, said Pizarro.

I'm sorry?

I despise them.

You despise them?

Yes.

The Governor felt ill. What man despised a simple, lovely parade?

Why? he said.

I detest pomp, said Pizarro, and I detest circumstance.

My initial enthusiasm appears to have been misplaced, the Governor said.

Yet you've still heard nothing, Pizarro said.

It is not necessary for me to hear more, the Governor said. This is simply impossible without a parade. He turned to his assistant. Is this not true?

His assistant nodded. Impossible, he said.

I might have been willing to settle for one parade, the Governor continued. But the fact that you are completely uninterested in even the single parade is, as I'm sure you can understand, greatly disturbing to me. The Governor began to stand. He could almost taste the warmth of his bath.

But you've yet to read it, Pizarro said.

I don't need to.

This seems a strange approach to the world.

What do you mean?

Do you treat everything this way?

What way?

Dismissively.

I'm not dismissive, said the Governor. He sat back down. I simply have rigid standards. I've listened, you've told me. What more is there to hear?

As if on cue, the priest rose from his chair and crossed the room to Pizarro, pulling a rolled parchment from the folds of his cassock and placing it in the conqueror's outstretched hand. Pizarro placed the parchment on the desk between himself and the Governor.

As I said, I'm not interested.

But you might be.

I'll find somebody else, the Governor said. Someone willing to parade.

There is nobody else, the priest said.

The Governor's assistant (upset by the priest's sudden entrance into the conversation) joined the Governor at his desk in a gesture of defense. The Governor decided to bluff.

The world teems with conquerors, he said. You are a dime a dozen.

He is not, said the priest, and everyone knows the rest are taken. He pulled a pamphlet from the folds of his cassock and laid it flat on the desk between Pizarro and the Governor.

He doesn't read the pamphlets, the priest said, pointing to Pizarro (who stared at the Governor flatly, as if, the Governor thought, the whole thing had been minutely calibrated to ruin him), but I do. He pointed to our lowly official's story. You have a problem, he said.

I am immune to problems, the Governor said.

There's a plague, the priest said.

Ah, said the Governor. That.

It is worsening.

The investigation is ongoing, the Governor said.

It worsens by the day, soon by the hour.

You speak in ominous tones that I find distasteful.

And you suggest a certain intention with your insistence on parades, he said. Such a singular, narrow need is beyond reason.

Consider tradition, said the Governor.

Tradition does not concern itself with me, Pizarro said, nor do I concern myself with it. Either way, you see my bind.

No parades, the priest said. The less known the journey, the better.

You see? the Governor said. I do not need to read the proposal.

I have a suspicion, said the priest.

Do you? the Governor's assistant said, feeling his blood hiss and rise.

The priest continued as if he was unaware that the assistant existed. I suspect you need this, he said.

Need? the Governor said.

You are desperate, said the priest.

That is absurd.

I further suspect that you cannot say no. You are bluffing by refusing to read this. You are bluffing by sending us away.

Without us, Pizarro said, we suspect you are doomed.

The Governor's rump-sweat slithered down his legs to pool in his boots. He swallowed. Wherever did you get this outlandish idea? he said.

The priest shrugged. The facts suggest it. You've heard nothing of our proposal and yet you rush to reject it. It is easy to infer that you desire a journey. But most importantly you desire parades. One wonders if you might simply settle for the journey.

One wonders idly.

And yet, the priest said. He pointed at Pizarro. He is your only choice.

The Governor felt himself a jungle, monsooned and steaming. His body, he was sure, was rotting where he sat, then stood, then sat again. He motioned to his assistant who lowered his head to the Governor's. The Governor raised his hand over their mouths, and began to whisper. How? he hissed. How? How? How?

Intuition, his assistant whispered.

Damn the searching mind!

They understand your predicament precisely.

It is most unfortunate news, the Governor said. We've yet to hear a word and already we are ruined. I blame you.

His assistant felt a sadness bloom deep within him. Imperceptibly, he inched away from the Governor.

They have made fools of us. Most especially me. And yet you allow it. Look at that priest. Trimmed up, straight as a board and Pizarro, my God, Pizarro— even a forgotten failure trumps me...

Stop, his assistant said. Stop right there.

The Governor went silent, hung his head, and soon after, the first notes of that awful wheezing began, that death cry of mongooseian descent emerging from deep within. No! his assistant whispered. No!

Just before the cry emerged, the Governor took a choked, shuddering breath. Dear God! he gasped. What will I tell them?

His assistant's mind raced. Breathing trouble, he said.

Breathing trouble! the Governor said, not comforted at all. He took another deep breath. I'm sorry, he said. He was trembling. What do you suggest?

It took his assistant a moment to respond.

Hear the proposal, his assistant said.

Whatever for?

Perhaps there is value within it.

I must have a parade.

There is always room for negotiation. And besides, he thought. What other choice do we have?

Fine, the Governor said. Fine. He sniffled. How should I proceed? he said.

His assistant could not help himself. He reached out and touched the Governor's shoulder. It was rank with sweat.

With honor, of course, he said.

The Governor nodded. Of course, he said. With honor.

CHAPTER VI

(In which the Governor considers Pizarro's proposal)

The Governor and his assistant parted heads and the Governor (hoping that the blood red capillaries in his milky eyes were not obviously agitated, hoping the mist at their corners had cleared), adjusted his ruffled collar, tugged at his pantaloons front, and once again drew himself up.

I will hear the proposal, he said. On hypothetical grounds.

Pizarro and the priest glanced at each other, then simultaneously inclined their heads to the Governor, who reached forward and pinched the parchment with two fingertips, (lifting it toward him as if it were one of the many pieces of garbage littering the outskirts of the gypsy encampments), and laid it flat, holding back its efforts at furling closed with two down turned palms clamped at the corners. Together, the Governor and his assistant leaned forward to read it. Forgetting his monocle and greatly narrowing his eyes instead, the Governor mouthed the words as he read, unintelligible little wisps of sound escaping his lips, while his assistant remained silent, his eyes (ballooned by the over-large spectacles held in place with a careful hand) tracking pendulously across the latitudes of the parchment.

Unusual, muttered his assistant.

Most unusual, muttered the Governor.

Their eyes widened in tandem as they read further on. When they finished, they turned to face each other. An understanding seemed to pass between them, though as both turned back to face Pizarro and the priest (the Governor's assistant, noticing the priest's hand resting on Pizarro's shoulders, fought back the urge to do the same), neither felt certain what they themselves had understood. The assistant leaned down to the Governor's ear.

They're hiding something, he whispered.

But whatever is it? the Governor said.

I cannot guess.

They don't state the destination. Nor do they want any wealth.

That, at least, is inarguably in X's favor.

Yet it is against tradition. And madness. What other whips crack the man's back?

Glory.

But that is standard.

Something..., began his assistant.

... yes, said the Governor. Personal.

But the money.

It is *too* tempting.

You believe a trap.

Precisely, said the Governor. It reeks of bait.

Hedge, said his assistant.

The Governor nodded. They parted heads and returned their gaze to Pizarro and the priest, who had not moved.

This proposal, began the Governor.

Yes? said Pizarro.

It is most unusual, said the Governor.

Anything is unusual when looked at for long enough, Pizarro said.

You propose a vague journey...

They are always vague, said Pizarro.

...and stipulate that you wish to hide it from the public eye.

The journey is not for the public.

Yet this is precisely why I need you to journey.

So it is the plague, said the priest.

The Governor ignored him. You state no destination, offer me all of the wealth you are likely to accrue, and then demand that the journey be a complete secret. Why?

Pizarro said nothing.

It is a generous offer, said the priest.

I do not deny it, said the Governor.

You would be a fool not to accept.

The Governor looked at his assistant. His assistant nodded. I would like more time, the Governor said.

You're drowning in time, Pizarro said.

One day, perhaps two, said the Governor.

What will you do in that time? the priest said.

Surely, he will bathe, Pizarro said.

The Governor pressed forward. Consider this, he said, pointing to the parchment.

There is nothing to consider, the priest said. Everything is plainly stated and is decidedly in your favor. Toss this proposal to the Governors of Y and Z and they will fight over it like starved dogs.

So, said the Governor. Toss it to them.

Pizarro and the priest looked at each other, and in that moment of hesitation, the Governor and his assistant saw that all was not lost.

We would like to respect your place in line, said Pizarro.

Give me one day then. I will pigeon you tomorrow evening.

Pizarro and the priest brought their heads together. The soft hiss of their whispering filled the chamber air. Pizarro stood. The priest straightened. From the corner of his eye, the Governor saw the bodyguards did too.

One day, Pizarro said.

Excellent, said the Governor. His bowels went dangerously loose.

I will ask you to remember something, Pizarro said. He turned and looked at the tub. While bathing perhaps.

The Governor felt his bowels scamper back up his throat. What is it? he said.

What we want is not that different, Pizarro said. Or rather, what I want is what you want. If you could have what I'm looking for, you would clamber over stone and stream until your palms and knees bled. You would slit throats and howl at the moon too.

I don't much care for the out of doors, he said.

Consider it a metaphor then.

I want a parade, the Governor said.

Wouldn't you much rather hide?

The Governor's veins went cold. He did not reply.

Run away, Pizarro continued. Disappear completely. Never see them or yourself again.

No, the Governor said at last. No, I don't think so. He looked down. His hands were shaking. He hid them beneath the desk.

Pizarro shrugged. Suit yourself, he said. When he reached the door, he paused and turned back. One day, he said.

The Governor nodded. One day, he said softly. And then Pizarro and his men were gone.

CHAPTER VII

(in which the Governor and his assistant hatch a plan)

After the doors swung shut, the Governor ran from his desk as if a man on fire, flung free his clothes, and ordered his assistant draw the bath. He waited, shifting his weight from his left foot to his right, a movement his assistant, who watched him from the shadows of the stove, decided resembled an obese duck waddling in place. The assistant turned as a breeze lifted the balcony's curtains. Through the brief gap, he saw the changing light: the city was half in shadow, afternoon giving to evening, and this too would soon die.

Hurry, said the Governor.

A watched pot, said his assistant.

Damn your pot and its observations!

His assistant could hear the mongooseian wail rumbling beneath the surface again. I cannot hurry the laws of nature, he said.

The Governor shook his head. If only one could step outside the bounds of them, he said.

Perhaps this is what Pizarro seeks, said the assistant.

He certainly seeks *something*. And yet it remains in the distance, obscured by the mist of himself. He has buried it in his core. Burned the map. Eaten the key.

Does it matter why he goes?

Of course! What will I tell the people? There must be nobility in the purpose, hope, a captivating trajectory—they need a reason to believe. They must *become* Pizarro, or believe they are him. He paused. And anyway, he is lying. He makes fun of my bath and then he lies to me. In my own chambers. *In spring*, the time of love and friendship and happiness! Where is his deference? Does he not know power when he sees it?

His assistant stared at the naked, waddling Governor. He called you a man of adventure, he said.

The Governor stopped waddling, put his hands on his hips, and glared at his assistant. Do I look adventurous to you?

His assistant replied from a certain perspective, adventurous might be the only word to describe the Governor.

He was making fun of me. And now you are too.

His assistant rushed to assure him he was not.

The Governor sighed and resumed waddling. He wants no treasure, he continued, no pouch or purse, no coin, jewel, weapon, or body. He offers all of it to me.

It is undeniably generous.

And yet there's something rotten in it. Why else does one journey?

Besides treasure, glory, and blood? It is beyond me. No journey in the history of X, Y, or Z has not pursued these ends.

It is clearly a personal errand.

Yes.

He wants to hide. To *hide*. Hence no parades. Hence no public at all. Is it cowardice? Cunning? Deceit? Does it matter? He turned to his assistant. No Governor would accept this.

His assistant nodded. We need the parade.

The Governor exhaled. The parade is precisely the point.

His assistant crossed the room and filled the bath. The Governor sank in, the woes of the wretched afternoon evaporating with the steam. He closed his eyes.

He believes he has the upper hand because I am desperate, he said. Yet he has failed to return triumphant twice. His name is mud-sullied. Who would accept him as he is, with this in his hand? He thinks he can force me to look past what is strange... The Governor smacked at the surface of the water several times in succession, sending spray over the edge. Damn it all, he said. First the plague, now this fool.

Wiping his hands dry, his assistant took a chair and placed it adjacent to the tub's edge. He shrugged as he sat down. He has found our weakness, he said. Now we must find his.

What do you propose?

His assistant thought about this for a moment. I will follow him, he said. Now. I will go. In the meantime, you will move forward with the council.

But I have no guarantees. If I accept the proposal as is, I will be funding the pet journey of a washed up fool, the plague will rage on, and I will have no consolation prize to offer the public. They will simply be dying, stuffed up in quarantines, plague doctors roaming the streets. No one will be happy. Except Pizarro. And who cares about him?

The assistant paused, as if considering something. The proposal is ill, yes? he said at last.

The Governor nodded. It reeks of trickery.

The assistant stood. And yet he has come out of his hole for something, he said. No one hears from him for several years, you pigeon, and he replies, just like that.

Where are you going?

He too is desperate.

But how can you know?

Why else ask you? Why not ask the Governors of Y and Z?

Besides their despicableness? They already have conquerors.

But who doesn't want more? Think of it: would you not fund another, if the coffers allowed, and you thought it might please the public?

The Governor was silent for a moment. Of course I would, he said.

So.

So you think he's hiding something.

Yes.

And what do you propose we do?

We find what ails him.

And?

We poke it.

The Governor stroked his chin. With hot iron?

His assistant nodded. The Governor smiled. What do I tell the council? he said.

Tell them what you wish were the truth. And then we hope this becomes the truth.

They will want to solve the plague.

But you *are* solving the plague: tell them of the quarantines, the doctors. Assuage their doubt.

Perhaps, said the Governor, perhaps, but the quarantines and the doctors: these will only worsen things. We edge closer to the crisis of shit. Or that infernal gypsy child. The Governor covered his face and shuddered.

The assistant touched the Governor's shoulder. But it can be pushed from the mind, he said. And what better way, besides? Not even the council is immune to a conqueror's sway.

Yet it is Pizarro who we propose.

It is a risk we must take.

The Governor uncovered his hands and looked up at his assistant. You seem to care even less for my neck than I do, he said.

The assistant smiled at him, gently, and the Governor felt something move in his chest. He wondered for a moment how he would ever live without the man. And then the thought was gone.

They will come around, his assistant said. Their desire for a conqueror will eventually usurp their detest for Pizarro. And so too will the public's.

There was a knock at the door.

The Governor glared. Just when we'd settled in, he said. Who could it be?

Perhaps a messenger, his assistant said as he crossed the room, and when he swung wide the doors, it seemed he was right, though it was not the man he wanted to see: there was the head medical official, stone-faced, his hands clasped at his front.

What do you want? the assistant said.

Is your man in?

Who is it? the Governor called.

He's occupied.

I have urgent news.

I'll pass it on.

The head medical official shook his head. I must tell him, he said. You will too much soften it.

What do you mean?

You cannot protect the man forever.

The assistant stared at him. I do no such thing, he said. He was suddenly embarrassed and wished the official to go away. But the official did not move. Instead, he stood on his tiptoes and peered over his assistant's head through the cracked doors. His assistant attempted to close them, but it was too late.

Bathing, I see.

It is his own free will.

And yet, the official said, as he pushed passed the assistant, how did the water get there?

He made straight for the bath, and the Governor began to protest the instant he spotted him.

Oh no, he said. Oh no. Go away. Is it bad news? I cannot have bad news.

It is bad news.

Leave. Immediately. I want none of it.

You must hear it.

The official stopped when he was a few feet from the tub's edge, and clasped his hands behind his back. The Governor stared at him angrily.

Do you see me here? he said.

Yes.

What am I doing?

You are bathing.

Yes. And what do you think that means?

The official smiled, briefly. It was a condescending smile. Frankly, he said, I haven't the slightest idea.

It means, the Governor said, that I would like to be left alone. It means, more to the point, no news.

It concerns you, the official said.

The Governor blinked at him, suspecting a trap. Then he sunk back into the water until only his head was visible, and so that it appeared severed, fat and floating. He closed his eyes. Fine, he said. What is it?

The plague, the official said. It has afflicted the North Hill.

The Governor sat straight up, sending water over the edge in waves. The North Hill? he cried.

The head medical official nodded. It has just been confirmed, he said.

In an instant, the Governor was in a panic. Was it a man? he asked, thinking of the purple-smock.

He nodded again. In the fountain, he said.

The Governor's heart went cold. His eyes, he said. They were bleeding?

The official narrowed his eyes at him. This appears to be a new symptom, yes. How did you know?

I saw him, the Governor said, his eyes wide. He spoke softly. Today, he said. In the telescope, I saw him. Oh God, he said. He hugged himself and began to grope around at nothing, or at something that wasn't there. I am doomed, he thought. The plague approaches, and I am doomed.

And then he hung his head, and to the assistant's great surprise, there was no mongooseian wail, no wild exclamation, but silence, a silence and a stillness that surprised the assistant and then disturbed him. The Governor sat slumped and nude in the bath, his face hidden by his hands, his body trembling slightly with its troubled efforts to hold steady the sure-to-be howling wail as it rushed through his labrythine caves, his breathing short and quivering as he struggled not to burst out, not to leap or curse, and this seemed to the assistant to represent (the instant he realized it he began walking toward the Governor with concern without realizing he had) pain, true and genuine pain. He placed a hand on his shoulder when he reached him. Then he whispered something in the

Governor's ear, who, after a moment of listening, began to nod, then wiped his nose. The assistant turned to the official, who was staring at him with a mixture of amusement and disdain.

What? the assistant said.

I wonder, said the official at last, if that was embarrassing for you as it was for me.

The assistant ignored him. Do you expect it to spread through the North Hill?

The official paused, as if considering whether to allow the subject to be changed. And then he seemed to give in. We don't know, he said. The man who died was only from the North Hill. But he was not in it. So we must wait and see. Still, it is undeniable that the more quickly we have the quarantines at the ready, the more quickly we can respond. He turned to the Governor.

This, above all, is what I have come to tell you, he said. The need for quarantines redoubles. And fast. It is bad enough that our citizens are running around telling the truth. For us to do so would be a very different nightmare.

The Governor nodded, though his eyes were far away, as if he had not heard. He answered as if he had. It must not come here, he said, and pointed toward the balcony, indicating the city. There are things nobody can know.

There are things nobody *wants* to know.

But the Governor did not hear him, lost as he was in thinking of what it might be like to be consumed by this plague of honesty and (this thought was far worse) what he might to say and to whom. None of the things he thought we're good, and everywhere he imagined he might succumb to the disease and everything he imagined might be ejected

from his mouth came rushing to his mind at once, so that he nearly leapt from the tub right there, and ran onto the balcony, wailing. He bit his lip until it bled.

We must build the quarantines at once, he said. He clutched the sides of the tub. We must build them now. We should already have been building them.

This is what I have been telling you. When do you meet the council?

Two hours, his assistant said.

But that is two hours too late! the Governor said. Begin. I order you to begin.

You are sidestepping the council, said the head medical official. This is risky, even—

Silence! cried the Governor. He spoke as if possessed. Gather every available laborer, he said. Build as many as you think are necessary. Work by torchlight. Work until dawn. Work until your fingers bleed. It is an emergency. He sank back into the tub and closed his eyes. He felt exhausted. It was all too much. I cannot spill my insides, he said, shaking his head slowly. His voice began to fade. What I have inside of me alone will cause the city to collapse.

The official opened his mouth to reply, but before he could the assistant stepped forward and interrupted. He was distressed, but did his best to conceal it, as he did not want to overly stress the already fragile Governor, perched as he was (and the assistant along with him) on the precipice of the still-building wail. Yet something in the proposal of the quarantines was bothering him and he could not let it go. He glanced after the Governor before speaking. He was relieved. The stress had finally swallowed him up: it seemed he'd fallen fast asleep.

How, he began softly, then stopped, clearing his throat. How do you plan to find them? he said.

The head medical official frowned. Find who?

The afflicted, he said. How do you plan to find the afflicted?

Night raids, the official said. We will gather all available officials and soldiers and we will go home by home, knocking on the doors and examining those we find there. And we will look for those who are sweating. And those who are honest.

The assistant shuddered, remembering his youth. Night raids, he said.

The official nodded. Night raids, yes.

The assistant's mind protested. They were horrid enough already, but here, with this plague? And yet there was perhaps no other way...

But how are you to tell between a simple honest man and an afflicted? he said. What if those you lock away are not sick after all?

The head medical official smiled. There is a difference between the truth and *the truth*. One is necessary, the other excessive. I make my life in the former. I, like the rest of X, avoid the latter.

You tell the truth now.

Yes, the official said, yes, of course. Empirically speaking, what I say is verifiable through the world we taste, touch, and see. But the truth of myself? My essential truth? This is what the disease reveals. And no one, no one willingly reveals that.

The assistant blinked.

So we will look for the other one, the official continued. *The truth*. And when we see it we will snatch it up. Here the official shrugged, as if to suggest the decision was not his. What else can we do? he said. It seemed that damned official was right after all: here are the symptoms, here are the signs. We are fools now if we do not follow them. He straightened, unconsciously pinching the ends of his moustache. This is I will order the deployment of officials into the streets. This is why I have called on every available soldier.

When will the raids begin?

As soon as the quarantines are complete.

History suggests...

History suggests nothing. We suggest things to it.

The assistant opened and closed his mouth. It seemed he had no choice. He glanced warily at the sleeping Governor. You must not mention this to him, he said.

The official could not help himself. He smiled. You don't plan to tell him?

In my own way, yes.

He was mortified when the official began to laugh. Do you see what I mean? he cried. It's precisely what I said before, when I—

He stopped when he saw the assistant's face. Oh, never mind, he said, seemingly disappointed. He spoke over his shoulder as he headed for the door. It's no use, he said, uttering the words that would later echo through the assistant's dreams. Not even I can break a broken man's back.

(MEANWHILE...)

... the pamphleteers, knowing everything (they had ears, the Governor liked to say, like billowing sails), rushed in droves up the North Hill, already composing the headlines for a council session that had yet to even begin. *Council in Dither!* they planned to write. *Governor Proposes...* but that they did not yet know. There were several suspicions, each more outlandish than the last. One pamphleteer, a dumpy fellow that the others thought a lesser-minded hack, went so far as to suggest (citing rumors from sources he refused to name) that the Governor planned to announce quarantines involving glass cubes. Glass cubes? a fellow pamphleteer cried, indignant to the point of quivering. Why, that's madness!

The dumpy pamphleteer asked why this was madness, to which the indignant pamphleteer replied that he did not know, it just didn't feel right.

I also heard, the dumpy pamphleteer said, that the Governor has spoken with Pizarro.

Who? said his fellow pamphleteers.

Pizarro, he repeated.

A light dawned for each of them. They stared at the dumpy pamphleteer like he was a diseased gypsy.

You ought to be beheaded, said the indignant pamphleteer.

The others murmured in assent. The dumpy pamphleteer shrugged. I hear things, he said and left it.

Later, as he and his fellow pamphleteers trudged upstream through the late afternoon rush of palace workers down the North Hill, the dumpy pamphleteer, winded and feeling peckish, slipped into a cheese shop and asked the merchant for his finest. The shop-owner stared at him. The dumpy pamphleteer made a sorry sight—his smock, stained and missing buttons, failed to cover his potbelly, and it appeared to the shop-owner he had not bathed in several days. His nose, red, bulged, and he stank, like something left wet and moldering. In the dank basements of the pamphlet-houses that formed the liminal space where the port slums ended and the West End began, he would not have appeared out of place, but here, halfway up the North Hill in a cheese shop carrying delectables he could not pronounce, he very much stood out.

Naturally, the shop-owner refused to serve him, then attempted to rush him out the door and back onto the bustling street. But the dumpy pamphleteer refused to go. They tussled for a moment, raising dust from the floorboards, and then tumbled apart, each pausing to catch their breath.

You look ill, the pamphleteer said. He wiped his mouth.

The shop-owner replied he felt just fine. Though, he admitted, still breathing heavily. I've felt some heat in the blood since this morning.

Heat in the blood? said the pamphleteer. He reached for his pocket folio and quill.

Yes, said the shop-owner. Now please leave, he said, before I'm forced to notify the officials.

The pamphleteer peered at the shop-owner. He was sweating and seemed not quite able to control the precise movement of his limbs.

I would like to stay, he said. He set a sizable purse of gold on the table between the shop-owner and himself. And I would like to consume that much cheese, he said, indicating the bag.

The shop-owner stared at the purse, torn. He found the man detestable, yet he was not, on principle, one to refuse gold, especially in so desirable a volume... Fine, he said. What would you like?

Surprise me, said the pamphleteer and sat down across the counter from the shop-owner, who stepped behind the counter.

Have you been here long? the pamphleteer said. He watched the owner unwrap a wheel of goat cheese.

Very, the shop-owner said.

Do good business?

Mostly.

Had trouble with the plague?

The shop-owner stared at him. This is the North Hill, he said.

And?

I think that statement explains itself.

Surely you've read the pamphlets.

I do not care for pamphlets, said the shop-owner. All rubbish, trial and toil.

If you'd read them, you'd know the plague has entered the North Hill, the pamphleteer said. He smiled and took his first bite of cheese.

The shop-owner stared at him. Preposterous.

The pamphleteer shrugged and pulled his own pamphlet from his pocket. The shop-owner read quickly. It is a mistake, of course, he said.

This attitude would seem to invite doom.

The shop-owner shrugged, his composure renewed. An impossibility is always an impossibility, he said. And this is simply impossible.

Silence descended as the dumpy pamphleteer consumed the rest of his cheese quickly, without any of the relish and savor the shop-owner considered necessary and appropriate. He smacked his lips and asked for the next round.

Who was it? said the shop-owner.

What?

The man, he said. Who died. Who was he?

A rich man.

What did he do?

He was the son of a merchant.

The pamphleteer broke into the second wedge of cheese.

What did he say? the shop-owner said.

The pamphleteer wiped crumbs from his mouth and smiled.

I don't know, he said.

But you wrote the story.

The pamphleteer nodded. I tried, he said. Believe me. I asked and asked. But no one would tell me.

Why not?

The pamphleteer shrugged as he swallowed. They said they'd rather not talk about it, he said.

The shop-owner's eyes glazed over as he imagined what the content might be. Then he shook his head. It must be terrible, he said.

What's that?

Their last words.

The pamphleteer nodded. I would guess so, yes. He wiped his mouth. What do you think you might say?

Me?

Yes.

I have no idea.

Surely, you have *some* idea.

The shop-owner shook his head, retrieved a broom leaning on the wall, and began to sweep the floor. What about you? he said.

The pamphleteer smiled. I prefer not to think about it, he said.

The pamphleteer's chewing was audible in the silence that followed.

Anyway, the shop-owner said. The plague will go away.

Do you think so?

We've been plagued before.

But not like this.

No, the shop-owner agreed. His voice was far away. Not like this.

The pamphleteer stood. I've been wondering, though, he said. Does this makes a difference, in the end? He raised a finger before continuing. Consider that the eventual outcome is death, regardless of the avenue of arrival. Of course, the avenue is painful, tragic even—paved as it is in the succumbing of the body to an outlandish set of attacks and, finally, a most unwanted series of revelations— but then it is over. Done. Gone.

What of those left behind?

They are always left behind.

But with the revelation rattling in their heads! In terror at the truth, they cannot bring themselves to tell a soul what they hear. Think of it, the shop-owner said, shaking his head. Not a single soul. They bury themselves, as if in a tomb.

Usually they die not long after.

The shop-owner shuddered. The pamphleteer noticed his face seemed even more flushed than before. He narrowed eyes. Yes, he thought. His sweating had worsened.

Perhaps they are better off, he said.

The shop-owner paused in his sweeping. Dead? he said.

The pamphleteer nodded. The shop-owner said nothing.

You think me cold, the pamphleteer said.

The shop owner nodded. What you say is not human.

But is it not natural?

What does it matter, natural or not? The question is whether it causes pain.

But pain too must die.

No, said the shop-owner. Pain lives. It lives and lives and lives.

Again, they were silent a moment, lost in thought. The pamphleteer looked at the shop-owner. The sweating had worsened and—he could not be certain— there appeared to be two pricks of black blood beading at the corner of his eyes.

I lied earlier, said the shop-owner.

What?

I have seen the plague, he said. My wife. Her friend. She died.

Where?

Over dinner, in our rooms.

Was it terrifying?

Yes, said the shop-owner.

What did she say?

The shop-owner stared at the pamphleteer horrified. He began to speak just as his limbs burst into twitching. He was no longer in control of himself. I must sing to successfully defecate! he shouted.

What? said the pamphleteer. He stood from the table.

I imagine diving beneath the skirts of women and exploring the joys I find there!

Yes, said the pamphleteer, backing away. But—

I have several times attempted to slit my wrists, but have been unable to find the courage!

The pamphleteer backed away quickly now as the shop-owner—blood slipping down his cheeks, his body convulsing—approached him. The pamphleteer found his back against a wall of cheese. The shop-owner grabbed him by the smock and pulled him close. His breath smelled acrid. The pamphleteer urinated himself.

I have no idea, the shop-owner said, annunciating each word slowly and carefully, what any of this means.

You're not alone, said the pamphleteer.

I am, said the shop-owner. Yes. I am. He pulled the pamphleteer closer. Are you?

Yes, said the pamphleteer, terrified. Yes.

Good, said the shop-owner, and fell dead to the floor, dragging the pamphleteer down with him.

The pamphleteer jumped up quickly and dusted off his smock. He looked around, worried that someone might have seen. But the shop was empty. Outside, he heard the carriages and people bustling past. The pamphleteer looked at the shop-owner's still twitching body. Then he looked at the shop. He could not remember now why he'd stopped in the first place. Distantly, as if it arrived by echo, he thought of the council session, but could no longer see the point. In the gathering dark, he returned to his rooms on foot, wandering past cafes and taverns loud with useless gaiety. Two days later he would kill himself. The officials who arrived shortly after would feel relief when they saw the noose. At last! they thought. Someone goes normally.

They would sing in unison as they lifted his body away.

CHAPTER VIII

(in which the assistant pursues Pizarro)

The days still short in early spring, it was approaching evening when the Governor's assistant slipped from a palace side-door into changing light. He allowed himself a moment to breathe (taking in the sun glowing above the mountains in the distance) before making his way down the wall toward the palace entrance. The road leading straight up the North Hill crested its peak at the palace gates before winding up through the palace grounds (trim green lawns sloping to high brick walls adorned with steel spikes), until the road turned circular and rounded a fountain, allowing carriages to pull up and deposit their occupants on the palace steps before rushing back down the North Hill again. It was here, turning the corner of the palace, that the assistant discovered a great tumult of activity: a press of councilmembers and their assistants milled on the steps near the entrance (already arguing over the minutiae of policy, though the session had yet to begin, their assistant's standing by clutching towering armfuls of parchments or otherwise holding the excessive hems of their councilmember's robes, which inevitably dragged behind like sinuous tails, threatening to trip any in their path), the whole mass of them observed by two taciturn guards standing on either side of towering oak doors, city flags alternately snapping and drooping from wall-mounts hung above their heads. Between and below the council-members, hordes of pamphleteers had gathered, raising their quills and parchments as they shouted out questions that went

unanswered, some rushing to greet a council-member as their carriage pulled up to the steps. And between them, rushing and winding and wending like fish in a crowded sea, palace workers (officials, laborers, soldiers, assistants, servants, the daily occupants filling the palace from its basements to its top-most floors) were leaving for the day, the higher ranked jostling for carriages while the lower ranked donned their hats and hung their heads to begin the long trudge down the North Hill. The scene was loud, sweaty and red-faced, marked by shouts, disagreements, the incessant screech and holler of the pamphleteer's inquisitions, the horses snorting and the carriages kicking up clouds of dust as they rounded the fountain, their drivers shouting for the crowd to part ways to let them through, which most, as any citizen of X would have, ignored.

The assistant, unnoticed by any in the madness before him, stepped to the elbow of one of the guards.

I'm looking for someone, said the assistant, and I wonder if you might help.

The guard waited for him to continue.

A conqueror, to be precise.

At this the guard's eyes lit up. A conqueror? he said.

Yes, said the assistant. Pizarro.

Who? said the guard.

Pizarro.

Never heard of him.

The assistant described him. Then, for good measure, he described the bodyguards and the priest too.

I thought he was dead.

He's not dead.

Pamphlets said he was dead.

The pamphlets are often wrong.

Not in my experience. Go back and look. They're right, even when they're wrong.

The assistant did not care to understand what the guard meant, but the man went on anyway. Look at them, he said, indicating the pamphleteers on the steps with a slight nod of his head. Little ciphers, he said. They see what we want to see and then they tell us what we wanted all along. And that becomes the truth, whether it's truthful or not. Do you see?

The assistant said he did not.

The guard shrugged. From across the entrance, the other guard chimed in.

Is he talking nonsense again?

I don't know, the assistant said.

Did he say something about the truth?

The assistant nodded.

The other guard nodded. He's talking nonsense then.

The first guard indicated the other with his thumb. He doesn't see either, he said.

But not many do. It's a thing you get used to.

What's that?

Being misunderstood, the guard said. I have many theories, you see. And they are very difficult to explain. Impossible, even. I'm not sure I've adequately explained anything in my life.

I understand you, said the assistant. I just disagree.

But the guard shook his head. That means you don't understand, he said. Which is too bad, but of course, I expect nothing less. As for your conqueror, I didn't see him. But I did see the bodyguards. They're standing by that carriage, over there.

The assistant followed the guard's finger to a gleaming black carriage, gilded with gold, idling at the edge of the crowd. Two yellow flags rose from the roof, fluttering in the wind, and on either side stood the bodyguards, the shorter seemingly asleep, swaying where he stood. At the lead, black horses, bored, snorted, stomped, and shook their manes. Above them, a thin, bloodless driver held the reins, his glassy eyes staring ahead at nothing. Looking at the driver, the assistant felt a cold creep up from his toes and flood him. He shuddered, then turned back to the guard.

Thank you, he said, and reached into his pocket to hand him a coin, but the guard held up his hand in refusal.

I'll tell you how you can repay me, he said.

How's that? the assistant said.

Think about it.

About what?

What I said.

The assistant opened his mouth to reply when he saw the bodyguard's open the carriage doors and slip inside. Holding his hands up in apology, he stepped into the crowd, pushing and shoving until he reached a carriage just loosed of its charge. Slipping silently between two bickering officials, he handed the driver a large purse of gold, and ordered him to follow Pizarro's carriage as soon it moved. Then he settled into his seat, intending to stare at the dark wood and think of nothing for as long as the moment lasted. But it did not last long. The assistant heard the whip-crack of his carriage and felt the wheels strain, then loosen. He patted his coat for his spyglass, and soon, (the curtains peeled back from the window, his spyglass slipped through the gap to better observe Pizarro's carriage ahead of him), he was rumbling in pursuit down the North Hill.

The stream of palace workers continued down the long slope and the assistant's carriage and Pizarro's ahead pressed their way through them, the assistant's driver occasionally hollering for a stubborn bunch to step out of his way (Pizarro's driver did not need to shout—it took one look from him and passers-by were off, dashing to the safety of the road's edges). The going was slow and after what felt like an eternity of descent, they reached the entrance to the city square. Here, Pizarro's carriage turned right, following the curve of the square to the road leading to the West End, where it again turned right, pressing through the evening's rush of bodies spilling through the streets toward the taverns and the cafes.

They turned right, and followed the main thoroughfare through the West End, before turning onto a side street, leaving behind the press and heat of the condensed

citizens of X. As the light fell, laborers (all of them hunched, brow-beaten men) began emerging to light the lamps. They passed them on each street, turning here, then there, winding past markets covering their wares, shops shuttering their doors, cafes and taverns opening theirs, and inns that seemed to exist in limbo, never opening, never closed. The first notes of the orchestra of night could be heard throughout the city: in the chatter and clink from the inns, in the squeals and shouts from the dance floors in the taverns. To the assistant, X seemed peaceful, in good spirits, perhaps even the same as he remembered, and yet there was malice in it, something sour, gathering... he inhaled deeply. In the changing air, he smelled wine uncorked and sloshing in the glass, smelled brine, smelled salt, smelled ash from forge fires recently extinguished, smelled rot, the stench of the slums, and the tang of something that resembled blood. It was nearly nightfall. He put away his spyglass and slipped his whole head from the carriage window, confident that the deepening darkness and the distance his driver had kept (a good man, he thought) would conceal him. But he found he could only see the vague outlines of the carriage ahead, and even those were rapidly slipping away. He wondered how the driver could see. He did not duck back inside (he was enjoying himself too much) and instead listened to the sounds of X breathing: shouts, sighs, laughter. The wind from the marshes swept over him. He tasted the sea. Twice, a child watched him pass. One of them waved and the Governor's assistant, moved, waved back.

It was as the assistant turned to stare with longing at the warm glow of an inn now filling with revelers intent on losing themselves in the moment (a fiddle tuning, the scattered claps that precede dancing like the first rumble of thunder) that he noticed a

woman in a drab brown dress and red headscarf running full speed alongside the carriage. He could hardly believe his eyes. She was not looking at him, but was instead staring straight ahead, running, it seemed, with some kind of intent.

He said something in a voice that seemed not his own (he could not remember what it was, perhaps excuse me? or what are you doing? or my fucking God) and at this the woman turned, revealing her eyes, which were bleeding, and her skin, which was bloomed with sweat. She looked desperate. She was younger than he'd thought. She stayed intent on the road and the assistant (he remembered this clearly) reached out to her, though why he could never say, and it was then she stopped, stopped cold, the assistant letting fly a little shout of surprise as the carriage whipped past her, her figure growing rapidly smaller as the carriage sped on. It was then that she spoke. I once... a... for the..., he heard her say, but her words were lost in the distance and the din from the inn. All of it faded. The carriage rushed ahead, his body still half out the window. He did not (or could not) blink.

What could she possibly have said? he thought.

And then he ducked back inside and leaned against the headboard, unable to think of anything else.

Then he remembered his pursuit and for a moment managed to push her from his thoughts. He returned to the window. Pizarro's carriage continued to wind through the West End, following the curves of the thoroughfares before finally (the assistant heard it and smelled it first, then, in the vague blue of the deepening darkness at last saw it)

clattering across a stone bridge arcing over the river, fat from winter's melt, the water's rushing steady and loud, heavy with salt and old snow, trash and debris. The assistant pulled his head back inside. If they'd crossed the river, this meant they approached the walls, which meant they approached the encampments and this, he knew, was where secrets lived. He leaned back out, expecting that they would soon leave the city, but was disappointed when Pizarro's carriage slowed and made a sharp left into an alley just short of the city wall. It halted and a moment after, so too did the assistant's carriage, stopping a few hundred paces from the alley's mouth. The assistant peered around. Here, deep in the West End, laborers were just reaching the lamps, walking in a steady rhythm, lighting one after the other, illuminating a quiet street much like the rest of the West End: a few shops, a forge, various rooms, and, some ways diagonally from the alley Pizarro's carriage had slipped into, a butcher, where, amongst the gutted pigs hook-hung and dripping blood, amongst various cuts staining the wood, a tall, thick, tow-headed woman was bent over a broom, illuminated by the pale orange of wall-torches, whistling to herself as she swept. The assistant could only just hear her. He handed the driver another purse of gold. Wait here, he said and then stepped onto the street.

He was forty paces from the alley when he saw Pizarro emerge a step or two into a length of shadow, only a sliver of his profile visible in the lamplight. He froze, but Pizarro seemed to have no intention of going any further, so the assistant (on tiptoe) pressed himself flat against the wall, and concealed himself in his own darkness. From here, he could see both Pizarro and the rest of the street.

He held his breath, and did not move.

At first, nothing seemed to happen. Pizarro remained standing and staring at the woman, who remained unaware she was being observed, lost, it seemed, in the pleasures of her work. The assistant's eyes began to hurt, and as the minutes passed, he wondered what he should be looking for. He decided perhaps he should look closer and, slipping his spyglass from his pocket, observed the woman plucking feathers from a limp pheasant. He watched her move, her hands especially, struck by the strength and delicacy with which she completed her work, and as she moved on to preparing a boar (shock-eyed, its tongue limp and lolled), he refocused his spyglass to get a better look at her. She was unusually stout, thick-limbed and tall, her long, flaxen hair ending just above her waist, and she had pale, olive eyes, and though the source of her attractiveness was not immediately obvious, the assistant did in fact find her beautiful, something he felt more than thought, his blood tide-swooned, lifted. The more he stood staring at her, the more he found himself captivated, so that when his head finally cleared and he removed the spyglass from his eye (blinking as he watched a young couple pass, arm in arm, briefly visible in a lamplight's bloom, dressed, perhaps, for a night at the theatre), he realized several minutes had passed and he had not moved at all. He looked at Pizarro. He remained in the same half-concealed, motionless position as before. He shook his head. He could not understand it. What power, he thought. And yet not of the conventional order... He returned to the spyglass. The boar's stomach was split and half its ribs were gone and now she was removing its innards, placing some in a bucket behind her, some in a bucket on the corner of her table. She continued to whistle. Blood streamed from the table to the floor. She was young, the assistant thought. And it seemed that the longer he

looked her, the more certain he was that a whole universe swirled behind the curtain of her body—the complexity that lurked there was difficult to fathom, but it seemed to the assistant that a man might long to explore such a landscape so that he could observe and indulge the many wonders that were surely housed there.

He looked to the alley's mouth and thought for a moment about Pizarro. Then he returned the spyglass to his eye. She was nearly finished the innards now. He followed her movements closely, lost somehow in the force of them. Every so often, she wiped the sweat clear from her forehead with the back of her blood-stained hand, and when a few strands of her hair fell from her scarf over her face, she blew them clear... He removed his spyglass and looked at his watch. Several minutes again. He looked to the alley. He looked to the woman. He looked back to the alley. He shook his head. A longing, he was sure, lurked in the shadows with Pizarro, along with who knows what else: the bevy of it, the assistant thought, the whole mad range of states, entwined inseparably, as if woven, like rope. His heart beat rapidly. Perhaps, he thought, the thing I've been waiting to see has been here all along. Why else do men stare from darkened alleys beneath the blanket of night? Yes, thought the assistant. Why else?

Just then, the butcher himself appeared from a door at the back of the shop. The assistant ducked back into shadow, and stared through the spyglass. The butcher was balding, his smock stained with old blood, and he was much older than the tow-headed woman and even looked a bit like her, so much so that he concluded the man was her father. The tow-headed woman paused in her work to allow the butcher to kiss her on the forehead. They spoke for a moment (the tow-headed woman smiling, placing her hand

on her father's shoulder), the conversation seemingly pleasant until the butcher began to insist on something, gesturing in frustration. The assistant could only make out the sounds of their voices, the pitch of each rising, the speed of their talk greatly increased. Based on her expression, the tow-headed woman seemed to disagree with the man: she was no longer smiling, and was now also gesturing in frustration. The butcher grew red in the face. He stamped his foot. The argument went on like this for a moment longer and then, as suddenly as it had begun, the butcher threw up his hands in disgust and disappeared through the door by which he'd entered. The door's slam echoed through the night. When he'd gone, the butcher's daughter hung her head and stared down at the half-dismantled boar, staying like this for several moments before taking a deep breath and returning to her work. When she finished with the boar, she began to wash up at a bucket behind her. She did not whistle. She did not smile. Then, when her arms and hands and face were mostly clear of blood, she extinguished the torches and quietly disappeared through the same door the butcher had appeared by.

The assistant set down his spyglass and turned in the direction of the alley mouth. For a moment, Pizarro remained still. The assistant sensed pain in the darkness. The street was silent. Elsewhere, lutes, stomped feet, laughter, fiddles racing headlong, the moon above a sliver, a dog barking, then cut short—the moment, it seemed to the assistant, hung there in perpetuity. And then it was over: Pizarro took three steps, reentered his carriage, and, whips cracking, the horses whinnying at the sudden change, the carriage was off, rushing toward the city walls and (the assistant was sure of it) toward the gypsy encampments. He stared at the carriage's receding back, rooted by shock where

he stood. A butcher's daughter... he thought. He glanced once more at the shop across the street and then, coming to his senses (Pizarro's carriage nearly invisible now), he leapt from the ground and rushed panting back to his carriage in wait. Onward! he said. But the driver did not move. He seemed to be asleep. Excuse me! said the assistant. Then he shouted it once, twice and when the driver started awake he found the assistant standing there, pointing down the street, ordering—no, imploring him—to follow.

CHAPTER IX

(in which the Governor's assistant finds himself in the gypsy encampments)

When they crossed the threshold dividing the city's West End from the marsh (the Governor's assistant—who'd never before been to the encampments—tap-tapping his knee), the carriage began to jostle, the bumps and jolts worsening the deeper they went. Ahead, Pizarro's carriage led on, winding through the tents, guided only by the moonlight pale on the marsh. The stink was unrelenting, but sweet too, mixed with wetland and open sea. Small children, scantily clothed, ran laughing and waving alongside them. The assistant closed his eyes and tried holding his breath, but the scent came through no matter what he did, and only got worse the further they went into the encampments, until at last Pizarro's carriage stopped near the rear edge of the encampments a few feet away from the mouth of a lonely tent, warm light spilling from the parted flap. Here, beyond the last tents, the marshes turned to grass, the grass to sand, and the sand into desert plain that stretched to the mountains, parallel to the sea. The assistant ordered his carriage to halt. In the sudden silence, he heard laughter, the tide, lovemaking, perhaps, or struggle.

He did not have to wait long. The carriage stilled, the doors swung open to reveal the bodyguards, who took up their positions beside the door. Pizarro, ducking his head, followed. Then, after seeming to sniff the air, he slipped into the tent and, with the haste

of a regular visitor, sealed the flap behind him. The assistant stood through the hole in his carriage-roof.

Did you see that? he asked the driver.

See what? the driver said.

That man, he said. With the helmet and armor. Did you see him?

I did.

What do you make of it?

What do you mean?

Why do you think he went in the tent?

Why does anyone go in the tents?

Well, said the assistant, suddenly embarrassed. What I mean is, if you had to guess...

I wouldn't dare, said the driver. But he's here all the time.

Who is?

Pizarro.

You know him? the assistant said.

Of course I know him.

The assistant asked him what else he knew.

He's been coming for months.

And?

And what? He comes and goes, just like everybody else.

You must hear things, the assistant said.

I do.

Well?

I'm disinclined to share.

Please.

The driver shook his head. He's a wounded man.

Wounded?

I've said too much already.

The assistant waited, and when the driver did not continue, he said: You are surely not the only driver with this information.

But I'm the only driver you know.

I can take other carriages.

So do so.

The assistant said nothing for a moment. The bodyguards remained at their posts, the tent sealed.

The assistant hesitated before asking his next question.

Have you ever been to one?

One what?

A tent.

Yes, said the driver. Of course.

Again, the assistant hesitated.

What? said the driver.

Do you mind...?

What? the driver said again.

Telling me...?

...what I went for?

The assistant nodded.

The driver shrugged. It was all very simple, he said. My wife had died.

The assistant opened and closed his mouth. That's very sad, he said.

In the end, it wasn't really, said the driver.

The assistant did not know what to say. Then why did you go? he asked.

Because I *felt* sad.

What's the difference?

The difference? The difference is everything. Everyone must die. And she died then. Nothing sad about it. As natural as air or birds or love.

But the ache you must have felt...

Yes, yes, the ache. The ache is living. It's as natural and as unremarkable.

Everything simply is and should be accepted as such. There is no use in bellyaching.

Is that what you did?

I bemoaned my fate quite loudly, yes. I was given several potions. They did nothing. Or something. I don't know. Eventually, I came to understand what I understand now.

Which is?

The driver turned in his seat to face him. Everything, he said, should be celebrated.

He grinned.

Celebrated? the assistant said.

The driver turned back around. Yes, he said. With candles. And joy.

The assistant was not sure he fully understood the man. And parades? he ventured.

Yes! Now you're getting somewhere. Parades celebrating the bleak insistence of death. And the equally bleak insistence of living. The two stumbling along, hand in hand, like lovers...

So the potions, then, the assistant said, thinking of his Governor.

Yes...?

They were ineffectual?

As I said, who knows? Perhaps they work for some. Or perhaps not. Perhaps they simply fool us. And again, I see no difference. I did, however, once stare into my soul.

And how was that?

Dull, predictable, banal.

The assistant thought he had never spoken to a stranger man. He could not think of a reply. And what did the soul resemble? he said finally.

Why it resembled you and me, the driver said, seemingly pleased the assistant had asked.

But the assistant's brows furrowed. How disturbing, he said.

How beautiful, corrected the driver.

The bodyguards shifted, their armor clanking lightly. The tent remained closed. The assistant returned his attention to the scene. I must get closer, he said.

Impossible, the driver said.

Why?

They'll know you're there.

How?

They know everything.

The assistant stared at him. He was beginning to find the man unpleasant. Will you stay here, if I go? he said.

The driver stared at him a moment, then shrugged, and nodded. Relieved, the assistant exited the carriage. The marsh was softer than he thought and he sunk into the muck before finding himself buoyed by harder earth. Here, on the ground, he felt light, buoyant, freed from the strange aura cast by the carriage driver. But the muck made his steps unsteady and he proceeded slowly, keeping his eye on the far tent housing Pizarro. His steps squelched. He approached this way, overstepping the heaps of refuse and decay, alternately holding his nose and inhaling experimentally, slipping between the tents until he reached the one Pizarro had disappeared into. It was warm, like a womb. On the cloth, he saw vague, unsteady shadows, heard a murmuring he could not understand, heard breathing, heard a droning—perhaps a kind of singing—heard the hiss of steam and the snap of cards, and tasted the oily smoke that, he decided, was perhaps the source of sweetness in the air, or perhaps the source of what was rotten in it.

He held very still.

But he heard nothing he understood. Pizarro did not seem to ask questions, though there were shifts in the tenor of the gypsy's murmuring, a seeming rhythm to whatever was transpiring inside that the assistant decided must be dictated by desire expressed, at the very least, through gesture (perhaps the lift of an eyebrow or—he was horrified as he imagined it—the simple sight of Pizarro's narrow visage stoic and tear-streaked) or (this seemed equally possible, given the circumstances) the unvoiced but undeniable vibrating of Pizarro's need. Or, the assistant thought, they had simply done it all before. Old hat. The same old tired thing. He, for one, could understand that. He was desperate to look inside the tent. But how? It was round, large, sprawling even, wrinkled copiously where it met the marsh, suggesting the cloth could be stretched to cover a much larger space. In X, it would comprise the area of a modest, but respectable room, though the sand and grass floor, the stench of shit not far off, might deter even the most desperate in X from habitation. He followed the curve of it until, past his leading shoulder, he could see the carriage, idle, and the bodyguards, the shorter dabbing the toe of his boot into the water pooled on the surface of the marsh. Here, the cloth was colder—the assistant guessed the fire burned closer to the opposite side and that there, Pizarro and the gypsy sat. He took two steps back, shielding himself further from the bodyguard's possible gaze. Beyond him, the land spread, open and dizzying. Then, crouching as silently as he could, he turned and slowly, delicately, lifted the cloth. Encouraged, he saw only more darkness. The smell was stronger now. He ducked under the cloth in one brisk movement, and found himself inside.

CHAPTER X

(in which the Governor prepares to address the council)

As evening fell, the Governor took to his desk, intending to take a note or two on the shape of his speech. At first, he'd thought he would take the assistant's advice and simply tell the council the truth: yes, there was a plague afoot, no, there seemed to be no cure, yes, the officials intended to quarantine, no, there was no other way, yes, it had already been ordered, no, they could not stop it, yes, they were somewhat certain that the quarantines would be effective in slowing the spread of the disease. And then (at first) he'd thought he would follow this by announcing Pizarro, erasing the unpleasantness of the whole plague business with the revelation of the conqueror's pursuit, imagining a triumphant shout and the blast of a bugle as he spoke the words, though after replaying the scene of triumph several times in his mind it soured and he began to see that this would not work, that there would be no bursts of bright sound but only the dark rumble of disturbance and horror: so rattled and roused would the council be by worry at the plague that the glory of Pizarro's journey would be lost in all the noise. What point would the council see in Pizarro traveling? What use was treasure and glory in a time like this?

Feeling defeated at these questions, he took to his bath, where he lay supine, staring at the ceiling, and wondering why anyone ever chose him to lead anything. He turned to the assistant for reassurance, and nearly started when he found the room empty. He'd forgotten the man was gone. He opened and closed his mouth. Through the

curtains, the sky was changing, the sun a slowly shrinking orb above the ridgeline in the distance. Faintly, he heard the sounds of early evening revel, and thought (as he had done many times before) that in a different life he might be there, amongst the people, laughing and shouting and enjoying his sweet slice of the brief pleasures life offered, little distractions from the tired truth of it all, moments of forgetting oneself so completely as to act and act solely, unquestioningly speaking and smiling and dancing and drinking and kissing and fucking with the abandon of a free man, loosed on life's rapid waters but believing them to be steady, glass, calm. He felt a pang of envy, and then he missed the assistant and wondered whether the assistant missed him too, whether he too passed the inns and felt such embarrassing vulnerabilities and then (his thoughts suddenly turning), he realized the assistant most certainly did not miss him, not like this, and he felt angry, angry at the assistant for a betrayal he could not shape or name, but that took hold of his heart and clouded his eyes so that he now gazed at the world on behalf of a new truth of which he was the author, unaware that anything had changed.

It hurt to think that he needed someone so desperately. So he did not think about it. Soon, he fell asleep.

He was awoken by a knock at the door, then a shouting of his name. His chambers were shadowed and through the curtains he saw the deep glow of a dying evening. He sat up, cold bathwater, the consistency somehow thicker than before, rippling around him.

The knocking persisted. Governor? cried a nasally voice. Governor! Goddamnit all to hell. Governor!

There was a muttering, as if the voice was speaking to itself. The fucking fool, it said. He's made the council wait.

The Governor's mind snapped to attention. Coming! he shouted.

His mind reeling with panic, he dashed to his dresser, lit a candle, dried himself, and dressed. He could hardly button his smock and nearly put the wrong shoe on the wrong foot twice. When he was finally dressed, he took stock of himself in the mirror, smoothing down his hair. He looked disheveled, like a doll battered by its owner. He still had no plan for the speech. Again and again in his dreams he had announced the journey and again and again the council had consumed him with the glee of cannibals and when he thought of standing on the lectern now he could conjure no shouts, no bugles, but only a howling in which the mass of bodies stared and stared and stared, and let out shout after shout after shout.

The knocking and the shouting were louder now. He hastened to don his Governor's robes (nearly tripping on the tail twice) before finally dashing to the door.

When he opened it, he nearly fainted with rage.

Are you deaf? said the head medical official. I've been knocking for minutes.

The Governor stared at him. Why you? he said. Why not anyone else? Why not the head accounting official, or the head sanitation official, or the head port official? Or why not simply these two? The Governor pointed to the two diminutive men who stood droopy and silent, ready to hoist the robe hems.

You're unnecessary, he said, and frankly, I'm not very happy to see you.

The official narrowed his eyes at him.

You look ill.

It was true. The Governor was pale and trembling, and he felt as if he might vomit right then and there.

I've never been better, he said.

Well then come on, come on, the official said, gesturing toward the lamp lit palace halls. The council grows impatient. If you wait any longer, you'll find a hostile crowd.

The Governor did not move. Hostile? he whispered.

Shh, said the official. Listen.

Far off, somewhere along the labyrinthine halls, the Governor thought he heard the sounds of angry speech coming from the council chambers.

They are very worried about this plague business. I hope you have a doozy prepared.

The Governor swallowed. It's a showstopper, he said.

Well then?

But still, the Governor did not move. He needed the assistant. Why had ever sent the man away? Yes, he said, Yes, right away. He began to chew his nails. I'm right behind you, he said. I'll catch up. I'm on my way.

CHAPTER XI

(in which the assistant overhears a thing or two)

Muffled darkness, strange shapes, the air stifling, the smells heady, Pizarro and the gypsy briefly visible. The assistant hid himself behind the first object he spotted, which (after a moment of hesitant touching, his eyes adjusting to the dimness of the tent), he discovered was a pile of vibrantly colored cloth and beads. He held what he hoped was perfectly still. The indistinct murmuring continued, the oily smoke thicker and stronger. He could taste it, even without opening his mouth. He began to salivate.

Working up his courage (every possible outcome of his ill-planned decision to sneak closer spiraling through his vibrating mind), he peaked one eye around the cloth pile to observe the gypsy and Pizarro. The conqueror sat with his back to him in the middle of the tent, perhaps ten feet away, while the gypsy sat opposite him—middle-aged, the assistant guessed, though, he thought, with these maddening people who knew. She had a thin mouth and a thin nose and large ears from which hung tin hoops holding bits of light cast from the fire. She was clothed in a multitude of fabric so voluminous and so brightly colored the assistant thought she might be her own light source. The tent's contents spread out around them: more piles of rich fabric, appearing, to the assistant, like gathered liquid. Lamps along the beams. Stuffed birds, bones, the head of a deer, blood-rung and decaying, jars with eyes, pigs feet, teeth, tongues, bits of tin, copper, gold, silver, iron, rope, string, twine, silk, yarn, beads, smoke rising in tendrils everywhere he

looked. He returned his gaze to the gypsy. Her eyes were closed and her legs were crossed and she was indeed muttering, though to Pizarro or to herself, the assistant could not tell. Pizarro's sword lay in its scabbard by his side, his hand resting on his hilt. He held perfectly still.

Briefly, and without meaning to, the Governor's assistant peered over the edge of himself into the madcap tumult of the various warring, contradictory, burdensome states which, he was surprised to see, were threatening to burst from the containers in which he had so carefully placed them. He sensed something very intoxicating in the gypsy's murmur and it occurred to him that, without protest, he might sit here and listen to her for a very long time.

He fought back the terrifying urge to sneeze.

It was then that the gypsy's eyes opened and her muttering ceased. Pizarro stirred, and both he and the gypsy shifted and stretched as if waking from a deep reverie. Then the gypsy smiled, revealing black gums and a lack of teeth. Pizarro cleared his throat.

So, the gypsy said.

Yes, said Pizarro.

You've come with further questions?

They are the same questions as before.

Then you will receive the same answers. Unless you'd prefer I lie to you...?

Most things are preferable to the truth.

Not so, not so, she said. Yet I can understand why you feel that way. The truth, in your case, is very painful.

It is beyond pain.

Pain, the gypsy said, has no boundaries. She turned to retrieve a pot and two clay mugs that sat behind her. Tea? she said. Pizarro shook his head and watched as the gypsy poured some for herself. Steam rose between them.

What burdens you, she said, returning the pot to its place, is that this particular truth has so upset your carefully calculated worldview that you now wonder at the purpose in living.

I've wondered at that for some time.

And yet perhaps you found your purpose, briefly, in her.

Pizarro said nothing.

These things are difficult to discuss, the gypsy said.

I've come here many times searching for answers, Pizarro said. And I believe all I've found is a pile of platitudes, half-truths, and outright lies.

I'm sorry you feel that way.

I'd like my gold back.

I've spent it, she said. And besides: you would receive precisely the same answers in every tent across the marsh.

So you are all useless.

She shrugged. We simply tell the truth.

The truth, he said.

Yes, she said. She pointed to the crystal ball between them. As this sees it.

The assistant, forgetting himself, leaned out to better see. He felt a hunger gnawing at him, but for what, he could not tell.

This, said Pizarro, is the most useless of all.

You do not like what it reveals. This does not make it useless.

I would like to know why she left, Pizarro said.

I have told you.

What you've told me is not possible.

This is precisely what I mean, the gypsy said. The answer does not fit your worldview, so you dismiss it. You'll forgive me if I pronounce this foolishness. In behaving this way, you invite a most magnificent shipwreck of self.

But I know she loves me, Pizarro said.

The crystal says no.

Then I dismiss the crystal.

Yet you return, again and again.

I hurt, Pizarro said. Very badly.

This much is clear.

Pizarro stood. And yet who knows why I return, he said. You've dangled every promise of relief in front of my eyes and I, famished, have followed every one to failure. And yet, here I am, attempting to traverse the wide earth on your word. Why? Why do I trust you? Your potions are useless, your concoctions vile—

—I have given you my best—

—the progress halting, the intent unclear—

—baseless accusations, the gypsy said, shaking her head, baseless indeed—

—and your insight as murkily lit as my own. He stared at her. Why am I here?

You want the map, she said.

The Governor's assistant leaned further toward the fire and nearly took the fabric pile with him. Hastily, he leaned back.

I do, Pizarro said. Very much so, I do.

Do you have the gold?

Not yet, Pizarro said. I've encountered some... difficulties. But nothing that cannot be circumvented. He paused. But I still want the map.

That was not our deal.

So I've changed the deal.

No one will be changing anything, she said.

I was promised.

As was I.

Pizarro began to pace, waving his sword dangerously, nearly knocking the lamps from the worn beams overhead. The gypsy, her mouth set, followed him with her eyes.

Again and again, I've come to you, he said, and again and again, I spin my wheels like a wagon stuck in the infernal muck of these infernal marshes on which you and your pathetic, God-forgotten kind writhe and rot. I have prostrated myself before you for no gain and have allowed you to profit from my embarrassment. I would like to know my efforts have not been for nothing. I will pay you, you have my word. But I would like the map and I would like it now.

The gypsy said nothing and, with a gesture resembling reluctance and fatigue, Pizarro reached to his scabbard and drew his sword. He leveled the point at the gypsy.

You might imagine what happens next, he said.

The gypsy blinked twice.

Surely you don't think I'm stupid enough to give you this for nothing. Even with you waving that thing around.

Pizarro did not lower his sword.

And surely, the gypsy said, her voice slower now, you're not stupid enough to murder the only person who can help you.

Pizarro hesitated, then lowered his sword. At least let me see it, he said.

There was a moment of silence.

No, the gypsy said at last. But I will, out of the goodness of my heart, give you a clue.

I don't want a clue.

That's too bad, she said, because I'm giving you one anyway. Are you ready?

Pizarro said nothing. The assistant leaned forward, listening.

The cure that you seek, the gypsy said, is beyond the mountains in a valley in a city, just as I live and breathe here now. Beyond that neither I nor the map can say. A mysterious landscape, she said, shaking her head. I suspect it perpetually consumes and rebirths itself for its own cruel amusement...

Pizarro shook his head. More proof, he said.

What? she said.

Uselessness. He indicated the breadth of the tent. You proffer uselessness.

Fine, she said, think what you want. But you have no other choice.

You've said this before.

And I will say it again. And again. And then once more.

I would like to expect everything.

Then you would be better off dead.

I'm glad someone else agrees.

You trust me.

Nobody trusts you.

She smiled. And that is precisely why you do. She tapped the crystal ball. After all, she said, I've seen it.

Pizarro stared at her. Wonderful, he said. That damned hunk of devilry pursues me to the end.

And then he sheathed his sword and turned to leave, pausing just before the tent mouth. He looked at the gypsy. She remained smiling at him. He did not smile back.

It's been a pleasure, she said.

He stared at her for a moment, his face unchanging.

No, he said. It hasn't.

And then he was gone, the tent flap swaying in his wake.

The assistant did not move. He listened. He heard the clanking of his scabbard. Then he heard Pizarro step inside the carriage. Then he heard the bodyguards follow.

And then he heard the crack of the whips, heard the carriage pull away, heard a wolves' howl, heard a bird's rustle, heard a baby's cry, and still, still he remained.

You can come out now, the gypsy said.

The Governor's assistant did not move.

You, she said. Her voice was soft, inviting. There, behind the cloth, she said.

Come on out.

The assistant, brushing off his smock front and smoothing his hair, emerged and bowed so deeply his head nearly touched the floor. He had no idea what he was doing and was disturbed when the gypsy began to laugh. What was that for? she said.

How did you know? he said.

She narrowed her eyes. I think you know how I know.

Your power is something I respect and fear greatly, he said.

Finally, she said. Someone who speaks the truth.

I must go, the assistant said.

Stay, she said.

I couldn't, the assistant said.

I'm very affordable, she said.

I have nothing to give you.

A sample, then, she said.

Impossible.

Why?

I don't know.

Do you fear me?

Of course.

Then surely, you fear yourself.

The assistant stared at her stupidly. He was peering over the edge of himself again and the maw, pinpricked with stars, was peering right back. He felt vertigo rise from his toes and rush upwards. He would rather die. Die! The Governor was waiting. And the shame! He could never tell the Governor and yet he would have tell the Governor—

He stopped. The gypsy was waving for him to sit down. Come now, she said. She smiled. Stay awhile. Open a vein.

He continued to stare at her as, outside, the night winds flew past. The moon was fading. Everywhere, everyone would soon be asleep.

He thought of the Governor. He thought of the woman alongside the carriage. Then, trembling, he sat.

(MEANWHILE...)

...in the merchant district, a seller of shoes awoke to his wife screaming in a puddle of her own sweat. What ails you? he said, lifting her into his arms and carrying her to a bucket of water. Her eyes were milky-white and rolled back into her head and in the corners he saw beads of black. He reached the water-bucket, lay her down, and wetting a rag, began to dab at her forehead, singing lullabies he remembered from his youth. He sang:

Death is coming, its coming

Death is coming for you

But don't you ever worry

For Death runs away too

He wondered if perhaps the words were inappropriately morbid, given the circumstances. It then occurred to him his wife was lost somewhere in the maze of her mind and heard nothing. She was muttering. He placed his ear to her twitching lips and listened.

I'm not finished, she said.

I know, he said.

I've always loved you.

Yes.

But there was another woman.

What?

I loved her too.

I don't understand.

She was my true love.

Why are you telling me?

She reared her head back. She was so much better than you! she cried.

Why? he said, nearly dropping her. Why are you telling me?

You must know!

But I don't want to know!

I have so much more to tell.

Please, her husband begged. Please.

Oh! she said, as if lost in a memory made real. Oh my! _____! My sweet, dear
_____!

The name she shouted was not her husband's. He stared at her in disbelief. And then she was dead and quivering like a leaf in his arms.

The shoe-seller, understandably, felt very ill. He stared at his wife's face for some time, stared even as it began to bloat, even as she twitched, on and on and on. He was thinking that perhaps life is a series of mistakes that one does not realize they are making until it is far too late. Either that, he thought, or it goes exactly as planned. He decided it made no difference. What a useless drubbing, he thought. What a tired, terrible trial.

What a goddamned crock in a goddamned useless world filled with pathetic, sniveling—

He would die the next day, in the merchant district at high noon, having shouted for all to hear that he had experimented with a pig in his youth. He wept blood, his fellow

merchants backing away. He was not ashamed, he said, the last emotion he ever felt an overwhelming swelling of pride—he regretted nothing, he said, not even a little bit.

CHAPTER XII

(in which the Governor and his assistant exchange news)

The council session had long ended when the assistant (exhausted, his legs like kicked stilts) returned to the Governor's chambers to find the Governor in the bath, his feet propped above the surface of the water, his hands resting behind his head, a contemplative pose that, unusually, betrayed nothing about the Governor's mood. The assistant knew his news would please the Governor: they wanted to nab the man and they had. Yet the assistant could think of nothing but the gypsy and her hot-mouthed tent, what he had left there and what he had taken away. He was beat, spent, scraped clean like a gourd. He reached the edge of the Governor's tub without realizing he had.

What's the matter with you? the Governor said. He thought the man looked ill, and instantly he was anxious for the news he carried.

What? said the assistant. I'm fine.

The Governor sat up in the bath and narrowed his eyes. You've got the plague, he said.

What?

The plague! he cried. The devil be damned, you've got it!

I have no such thing, he said.

Tell me a lie.

The assistant froze, his mind reeling. I ate roast lamb for breakfast, he said.

The Governor smiled, and sat back in the bath. You despise lamb, he said, and therefore do not have the plague. Now. News. Do you have it?

Yes, his assistant said. He was breathing again, if only slightly. He'd thought the Governor had seen through him, could smell the gypsy's tent on his person, stuck in his clothes or in his hair, or perhaps (this thought was worse) that the magnitude of what he'd done was written like a sentence in his eyes, waiting there for the Governor to read it. He'd ordered the carriage to stop and in his haste and panic had washed himself in the river, while the driver had looked on, a bemused look on his face. What? the assistant had asked him angrily when he'd returned to the carriage, to which the driver had said nothing, only that he seemed to be going through a lot of trouble to hide something that was plainly true and probably (he said) the source of all his woes.

The assistant had not cared to think about what the driver meant by that.

And you?

Copious news, he said. Copious news.

Good, I hope?

The Governor looked at him wildly, his face somewhere between joy and terror. I have no idea! He grabbed the assistant's smock and pulled him closer. I have done something extraordinary, the Governor said.

What?

You first.

But I am anxious.

As am I.

I cannot go first.

Why not?

I am not prepared.

But it just happened to you.

The assistant's voice began to rise. I must compose myself, he said.

To what end?

I need to breathe. Then eat. Then breathe again. Wait. Only breathing! Where is the air in this place?

You speak nonsense. What ever happened—

A gypsy! he shouted. He went to a gypsy!

The Governor released him and sat back. A gypsy? he said.

The assistant told him everything. He told him about the butcher's daughter and the encampments, and the tent and the gypsy and the map.

He did not, however, tell him about what happened after.

When he was finished the Governor rose from the bath as if entranced and, nude and dripping, began to waddle the chamber's middle, muttering to himself, softly at first, then louder and still louder. Wonderful, his assistant made out finally, simply wonderful. Then the Governor began to laugh. Wonderful! he shouted. He turned to his assistant.

You are a very brave man, the Governor said.

Well, the assistant said.

It is no easy task to stomach a gypsy.

The assistant nodded in agreement.

You deserve medals much larger than natural laws will allow.

Ashamed, the assistant looked at his boots and thought again of what he had said in the smoke-thick dark. I labor simply to labor, he said.

The Governor returned to his bath, sank down to his neck, and clasped his hands below his chin. He had several questions.

This woman, he said. Who was she?

The assistant shrugged. I have no idea. The simple daughter of a simple butcher.

And yet you say Pizarro is in love with her?

It appears that way.

And he's visited the gypsy many times?

If his own word is to be believed.

Did you see the map?

No.

But you say he seeks a cure?

The gypsy said so, yes. The assistant paused. This must have been what he meant when he said he was looking for something...

The Governor rapped his knuckles briefly on the side of the tub. He was unsure what to make of this news, in light of the council session. He needs money, he said.

Yes.

Our money.

The assistant nodded. The Governor tapped his fingers together contemplatively. Well, he began. He stopped. How wonderful it was to have the assistant back. His anger seemed distant, like a dream. He asked his next question without thinking.

What do you propose we do?

Shaking his head, the assistant took a deep breath. He had the rest of his life ahead of him to consider what the gypsy had told him, but what he really wished to do was return to his rooms and quietly die.

It's clear he needs the money as badly as we need him, he said. So we refuse his proposal, and demand the parade as ransom for acceptance.

Parades, corrected the Governor.

Parades, his assistant repeated.

And if he refuses?

Threaten to reveal his secrets to the pamphlets. This would ruin him completely. No one will fund a journey based on a map proffered by a gypsy, especially not one for a washed-up conqueror who wishes everything to remain a secret. We hold the power to reveal everything.

The Governor nodded. It is an emergency now.

It was an emergency before.

Yes, said the Governor. But now...

The assistant was suspicious. What happened with the council? he said.

The Governor hesitated. The council?

Yes, his assistant said. Did they accept?

The Governor was suddenly embarrassed. Now that it was time to share his news, it seemed clear that perhaps he had not done something so remarkable after all.

Yes, the Governor said quickly. They did.

You seem uncertain.

You are mistaken.

What's wrong?

The Governor looked at him indignantly. Wrong? he said. Nothing.

You're lying.

How dare you. I hide nothing.

But of course, he did. His bowels contracted, then released as he thought of the council session. He looked down, worried he'd soiled the tub.

His assistant leaned forward.

The Governor stared at him, opening and closing his mouth. Then, imagining himself flattened by a runaway carriage, he pushed himself up. Well, he began.

Yes? said his assistant.

But the Governor said nothing, memories of the council-session passing like a wind through his mind. He appeared stricken, his eyes pale and bloodshot, and the assistant had to force himself to look away, so strong was his desire to reach out and comfort the man.

He thought again of the gypsy.

So I've made myself clear, the Governor said at last, imagining he'd spoken aloud.

But you've said nothing.

Surely you understand.

How could I possibly...? said his assistant.

I lied to them.

What?

A teensy lie, he said.

How?

How what?

How did you lie to them?

The Governor hesitated. I told them there was a conqueror...

Yes? said his assistant.

Who would travel in search of the cure.

The cure?

For the plague, the Governor said. He was sheepish. Then he was proud. He waited for his assistant's exclamation of approval.

But where? his assistant said. And how? What evidence did you offer?

Books, said the Governor.

Which books?

The Governor waved his hand dismissively. That is hardly the point, he said.

The assistant fought back his mortification. What is the point? he said.

Hope, the Governor said. He began to laugh. Hope is the cure.

But hope is not the cure, said his assistant. There is no cure. There never has been.

But don't you see? he said. It's moot! Hope will save me. And them. And me. He smiled. Us. It will save all of us.

The assistant shook his head. Surely, the council saw through this, he said.

But the Governor sat up and gripped his assistant's arm. The council loved it, he said.

His assistant stared into the Governor's boy-wide eyes. Loved it?

The Governor shrugged. They do not believe the plague will destroy X.

But surely, the head medical official told them...

A pox on the head medical official! He is a sniveling sack of lies, a drummer-upper of hasty and misplaced fears. The council knows this. Think of him! Always barging in here, with this fact and that figure. The council distrusts the officials. Some wish in private to execute them summarily.

But forty-four more died today, his assistant said. He removed a pamphlet from his smock, and handed it to the Governor, who read it quickly.

He returned it dismissively. What is forty-four, precisely? he said.

A large number. And if those numbers continue...

You forget the quarantines.

The assistant thought of the night raids and his heart shriveled at the thought of telling the Governor. He swallowed. This is assuming we can gather all the afflicted, he said.

And why not?

It is a tall task.

And we are a taller city. The council has offered their full cooperation. After I confirmed the rumors that the plague had entered the North Hill, agreement was unanimous: the plague cannot be allowed anywhere near the palace. And as for Pizarro, you continue to miss the point entirely. Listen. The Governor sat up. The council believes the officials lie, and the officials believe the council are fools while, as usual, the public is terrified. We let the council proceed as they will and let the officials proceed as *they* will while we offer everyone hope they can believe in. This buys us time. We throw parades. We weather the storm. The plague will eventually leave, as all plagues do. And if Pizarro returns empty-handed before the plague has left, we'll hang him in the square. Then the public vents its anger. And we're right back where we started. But in the meantime...

... in the meantime...

...they suckle at the teat of the possibility of a miracle that I, singlehandedly, have handed them. Everyone is placated. The officials have their schemes, the council their reassurances, and the public has Pizarro. And it is I who fund Pizarro's brave search for the cure, he said. It is I who leads the parade. And it is I who avoids their damned wrath, their torches, their admonishing glares and wagging fingers; I who will sleep soundly, dreamlessly, without guilt or second-thought so long as there are no loud knocks at the palace doors and no shouts tossed from far below calling for my head. And it is, finally, I who will take credit for saving them, or destroying his failure. Either way, they will love me.

The assistant opened and closed his mouth.

They need hope, the Governor said. And he is mine, my gift to them.

The council, the assistant said. They accepted that it is Pizarro who will journey?

They could not remember him at first...

And then...?

I reminded them. I explained that he'd reformed and that he was thrilled to save the city. Now the work is to sway the public.

They want the cure. *Your* cure.

Precisely.

And you think the public will believe Pizarro can find it? In time? To save them?

The last plague lasted three years. And the one before that five. We have plenty of time. Besides: where else would we look? Across the sea and in the unknown of faraway lands seems as good a place as any for a cure to hide. But in truth, we will do what we have always done: cross our fingers, and wait.

He paused, struck suddenly by a thought. Perhaps it's a good thing Pizarro's already looking for one, he said. It'll be easier for him to pretend...

Perhaps, the assistant said cautiously. But he is so strange, so unpredictable...

But the Governor was not listening. He had come to his final revelation. He hesitated before he began. I've had an idea, he said finally. It's a modest idea, something simple, perhaps you would like to think it over.

He stared at the assistant. I would like to attempt something never attempted before, he said.

The assistant waited.

I would like to... How might I put this? *Weave a total narrative*. Reports, weekly, as fast as we can get them. Every minute detail of the journey published in the pamphlets. We will not only follow Pizarro. We will not only follow the search. We will become Pizarro. We will inhabit the search. But not the real Pizarro. Or the real search. Both of these we must invent. Still, for the sake of the illusion, we must send someone along, a messenger, or a kind of spy perhaps, yes, a spy...

The assistant stared at him uncomprehending. The Governor smiled. Pigeons, he said.

Pigeons?

Pigeons, the Governor repeated. His grin widened. Is it not brilliant? Is it not wonderfully beyond all comprehension?

Still, the assistant stared. He was certain the Governor had gone mad.

But a pigeon—

That bookshelf over there, the Governor said, pointing across the room. The assistant turned. Grab the orange bound folio, the Governor said.

Mystified, the assistant did as he was told. He read the spine. *Philosophical Transactions*, it said. *A Summation of the Knowledge Housed on this Modest and Often Difficult Sphere*.

Turn to the final ten pages.

The assistant did so.

Now read the section title aloud, please.

The assistant looked at the Governor from across the room. He was sat up in the tub and looking at him encouragingly. The assistant looked back down. And this is what he read:

A Minor Dissertation on the Long Distance Communicative Uses of the Common Pigeon, Never Heretofore Considered by Any Learned Man of Science, Occult or Otherwise, but to be Argued as an Overlooked Aspect of Daily Pigeon Practice.

It explains how, the Governor said, watching the assistant's eyes track across the page. Or seems to. I only read the title. He cleared his throat, fighting back a brief wave of embarrassment. I was hoping you might read the rest, he said.

Blankly, the assistant nodded. He could hardly believe it. He had never before seen the book. It felt wonderful in his hands. He began to skim. Written by an alchemist and a partner in a wild country across the sea, a doctor who'd settled there and had studied amongst the shamans. The article was old. Seemingly forgotten. The spine on the book was battered and bent.

He could not wait to dive in.

And then, all at once, several nagging questions presented themselves to him. They emerged as an unfortunately timed statement. Pizarro will never accept this, he said.

What? said the Governor. He seemed to shrink, retreat into himself.

I'm sorry, said the assistant, stepping forward. He still held the book. The idea is brilliant. Perhaps you're best.

He hesitated, then pressed on.

But think of it, he said. Pizarro can hardly stomach the idea of a parade.

Parades.

Parades, the assistant said. And now you wish to make every inch of the journey public. He hesitated before he spoke again, for he could not believe it was on the tip of his tongue, but then there it was, out in the open.

You risk destroying our gains with this plan, he said. Think of it: first we have proposed a journey to the council we have not yet secured, a journey whose true nature and purpose are far from our promises, and now we aim to turn it into a spectacle beyond historical precedent.

But we will lie.

The assistant stopped. Yes. Well.

And why we would tell Pizarro of the pigeons at all?

He'll see them coming and going.

So we pretend they are personal. Between us.

But if this is true, the assistant said, holding up the book, they will pour in like never before. He will wonder at their volume.

The Governor stared at the assistant. He opened and closed his mouth. He blinked, his small eyes wet and narrowed. Then, he hung his head and stayed that way for some time.

The assistant crossed the room, his shoulders slumped. What had he done? The Governor appeared to him shattered, the pieces strewn...

Of course, this challenge can be circumvented, he said.

The Governor's head remained hung. He did not reply. The assistant's mind reeled. He was desperate to fix the damage he'd done and yet...

You are a right, he said, hating himself. You are absolutely right.

The Governor sniffled. I don't follow, he said.

We will hide the pigeons under our hat, the assistant said. But we send someone along...

A spy?

No... An ambassador... Yes! An ambassador. For the city of X. Appointed by you.

And this person, he will be in charge of the pigeons?

Precisely. Official business of the city. Standard archival work. Nothing tricky about it.

It is not the worst idea...

Then you have your narrative. And Pizarro has the illusion of his secrecy. Of course, this ambassador must be someone you can trust entirely.

The Governor nodded, and wiped his nose. Slowly, color returned to his cheeks.

I will compose a list of candidates immediately, the Governor said.

The assistant nodded. And naturally, he said, my name will be first on the list.

Immediately, he wished to rope the words back into his mouth. Why? he thought, cursing himself silently. Why do I ever speak? He wished to go nowhere, nowhere at all. He planned to die in X, not on a ship, in a jungle, tumbling into the mouth of a spewing volcano...

Only if you would like, of course, he hastened to add.

But it was too late. The Governor had already heard him. He had hardly considered the idea before the brilliance of what the assistant suggested seemed clear to him. He would not think about the weight of the assistant's absence, nor would he be convinced that the assistant had premeditated it until much later. For now, he could only see his plan crawling toward the light. It was nearly there. He could almost see it breathe.

He smiled.

Of course, he said. Perhaps I won't need a list after all.

And then, a sudden hope flooding him, he reached below the desk, and offered up a bottle of port. It seemed he had triumphed, or nearly so, and now it was time to celebrate. The council had accepted everything, down to the last drop, and now the work was to wait and see. He said all of this to his assistant who nodded, and smiled weakly.

The Governor uncorked the bottle. Well then what are waiting for? he said. He was eager to forget, forget everything and everyone all at once.

The assistant nodded, but he could no longer concentrate. The Governor poured again and again. He drank his port, but did not taste it, drank until together they were drunk as dockhands and singing songs from their youth. Not even then could the assistant get her words out of his mind. *You coddle him*, she'd said. *You're the bassinet*.

(MEANWHILE...)

The clink of glass, a fiddle warming.

Night raids?

Yes, yes, so I heard.

Is it really so bad?

That's what they say.

Who's they?

The pamphlets, people, everybody.

But what do they know?

Things. They know things.

I want evidence.

The rumors are the evidence.

That makes no sense to me.

Makes perfect sense to me.

What else have you heard?

Plague doctors.

Plague doctors?

Plague doctors, too.

Seems like the whole city's gone mad.

Well. Not yet. But it will, of course. It will.

Silence. Laughter, shouts, a string snapping on the fiddle. Curses from the band.

Do you remember the last raids? In the plague of shit?

Yes. I lost a cousin.

And I lost an uncle. And an aunt. A grandmother. A third cousin. A half-brother.

And a nephew, a little baby, just born... We said never again.

We always say never again.

But the terror...

Just the way of things.

That's just it, in your view? The way of things? All to be accepted, all fine and dandy?

What else is there to do?

Protest. Demand better.

I'm not sure there's much better to be demanded...

There's always better to be demanded.

Progress is an illusion.

Progress is how we measure time.

We go in circles. Round and round and round...

You just don't want to invest the charade.

It's true. I don't want to invest in the charade.

How nice for you.

How necessary.

Necessary?

Necessary.

Truthful...?

Yes. Truthful.

Another moment of silence.

Has it occurred to you that you might have it?

Have what?

The plague.

I always tell the truth.

You're sweating.

It's warm in here.

It's not so warm.

It's a little warm.

How are your eyes? The pamphlets said don't forget the eyes.

My eyes feel fine.

The band beginning, tavern-goers spilling to the dance floor.

When are the raids supposed to start?

Who knows? The rumors are never that specific.

Well I guess we'll find out then.

Find out what?

Whether you should expect to die.

But I already do.

I meant soon.

It might be soon.

What do you think you'll shout?

I'm planning to keep my mouth shut.

Shut?

Shut.

Good luck.

What about you?

I can't tell you that. If I could, I wouldn't have to shout it.

You could just say it now. Get the whole thing over with.

Why don't you?

I don't have anything to shout.

Everyone has something to shout.

Not me.

You're impossible.

Two men fighting in the corner over the last dregs of a port glass...

You heard about this Pizarro business?

A bit, yes. There's talk of a journey?

That's what I've heard.

Good. We need something at a time like this. Something to lose ourselves in.

You'd think we could just solve the plague.

That's a fool's errand.

You could say that about any pursuit.

And it's true. It's always true.

Are you sure you're not sweating?

Yes, yes, I'm sure.

Barkeep! Barkeep! Yes. Over here. Is he sweating?

Yes. No. I don't know.

Look at his eyes.

Eyes look fine.

But he's telling the truth.

Lots of people tell the truth.

Especially these days?

Oh. Oh, I see. How are you feeling?

I feel fine.

Do you feel like you're going to die?

I don't think so, no.

Well if you're going to do it, do it outside.

I'll do my best.

I'm warning you. Don't die in here. Bad for business.

I understand.

I mean it. Outside.

Ok, I said, ok.

The barkeep walking away, the band louder and raucous now.

I'm going to dance.

Fine, fine.

You're not coming?

I don't much feel like dancing.

You love dancing.

I know.

Then why not? Why not dance?

I don't know, said the man with the plague. I just don't feel like it.

CHAPTER XIII

(in which Pizarro is as opaque as ever)

The next morning, the Governor rose late, but cheerful, and in between mouthfuls of lamb stew and more port, dictated a pigeon to his assistant explaining to Pizarro that the game was up: the Governor knew his secret and unless he wanted the pamphlets aware he was consorting, gold in his palms, with the gypsies—and thus all hope of his journey dashed—he must acquiesce to the parades and, further—without, the Governor made certain to add, sarcasm, irony, or bitterness—act as if his journey were a noble search for the cure to the plague, and not the shameful pot-shot search for a useless gypsy cure it would sadly remain. Satisfied, he took to his bath to wait for the reply, requesting that the assistant read the morning pamphlets aloud to him. It was another crystalline day: bright sun, open sky, winds to remind one of their flesh, their muscle, their bones—their very *livingness*—and that same wind crept into the chambers through the curtains on the balcony, infecting the Governor, who seemed so pleased with everything as to be hardly able to contain himself. He was still riding the high of the council-session, unable to concentrate, interrupting the reading repeatedly with little giggles, and though the assistant was growing impatient (he still thought he was celebrating much too soon), he felt he could not complain: the Governor was taking the headlines much better than usual, and the mood (jovial, light) acted as a buffer against every terrible thought that had the previous night rushed through the assistant's mind. He had hardly slept at all, but

now here, in the chambers, the light from the city below where the pamphlets would later report eighty-three more died that day, including four children, and two more residents of the North Hill, he forced himself to be light-hearted and quick to laugh, too, and for a moment was able to forget about the gypsy's tent, and the night raids (which he had not remembered until this morning, the realization nearly pushing him back to bed), the whole mass of it draped heavy as a curtain over his heart.

But only for a moment.

Sixty-seven died yesterday, he reported, scanning the headlines. He adjusted his glasses and peered closer.

Bah, said the Governor. Do they say anything about me?

Mmm... his assistant flipped through them. The usual. It is all unpleasant to hear.

The Governor nodded, as if satisfied. Then it should not be heard, he said.

They have reported the council session, the assistant continued, but it seems they have only reported the session. Yes, he said, adjusting his glasses. Simply the existence of a session. Each pamphlet speculates differently as to what this might mean, but all of them believe it is connected to the plague.

Fine, said the Governor, fine...

There is a great deal of rampant speculation.

When isn't there?

About the plague, I mean. One pamphlet even speculates the gypsy's are responsible.

Better them than me...

The assistant scanned further. There are reports that the city of Y is building an addendum to their already massive Governor's palace...

Who cares? Boastful twits, is what I say...

... and that it is to be composed of pure gold. Though this strikes me as a rumor, he said, adjusting his spectacles.

Regardless, said the Governor, they are a collection of fools and I care not for—

Oh, his assistant said.

What is it? the Governor said, opening one eye.

Nothing, his assistant said.

You saw something, said the Governor. Both eyes were open now.

No, said the assistant. I simply exclaimed.

The Governor narrowed his eyes. You exclaimed *at* something, he said.

It was only a headline.

What *kind* of headline?

His assistant wanted to, but could not begin. It seems...

The Governor sat up, gripping the edges of the tub. What? he said. What what what?

It seems that news of Pizarro has leaked, he said. They cite unnamed sources claiming that you plan to fund Pizarro's journey in search of the cure.

The Governor's tongue turned to lead. He swallowed slowly. I see, he said. And what is their opinion of this development?

It's difficult to say, the assistant said slowly. He was fighting back panic of his own. He reread the story for clues. They seem to have no opinion, he said finally. No opinion at all.

The Governor requested that the pamphlet be passed to him and, reluctantly, the assistant did so. He braced himself for the wail. But instead, placing the monocle to his eye, the Governor read it quickly. Then he read it again. Then, silently, he returned the pamphlet.

Is it bad? he said.

The assistant hesitated. But he did not answer. We have secured nothing, he said, then reread the opening of the story. But they have no evidence, he said. Perhaps the public—

He stopped short, thinking of his conversation with the palace guard yesterday afternoon.

Perhaps what?

Nothing, said the assistant. We should not be worried about the public. We must worry about Pizarro.

Who cares about him?

He will see what you have done.

And?

But do you not see? The driver called him wounded. He stares at women from dark alleyways at nights. He hides his true intentions, and plans to journey on behalf of a cure a gypsy has promised him. It's as if he wants to disappear.

The assistant stood for a moment tapping his foot. Then he began to pace.

When he sees this, he will not be happy.

The Governor began to bite his nails. What do we do? he said.

It all depends on what he reads first, the assistant said, not hearing him. If it's the blackmail, he'll think us hasty, but perhaps will remain within our grasp. But if it's the headlines? He shook his head. He might run. He might hide. We might never see him again.

And then he turned and saw the Governor's face. He will acquiesce, of course, he added quickly. He must eventually see we are the only way.

The words were simple, automatic. He saw the Governor's face lift.

Yes, said the Governor, nodding slowly. He began to sink down in the bath again.

And if he doesn't, the assistant continued, now at the point of being sick with himself on the Governor's floor, you can hang the pamphleteer who wrote it.

He looked down at his shoes. Libel, perhaps, he said. Or poor taste.

When he looked up again, the Governor was nodding, the relief of the fiction made all too easy.

And besides, he added, this begins the hope a moment earlier. He closed his eyes, and folded his hands beneath his chin. The assistant exhaled. They had passed through it.

Yes, the Governor continued, yes. And not a moment too soon it seems! The death toll rises and the quarantines will soon begin... We might think of all this as a little insurance against the ire the plague continues to foment. He turned to the assistant, eager for confirmation. Might we?

The assistant stared at him, hardly breathing. The sudden need to tell him of the night raids seized him and did not let go. It seemed now or never. He rushed to convince himself. What could it hurt, he thought? It was only one more thing. And were they any worse than the plague or the quarantines themselves? Surely the citizens and the council (if they could conceivably agree to quarantines) could accept that they would need to be filled *somehow*, the most reasonable among them maybe even accepting that the night raids were the most efficient and therefore most desirable means by which to do so. But then the assistant remembered the last plague that affected the city (this one causing the bowels to run freely until there was nothing left of their body or soul), and then he thought (as any citizen of X would have) of his own cousin and aunt and uncle ripped from their beds in the house next door to his own, the assistant (his mother's hands only partially shielding his eyes) watching from his front stoop as soldiers with scarves tied over their mouths dragged them kicking and screaming to be taken outside the city and loaded onto ships which were guided out to open, dreary sea, and set aflame, those tasked with this business rowing away in lifeboats, the burning ships shrinking in the distance until they only heard the screams of those on board as the fire swallowed them up and the sea took them under.

The assistant swallowed. He closed his eyes. He would have to tell him. To have left it so long had already doomed him to a fate far worse.

We might, he said. He waited a moment and then spoke again. There is something, he said, and thus began his tiptoe onto the thin ice of the impossible—

But the Governor cut him off.

Not now, he said, raising his hand. I've had enough of the pamphlets for one day. So they are dying. So it worsens. So our secret is out. We have one goal and one goal only: to secure Pizarro. All else is moot.

Then he closed his eyes and, to the assistant's horror, fell straight to sleep.

Finding himself with nothing to do and needing to distract himself from his growing worry (a pitched, insistent sound that he heard both far off and very near), the assistant busied himself by perusing *Philosophical Transactions*, reading various articles before finally arriving at the dissertation assigned to him by the Governor. He decided it was a pleasant day to read in the sun, and so, taking the folio with him, settled himself on the balcony. On the sea, fishing boats, miniature in the distance, hauled up their nets, their teeming contents glinting silver in the sun. Smoke rose from the clustered darkness of the port slums, and low white clouds hung over the mountains and the valleys beyond them, pale and opaque in the sun. If he had not known better, the assistant would have said the city was peaceful, the same as ever and under no duress at all. He found it hard to imagine people suffering the symptoms the head medical official had described on such a day, much less shouting out truths. And yet he knew it was likely that somewhere far below a man was sitting straight up in bed and—

He stopped himself. In the end, he was simply glad he was not there to see it.

Then he reread the title (*A Minor Dissertation on the Long Distance Communicative Uses of the Common Pigeon, Never Heretofore Considered by Any Learned Man of Science, Occult or Otherwise, but to be Argued as an Overlooked Aspect of Daily Pigeon Practice*) and as soon as he did so the

excitement he had felt the previous day when the Governor had introduced the idea turned sour. *You're truth is your creation.* The gypsy had said this, too, though he did not understand it. It had rung in his mind the whole way back from the encampments, rung as he stared into the inns and the taverns and the cafes and longed to lose himself, rung as he rushed to balance the Governor, rung as they'd drunk port, rung as he reached his room and shut the door wearily behind him, rung as he stood without removing his coat, rung as he finally undressed, rung as he lay in the cold dark, rung right into his dreams, which were wild and bloodless and made with wind and ice, and even now, after all that ringing, he still did not understand, not fully, though he knew now just as he'd known undressing in the pale light of a stubby candle over his cold straw in his cramped chambers that what the Governor and himself convinced themselves they hoped for was perhaps more complicated than they wished to believe, and that they had failed to consider (or rather had been unable to bring themselves to consider) the truth of the situation, which themselves composed a litany of the ways they might fail. Might already have failed. Might be doomed to fail again.

For a moment this truth gripped him as if there was nothing else in the world, and then it was gone, lost to the ether. He was simply on the balcony, and the Governor was asleep in the bath. It was any other day. And yet why, why did nothing look the same?

He shook his head, preparing himself to be disappointed. Pigeons over the sea? The idea was preposterous.

With this in mind, he began to read.

The treatise began innocently enough, arguing that, while others had explored the possibilities of long distance communication by way of the common pigeon, none had suggested an effective and practical method for doing so. The purpose of this particular dissertation, the authors wrote, was to present a case of possibility by combining aspects of occult and alchemical practice with the precepts argued by natural science. They warned the reader that skepticism would haunt them as they read. They too had been skeptical, and yet they urged the reader to give the case they presented a fair hearing, and encouraged them to continue to read as they took them through their own process of banishing their doubts.

So they knew I was coming, the assistant thought. He read on.

The next section turned to a summation of daily pigeon practice, which the dissertation explained (and as the assistant, like any a citizen of X, was already well aware) was principally for short-distance communication between various entities within a small, shared geographical space: they offered the city as the primary example, for it was in cities that the use of pigeons for daily communication was born. Long had it been believed by scholars living in the city that, because of the necessity of food and water, the inevitability of fatigue, the unpredictability of the elements, the gargantuan nature of the task of navigation such a monotonous space presented (here describing the sea as a liquid desert), that it was simply impossible to send a pigeon over a truly great distance, though many had suggested it and yearned for it (sailors, soldiers, merchants, lovers left yearning; the list went on), impossible still that the message would arrive on time, let alone reliably, let alone intact, let alone in the right place. And then there was the question of habit:

users of pigeons (again, principally city-dwellers) were used to a certain expediency associated with pigeons, and the idea that its uses might be reduced to a context in which they would receive their messages erratically, unpredictably, or perhaps not at all, would violate the contract between people and pigeon to such a degree that the public might cease using them entirely.

The assistant paused just as a pigeon happened to flit past. The problem struck him as intractable. Confirmation of his doubts that the Governor had found a miraculous and yet overlooked discovery in the sciences seized him, and he felt foolish that he'd let his excitement get the best of him. They'd known he was coming, and now they'd tricked him, he thought.

But, once again, the dissertation seemed to anticipate his thoughts. Describing in detail how, after reading the various other folios, dissertations, and theses attempting to solve the problem, they too had come away possessing the nearly insurmountable doubt they alluded to their introduction, the authors then described their experience of approaching the problem as one of an overabundance of variables. They began with the idea of reduction. What if, they asked, they approached each variable alone and in this way could reduce them to their minimum possible number? Could this solve the problem presented by long-distance communication?

They began with food. It had long been known among scholars of the occult (of which the man across the sea was, having dedicated his life to this pursuit) that the gypsy's used a crushed root of a flower to subvert the need for hunger (the partner across the sea, like many on his ship, was carrying some with him for the purposes of his lengthy

journey), and the authors discovered (after some horrifically, and at times, the assistant thought, even comically failed experiments—once, even causing a pigeon to inexplicably grow fur), that a miniscule amount of this powder made it possible for a common pigeon to go two full weeks without food with no visible ill effects. Thirst they solved in the same way (the gypsy's again, a different plant, this time a stem of a common flower soaked in wine then burned to fragrant ash). This left distance, the elements, and time. The middle of the three the author's dismissed as an impossible to reduce variable—unless a person were God or devised a way to sit in his place and pull his pulleys and levers, pigeons (like people) would remain victims of the fickle, vengeful habits of the weather. Distance and time, however, we're a different story, and here the author's turned to the task of wrestling these slippery beasts under their control.

Not noticing the faint screams of an afflicted streaking through the city square (a woman, in only a tattered, sheer robe, her hair gripped in handfuls) and the two soldiers pursuing her, the assistant, enraptured, turned the page.

The authors began with distance. By abolishing the needs of hunger and thirst, the authors described how they could then focus on the problem of fatigue. This was solved easily enough, and by providing a stimulant, the author's found that a pigeon flew between them with ease, arriving remarkably unworn, not at all hungry or interested in the water offered to them—there was even, the authors suggested, a touch of pride about the pigeons, as if they were refusing the water out of a sense of duty. Anticipating the objections that no pigeon could fly such a distance without some ill effects, the authors admitted that of course, at times, their feathers were a bit ruffled from a storm or two,

and yes, they might have lost a bit their beak or perhaps their foot, but that the conditions were always acceptable when considered against what was gained. Even better, by offering this stimulant, they seemed to have solved the problem of time: not only did the pigeons travel between them reliably, when combining the three powders in the doses prescribed before each journey, the authors found, much to their delight, that the pigeons arrived invariably in one week.

One week. The assistant could hardly contain himself. Could it be true? He wished to the test the hypothesis immediately and rushed to the dissertation's end, scanning the list of ingredients...

It was then that the assistant discovered the problem.

The stimulant, it seemed, was derived from a root found only in the country across the sea, meaning (the author's noted this sadly in a parenthetical aside contextualizing the ingredients) that any pigeon intended for long-distance, trans-sea uses would have to *begin* there, carrying with it on it's first journey a small pouch of the powder for use by the man on the receiving end. The author's admitted this was a hindrance to the practice of long-distance communication being incorporated into daily life as they so modestly envisioned, but that they were working to produce this powder for sale in as large of batches as possible. The assistant scanned the date. The dissertation was over fifty years old. If the powder was in production, the assistant had never heard of it.

It was in the midst of these distracted reflections on how best to solve this problem and capitalize on the mad brilliance suggested to be possible by the dissertation that the assistant was interrupted by Pizarro's pigeon fluttering like a drunk to its place on the

balcony's ledge. It stood there pathetically, its head cocked toward the assistant, who rose automatically, his feet not quite anchored in the world, the exhalations of the city below him coming to him as if he were underwater. He did not see the soldiers tying the women up and dragging her away. He did not see her kicking and screaming, and he did not see the citizens gathered in the square staring and pointing and covering their mouths while they backed away.

Quickly, he untied the note from its leg, and feeling sorry once again for its appearance of poor health, raised his hand to the blue of the sky and watched the bird rise left, then right, then disappear over the palace roof.

Over the sea, he thought, still marveling at the article as he watched the pigeon go. And in one week's time! His doubts from the night now seemed distant, even foolish: damn that gypsy, and her pronouncements. How could he have ever let himself believe them? This idea held more than water. And yet that damned powder! And yet there was a way out of it, just as there was a way out of everything. The Governor would be elated. Perhaps he could tell him first of the night raids, then of the pigeons... But there was no time now. He cut the parchment free from its twine and unrolled the note, his mind spinning, anxious to see with what news he would be forced to wake the Governor.

CHAPTER XIV

(in which the Governor receives some disturbing news)

Dear Governor, the assistant read. *That you've resorted to blackmail strikes me as unfortunate—*
you seem not to understand how vital my journey is for your (by which I mean our) eternal predicament. I
already travel in search of the cure. It is one you yourself (by which I mean we) happen to seek.

The assistant reread the note twice. He blinked. Whatever did it mean? Did he say yes, or no? Did he answer the question at all? He did not mention the headlines, though this did not mean he had not read them. The assistant looked between the note and the sleeping Governor. This was sure to displease him, sure to strike him as... how might he put it? Another of Pizarro's infernal riddles. But the assistant knew he must. He trembled.

They lived their traumas together. The gypsy had revealed this to him too, and he had no idea what to do with any of it.

Governor, said the assistant, softly at first, then louder. He repeated it. Still, the Governor did not stir. He took a deep breath.

Governor! he shouted, and at this the Governor leapt up, sending water everywhere, so surprising the assistant that he let out a little yelp for which he was immediately embarrassed and for which, now wet, he flushed right to the roots of his white hair, and covered his mouth.

The Governor gripped the edges of the tub and stared at him with crazed eyes.

My dream, he said.

The assistant uncovered his mouth. What happened?

The Governor sank back into the bath wearily and rubbed his eyes. I dreamt that I spoke to them.

Who? Who?

The people, he said. I spoke to the people.

And what did you say?

I don't remember. It was unpleasant. I found it unpleasant, that is. And yes, he said, holding his forehead as if remembering caused him pain, oh yes, they found it to be unpleasant too. They hated the news, in fact.

He turned, clearly shaken by the dream. They ate me alive, he said.

The assistant (not knowing what to say) responded dumbly by handing the Governor the note. The wail, he thought as he did so, was now inevitable.

Looking at the assistant with concern, the Governor donned his monocle and read it quickly. But he did not wail. Instead, requesting his robe, he began to pace his chambers.

But what does it mean? he said.

His assistant shrugged. I don't know. He seems to sidestep... well, everything.

But how? How is it possible to speak in such way? It is empty, meaningless!

Perhaps he is not afraid.

The Governor stared at him in disbelief. But we threaten to sink his whole enterprise! he said. He shook his head. Something is wrong with the man. He plays by an invented, hidden set of rules. He attempts to force me, I attempt to force him, now what? He seems to refuse, but does not withdraw. And then on and on about this silly cure—what could he possibly mean?

He turned to the assistant. What has the gypsy promised him?

The assistant stared at him, the image of Pizarro with his eyes closed beside the gypsy's perfumed fire frozen in his mind.

But why should I even care? the Governor said before the assistant could reply. The man is an armor-clad fool, a nitwit, a stubborn washed up child. He paused, panting. I am unperturbed, he said, hesitant at first. Then he repeated it with force. Yes, he said. I remain unperturbed. He turned to his assistant and smiled, a smile so genuine, so hopeful, that the assistant felt his heart threaten to give way and shatter.

Let us try again, he said.

So they did. *Dear Pizarro*, the second pigeon began. *I have composed a letter to the pamphlets revealing your schemes, alongside letters to the Governors of Y and Z. If you do not comply, these will be pigeoned immediately. The choice is yours.*

Regards, the Governor.

P.S. Do not forget the butcher's daughter.

They'd argued over the postscript, the assistant saying it was too soon, too much, too criminal, while the Governor insisted there was no either way, it was an emergency, they were desperate, and at last overrode him, a part of him (though he was not aware of

it) surely wishing to prove that he did not need the assistant as much as everyone seemed to think he did. The Governor had never felt so forceful in his life. He handed the assistant the note, who (wishing he had not backed down) stepped onto the balcony, lifted his hand, and watched it fly away with lead heavy in his heart.

But, as soon as the Governor was forced to wait, this unnatural burst of hope gave way to his usual doubts, and he soon found himself agitated and uncertain, sunk deep into the recesses of his bath. The whole problem simply vexed him. Never before had he dealt with such a peculiar man. He seemed to insist on speaking in riddles, as if this way of speaking was most natural and comfortable to him. The Governor did not understand a word of it, and yet he could not help but be intrigued by all that nonsense too: what cure? And why was Pizarro so certain that this cure was something the Governor needed too?

What was worse, the Governor no longer felt he had the man cornered. He had gone to bed the night before, drunk and full, certain he was about to collect the treasure of his maneuverings ten-fold, and now here he lay once again, back to the start, still unsteady in the pit of himself, as if he could not get his heart and brain to align. How, even from afar, could Pizarro torture him so? He'd known many foils in his life (the head medical official chief among them) but none so alluring so horrid so fascinating yet so perplexing as the lanky armored man who'd strode into his chambers the day before. He wanted very badly to bap him on his shiny steel helmet and watch the plume tremble. He wanted to reveal the shrunken body surely hidden under that skin of armor. He wanted to rub his nose in it.

And yet here he lay, in the thick of his own nervous stink. Waiting, he thought. Waiting and waiting and waiting...

In the midst of these thoughts, he once again fell asleep.

Pizarro's reply arrived an hour later. The assistant brought it to the bath, where the Governor remained dozing.

It's as if, the Governor grumbled as he unfolded the note, the man is watching my habits, so he may time his jabs and pinpricks, his little slow killings, *appropriately*...

His breath came short as he read the note: *Dear Governor, it said. What is worthy? Who defines it? And where does it go when stacked up against the finality of death? Mere idle conjectures of a hobbled old mind, of course. And the cure? It is the only cure. The single cure. It is all we adventurers will ever need. Regards, P.*

P.S. Do not forget I will kill you.

The Governor slapped the water. What a fool! he shouted.

He is mule-like, said his assistant.

He is beyond reason, he said, and sunk deeper into his bath. Even when I have the power, I don't have the power.

He ripped Pizarro's note to shreds and let the pieces fall and when he turned to the assistant his eyes were open and pleading again and the assistant felt a pang of sympathy he wanted no part of once more rise from deep within him and settle in the nook of his chest.

This note is even less intelligible than the last, the Governor said. Clearly, he fears nothing.

Unless he is bluffing.

Do you think so?

Or else he sees that we are bluffing.

We are?

Do you truly intend to ruin your only chance at funding a conqueror by revealing his reliance on a gypsy?

This is why we needed the possibility of kidnapping, the Governor began.

There was a knock at the door.

I don't care who it is, the Governor said. Tell them I'm dead.

The assistant crossed the room and opened it to once again find the head medical official standing there. The assistant was not sure (given the current state of things) whether to be mortified or relieved. He was leaning against the door, his face pale, his eyes red with what appeared to be exhaustion.

You look terrible, he said.

I've been up all night, the official replied, and slipped past the assistant through the door as if he belonged there.

Why? cried the Governor when he saw him approach, why? He put his hands and began to wave them, as if to ward the official off. You have this knack, he said, of arriving at the most inopportune of moments, as if by the design of God himself you were placed

on this earth to ruin me. He stopped waving and stared up at him when the official reached the tub.

I have never more despised a person, he said.

The feeling is mutual, the official said. I have news.

I hate news.

It is good news.

The events of recent days leads me to believe such a thing does not exist.

The official opened his mouth in annoyance and then closed it again. The quarantines, he said finally. The quarantines are complete.

The Governor sat up. He'd forgotten, forgotten completely. The quarantines, he said. Yes, of course. Take a seat, he said, gesturing to the stool.

But the official did not sit. He pointed to the balcony. If you'll join me, he said, I'll show you.

When the Governor was dressed, the three men parted the curtains and stepped to the ledge. The Governor removed his spyglass, propped his elbows, and stared down at the city below, the head medical official and the assistant each joining him at an elbow, each with their spyglass to their eye. There, said the official. And there. At each entrance to the square you'll find them. When I said complete I meant three of four. But the West End is nearly finished. Look there.

Together, the assistant and the Governor trained their spyglasses on the main road where the West End and the city square met, and indeed, there was a cube, not

quite complete, surrounded by oak scaffolding from which laborers, hammers aloft, hung. Below them, other laborers hoisted massive wood frames housing four equally massive panes of glass above their heads while still others wandered through the scene, various tools in hand, seemingly without purpose. Small handfuls of citizens gathered around them, staring up at the laborers curiously. They turned to one another and pointed, shaking their heads. Not one of them seemed to understand what they were looking at, much less (the assistant imagined) could they guess at the purpose of the strange construction that towered above them. But the assistant could. The four panes in the frame formed a wall, and the four walls were joined at the corners to form the cube. He moved his spyglass to the other three completed quarantines and indeed, it was true: there were three perfect glass cubes marking the entrances to the city square. Anyone walking between the four districts (and at the busy hours, this would mean nearly every citizen in the city) would see the quarantines. Soon they would be filled with the bodies of the afflicted, but for now, they sat there like gems, inevitable, as if they'd been there all along.

It is a house of windows, said the assistant.

The official nodded. A glass cube, he said, as ordered. The idea has received much discussion in the official's halls. He cleared his throat. It pains me to admit this, but your solution is being heralded as brilliant.

Not hearing him, the Governor straightened. Suddenly he smelled coffee, rich, almost burnt. He removed his spyglass and looked up. The clouds appeared to be breaking up and slipping away. He felt the first breath of pure sun warm his cheek. He

returned to the spyglass. They were exactly what he'd imagined: little houses of silence, glistening, blue silence...

How many can it hold? he said.

Hundreds, said the official. Perhaps thousands, if we stack them.

Stack them? the assistant said.

They die so quickly, explained the official, I suspect we will need a full-time duty posted at each cube to deal with the corpses. We'll probably have to pile them in the marshes. Perhaps burn them... He shook his head wearily. A messy business, he said. But we do what we must. If you are in the cube, it is of course far too late for you. A little stacking, if it is rendered necessary, cannot hurt.

When will they be completed? the Governor said.

This evening. We plan to begin the—

But the assistant hissed and cut him short. He turned wildly, but the Governor remained with his elbows propped on the ledge, gazing into his spyglass, whispering to himself like a child.

The official gazed at him with amusement. It seemed impossible that the man had been such a fool and yet...

Have you...? he began, but the assistant waved his arms frantically for silence.

So you haven't, he said and smiled. Then, for reasons he chose not to examine, he decided to toy with them.

The Governor stood straight and returned his spyglass to his pocket. They are, he said, and truly, there is no other way to say this—they are very beautiful.

The official nodded, though in fact was not listening, but was instead looking between the assistant and the Governor with a bemused look, so pleased was he at the pickle between the two men, his composure suggesting to the Governor in a vague way that instantly made him uneasy (he found himself suddenly and briefly transported to the infinite reservoir of pain that was his childhood) that the official had a secret he did not plan to tell, and was, in fact, maliciously keeping it from him.

What? he said. His smile left his face. What is it?

Nothing, said the official, feigning innocence. The assistant glared at him and when the Governor turned, hoping for an explanation, and saw this, he knew he was truly betrayed and his panic worsened.

What is it? he said angrily. I demand to know.

It is nothing.

Tell me.

Really, I think it is best that you do not know. Or at least, he said smiling, this is what your assistant thinks.

The Governor wheeled on his assistant: What have you done? he said. His voice was somewhere between angry and pleading. How could you consort with this man?

I did not, the assistant began, but hung his head. He could not finish.

He does not consort with me, the official said. He consorts with you.

The Governor wheeled back on the official. There was venom in his voice. I do not understand what you mean, he said. Now. It's an order. Out with it.

The official stared at the Governor as if he had struck him. He blinked twice. I was only wondering what your opinion was of the night raids, he said.

And upon hearing these words, the Governor's entire body went cold. Night raids? he said.

Yes, said the official very seriously. He felt himself intoxicated with the pain he knew he was causing and he could not stop himself. The night raids, he said. To gather the afflicted.

The Governor turned to his assistant who stared back in utter dismay. He'd tried to trust the man, and here he was, betrayed again. He turned back to the official. He felt his bowels twist and writhe into a knot that seemed as if it would be there forever. Whatever do you plan to do? he said.

The official detailed the plan with a terseness he meant as cruel.

But history! the Governor said, when he was finished. Memories, cruel and unkind. He placed his hand to his head. The poor people, he said. The poor, poor people. I must sit down. And water. And air. Oh my, he said, as the assistant (who did so automatically) lead him by the elbow to the chair. When the Governor was stable, he rushed to fetch water and a fan and when he returned, he found the Governor still sitting with his head hung, almost wheezing, early signs, the assistant knew, of the mongooseian wail. The official stood staring at the city, pretending to pay no attention to the Governor at all. The assistant handed the Governor his water and for a moment the two men were silent, the assistant fanning the Governor, who, trembling, took short sips from the cup of water.

You knew about this, he said finally.

The assistant stared at him, but did not stop fanning. What could he say? Slowly, he nodded.

The Governor turned to him. Why? he said. Why did you not tell me? You let me lie to the council. And now the public! Whatever can I tell them in time? Once the night raids begin, the hope will be too late.

The assistant looked down. For the first time in his life, he felt he understood a broken heart.

I am ruined, the Governor said.

No, the assistant said.

They will destroy me.

No, the assistant repeated. Panic began to rise in his chest.

How? How will they not?

There is Pizarro...

But we don't have him!

But the parades...

There are no parades!

But the hope...

But there is no hope! We've lost it, let it go. The Governor stood and began to pace. His breath came faster now, wheezing, trembling, wheezing, trembling, and the assistant knew it was near.

No, said the assistant, no. He had to do something, something instant, something drastic, it was his fault, all his fault, and all at once he began to shout.

Think of it! he cried. Nothing has changed, nothing has changed! He spoke as if a man possessed. Pizarro is still the hope, he said. He is still the hope!

They will come, the Governor said, not hearing him, they will beat down the doors, they will bear torches, knives, pitchforks—they will gather with their voices and their shouts which will become one voice and one shout—

Stop! the assistant cried at last. Stop stop stop!

The Governor gazed at him in horror.

It does not matter, the assistant cried, his arms wide. It does not matter at all.

And then he placed his hands on his shoulders and looked deep into the Governor. The terrain of the man stretched away, endless and weather-beaten. You have no choice, he said quietly. They are coming for your head no matter what you do.

The official (who had turned and been listening the whole time) nodded casually, as if the moment were as banal as any other. He is right, he said. It is the public's essential nature that they should desire your head. You can think of it as a delicate dance—

But the assistant interrupted him. You! he shouted. He stepped toward the official. You, he repeated. Shut up. This is your fault, your doing, your responsibility. You torture him for no purpose other than to mend your own wounds.

The official stared at him slack-jawed.

And look at you! He reached out and plucked the official's smock. Impeccably dressed, all groomed, and combed through, and yet you are as pockmarked as anyone else. You think we cannot see it, but we can see it. He leaned into the official's face. *We can see it*, he said.

Then he stepped back. Below, the laborers hammered the last nails into the fourth and final quarantine. The work was done. The city was set for its transformation. On the balcony, all was silent.

Well, the official said at last. He turned to the Governor. He seems to call us out.

He speaks the truth, the Governor said softly.

Yes, said the official, turning to the assistant. He does.

The assistant saw the two men staring at him and his heart began to beat very quickly.

Surely, he began. He took a step backward, then another.

Surely nothing, said the official. No one is above suspicion.

And so this is what it will be? the assistant said. At last, a man speaks his mind and you will take him away and throw him into the cube to rot and waste on simple suspicion?

The official shrugged. We cannot be too careful, he said.

The assistant turned to the Governor and perhaps, he would think later, he was pleading with him, the scene replaying his mind as he sat alone in his rooms with the wind howling outside the window, listening to the clank of the soldier's armor and the pounding of their boots in unison as they flooded the city.

I ate roast lamb for breakfast, he said softly.

But the Governor did not hear him, lost instead in feeling everything, everything all at once. He was betrayed, yet protected, and yet still the man had changed, the man he had known, the man he had relied on, his limb, his organ: surely these had made to bend to his will; surely they could not change that of which they were inseparably a part. And yet could he have expected otherwise? Again and again he had asked his assistant for advice and comfort, and again and again the man had provided it in such heaping multitudes that for the first time in his life the Governor saw himself indebted, so burdened by the necessity of gratitude that he could never repay (he saw it clearly before him, as if it lived and breathed) that he began to lose his breath, as if he were choking. It was painful to consider it, just as painful as it had been before, and now as then his mind gathered together to jail it, swallow the key.

And then all at once, he was angry. He began to sweat and grow red in the face. The assistant mistook it for evidence that the mongooseian wail was rising, and rushed to the Governor's side.

Do not begin this now, he whispered. He pointed back towards the official. He is nothing. He is less than nothing. He is the dirt on the heel of a gypsy slipper—

The Governor turned to him and so haunted was the look in his eyes that the assistant immediately ceased speaking.

I wish you would go away, the Governor said. He hung his head. Perhaps, he said quietly, it's best that you be ambassador after all.

The assistant stared at the Governor in astonishment, and as soon as the words were out, the Governor felt a pang in his heart that he thought might never leave. He wanted to take it back. But he did not know how.

You've hurt me, he said.

I know, said the assistant.

Why?

The assistant said nothing.

The Governor turned to the official who remained gazing out over the city. When will the raids begin? he asked.

Tonight.

And they will be as before?

There is no other way.

We will gather as many as we can identify.

And when will the plague doctor's arrive?

In three day's time.

Three days. He turned to the assistant. He could not go on without him. His anger would have to wait, for now.

Three days, he repeated. The assistant nodded. And then the Governor asked him the question that would hold them together forever, or at least for a time.

What do you propose we do?

The assistant stared at him, then (suppressing a leap and a holler), he composed his face and cleared his throat, straightening, as if reporting for duty.

We must continue as planned, he said slowly. And it is of course imperative that we secure the journey. And the parades, he added. The parades are perhaps more important than ever. The public will be angry, yes, but this was inevitable, was in fact what we had planned for all along.

The Governor nodded. Yes, he said, understanding. We expected this. In fact, it could not have gone any other way. Why else do we pursue the madman Pizarro? Why else let him sully our chambers with his presence?

May I...? the official interjected.

Shut up, the assistant and the Governor said together.

We are right where we started, said the Governor.

I quite agree.

Whatever are we afraid of?

Oh, said the assistant. Many, many things.

But you know, the Governor said. Pizarro remains an oiled weasel.

The assistant nodded in agreement. Yes, he said. But for even these, they make traps.

We must announce the parades now. Today. We must announce them today.

The assistant stared at him. But we are too far ahead already, he said. Why imperil ourselves further?

Because the plague is bigger than us now. It is bigger than Pizarro and bigger than the journey. Once the night raids begin, the city will be lost. We must beat it to the punch.

The Governor stepped to the balcony's ledge and stared down at the city.

If they have the parades to look forward to, perhaps everything will go as we hope.

I wouldn't—, began the official, but the assistant silenced him again. He placed his hand on the Governor's shoulder.

Perhaps everything, yes, he said. It came out like he meant it. It felt wonderful to hold up the glass again. It was so easy, so simple, the most natural thing of all. The gypsy was as right as she was wrong.

All he needed to do to avoid pain was to lie.

There were protests, of course, he added, but they only lasted so long.

They lasted until the night raids ended, the official said. And then they started up again after that, and often lasted throughout the plague.

But they did not have Pizarro, the assistant said.

Nor do you, if I'm not mistaken, said the official.

But we will get him, the Governor said. He said it like a death sentence. And then he turned to the assistant. Inform the pamphlets immediately, he said. The parades will begin in one week's time.

What about Pizarro? the official said.

What about him?

What will you tell him?

The Governor stared at the assistant. Well?

The assistant looked between the men.

We repeat ourselves, he said. Until we're blue in the face.

He stepped to the balcony's ledge and looked at the city.

He's down there somewhere, waiting, he said. He needs us, too. He just hasn't admitted it yet.

We must give him a good reason, the Governor said.

No, said the official. He must realize it himself.

And then the official and the Governor joined the assistant at the elbow and together the three men stared out over X, the port slums greasy and black, the West End tidy and ordered, the merchant district high and spired, and the North Hill clustered and immaculate, a long slope of perfection, all of it quiet in the afternoon, the sun's hue deepening, the light falling endlessly, the streets a quiet lie, appearing composed, yes, the people out and lounging in the sun, appearing to the three men from above strangely carefree, like fools are carefree, unaware, as always, that the worse is yet to come, smiling, laughing, chatting, turning away from the headlines or the people streaking past, afraid, yes, but never once glancing left or right, simply moving their legs and limbs to continue going forward, because this is also necessary and has been for some time.

BIOGRAPHY

Spencer Seward is originally from Bakersfield. He has a cat named Nugget, and several humans in his life who are very important to him.