

*THE ENDS OF SMALLER WORLDS*

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*The Ends of Smaller Worlds* is a collection of short stories set in Indiana. The preface is about the representation of the information age using elements of dirty realism and Gothic fiction.

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PART I

GOTHIC FICTION AND DIRTY REALISM IN THE INFORMATION AGE

To live in Indiana is to be part of the Rust Belt, the Corn Belt, and the Bible Belt, which is to say, from one end of the state to the other, there is no shortage of abandoned industrial complexes, nearly-extinct or deserted towns, dizzying amounts of cornfields, and various forms of conservative evangelicalism. As such a place, there is a lot of beauty and darkness, and negotiating the tension between the two can be complex. Perhaps such negotiation is why the bulk of Gothic fiction and dirty realism in the United States is set against the backdrop of the Rust, Corn, and Bible Belts. These genres' tropes of violence, madness, decay, grotesqueness, and supernatural elements flow naturally from writers who explore the complications of these regions, complications that range from failed industries, economic decline, an increasing lack of viable employment opportunities, addiction, and poverty. William Gay's Tennessee in *Provinces of Night* and Breece D'J Pancake's Appalachia are both depicted as harsh environments where poor and working-class characters experience violence and alienation, and yet, there is a lot of beauty in the stories. Donald Ray Pollock's Ohio in *Knockemstiff* and Frank Bill's Indiana in *Crimes in Southern Indiana* build on Flannery O'Connor's tradition of exploring a region through moments of crime, violence, madness, and decay. As works of dirty realism Pancake, Pollock, and Bill may not be entirely Gothic, but their respective genres share a lot in common with the Southern Gothic tradition. For my collection *The Ends of Smaller Worlds*, I drew inspiration from the styles and traditions of O'Connor, Gay, Pancake and, more recently, Pollock and Bill. However, my stories differ conceptually from these writers in that they take into consideration the significance of the information age.

Much of the twenty-first-century Gothic fiction and dirty realism which is set in the South, Midwest, and Appalachia is also set in the twentieth century. Ron Rash's novel *The World Made Straight* is set in the 1970s; *The Risen* is set in 1969; and *Serena* is set in 1929.

Donald Ray Pollock's 2008 story collection *Knockemstiff* spans the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. William Gay's 2009 novel *Provinces of Night* is set in the 1950s. Some Gothic works even cross over into the future by way of the post-apocalyptic genre. Frank Bill's 2017 post-apocalyptic novel *The Savage* is set in a future with no electrical grid, and Cormac McCarthy, another author with a penchant for setting Gothic novels in the distant past, published *The Road* in 2006, and unsurprisingly there is no electricity in the post-apocalyptic setting of the *The Road*. This point about past and future settings in these works is simply an observation and not a criticism. The tendency to set works of Gothic fiction and dirty realism in the past and future is interesting because it exposes a particular void in the genres – the information age and its implications. The steady focus on pre- and post-internet worlds results in Gothic fiction and dirty realism bypassing a sense of darkness and realism that can only come from depicting characters influenced by the information age, particularly computer technologies.

The conventions of violence, crime, and poverty common in Gothic fiction and dirty realism, or grit lit, automatically imply works in these genres will focus on that which is visceral, material, and concrete. The names of the genres also promise as much. The words *grit* in grit lit and the *dirty* in dirty realism do not suggest that these genres will explore abstract concepts such as existentialism, utilitarianism, or linguistic determinism in the ways authors like Albert Camus, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Ted Chiang do. Even the term *Gothic* in Gothic fiction evokes a sense of concreteness as a reference to the style of Gothic architecture such as castles and cathedrals. There is perhaps even a sad and absurd comparison to be made between the spooky castles common in Gothic horror novels like *Dracula* and the Rust Belt's abandoned factories, mills, and grain elevators.

But what about Gothic fiction and dirty realism set in the twenty-first century? Works of

these genres set in the 2000s and 2010s arguably represent regions like the Midwest, South, and Appalachia as closed systems that are isolated from the rest of the country. As a result, these regions can appear unaffected by the information which constantly circulates through various forms of mass media, particularly the internet. While there may be some truth in depicting certain rural and impoverished settings as technologically disconnected for reasons relating to poverty and the digital divide, these genres also frequently focus on representations of working class communities and characters who, frankly speaking, would likely have access to present-day forms of computer technology. Shirley Jackson's fiction also serves as a reminder that Gothic fiction is not necessarily bound to any particular socio-economic category. Jackson's dark depictions of groupthink, paranoia, and distorted perceptions are timeless, and Jackson's style of psychological horror was a source of inspiration for me while writing these stories.

The title story "The Ends of Smaller Worlds" works as a kind of "thesis" for the overall collection because it represents the dual nature of many of the collection's stories, which I would describe as the intersection of material and informational decay. The setting in "The Ends of Smaller Worlds" represents the notion of personal loss due to the economic and architectural decay common throughout the Rust Belt – abandoned towns, shops, farms, and homes. The story is set on the eve of Y2K, and Em, the main character, considers the ways in which little "Y2K"s have been happening for a long time for working-class people and to parts of the Rust Belt. These localized "Y2K"s represent "the ends of smaller worlds" to Em. The title stands in contrast to the common apocalyptic phrase "the end of the world," which, historically speaking, was also associated with the Millennium bug. Em's perception of Y2K stems from a frustration with class inequality. She perceives a form of hypocrisy in the panic surrounding Y2K, and her thoughts imply that, in general, the public is only concerned about Y2K because it will affect



modes of production and the comfort levels of the middle and upper classes. Em knows that if computer systems everywhere crash, people could potentially have to face unemployment, a lack of water and electricity, and limited access to food. For Em, Y2K could create a large-scale version of what is already happening in the Rust Belt. This realization on the eve of Y2K gives Em a sense of satisfaction because she believes, somewhat implicitly, through the line “*let the fuckers sweat,*” that Y2K could create a level playing field.

Em’s sentiments on class and Y2K are amplified in Troy who sees the prospect of societal collapse as an opportunity for a new beginning, the thing that might give meaning to his otherwise unsatisfying life. Given Troy’s survivalist approach to Y2K, it is no surprise that he becomes a follower of John, a survivalist-type wanderer who has become displaced after losing his job in Muncie, a town in northern Indiana which, historically, represents the economic decline associated with the Rust Belt. The setting of Sloan, an actual extinct town, reflects the characters’ sense of alienation. Overall, the characters’ sense of hope sadly hinges on the dismal prospect of societal collapse and survivalism. However, “The Ends of Smaller Worlds” is not a survival story in the traditional sense. Survival stories often reinforce the mythology that a person can bootstrap herself into stability against all odds and in the face of any number of obstacles (which is not all bad). Post-apocalyptic fiction is the new survival story. In a way, the post-apocalyptic genre represents a certain conservatism in its desire to shed progress. Post-apocalyptic stories, even in their darkest, often romanticize a return to “simpler times” by annihilating all signs of human progress and reintroducing an American “frontier” that necessitates violence. One reading of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* is that the novel is a neo-Western which retells the old story of heroes traversing a frontier of lawlessness in order to secure a new homestead. Frank Bill’s *Crimes in Southern Indiana* has a lot in common with *The Road* in terms of characters

confronting lawlessness, except Bill includes the perspectives of the collection's villains. Both Bill and McCarthy depict characters facing and surviving a form of social regress, but what about characters facing and surviving rapid technological and economical progress?

In "The Ends of Smaller Worlds," Y2K stands as a pivotal moment not only for the characters but for humankind in general because it reveals the extent to which humans have come to rely on computers and computer networks. A global crash or disruption of computer systems could have had serious implications for the stock market, banking systems, electrical grids, and the distribution and sales of goods. Realistically, the Y2K correction was obviously a good thing. However, for the characters in "The Ends of Smaller Worlds," there is a sense that the old ways of Main Street, family farms, and factory jobs are quickly becoming obsolete. The character John acknowledges this "obsoleteness" when he rails against computers and automation, essentially welcoming a Y2K collapse. The story's setting is stuck in a sort of limbo in which there is neither a sense of progress nor an opportunity to revert to the old ways. This is shown by Troy's and John's absurd attempts at being some kind of frontiersmen or survivalists, which ultimately ring hollow since they only succeed in adding to the destruction of Em's family home and her car.

As a character sympathetically tied to the deserted town of Sloan and to her grandparent's abandoned house, Em is the tragic recipient of Troy's and John's destruction which masquerades as proaction. However, Em's strength is her ability to confront the sense of chaos surrounding her without deluding herself into thinking she has a false sense of control. At the end of the story, when Em finally becomes untethered from Troy and John, she figuratively floats above the fields and trees to gain a new perspective. She echoes her own previous sentiment of "*let the fuckers sweat,*" but she does so with a self-mocking tone. She then recalls the Bee Gees' lyrics, "*If I'd only seen the joke was on me,*" which shows a sense of regret for delighting in the prospect of

collapse and for having gone along with Troy's half-baked survivalist plan. In the last scene, Em is finally able to see clearly without anything obstructing her view, but her newfound clarity is blurred by the dirty reality that the world below is still a place full of danger, pain, chaos, and fragility.

In Gothic fiction and dirty realism, depictions of characters facing the struggles and complications of poverty and decay are often honest and sympathetic ones. However, there is often a sense that characters of these genres are non-ideological, that they are not really influenced by the ideas of the outside world. Because these characters are so preoccupied with the physical and the visceral – the grit and the dirt – they often seem to have no connection to systems of thought outside of their own communities. Works of Gothic fiction such as Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and Donald Ray Pollock's *The Devil All the Time* contain characters who move beyond material concerns into immaterial ones. However, these works stay close to the Gothic tradition of focusing on spiritual belief when it comes to exploring characters' immaterial concerns. In *The Ends of Smaller Worlds* I build on the traditional Gothic elements of decay, violence, madness, and the supernatural, but I also use the conventions as a way to represent information as something infectious, perception as something fragile, and reality as something upon which characters cannot agree.

In addition to showing characters facing the material implications of technological progress, I wrote some of the stories in a way that forks to also consider the ways in which technological progress introduces new ideological landscapes which characters must traverse. For example, "The Ends of Smaller Worlds" is set during a time when anxieties surrounding the Millennium bug went viral, so to speak. And yet, despite the well-publicized reality that computer scientists around the world were correcting the Y2K problem, many individuals and fringe

groups embraced and peddled end-of-the-world conspiracy theories. In “The Ends of Smaller Worlds,” a “prophecy” from a fictitious ancient text called the *Carunda Mundi* is a contributing factor to Troy’s extreme response to Y2K. Troy is obviously duped by the *Carunda Mundi*, which claims to predict Y2K by 2,000 years. The idea of a prophecy implies there is a sense of destiny and order to human existence as opposed to chaos and unpredictability. As a character who believes in the *Carunda Mundi*, Troy behaves as if the end is inevitably near. This idea of inevitability leads to conviction, and his conviction leads to action. Troy buys a gun, camping equipment, canned food, and gallons of water. He empties his life savings and buys a gold chain with his money, which symbolizes the unnecessary burden of conviction that he has placed on himself in response to the *Carunda Mundi*. There is a cause and effect at work in Troy. Because he feels backed by a sense of special knowledge, he believes he now has some control over an enormous problem when, in actuality, he has no control over the Y2K situation whatsoever.

The name *Troy* is also a reference to the concept of the Trojan Horse, a harmful vessel of deceit. In computing, a Trojan Horse is a deceptive way of delivering a malicious payload to another user’s computer, often in the form of harmless-looking web links or executable email attachments. Troy is, in a sense, an infected computer, and the fake prophecy of the *Carunda Mundi* is the malware that infects him via a website. The notion of information infecting a person is echoed again when Troy is easily influenced by John, a faux-prophetic figure and absurd rendition of John the Baptist and John of Patmos. Troy very quickly becomes something of a follower of John near the end of the story.

To explore how the information age, as a immaterial environment, can shape characters’ perceptions, convictions, and actions, I arranged *The Ends of Smaller Worlds* chronologically ac-

ording to each story's setting. The setting of the first story, "Rotten Clay," represents a preternatural state, so to speak, not exactly outside of time but indifferent to time. The setting of "Rotten Clay" appears rather warped because Darryl's perception of reality is warped, not just by the abusive and neglectful nature of his material environment but also by the information around him. The word, and concept of, *idiot* literally infects Darryl's brain as a parasite that he can feel; the idea has real, material consequences for him as a character. Also, the father's prayers and ledger represent a cosmic form of surveillance, judgment, and condemnation which contribute to Darryl's descent into madness. Even the notion of positive reinforcement is warped in "Rotten Clay." For instance, Darryl's father praises Darryl for shooting birds and later gifts Darryl a more powerful gun. Darryl's mother also reinforces Darryl's bad eating habits to the point of obesity, which represents another way that Darryl is being shaped like clay. As the first story, "Rotten Clay" stands as a grotesque exaggeration of a material environment's power but also of the power of harmful information to warp and shape people like clay. I chose "Rotten Clay" as the first story because it sets an ominous tone for the rest of the collection and acts as a foundation upon which later representations of information technologies are built. After "Rotten Clay," the remainder of the collection moves through the 80s, 90s, 00s, and 10s and ends with "They," a story which echoes the delirious effects of infectious information depicted in "Rotten Clay."

Although *The Ends of Smaller Worlds* is about concepts related to the information age, I did not set every story in a post-internet world. Instead of attempting to dramatize characters in settings such as web forums, I wrote computer and internet references into the backgrounds of certain stories, or as asides. The context of the collection as a whole should reinforce the relevance of these information technology references, however small they may be. With some stories, I relied on analogous situations entirely. For example, even though "All of Them Stars in

Heaven Shall Fall” is set in the 1980s, when home computers were a novelty and the internet still a seedling, as a representation of the Satanic panic, the story reflects certain attitudes and circumstances which have become prevalent in the first quarter of the twenty-first century with the advent of computerized information technology. For the entire collection, I wanted to explore a certain mentality or culture that today might be described as post-truth: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs” (“post-truth”). While post-truth circumstances are arguably nothing new to human behavior or psychology, certain technologies of the information age have provided more people with the tools to shape public opinion. Anybody with a personal computer and internet access can now publish and broadcast information, and with the help of social media platforms, anyone can potentially develop a large following. As with any tool, such technologies are neither good nor bad, and they can be used either constructively or destructively. I wanted to explore some of the more destructive ways technology can be used when it comes to the spread of information and misinformation.

There is often a streak of Naturalism in Gothic fiction and dirty realism – that unsentimental depiction of humans facing strong environmental forces – shown in works such as Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat” and *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* and Jack London’s “To Build a Fire.” I was also interested in showing how characters are affected by their environments. However, the notion of environment in my stories includes not only Indiana and the Midwest but that of a larger world of ideas consumed through information technology. Ultimately, in *The Ends of Smaller Worlds* I explored both material and immaterial forms of decay. I tried to focus on the infectious nature of information and the ways in which ideas take root and shape characters’ perceptions of reality. In terms of Naturalism and how it relates to dirty realism, instead of solely

considering humans as animals in natural environments, I wanted to consider the significance of humans as semiotic animals in informational environments.

For the overall context of *The Ends of Smaller Worlds*, I tried to put forth the notion of a “virtual Naturalism” or “informational Naturalism” and, on some level, a “technological Naturalism,” in which characters within certain immaterial environments face threatening ideological forces. However, it is important to note that, while I explore the implications of characters facing threatening sources of misinformation, I also look at the ways in which characters read or misread information. In this way, my characters are not entirely innocent. When it comes to my characters’ relationships with information, I did not want them to seem like victims of misinformation who lack intellectual agency or who have no sense of personal responsibility. I tried to consistently work with characters who read various texts and are seriously influenced by those texts. For this, I drew inspiration from characters such as Ignatius J. Reilly from John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*, a character who is influenced by Boethius and who constantly references Cassandra and Fortuna; Oedipa Maas from Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, a character who becomes obsessed with the sign of a muted post horn and a Jacobian play; Shirley Jackson’s characters who read nonverbal cues and other people as texts, such as in “The Daemon Lover” and “The Renegade”; and the son from Vladimir Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols,” a character with “Referential mania” for whom “Everything is a cipher” and who “must be always on his guard and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding of the undulation of things” (Nabokov).

The isolation, alienation, and madness common to the Gothic genre takes on new complexities in the age of information, particularly in a post-truth context in which a shared sense of reality based on factual information undergoes decay. In “They,” the final story of *The Ends of*

*Smaller Worlds*, instead of a physical threat, the main character Reid is in danger of being mentally destroyed by informational forces. As a form of research for “They,” I gathered information about conspiracy theories from YouTube channels, subreddits, blogs, and Wikipedia pages. In “They,” I juggled competing settings of the concrete world and the abstract world. To highlight the concrete world, I zoomed in on limestone, quarries, streets, extreme weather, architecture, and the human body. In contrast, I laid out an extensive psychological landscape, so to speak. I included a lot of abstractions in the form of a plethora of signs, symbols, and theories. As a character obsessed with theory, Reid’s connection to the concrete world is incredibly fragile. Within the first scene, Reid is shown to be so obsessed with theories that he is indifferent to the state of suffering present in his father’s physical body. In this opening scene, Reid is more interested in the intangible nature of light, radio transmissions, and code than he is his father’s well-being. Something as simple as a circle, like the circle in downtown Indianapolis, is no longer an innocuous shape for Reid but a conspiratorial sign that is part of a much larger plot. The convolution of signs and motley soup of theories in “They” may seem exaggerated, but, all together, the story represents the nature of the internet, where any and all ideas can collide, feed off one another, and grow into a sort of chimera.

The sense of madness and alienation in “They” comes from Reid’s delusion that he is the victim of some type of “architecture,” a grand scheme in which a nebulous *They* construct and control his reality. The dark irony of the story is that Reid is living in a hellish labyrinth of his own construction. Reid is the *They* he claims to fear because he is constructing and living in his own false reality, a false reality built on poorly constructed theories with no evidence. As a character who suffers from bouts of derealization, I wanted to suggest how Reid’s obsession with theories keeps plunging him into this unsettling psychological state where nothing seems real



and everything feels like a dream. In this way, I drew inspiration from Nabokov's short story "Signs and Symbols," in which a young man obsessively interprets all information around him in an ego-centric way. In contrast, the mother and father in "Signs and Symbols" interact very naturally with a variety of signs and symbols in their home – numbers, words, colors, and patterns. The mother and father enjoy a shared sense of reality based on their interpretation of the signs and symbols around them. In other words, the mother and father read the world in the same way, or, at least, in a very similar way. Because signs and symbols are arbitrary and carry no inherent meaning, the interpretation of signs and symbols depends on an agreement between people to solidify a sense of shared reality. "Signs and Symbols" shows how a shared interpretation of signs and symbols is crucial in binding the mother and father together but also shows how an unshared interpretation isolates and alienates the son. Nabokov's story shows how an individual's relationship with language can affect that person's perception of reality and how it can either reinforce or fracture that person's sense of unity with those around him. As a thought experiment, it is interesting to consider how a character with "Referential mania," such as the son in "Signs and Symbols," would be represented in the information age in which such a character would have access to an endless network of signs, symbols, and theories.

The undercurrent of madness which I included throughout *The Ends of Smaller Worlds* mostly comes from the notion of infectious and corrosive information. At times, the sense of madness is comical and absurd, such as in the story "Two Philosophers," in which the father Ira becomes obsessed with flat-earth theory. Flat-earth theory, which Ira accepts as fact, dominates his life and drives a wedge between him and his son. In other stories, I made the madness seem much darker. For example, in "All of Them Stars in Heaven Shall Fall," a story about the Satanic

panic of the 1980s, misinformation spreads through various channels such as discredited memoirs, talk shows, local news, church, urban legends, and rumors. As a result, the mother and father in “All of Them Stars in Heaven Shall Fall” become consumed with fear and paranoia. The story “They” also represents madness in a much darker way. The main character Reid sees everything as code and deludes himself into believing in things such as mind control. Reid’s sense of reality is always shifting because his sources of information are always shifting, and because his sources of information are always shifting, his interpretations and theories are always shifting. To Reid, *They* are, at one point in the story, aliens, at another point extra-dimensional beings, and at another point secret societies such as the Freemasons. The sense of madness in “They” comes from Reid’s obsessive relationship with information and the way in which information sends him in a downward spiral.

Many of the stories in *The Ends of Smaller Worlds* have characters who suffer from some sort of mental health problem. However, as a literary convention of the Gothic genre, the concept of madness in my stories is not necessarily meant to refer to the mental illnesses of characters; it is not meant to carry clinical connotations. On the contrary, I show madness in the stories as that which emanates from external sources of corrosive information, something that severely disrupt characters’ ability to think clearly, reason, or behave ethically. As such, madness sometimes exists alongside psychological disorders within these stories to show how corrosive ideas can exacerbate mental illnesses. Lori, for example, in “All of Them Stars in Heaven Shall Fall,” is implied to be on the schizophrenia spectrum, and the unfounded rumors of demonic activity and Satanic ritual abuse only serve to worsen her symptoms. She becomes increasingly delusional and paranoid as misinformation spreads about the prospect of secretive occult groups committing

heinous crimes. In the same story, Lori's boy Calvin, who is revealed to be predisposed to schizophrenia, becomes trapped, both by the panic and delusions of the larger community and by those within his own home. The story suggests that the immaterial and ephemeral environment of the Satanic panic is the spark that may ignite Calvin's predisposition for mental health problems and the fuel that inflames Lori's. To emphasize this, I associated both characters with fire in the story. In "All of Them Stars in Heaven Shall Fall" I am not saying that Lori or Calvin are mad, but that the collective madness of the Satanic panic in the story only makes their mental health problems much worse.

In terms of a collective madness, I wanted "All of Them Stars in Heaven Shall Fall" to set the stage for the rest of *The Ends of Smaller Worlds*. The madness which runs through all of the stories affects individual characters, but it usually originates from larger networks of madness based on misinformation and unproven theories which lead to a variety of neuroses in characters. Ira in "Two Philosophers," Troy in "The Ends of Smaller Worlds," Owen in "The State of Delaware," and Reid in "They" are all shown to be, or implied to be, connected to a larger network of information which is partly responsible for distorting their thinking. In this context, I was particularly influenced by Shirley Jackson's fiction, especially when writing my darker works such as "All of Them Stars in Heaven Shall Fall" and "They." Jackson's Gothic depictions of human nature are important because they stand as reminders of humans' capacity for evil, how easily people are influenced, especially in group contexts, and how people can act based on emotion or belief instead of reason. The collective madness in Jackson's "The Lottery," "The Renegade," and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* are chilling depictions of groups acting as a sort of hive mind. The horror in "The Renegade," for example, comes from Mrs. Walpole's realization that she is perhaps the only reasonable person in a community of like-minded sadists. "The Lottery"

is a very post-truth story because it depicts an entire town letting personal belief overshadow reason to the point of perennial murder. The townspeople in “The Lottery” have no qualms about stoning a person to death since they believe it will result in a positive agricultural outcome for the community. The story makes effective use of dramatic irony because, from a reader’s perspective, it is obvious that a human sacrifice will have no bearing on agricultural practices. Readers know this (hopefully) to be a fact, and yet, they still must watch the personal beliefs and convictions of the townspeople be the motivating force of the public. Jackson’s fiction, in this way, is a somewhat prescient depiction of post-truth thinking since her works show how public opinion (and action) can be shaped more by emotion and personal belief instead of fact and reason.

In the stories “Two Philosophers,” “The State of Delaware,” and “They,” I deal directly with the similarities between post-truth attitudes and those related to spiritual forms of belief. In all of these stories, the characters have been converted to an idea and are connected to a larger network of mythology. In “Two Philosophers,” Ira is converted to flat-earth theory by a prophetic figure named Jules. Ira also makes a pilgrimage, so to speak, to Indianapolis in order to congregate with other flat-earthers. Owen, in “The State of Delaware,” also makes a pilgrimage to Delaware to confirm his theory that the state of Delaware does not actually exist. Owen’s theory can also be traced back to online forums for conspiracy theories, which represent, in a way, not only his congregation but also his mythological text and source of “revelation.” In “They,” Reid absorbs so much conspiratorial information online that he is in danger of becoming detached from reality. He is so entrenched in abstractness and mythology, that he represents a kind of grotesque “mystic” in the throes of visions or hallucinations. Also, to explore the parallel between spiritual belief and conspiratorial belief, I sometimes included a form of proselytizing in

which those who believe in the mythologies of conspiracy theories spread, or transmit, their beliefs. In *Burning Down the House*, Charles Baxter notes how there is a similarity between literary epiphanies, religious revelation, and belief in conspiracy theories. Baxter argues that, “Conspiracy theorists thrive on epiphanies, insights, and revelations” (48). In relation to that same sentiment, Baxter writes, “Insights, in art and outside of it, depend on an assumption that the surface is false. That what one sees – the evidence of one’s eyes – is at best a partial truth. That almost everyone has been mistaken” (48). Although Baxter is discussing the nature of literary epiphanies in fiction, he makes a compelling point that applies to the characters in my stories and also to post-truth phenomena in general – the belief by some that truth cannot be known through observable facts and, therefore, remains something that is hidden, encoded, or hopelessly theoretical; under such a belief, only a revelation can uncover, decode, or illuminate the truth.

The nature of the internet, in a way, necessitates belief. As a mediated space controlled by others in which very few things happen in real time and everything is subject to, and suspect to, editing, the internet is obviously not conducive to accurately representing physical reality, and sometimes, observable facts. Most people know, or at least suspect, information presented online represents, at best, partial truths and, often, untruths. With regard to the millions of online blogs, vlogs, videos, photographs, and posts, there is the fact that a realer, more complete, more nuanced, world exists behind the mediated one being presented. In this context, internet space represents a new form of pseudo-spirituality. With some spiritual belief systems, the physical world is often believed to be temporary and imperfect whereas the hidden spiritual world is often believed to be permanent and more perfect. Internet space fits this model well. With internet space, there is also this idea that the physical world is temporary and imperfect; however, in internet

space, people can edit imperfections, information, and the self, and information stored online enjoys more permanency. This gives internet space a pseudo-spiritual feel. As a pseudo-spiritual space, the internet also exists as a place of constant “revelation” – new insights, new trends, new updates, new information. It is the new place where people go to feed their soul; or, if one does not believe in the soul, it is the place where people go to have their intellectual and emotional needs met. It is perhaps worth noting how the internet has adopted a certain religious phraseology for referring to individuals and groups: people have *followers*; people also have those they are *following*; artists are now *creators*. Since internet space is such a place of constant “revelation,” the idea of representation matters more than reality. Reality can never compete with representation in internet space because reality does not produce meaning in the same way that internet space manufactures a steady stream of crafted and curated revelations. Because of this, representation in internet space, whether true or false, always has the advantage of seeming more meaningful than reality. However, false information may also have gained an advantage in the age of internet space. In her essay “Lying in Politics,” Hannah Arendt writes:

Lies are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with a careful eye to making it credible, whereas reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we were not prepared. (6-7)

Although Arendt’s essay is a response to the Pentagon Papers and the lies of those involved, Arendt’s point is relevant outside of that context and takes on new meaning in the age of internet space. The ability for any person to craft any message for public consumption and then widely disseminate that message exponentially increases the odds of misinformation spreading. Such an advantage for falsehood combined with the pseudo-revelatory nature of the internet also exponentially increases the odds of misinformation being believed to be something true and

meaningful. In the stories “Two Philosophers,” “The State of Delaware,” and “They,” in particular, I explore characters who thrive on the notion of obtaining special knowledge, or revelatory information, through the use of information technology.

While, in “The Ends of Smaller Worlds,” I play with the idea that poverty can resemble a tiny apocalypse, either for an individual or for a region, in the story “Two Philosophers” I deal with a poverty of fact, or an apocalypse of truth. “Two Philosophers” is a story in which facts are decimated and personal belief reigns supreme, at least for the father. The story is key to the collection because its other main character Kennedy represents a foil to the collective madness at work in the entire collection. In “Two Philosophers” I blend the spiritual with the conspiratorial and set the story during a pivotal point in the information age – the time when the internet was still very young, somewhat magical, and a technology around which a lot of optimism still existed.

I use the concept of forking or branching in “Two Philosophers” to represent the tensions between the father and the son, between progress and regress, science and belief, and the infinite and the finite. The “two” in “Two Philosophers” also represents the dual nature of the collection’s exploration of material and immaterial environments. I associate the father with fading methods of industrial machinery and physical labor, and I associate the son with the burgeoning industry of computer science.

Both Ira and Kennedy represent characters who are greatly shaped by the information they consume from internet space, which I use to touch on the collection’s overall concept of characters shaped by immaterial forces. In *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O’Connor writes that, for her, “Belief ... is the engine that makes perception operate” (109). I focus on spirituality in “Two Philosophers” to explore the idea that belief is one of the most powerful things that can

shape a character's perception of reality. Spirituality in "Two Philosophers" is significant as it relates to characters' relationship with information because it deals with notions of progress and regress in unexpected ways. Although it may seem my exploration of spiritual belief in "Two Philosophers" mostly concerns Ira, Kennedy experiences his own form of secular sublimity through math and science. For example, Kennedy's narcolepsy represents an overwhelming sense of awe when confronted with the beautiful complexities of cosmology, infinity, self-similarity in the Mandelbrot set, and Conway's cellular automaton Game of Life. Baxter notes how, "An epiphany, in a traditional religious context, was the showing forth of the divinity of the Christ child. It was, quite literally, an awful moment. Awe governed it" (43). I use Kennedy's character to offer a form of reasonable awe, or an awe governed by reason rather than belief. Kennedy is a foil to the post-truth forms of belief present throughout the collection's stories. Also, in a literary sense, instead of a character who experiences one large meaningful insight, which would suggest the world was not as it actually seemed before that insight, Kennedy experiences multiple discoveries of beauty in the scientific and mathematical truths that have been come before him. While Ira is converted to flat-earth theory by Jules, a proselytizing prophet-figure, Kennedy represents a form of self-learning. Later, Kennedy becomes inspired to study computer science by Jude, a character based on Judith Milhon, or St. Jude, a well-known and influential computer programmer who was self-taught and who happened to be raised in Indiana.

Ironically, in Ira's acceptance of flat-earth theory, Ira's spirituality suffers a loss of awe. In implicating his god in the creation of a flat earth, Ira has also unwittingly stripped his god of power. Ira's god, who would normally represent the epitome of all that is infinite and awe-inspiring, now represents a deity capable only of creating something flat, stagnant, and lacking in complexity since there is no need for an orchestra of complex physical forces necessary around Ira's



flat earth. Ira's god, in combination with flat-earth theory, becomes more finite, less creative, and less awe-inspiring. While Ira accuses Kennedy of blasphemy, Ira is, in a sense, the true blasphemer since he reduces the complexity of his god's creation. It may not seem like it, but Kennedy, even as an atheist, is closer to the concept of spirituality since he recognizes the sublimity of the natural world, the cosmos, and mathematical complexity. Kennedy mocks his father throughout the story, but the ending implies that Ira is neither ignorant nor intellectually inferior in any way, but that Ira's attempts at self-learning and critical thinking are misplaced. I try to express this idea in the story's ending when Kennedy extends the olive branch of the Voynich Manuscripts to Ira, which represents an opportunity for Ira to study a worthwhile mystery and an opportunity to go on a journey of self-learning that will require Ira to use the internet to research history and code-breaking. I was not trying to disparage any particular belief system, or belief in general, in "Two Philosophers"; I wanted to show how belief has such enormous power to alter perception that a believer could inadvertently belittle his own god.

Flannery O'Connor writes that, in her fiction, "violence is strangely capable of returning [her] characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work" (112). O'Connor's comment is interesting since it implies that her characters were living in some state of non-reality, or pseudo-reality. While O'Connor uses violence to thrust her characters back into reality, Frank Bill seems to show extreme representations of violence to show readers a reality they perhaps do not know. It is fascinating how often violence is often used in Gothic fiction and dirty realism as a means for revealing reality. Only a few of the characters in *The Ends of Smaller Worlds* experience moments of violence; however, if anything, the violence in my stories only serves to disassociate my charac-

ters from reality. I wanted to show how violence, or abuse, in the material world can be so unbearable that characters can become separated from a sense of physical reality. Except for Em, perhaps, in “The Ends of Smaller Worlds,” the characters in my collection sadly do not experience a clear return to reality. The characters are left in labyrinths and voids and absurdities, not as a punishment, but as a form of realism. The collection ends, for example, with Reid, in “They,” standing in a void, in the dark, in front of a large blank stone, still incapable of, or unwilling to, abandon his quest for some deeper truth that does not exist. With his hand on the limestone, he cannot re-realize himself; he cannot re-associate himself with the concrete world. In a way, Reid is like Hazel Motes at the end of O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*. Figuratively speaking, like Motes, Reid has blinded himself and slipped into madness. However, unlike Motes, Reid’s figurative blindness and madness stems from his belief, not lack of belief.

It is perhaps debatable to what extent a collection of short stories about conspiracy theories, belief, and post-truth circumstances may be considered realism. It seems a certain amount of absurdity is unavoidable when certain facts and long-held truths have been decimated within a story. I definitely wrote bits of absurdity into some stories such as “Two Philosophers” and “The State of Delaware.” As a result, *The Ends of Smaller Worlds* as a whole may not be entirely classifiable as Gothic fiction or dirty realism. However, I wanted to show characters affected by some of the darker, more absurd aspects of the information age, and there is definitely a lot of darkness, madness, and violence within certain internet spaces and post-truth circumstances. The immaterial concerns of the information age are not unique to Indiana, but they are a new and important layer of reality that can be explored in conjunction with the material implications of living in such a state.

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PART II

*THE ENDS OF SMALLER WORLDS*

## Rotten Clay

Darryl starts life a wiry blond with a heart murmur. For years, he plays unnoticed in diapers in the backyard's mud and from room to room in his dilapidated home. A sagging barn and pigpen frame Darryl's house on a patch of dry land, and the skeleton of a red tractor colors the otherwise wooden landscape. Tobacco fields flank the Indiana house in the warm months, rows of humped clay in the winter. The soil is dense and cold and prone to rot. Beyond Darryl's house, at the end of a slope of razor grass and weeds, two ponds float pea-ish scums. There they wait like maws for something to devour.

Every morning, Darryl's family breakfasts on meats. To Darryl, his father has no face. He is a pink amorphous blob in torn white underwear. When his father speaks, his voice vines from his mouth and rakes the air. It is a siccative substance parching Darryl's ears. "Eat that god-damned fat," his father says. Darryl holds up a strip of bacon like the tail of a dead skunk. The meat is scab-red and white, a flatworm of enormous width and length. Darryl works the fat between his baby teeth. Swallows the cold grease. Breaks down the tissue with a tired jaw. Darryl stares at the checkerboard floor of black and white. Every tile is tinged with crud, and there is a universe trapped in every crack between each and every square.

In the grayness of dim dawns, Darryl's father is a silhouette leaving for work. He drives a car made of steel with doors that scream with age. He is a slaughterhouse man. Not the killing-floor kind. He is not soaked in blood and squeals. He is the spidery sort stuck in a high corner, a man behind wire-rimmed glasses and a desk. He sits in a white-white office with three red pencils forever sharp and aligned. A single black binder punctuates the desk's middle. Inside are documents on the slaying of hogs, the efficacy and efficiency of one method over another.

At night, Darryl's father is the smiling tips of shoes beneath Darryl's bedroom door. The

shoes are shiny, black, and aware. They delight in facing Darryl for an uncomfortable stretch of time. When the shoes finish glaring, the weight of his father's oddness bends the floorboards into unnerving creaks. In the room next door, Darryl hears the clacking of a hundred buckles. It is his father's closet contraption of belts which hang like sleeping serpents, and Darryl has felt the bite of each one.

Darryl's mother is the devil of country goodness, an alien curvature filling space. She has milk for eyes and her skin is stitched in denim from neck to ankle. She glides through the house behind her tent of fabric, an automaton on wheels. From the waist up, she is the mannequinistic movements of a head and two arms. Her face is drawn poorly from the uncanny valley, and she is always with child.

"A little Darryl is growing in my stomach," she says.

When Darryl hears this, he stalks his mother, cat-like and paranoid. He links an ear to her belly, hears gurgles and growls, fluid and a labored wheeze. He asks what little Darryl eats.

"He steals my food," his mother says. "He steals my food and he kicks me."

\*

At the age of four, Darryl tires of diapers and clothes himself. He finds a black trash bag in a hall closet and kneels before it. He is stickish and bony. He maps the bag's lumpy contour with his hands. When he rips into its plastic membrane, a body of girls' pajamas blooms around him. He smells cedar, smoke, and must, the inside of mother's purse. Darryl scoops the clothes into his arms and carries them to his room. He drops them into a pile, a collage of childish design. There are patterns of puppies, hearts, and otherworldly unknowns. He spreads out the clothes, flattens them into a gathering of human figures, places socks at the ankles of each body.

A tattered blue blanket is in the bag. He holds it by its corners and drapes it over the nearest human form. He chooses for himself a wizard shirt and pair of unicorn pants. The shirt is covered in sparkling wands, pointy hats with stars. He wriggles his legs into the pant holes, forces his head through the shirt's neck. He scratches the itchy splotches underneath the elastic wrist and ankle bands.

Darryl explores the expanse of the house, yard, and barn. He systematically investigates the contents of a milk crate next to the tractor. There is a carburetor, mask, two clothespins, a leather dog collar, and a trowel. The mask is hard and translucent. Darryl slides it over his face. He picks up the carburetor and learns it. He becomes engrossed with the dissection of machines. A toy robot, mother's electrical can opener, father's radio transceiver. He untangles the lattice work of their innards, smells the wires, glides his fingers over the sharp topographies of their circuitous boards, licks the oil off tiny cylindrical motors. He sorts the screws, nuts, and bolts, not by size, but as counter-top constellations the way he recalls the pieces in their native space.

For anatomizing the electrical can opener, Darryl's mother calls him an idiot. Darryl is six, and the foulness of her tone slices Darryl open for days. The event is small and not small. The word impregnates the base of Darryl's brain. It is a black stain scaling the wall of Darryl's medulla oblongata. It feeds on the axon terminals and dendrites of his mind. After the word engorges itself, it exits through a fontanelle porta of its own making, an amoebic sac attached to the back of Darryl's skull by an umbilical filament of parasitic design. There, it stays forever.

For opening the transceiver, Darryl's father locks him out of the house for a week. Darryl sleeps between the tractor and the pigpen. It is summertime. Dew and sweat soak through Darryl's pajamas. The clothes, once tight, now sag against his limbs. To pass the time, he squats between a wall of cattails to fish a scummy pond. When the sun peaks, Darryl is the gutted catfish

nailed to his own cutting board. He withers in mosquito song and humidity. At night, he is the last nightcrawler in the bait cup writhing in a black clump mucus of his own bilious concoction.

When Darryl returns home, he bathes himself. He eats a raw onion and a block of yellow cheese. He retreats to his room. He hears his father drag a kitchen chair across the floor. His father places the chair at the foot of Darryl's bed and sits. In his father's hand is a book, a ledger. In the ledger, Darryl's father records the deeds of others. It is his father's favorite book. Mother's name is there. The names of strangers. Darryl is there. Little Darryl will be there. He opens the ledger and reads aloud. Before turning a page, he presses his thumb into his tongue and wriggles it like a stamp. He reads it cover to cover. When Darryl falls asleep, his father kicks the bed. Once his father finishes, he prays aloud and reads it again.

\*

Time passes. Darryl forgets his parent's disgust but still feels empty. He swallows a melange of mechanical parts. A small spring. Four plastic cogs. A metal plate from an old vacuum cleaner. He vomits red. The mess is unforgivable. Darryl's mother bakes him into the background, and he walks in the amniotic fluidity of the wallpaper's ever-shifting patterns, sleeps in the ceiling's textured drip-plaster, moves between the walls with the fleas and the mice and the ghosts.

To be seen again, Darryl feeds on canned biscuits and corn syrup, on the sweets his mother makes. She likes this. She jams candy into his pockets, puts brownies on his lunch plates, stacks oatmeal and peanut butter cookies in his hands so he must balance them on his forearms. She feeds him birthday cakes, then canned spaghetti, then pickles, then gooseberry cobblers. She watches his chubby hand disappear into plastic tubs of ice cream. She eyes him and she smiles. She tells him to clench his spoon with his whole fist, and he digs mindlessly into vats of sticky



sweetness, a fat toddler of seven.

Darryl balloons into his clothes. He reverts to wearing underwear only. He has turnip skin and pimples. His eyebrows and eyelashes are missing. He plucks them when no one is looking. He no longer sits but stuffs his body into the fold of the couch. There, his brain idles to a cacophony of cartoons that zoink and zing and whiz. The TV strobos in his eyes. It feeds him worlds of hilarious destruction, and he learns he likes to laugh at the pain of others. He tricks his little brother who is now two. “Don’t move,” Darryl tells him. “There’s a giant centipede on your head.” His brother freezes. Darryl’s fingers cut trails through his brother’s hair, parting the waves one way then another. When little brother is calm, Darryl plucks a tuft of hair from his brother’s head and force-feeds it to him. “Zonk,” Darryl says, then drops the fleshy mallet of his fist onto his his brother’s skull.

Darryl follows his brother everywhere. He studies him, examines the tilt of innocence in his cranium, the cunning cuteness of his messy hair. He looks for little brother’s fontanelle porta, for a parasitic word scaling the stem of his brother’s brain. He finds none. There is no idiot-sac attached to his head. When Darryl learns this, he lumbers to the barn to retrieve their father’s toolbox. He returns and finds little brother cross-legged before the television. He investigates the hind part of his brother’s brain again, but there is still no opening. When Darryl sees this, he raises the toolbox ceremoniously, holds it like a vessel of holy relics over his brother’s head and counts to himself – three, two, one – then lets the toolbox fall. “Kaplowy,” he says and waits for his little brother’s cries.

\*

Father’s air rifle calls to Darryl at the age of twelve. He hunts the gun down and claims it. He eats with the gun, sleeps with the gun, lays the gun across his pimples lap when shitting. He

wounds a starling with it. Kills a female cardinal, then its colorful mate. His father likes this. He buys Darryl a .22 and three boxes of bullets. When Darryl begins to drive, his father gives him a 12 gauge. Darryl wraps the guns in blankets and cradles them to the car. He lowers them into the trunk like a newborn. People listen to music, so Darryl listens to music. He feeds the tape deck a tape, then turns down the volume. On a dumbly-covered stretch of once-strip-mined land, he shoots yellow hillsides of dead grass, mud puddles the color of corn flour. He tosses the .22 aside, a silly toy. He prefers the way the shotgun's butt fucks the corner of his shoulder on recoil.

The next time Darryl goes shooting, he brings targets. He brings little brother. He brings an aerosol container of mother's hairspray, cans of creamed corn, a gallon of milk, a catfish he's been nursing in a bucket. He puts the shotgun in his brother's hands, then rubs the fish across his brother's lips. His brother wipes his mouth and spits.

"Get ready," Darryl says, then throws the fish into the air.

Little brother panics. He whips the gun up and shoots. The catfish splatters against the sky, a spray of black and red. The pieces fall to the ground in a meaningless display of flesh. Darryl's brother returns the gun to Darryl. He stares at the dots of meat on the ground and asks, "How do we put it back together, Darryl?" When little brother looks up, Darryl stares him down with the shotgun, four eyes of hollow curiosity.

"Hello, little brother," Darryl says. Then, "Goodbye, little brother."

Darryl winks into the crevice between the barrels. He holds the wink, then holds it some more.

"Always point your gun to the ground," Darryl says, then lowers the weapon.

\*

A year later, Darryl enlists. In a small gray office with a small gray desk, an Army recruiter asks Darryl, “Do you have flat feet?”

“I don’t think so,” Darryl says.

“Do-you-or-did-you-ever have a serious medical condition?”

Darryl says he had a heart murmur as a boy.

“Let me ask the question again,” the recruiter says. “Do-you-or-did-you-ever have a serious medical condition?”

Darryl says just the heart murmur.

“I don’t think you’re understanding the question. Do-you-or-did-you-ever have a serious medical condition?”

Darryl understands.

“No,” he says, “never.”

Darryl learns he likes to lie. He practices.

“I’m just a country bumpkin,” Darryl says, “but I have perfect vision and I’m a damned good shot.”

The Army sends a white van to collect Darryl.

“Eat well,” his mother says.

Darryl kicks the van’s tire twice.

His father pens something in his ledger.

The van’s driver neither moves nor emotes. He is a dummy staring into the nothingness of space. Darryl turns his back, and his little brother waves a pudgy hand goodbye. When Darryl steps aboard, the van sinks to the ground and screams. Darryl hunches his shoulders and shuffles to the last seat. When he sits, the van drives away. From behind, Darryl is the bald profile of a

head in a window, an ill-formed potato framed in glass, floating away.

\*

A drill sergeant asks Darryl, “Do you love me?”

Darryl says nothing. Love?

The sergeant asks again, “I said, ‘Do you love me?’”

Darryl says no.

“Then why the fuck are you staring at me like you love me?”

The sergeant clutches Darryl’s brain-base and neck, makes him do push-ups. Darryl labors to his knees and tables his back. He angles his body into a lumpy line against gravity. His breathing is rusty and mechanical. When he lowers his body to the ground, his arm meat quivers. When he pushes up, his whole body shakes. The sergeant gets on all fours to yell in Darryl’s face, calls him a sad-sack of pig-shit and waste of human flesh.

“Sweet crippled Christ, your head looks like a fat-loaf,” the sergeant says. “Did your mother cry when she held that ugly meat-head of yours? Good God, that poor woman, giving birth to a Christmas ham like that.”

Darryl stops and tries a one-armed push-up but fails. He flumps into the dirt, a camouflaged bag of dough.

“Jesus, Mary, and Jehovah, what in tar-fucking-nation was that? Did you just try to do a one-armed push-up?”

The sergeant screams into a line of uniformed men, “Listen up, you unholy maggots. Lard-Nuts here is going to *successfully* complete thirty one-armed push-ups or every last one of you pansy-ass morons runs ten miles”

The men hate Darryl. They ghost him.

“Do you hear something?” they say. “I think I hear someone.”

“Must be that fat ghost,” they say.

“Yeah, I’ve seen that ghost. A real ugly turd.”

Darryl’s body wanes. He is sunken-eyed and thin-flabby. At night he creeps into a bed wet with the men’s urine. He sleeps with food they’ve left under his blanket. The cold meats he expels with his foot, but he lets his toes play with the eyes of old potatoes. Darryl’s parasitic sac begins to itch. He runs his fingers across the back of his skull searching for the thread. When he finds it, he yanks it out. He examines the ghostly blob, rubs its fibrous tail between his forefinger and thumb. “Idiot,” he says. But the root remains in Darryl’s brain, and another will grow in its place.

To become see-able again, Darryl catalogs the men. He notes their first and last names, their backgrounds and natures. He scratches each man’s face into his brain. Once classified, he chooses a man who barks, howls, and yelps, a soldier who overpowers the others for fun, who chokes them to sleep in unbreakable holds. He is a jackal the men tolerate because of his keg-sized chest and cinder-block jaw.

So he waits until nighttime, just before lights out. He walks toward the man in baggy underwear, his flat feet slapping against the floor. Darryl touches the tip of his nose to the jackal’s nose, meets his hyperactive eyes. The men’s particles resonate into quantum uncertainty.

“I am going to crush your throat now,” Darryl says. “Are you ready?” And when the jackal says, “What?” Darryl steps back and strikes the apple of his throat. He does this with a v-shaped hand, the trachea snugly caught between Darryl’s thumb and fingers. Darryl watches the

man deflate to the ground, watches him crawl a random pattern across the floor. He observes the man's saucer-shaped eyes looking for a sliver of air in the air, searching for his voice in the cracks of linoleum.

The other soldiers corral the jackal like a crab at the beach.

"Is he okay?" they ask. "Can he breathe? I hope he can't breathe."

\*

Darryl deserts. A bus drops him six miles from home. His flabby body has turned thin. He walks like a man wearing the skin of another man. The clear sky lays the summer sun bare, which burns Darryl's scalp. Darryl passes cows, tobacco fields, the occasional farm house and granary. He leans against a fence post to rest until the general cicada song churns his brain into a bellicose madness.

When he reaches his home, he waits at the tobacco field's edge. He waits for night. The house looks kinder from the outside, the window-squares of orange light soft against the darkness. If he goes inside, he will breathe the air of his own disappointment. He looks up and the night suggests evil and rain. The clouds hang like ghosts over a baby's crib. Darryl has seen this sky before – in utero. His father's twisted seed dead against the wall of his mother's womb. Darryl lays down and sleeps under the nightmarish sky, under the ghoulish watch of his life's first moments.

A hysteria of bird calls wakes Darryl. The sky is a wave of grackles. He rises to a blue dawn softer than dusk. He is damp. The house looks dead. He finds a can of oil in the barn to coat the door's hinges. He cracks his driver's license between the doorknob and frame. The kitchen smells of sugar and grease, and the floor dips where tiles have splintered. Darryl pockets

a bundle of keys from a hook, then his father's wallet from the kitchen table. He walks across the living room, down the hall, into his old room. He collects his shotgun from under his bed. Shells from his closet.

He lingers in his brother's doorway. His brother is fourteen now and sleeping corpse-like in a casket of blankets. His body looks hungry. His pajamas are two sizes too small, and his eyebrows are gone. His eyelashes are gone. His head is patchy, and his hands are duct-taped in oven mitts to stop his hair pulling.

When Darryl turns to leave, the hallway becomes a narrowing tunnel. Darryl's father stands at its mouth, a composition of geometry, a parallelogram of a man. He walks toward Darryl on rectangular legs. Under him, the house moans in its substructure. A buzz of cicadas sifts through Darryl's brain telling him to shoot. When he does, he shoots his father's knee. The kneecap opens like a flower, and the splintered bone and folds of flesh resemble a salmon bloom with teeth. His father's screams are disorganized, and Darryl is neither sorry nor glad. Broken mind. Broken body.

Darryl walks outside. He sees his brother in the window. His face and shoulders are the melted top of a candle. His brother lifts an oven-mitted hand and waves goodbye. The gesture is a motionless one. Darryl lifts the shotgun and points it at him. It is the closet thing they have to an inside joke, the only way Darryl knows how to say goodbye. Darryl speaks without speaking, and his brother listens. We are the same, Darryl expresses, made from the same rotten clay, baked in the same unforgiving flames. As Darryl drives away, he sees his brother stuck in that window forever, the fragmented panes of a Gothic stained glass.

\*

A police officer stops Darryl on the interstate's shoulder.

“What are you doing with that gun, son?”

Darryl remembers a cartoon phrase. “Hunting rabbit.”

“Do you have a license?”

Darryl says he does not.

“It don’t matter. You shouldn’t drive so fast. It’s dangerous. Could cause an accident, make a mess. I don’t like messes. Go on now. Git. Git on home.”

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

Darryl salutes the officer and drives to the next exit ramp. The cop follows him for a while, then gives up. Darryl drives for hours. He drives through fields and over train tracks. He passes six water towers and a city skyline. Out of gas, he abandons the car in a ditch. He says goodbye to the gun and walks to a town where everyone smells of cherry pie and gasoline. Across the street from an abandoned bank, he finds an old schoolhouse. It is three stories tall and red brick but no longer a school. It is a place for housing townspeople. The landlord is an elderly woman occupying the principal’s office.

“I’m looking for work,” Darryl says.

“What kind of work?”

“I can do whatever needs doing. Fix whatever needs fixing.”

“Can you repair a commode?”

Darryl lies and says he can.

“Are you a Methodist?”

Darryl says no.

“An atheist?”

The landlord tells him that an atheist is a person who says there’s no God even though he



knows better.

“Do you believe in God?” she asks.

Darryl says he does not know.

“Well, as long as you’re not a Methodist, I suppose we’ll be okay,” she says.

That night, Darryl lies naked on a cot and stares at the boiler room’s ceiling. He stares so long he sees shapes in the plaster’s stalactites. There is a fetal pig and a moth. A carburetor. A belt. The smiling face of a donkey. Eyeballs. Lots of eyeballs. Maybe he sees God in those eyeballs. Maybe not. Maybe those are his mother’s eyeballs. Maybe his mother sees all, is God. He tries his hand at prayer, the way his father used to pray:

God is a plaster  
of wet eyeballs  
baked into the ceiling  
of every room.

God sees everyone  
and everything  
on every world  
and every moon.

Darryl rises and looks in a stained mirror above the sink. He has the face of a bat, or catfish, or batfish. He studies his body. It is melted marshmallow, clownish and sickly. He puts his underwear on. Then his shirt. Then his pants. He flattens himself onto the bed. Never sleeps naked again. Never sleeps on his back again. He hears God’s eyeballs blinking, watching, feels his wet penetrating gaze, cold as rope. He fears God is an evil he will never shake, and he hates the landlord for philosophizing.

When he sees his father at the foot of his cot, ledger in hand, he scratches his idiot-sac.

He considers the possibility God is not real, not someone out there, but an idea-fish swimming in

his brain. A ghostly eel. Electric. The forever currents of his past. He asks the ceiling a question without speaking. "Am I alone?" He watches the question pass through the plaster, sees it tumble through space. It bounces off Mars, then Ganymede, the rings of Saturn, Pluto. It ricochets off trillions of space-dead prayers. When Darryl receives no answer, he becomes bored. He rests his eyes and welcomes the world of old cartoons. An anvil falls from the sky, a barrel of TNT explodes, and a hunter shoots his own head off with an elephant gun. My god, Darryl calculates, my god.

## All of Them Stars in Heaven Shall Fall

It's the year after Hinckley shot Reagan. Late August. The Satanic panic is brewing, and a hellish heat hangs over southern Indiana. It is a Sunday, and the Koestlers are sitting in their living room watching reruns of *Hee Haw*, not laughing. They're eating fish sticks and tater tots on TV trays, and Calvin's father Stan saves one tater for putting out his cigarette. He's a wooden man who keeps his mustache long to cover a scar on his upper lip, a man who always wears the same black cowboy boots and jeans, the same western shirts of turquoise, canary, and maroon, a hard pack of Reds in his breast pocket. Calvin, flea-bitten and chubby, just shy of ten, moves to the floor to sit beside his dog. He's trained the mutt to bark whenever *Hee Haw*'s donkey brays, and for a second, Calvin thinks his father laughs at this trick, but it's just a cough. His father is just coughing. Calvin's mother Lori only half-watches the show. She's begun slipping in and out of trances, gazing into the television as if tracking specters inside the machine, listening for whispers crackling around the television's enormous pair of rabbit-ears.

That night, after dinner, Stan orders everybody's church clothes on. Calvin, his black sweater and black jeans. Lori, her black sweater and black jeans. Stan wears his black western shirt, a pewter-and-turquoise bolo tie. They take their El Camino down a poorly-lit stretch of shotgun houses, empty lots overgrown with weeds. A pair of tennis shoes dangles from a telephone line, and a few homes spill their guts onto front steps and lawns – doll parts and plastic guns, baby strollers, pajamas on tree limbs. They're driving to church to hear about the dangers of devil worship in America. "Between Jonestown and the Manson family, atheism and the Soviet Union, and, of course, the Church of Satan. Well," their pastor had said, "people are getting nervous, and somebody's got to do something. Somebody's got to sound the alarm."

On the drive to church, Calvin thinks of the charcoal of Satan on the church's wall, that

dark angel perched on a desert cliff overlooking an ancient city with outspread wings. Below the scene, in cursive, *How you have fallen from heaven, morning star*. Calvin has always felt drawn to the picture, the emptiness of the desert, the sense of quietness in the fallen angel's face.

They drive past a liquor store and a XXX warehouse, fields erupting with goldenrod. There is Stan's childhood home, a small place built by his father, a mortician Death mastered from the ground up just to take him under again, to a basement buzzing with soiled bulbs and gin, ham radios snatching at strangers' voices, snakes burrowing burlap sacks of corn into a static hiss. The basement where Stan, as a boy, spent days locked away, just him on an army cot in dim amber light, rows of liquid-filled jars, his father's dizzy fists. His only escape – fields of razor-grass sharp with calm, just him and a .22, shooting trees, shooting birds.

They skirt the strip where teens race muscle cars and scream into the hollow of the town's only overpass, parallel the Ohio River under a humid seal of stars, overtake a barge undisturbed by light, a bloated corpse of a machine pregnant with coal and framed in the mass of the riverbank's black treeline. In a distant corner of the sky, ember bursts of heat-lightning pop in clouds like ash-piles. The moon is full and low and blush, and Lori studies it all out loud. "A red moon is a sign the world's about to end," she says, although she says it the way a stargazer delights in shooting stars, with a hint of childlike wonder. She bounces the bottom of her perm with two hands, paraphrases *Mark* quoting Jesus quoting Isaiah, "and the sun shall be darkened, and all of them stars in heaven shall fall."

Calvin sits between his parents on the El Camino's console, gear shifter between his legs. He is a boy who carries the burden of a heavy forehead, of a front tooth grown crooked over his other front tooth. Stan blames them both on an overstayed welcome in Lori's womb. "You were all scrunched up and twisted in there," Stan told him. "Two weeks late. That forehead of yours

just kept growing, and that's why your snaggletooth went all wonky.”

Calvin is too young to think it, but he senses his mother resents him for breaking her tailbone during birth, that witching hour delivery with a whiskey-breathed doctor, the clanks of surgical tools and harsh light, Lori in tears refusing to hold him, face to the wall. All of it etched into Calvin's brain not as memory but as injury.

Calvin rubbernecks toward the windshield to see a barely-rusty moon dog-eared space. Across his lap is his father's bible, sadistic and thick, bound in black leather and zippered up, a tail-like strap for carrying. It reminds Calvin of his father's whipping belt, the one nailed to the wall of their pantry, just above the washing machine and next to Calvin's shelf of canned spaghetti and bags of oat cereal.

Stan ignores the omen-talk of dying stars and blood-stained moons. He blows smoke through a cracked window, steadies the El Camino with a lax wrist. Calvin knows they're getting close to church when he sees the soybean fields and sign that reads, *You are now leaving Indiana's third-largest city*. On the other side of the highway is sign that reads, *You are now entering Indiana's third-largest city!*

Stranded on a gravel road, the church dots a treeless field among treeless fields. Spotlights angle up from the ground, yawn harsh light against white brick and a white spire. Inside, Calvin follows his parents down a stairwell to the basement. The air is flesh-gripping and cold. Exposed pipes crawl the ceiling's length. At the basement's back, an open door spills voices and fluorescent light. Adults clump and chatter between rows of metal fold-out chairs, and kids draw stick-figured Golgotha scenes and lollipop trees on chalkboards. The walls are the off-white of bones, the ceiling panels and floor tiles are the off-white of bones. A silver-haired man in a black suit approaches Calvin and shakes a bucket at him.

“Want some candy?” he asks.

The bucket is old and dented. A fishing bucket. The kind for keeping fish alive first, then for their carcasses. The man’s hair shines with gel, and Calvin can see liver spots on his scalp through the comb lines. Lori touches Calvin’s back and says it’s okay, so he clenches a fistful of peppermints and suckers.

“You can only have two,” the man says.

The pastor wheels in a television strapped to the bed of a long-legged cart. He too wears a black suit, is pale, bald, and shriveled. He flicks the lights off and on. The talk shushes itself, and everybody finds a seat. He greets everyone with a prayer, then launches into a sermon on Satanic churches in grottoes and basements, long-haired men in black cloaks, bloodthirsty and cold-blooded, sacrificing animals in empty warehouses, in sewers beneath cities and small towns.

The room falls dark, and the pastor feeds the VCR a tape. The words *Satanic Cult* appear on the screen. Calvin watches the TV flash images of black and red smoke, the number 666, caves and mansions with checkerboard floors. Robed and hooded men with pointy goatees encircle pentagrams with horned skulls in the center. The camera zooms in on a punk rocker’s earlobe, on her upside-down cross earring. A voice-over warns against astrology, witchcraft, and fortune telling, says they are the Serpent’s playground.

The video ends on a clip of a talk show. A woman and her psychiatrist speak on ritual abuse. The doctor discusses hypnosis and recovered-memory therapy. With his patients in a suggestible state, he says, he can direct their thoughts into the dark tunnels of the mind, the unexplored corners of the brain. The woman recounts her past, tells stories of Satanists locking her in cages, of animal sacrifices, of rituals meant to incarnate the Devil himself, decades-old memories, she says, which her psychiatrist pulled from her *mentis oculi*. Finally, she holds up her book

for the camera, tells the audience it's in stores now.

Calvin hears someone behind him sniffing. He looks over his shoulder and sees a small boy rubbing his eyes and leaning against his father. The father's hands and wrists are oil-stained, as if he's just dissected an engine. Calvin turns back to the glow of the television, watches the light ghost across the room on dust particles, each speck a tiny seed in his mother's and father's eyes. The pastor pauses the video on the image of the woman holding up her book, then turns on the lights.

"I've taken the liberty of buying everyone copies of this important book," the pastor says, "and I expect you all to read it. You'll be shocked to learn what's going on in America. The Great Serpent is building an army, and his soldiers could be a neighbor, a teacher or a babysitter, a co-worker or a classmate, even a member of your own family." The pastor narrows his eyes and scans the room. He eyeballs Calvin, and Calvin glances down at his mother's hands, a stone in her lap wrung pale. Calvin turns to his father, reads a flicker of fire in his face. *A member of your own family.*

\*

Every night, Calvin sees his father hunched over the kitchen sink eating powdered donuts and smoking cigarettes. He's just standing there in his paramedic uniform, waiting for the graveyard shift, staring out the window. There's nothing across the street but an empty lot between houses, a concrete slab where someone's shed once sat. The kitchen is dark except for a night-light, and Calvin can see the book from church on the counter. The cabinet doors hang limp. Food splatters cover the stove-top and fridge, and the pantry is missing its door. Trails of smoke snake through the air, and Calvin catches his father's face burning in the window's reflection of cigarette-glow.

One night, Calvin finds his father's partner shuffling cards at the kitchen table. He goes by Holder, and he is a long twitchy man with a pistol strapped to his ankle. His pant-legs are bunched up high and when he sees Calvin staring at his gun, he says, "You never know. The world can be a dangerous place."

He tells Calvin about the time he and Stan treated a young man outside of a tavern, some college kid from another town. The guy's heart was peeking through a stab wound. The kid was in shock, Holder says. He was just lying in the parking lot, head raised, trying to see his own heart. Holder vibrates his fist in front of Calvin's face to show him how fast the kid's heart quivered. There was nothing they could do, Holder says, except drive the poor bastard to the hospital so he could die in hopes of surviving. "It was probably a drug deal gone wrong," he tells Calvin "but your old man believes it was a Satanist – you know, for the blood. Can you believe that shit?"

Calvin stands at the kitchen table in the half-dark and listens to Holder. He'd heard his father tell similar paramedic stories – a teenage girl decapitated by the roll bar of a jeep, a motorcyclist splayed by a Cadillac's hood ornament. Once, they made a 400-pound man walk down three flights of stairs because they didn't want to carry him on the gurney. The man was having shortness of breath and stomach pain, and he stopped in the stairwell to vomit blood. It looked like coffee grounds, his father said.

Holder leans back in his chair and plops his leg onto the table, asks Calvin if he'd like to touch his gun.

"It's alright," he says. "Your old man's in the garage."

Holder raises his pant-leg even higher and wiggles his ankle.

"It ain't going to bite," he says.



Calvin pets the gun's handle a few times. It is gripping and dry, like snakeskin. He runs a finger down the shaft and peeks inside the barrel, disappears into that tiny black hole, swims around in there for a while.

"You want to touch the trigger?" Holder asks. "The safety's on."

Calvin swallows. The thought possesses him, the trigger marking the air like a steel apostrophe. But when he goes to touch it, Holder strikes out and catches his wrist.

"I'm just fucking with you," he says. "It ain't good practice."

Stan walks in, and Holder lets go of Calvin's wrist.

"I was just teaching your boy about gun safety," Holder says.

Stan tosses two wooden crosses onto the kitchen table. They land with thuds, and he tells Calvin one is for hanging on his bedroom wall. There is something kindergarten about the crosses. They are short, thick, and stubby, the pencil lines still visible. The cuts have gone past their marks. It looks like Stan, in a hurry, took a reciprocating saw to some spare blocks of wood. But it is the paddle that shakes Calvin. His father has drilled holes into it, sanded it. *Don't Spare The Rod* has been painted in black across the paddle's edge. His father hangs it over the leather strap in the pantry, and Calvin recalls past beatings, the ceremony of it all, the hour long wait in his room, his father looping a belt into a limp ouroboros and popping it, the methodical counting from one to ten, his arm ungoverned, the ritual cliches. *This is going to hurt me a lot more than it's going to hurt you. You'll thank me someday.* Everything seemed to return to his father – his teachers' reports of him failing, the woman who caught him stealing her birdhouse, his mother finding him in the garage burning rubber cement. His father knows all and sees all.

Calvin looks at his father standing next to the paddle, reads the flatness of his face, his river-rock eyes, the deep wrinkles. He knows his father was beaten as a boy, not because he'd

told him. A picture has formed over time. Calvin has guessed his father's scar is from a split lip because, after beatings, he would tell Calvin, "I know it hurts, but it ain't a fist."

"Go get your tapes and those damn scary story books," Stan tells Calvin. "It's going in the trash, all of it. And bring your black clothes and posters, too."

Holder picks up one of the crosses from the table. He points it at Calvin like a gun and makes a *pkew* sound. "Better do as your old man says," he tells Calvin, then leans in and whispers, "Don't worry. I was black sheep once, too."

Calvin walks down the hallway to collect his stuff. He passes his parent's bedroom and sees his mother lying in bed on her side, face jaundiced by the dim light of a smoke-stained lampshade. She is burrowing out of a hollow of space with her stare, preparing to crawl inside some interior world. She does this on bad days, moves from room to room in a tattered gray bathrobe, curls up in bed or on the couch and gazes the hours away. On better days, she gets dressed, goes outside, and fills the bird feeders. Sometimes, she and Calvin pick up sticks, pull weeds or rake, cut ivy away from the house, place it all in a pile in the backyard and burn it. Calvin always kneels to start the fire with an old silver lighter Stan once gave him, and Lori always holds Calvin in front of her, envelops him like a casket, and together they stare into the snapping flames until it all turns to ash.

When Lori sees Calvin standing in the hallway, her focus changes. She looks him in the eye and manages a smile. Her fingers crawl out from behind her blanket, and she motions for him. He goes in and kneels beside her bed. "I got you something," she says, "something from the TV. It's on your pillow. These parents on this show said devil worshipers worked at daycares and at schools, that they were taking kids to Mexico in hot air balloons and through underground tunnels. For rituals. Has anything like that ever happened to you?"

Calvin shakes his head no. He sees his mother's eyes water, and Calvin doesn't understand, doesn't know the exhaustion of a split mind, the energy it takes for the well part to keep the sick part sequestered. He cannot hear the voices in that dark partition of his mother's brain, cannot see the ghosts there – her and her sisters in a storm cellar waiting for the End Times. The high-necked and long-sleeved dresses. The heat. The prunish lips and shaky limbs from days of fasting. At the head of a wobbly table, their father, pot-bellied and white-haired, face wrinkled from the lifelong burden of being right and setting records straight. His endless sermons and prayer. How he fed them all communion from his calloused thumbs. *This is my flesh. Eat. This is my blood. Drink.*

Lori reaches out and lifts Calvin's upper lip with her forefinger, runs it back and forth over his crooked tooth. "Don't ever change this," she says. "It makes you, you."

When Calvin goes to his room, he sees a King James on his pillow. It is like his father's. The same black leather, the same zipper, the same long tail of a strap. He pulls down his posters of star ships and alien creatures, rolls them up like scrolls. He digs through his dresser for black clothes, sets his books and cassettes on the floor, ties everything up inside his black church sweater. The room's emptiness hollows him out. An entire universe swallowed up and gone in minutes. There is only the bible left – a thick and heavy slab where he lays his head at night.

\*

That fall, the church offers a Harvest Festival in place of Halloween. *Costumes are welcome*, the church flier says, *but nothing scary, bloody, demonic, Satanic, or unchristian. No jack-o-lanterns, ghosts, zombies, witches, vampires, or Frankensteins.*

Calvin goes as a clown. He wears a rainbow-colored jumpsuit, a blue wig and red nose. His mother whitens his face with powder, then paints an exaggerated smile from one cheekbone

to the other with lipstick. Stan drives Calvin to the Harvest Festival but drops him off where the pavement meets the gravel road. “I’m not getting the El Camino dirty,” he says.

Calvin watches his father drive away. The air is cool, but he is sweating from the costume. He misses the old Halloweens, the trick-or-treating with neighborhood kids, racing from house to house by the orange glow of jack-o-lanterns. He wants to smell the autumn leaves, hear them crack under his feet, see the reds, yellows, and oranges, but here there is only the smell of gravel dust and top soil, a sea of flatness cloaked in dusk.

Inside the church’s gym, Calvin stands in front of the baptism pool, just underneath the regulation-size basketball goal. The lights are on and kids amble about to hymns. They are younger, except for the pastor’s grandson, whom Calvin hates. All of their costumes look familiar – shepherds, Marys, Josephs, a Roman soldier, some wise men. Except for the pastor’s grandson; he dressed in a black suit and rubber Ronald Reagan mask.

Calvin sees several booths for playing games. He visits the *Cain and Abel* booth, a ring toss game. The sign reads, *Are you Abel to toss a ring over the Cain?* Calvin watches a Roman soldier toss plastic rings at an upside down cane, which a woman dressed as Mary is holding. Calvin remembers the Cain and Abel story from Sunday school. The two brothers, how God hates one because he likes vegetables, how God loves the other because he sacrifices animals. The vegetable brother murders his brother out of jealousy. The blood curses the ground.

When it’s Calvin’s turn to play, the woman at the booth tells him the rules. He gets six tries. One piece of candy for every ringer.

“You have to *earn* your candy here,” she says, smiling and wagging a finger. “No free handouts.”

Calvin tosses the rings at the cane, but only one lands. The woman drops a mini Pay Day

into his pillowcase, and Calvin is embarrassed that he's the only kid with a pillowcase for a candy bag.

"Make sure you check out the basement," the woman tells him. "We have a nice surprise for you kids down there."

Calvin sees lights and smoke coming from the basement door. He walks down the stairwell, notices a fog machine and a strobe light. A network of overturned refrigerator boxes covers the floor. It is a maze. Above its entrance, a sign reads, *The Mind of God*. And underneath, *Canst thou by searching find out God?* The cardboard shakes violently from time to time, and Calvin hears yelling and screaming. He feels a tinge of fear. It is beginning to feel like Halloween again. He gets down on his hands and knees and crawls into the maze, uses his hands to feel the walls. He plows ahead until he sees a light coming in through a hole in the cardboard. When he reaches the spot, a face appears in the hole and a man waves a flashlight in his face, shouting, "For Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light!"

The man shakes the maze ferociously, and Calvin falls onto his side. He gets up and crawls away. The next time he sees a light ahead, he drops to his stomach and crawls on his belly. He hopes to pass the next hole unnoticed, but a man gyrates a flashlight at him and belts out, "The devil is a lion looking for someone to devour!" Then, the maze quakes again.

Calvin rushes to the end, feeling for turns along the way. Right before the exit, two men stick their faces through holes and tag-team a long bible verse at Calvin. "Put on the whole armor of God!" one man yells. "So you can stand against the devil!" the other man screams. When Calvin emerges from the maze, his elbows and knees feel bruised. Calvin is confused. The maze was all about the devil, but he doesn't feel frightened, just tense.

He walks upstairs and checks the time. His father won't return for another two hours. *The*

*Mind of God* only took five minutes to solve, even if it did feel like an eternity. Calvin wants to go outside. He is soaked in sweat, the strobe lights and smoke are chewing through his nerves.

He slips unnoticed through the gymnasium door, goes outside and walks down the gravel road, eating his Pay Day. He turns into a field, wades deep into the darkness and dirt. He sits cross-legged on a lump of clay and removes clown wig and nose. He takes his lighter from his pocket and lights the wig, holds it over the flame and watches it burn. He drops it to the ground and feeds the fire his pillowcase and nose. He leans into its mesmeric glow and watches the fire Rorschach light and darkness around him. The stars look down on him, and he recalls his mother's words. *All of them stars in heaven shall fall*. Each one a missile aimed at earth, locked and loaded for Judgment Day. Calvin imagines God's hand over an enormous red button. He thinks of the drills at school, the fear of a nuclear fallout, how everyone crawls under their desks in perfect unison every time the warning bell rings.

\*

A rumor spreads that the body of a boy had been found that Halloween in a culvert across the river in Henderson, Kentucky, next to a dead skunk and a pentagram drawn in blood. Calvin learns this after his father beats him for causing a panic at the Harvest Festival. A group of people spent two hours searching for Calvin in the church and fields. When they found him, he was curled up like a fetus in the dirt, asleep beside a pile of ash and half-burned pillowcase.

It was true that a boy had been beaten to death in Kentucky, but there was no pentagram, no dead skunk. But the facts mean nothing. For months, local news programs air specials on devil worship. Reporters interview Catholic priests and Satanists, ask the latter if they drink blood, practice cannibalism, or sacrifice animals or humans. The reporters visit record stores, hold up heavy metal albums. *The Number of the Beast* by Iron Maiden. *Heaven and Hell* and *The*

*Mob Rules* by Black Sabbath. They quote lyrics about crucifixions and Armageddon, show clips from *The Exorcist* and *Omen*. When someone dies from cyanide-laced Tylenol in Illinois, people believe it is the work of a Satanic cult.

At school, Calvin hears stories of white vans abducting children. Kids cross their chests or pray when they see the unraveled tape of cassettes worming down sidewalks in the wind or caught around the poles of street signs. They believe Satanists have recorded curses on the tape, that if you walk too close or touch them, you'll be cursed.

The summer after the Kentucky boy's death and Tylenol murders, Calvin's parents keep him at home. Since Stan has thrown away Calvin's books and music, he buys Calvin a .22, a box of crayons, and a stack of coloring books. Calvin spends the first weeks of summer shooting empty milk jugs in the backyard, coloring in a book called *The Freshwater Fish of Indiana*. All of the fish are gray. More than once, Calvin watches his father investigate the empty lot across the street, sees him stand beneath a streetlight seized by June bugs and moths, the occasional dip of a whippoorwill or bat. The pearl handle of his father's pistol shines under the streetlamp as he scans from left to right, right to left, swearing later he'd seen a strange man dressed in black.

And more than once, Calvin listens to his mother talk about shadowy orbs darting from room to room in their house, silhouettes of people disappearing down hallways. "Evil spirits," she says, "that you can only see by not looking directly at them." And although Calvin's father says nothing about the silhouettes, he admits he's seen the orbs. "I'm not saying they're evil spirits, I'm just saying I saw them."

That same summer, Calvin finds his mother standing in the kitchen holding a canister of coffee, shifting from foot to foot with hyperactive eyes.

"Where's your father keep his gun?" she asks. "He's not back from work yet."

Calvin has just woken up, is still in his underwear and t-shirt.

“Here, smell this,” she says, “Do you think this coffee smells funny?”

Calvin buries his nose in the can and inhales.

“It smells okay,” he tells her.

She yanks it from him and sniffs again. Then again. She asks if it smells like poison, tells him it smells like poison. She pushes the can back into his hands and rocks side to side. He takes another whiff. This time, he searches for a hint of something strange. He breathes in deeply. His mother sways in the background, suggests again that the coffee has been poisoned. She keeps swaying and suggesting, swaying and suggesting, and now Calvin thinks he detects something, a chemical scent, the way a balloon tastes on the lips but as an odor.

“It smells a little weird,” he says.

“Someone’s poisoned it,” she says. “Like the Tylenol.”

They pass the coffee back and forth for a while, sniffing, inhaling, lightheaded from breathing in their own suspicions.

“Get dressed,” his mother says. “We’re getting it tested.”

She grabs the Yellow Pages from the junk drawer and hands it to Calvin, and they drive around town looking for a place to test the coffee. Calvin thinks they will go to the police station, but they don’t. Lori is in a hurry. She opens up the El Camino on straightaways, and Calvin feels scared but in a good way, like they are on an urgent mission.

They stop at an industrial park on the edge of town. Rows of semitrailers line the backs of brick buildings. There are no trees, and the sky is an open book of apathetic white and gray. Lori tries one of the building’s doors, but it is locked. She jogs back to the car, ducks in, and rips a



page from the phone book. She kneels on the pavement and sprinkles coffee grounds onto the paper, folds it up into a pouch and twists it shut. “Give me another piece,” she says grabbing at the air. Calvin rips a page from the book and hands it to her. She sets it on the car’s hood and writes something on it with a bank pen, then places the pouch of coffee and note in front of the building’s door, where the thing sits weirdly like a paper bomb waiting to be lit.

\*

A month passes. Calvin is sitting at the kitchen table eating canned spaghetti for breakfast. A bottle of pills sits in the center. Lori rotates a glass of water with one hand. The pill in front of her looks too big to swallow, but she takes it without making a face.

“Let’s say you and I color some pictures,” she says.

They spread out on the living room floor with a pile of crayons. Calvin colors a duck hunter in a blind, his shotgun pointed at the sky. His mother colors a cardinal. She lies on her stomach and cuts the air with her legs.

“Did you know with birds,” she tells Calvin, “that God made the guys the most colorful?”

They color quietly until Lori lays her head on the floor. Calvin watches her slip in and out of consciousness, her eyes – sometimes open, sometimes closed – waxen. Her arms and legs seem locked in place, and to Calvin, she looks sicker than she’s ever looked before. When he asks if she is okay, she just says, “Ssssstrange.”

Calvin drapes a blanket over her. He switches on the television, but the images flux like liquid curvatures, side-winding up and down the screen. Calvin can barely make out a nose, a mouth, an eye. He pieces together a face in his mind, then he realizes he does this with everyone – his mother and father, kids at school. Every face, a hodgepodge of geometric shapes.

He tries adjusting the TV’s rabbit-ears. He pushes the left antenna to the left, points the

right one to the right. He crisscrosses them, aims them at the sky. He handles the antennae like a crane operator – one lever forward, one lever back. He remembers his mother saying she hears voices coming from the rabbit-ears, and he wonders if he can send thoughts to her over the air-waves, like a prayer, but to his mother. He unhooks the rabbit-ear's from the television's back and sits. They look more like a butterfly's antennae. He wonders if his mother is really sick, or if she's just picking up the thoughts of other people, that maybe she is a natural antenna. He holds the rabbit-ears on his head and closes his eyes. He concentrates on his mother, calls for her in his mind. *Mom, can you hear me?* There is no answer, but he sees an image of her from years ago. She is sitting in front of him, palming the air like a mime. They are playing the mirror game. He must copy her moves, mimic her faces. If she holds up her right hand, he holds up his left. If she smiles, he must smile.

Calvin misses that game. He puts the rabbit-ears back on the television and lays in front of his mother, tries to mirror her. He pulls his legs up to his stomach, like her, folds his arms into his chest. He closes his eyes and falls asleep like a fetus on the floor, wondering if he too is a natural antenna, if God has made him the same way that he has made his mother.

\*

When Lori calls about the pills, a nurse tells her the side effects are temporary, that it takes time to adjust. For days, she glides past Calvin's bedroom, a phantasm, carries her body around like an outline, shuffles by Calvin in the hallway, a stranger. She struggles to hold onto things, apologizes whenever she drops her fork or spills a glass of water. But even after she throws away the pills, the TV trays stay folded up, and everybody eats in secret or not at all. At night, they watch TV preachers and the news, the same swarm of race cars circling the same loop over and over. On the couch, Lori tucks her head into the bend of Stan's outstretched arm, and

Calvin wishes it wasn't the first time he'd seen his parents close.

The summer ends quietly with Lori at her bedroom window watching the starlings take over the bird feeders, with Stan and Holder sitting at the kitchen table drinking beer and sweating in front of a fan. Holder is pricing a shoebox full of baseball cards with a pricing guide, and Stan is reading a book called *The Satan Seller*. The kitchen is quiet until Stan reads a passage from the book for Holder: "*I swung the now screaming cat over the smoking cauldron and then over the heart of the girl on the altar. Then, when the sword point touched the cat's belly, I thrust ....*" Holder elbows Stan, then nods toward the doorway. Calvin is standing there, listening to his father read, waiting for him to finish.

"I thought you were with your mother," Stan says. "What do you want?"

When Calvin asks if he can ride his bike up and down the street, Stan says no.

Holder motions for Calvin, says, "Come here, little man."

Calvin obeys. He stands between Holder's long legs, and Holder wraps his hand around the back of Calvin's neck, squeezes.

"Give the kid a break," Holder says. "Jesus Christ. Ain't no devil cults around here."

Holder massages the back of Calvin's neck, and Calvin hunches away. "Ain't that right?" Holder asks.

Stan bows his head toward the table and closes his eyes. He slides his can of beer over his forehead. "One hour," he says. "That's it."

"Attaboy," Holder says, then stands to open the kitchen's screen door for Calvin.

Outside, Calvin rides to the end of the street. He feels like he's crossed some invisible barrier, that if he turns around, his house won't be there. He's come to see his home as an unmappable place which the real world can never find because it is its own small universe.

He turns onto another street and rides to the Buy Low grocery store. The *Buy* has fallen off the building's facade, so the lettering just reads *Low*. He sees a strand of audio tape caught around the base of stop sign's pole. It writhes sporadically whenever a car passes. Calvin wads up the tape and stuffs it into his pocket. He wonders if he can re-spool it later, play it at home. He wants to know if the rumors are true.

He rides a couple of miles to the construction site of a new subdivision, walks his bike across acres of muddy plots, past freshly dug basements and skeletal frames, past wires and pipes jutting from the ground. He climbs to the second floor of a house with no walls, perches on a crossbeam of wood and looks over a stretch of dead land flattened by earthmovers. There are no people, no builders, no children playing.

After he climbs down, he investigates a sinkhole. The hole is a few feet deep, wide enough to swallow a small boy. The sweat from his forehead drips in, and the afternoon sun lights the mouth of the hollow. When he looks closely, he sees something moving inside, something pink, a mole maybe, a newborn. It reminds him of Holder's story, of that man's heart peeking through a stab wound, quivering, and Calvin wonders if the animal is injured, if it is all alone.

He leaves his bike at the edge of a treeline and walks into the woods, hoping to find some kids playing around the creek. It is cooler in the trees, darker, except where light filters in to lace the forest floor. When he reaches the creek, he finds no one, just some beer bottles and a wilted nudey magazine. The only sound comes from a drainpipe feeding the creek a rill of dark water. Calvin picks up a stick and flings the magazine into the creek, watches it float away, a perverse leaf. He walks on cracked mud toward the pipe. He wants to see what's inside. A faraway gunshot pops, and the treetops reveal a cacophony of bird-calls and wings. When Calvin looks up, a

star marks the sky though it is day. Near the pipe, he wades into the shallow edge of the creek. The water is hot, and the mud suctions his shoes where the water deepens. A cottonmouth swims past him, and the pipe's air smells like pumpkin guts and rotten leaves. He pulls out his lighter and lights it. The flame reveals only emptiness. He remembers the murdered boy from Henderson, beaten to death, then thinks of his father. He worries he's been gone too long, that he'll be belted when he returns. The trees rise like sentries now. They are eyeing his every move, noting his ways, counting down the minutes. He wants to crawl inside the drainpipe, wants to disappear into its darkness and be unseen. His gaze tunnels through space like his mother's, and he retreats inwardly. He looks for something otherworldly inside of himself but finds nothing. Now he knows he will revisit this place, that he'll return to this hollow spot, crawl inside, and lose himself forever.

## The Ends of Smaller Worlds

The last stretch of highway from Indianapolis to Sloan was cracked and narrow, and grit from the road's shoulders was wind-skimming the pavement in violent bursts. The December sun was nothing more than a white aneurysm bleeding into gray matter, and the whole mess was sliding down the sky into a horizon of frozen farm fields. Em held her arm out the car window and let the air take her cigarette. She blew smoke at the dreamcatcher on her mirror, brushed ash from her lap. There were bits of dried food on her work pants, and she could still smell burnt meat and grease. She took the wheel with her knee, cranked her window handle with one hand and lifted the glass with the other. The car drifted into the other lane and she said fuck-goddammit, but nobody was coming, not near Sloan. Only an abandoned grain elevator loomed over the flat fields, and a few empty homes hid in clumps of trees along the road, all of them miles apart, each one warped by years of heat and ice and rodents nesting, breeding, dying, and decaying.

Troy was rubbing the tops of his legs and talking about a manuscript he'd found online called the *Carunda Mundi*, how it predicted Y2K by 2,000 years. He called it a thing of beauty, said it was all parchment-and-calligraphy-and-Sanskrit-and-shit. A tattoo of a busty woman shored up his neck in bruise-blue ink, and he slouched in his seat with heavy eyes. Em reached over and combed his hair with her fingers, covered the bald spot at the back so she didn't have to look at it. He kept touching the gold chain under his jean jacket's fur, a piece thicker than Em's little finger. It was all of his money. "For when the computers crash," he said, "and all the banks go belly-up." He'd been researching the whole thing for a month, went out and bought a gun and Leonard Nimoy's *Y2K Family Survival Guide*.

Em saw what was left of Sloan, and she knew that Y2K had already come and gone in a

sense. No electricity. No water. No supermarkets or general stores. Industry and homes abandoned years ago. Then there were Corwin, Brisco, and Dunn, the other ghost towns she knew of. People didn't seem too bothered by the ends of smaller worlds, only the world at large. She thought of her own little Y2K in Indianapolis – the power company cutting her off, the weeks living with candles and a flashlight, how she stole food from the restaurant sometimes because she had to. She imagined Indianapolis months after the computers crashed. Utilities down, stores and banks closed, jobs lost. *Good*, she thought, *let the fuckers sweat*, though she couldn't say who the fuckers were. It was a loose They, the people on top maybe, anyone whose world hadn't collapsed yet.

She held out her hand and told Troy to give her something, she was nodding off. He pulled a baggy from his coat pocket and dropped two truck drivers into her palm. He turned to the back, pushed away water jugs and bags of canned food, grabbed her a Hamm's tallboy, then one for himself. Em clinched the beer between her legs and cracked it open. She took the pills with a swig and a head-jerk. Her throat was fat with infection and it hurt to swallow. The foam made her eyes water. She cursed and said it tasted like piss. The car was cold, so she slid her sweatshirt's hood over her head and pulled at the strings, put another cigarette in her mouth and waited for Troy to light it.

He had his new pistol out. He was pointing it through the windshield, aiming it at an oncoming semi. He closed one eye and play-shot the driver – one, two, three – made recoil motions after each round. He laid the gun between his legs and lit Em's cigarette, told her he was sick of tattooing dolphins and barbed wire on college kids.

“You keep saying that,” Em said. “but what the hell else you gonna do?”

He put the gun on his knee, wrapped his fingers around it and bounced his leg up and

down. "I don't know," he said, "Race car driver."

Em leaned forward and laughed. She slapped the steering wheel and rocked it back and forth, made speeding noises. "At your age?" she said. "Please."

Troy chewed up his lip. He stared at the grain elevator in his mirror for a while. "Hey, what do rednecks and hillbillies call grain silos?" he said.

He sipped his beer and waited. "Skyscrapers."

"Screw you," Em said. "You know my people are from around here."

\*

The sun was setting winter-early, and Em slowed to look for her grandparents' old house in the shadows between the trees. The ease of sliding off the road surprised her more than the accident itself. The car lifted a hair off the pavement. Troy muttered a weak "Jesus." They spun around in a slow smoothness, then skated weird-ways across the road into a tree. The thud was no louder than a car door slamming. Troy wiped at the beer on his stomach and crotch, said great. He twisted around and looked at the road.

"Black ice. You must have braked right on top of it. It's ice you can't see."

"I know what black ice is," Em said.

She pulled back and white-knuckled the steering wheel to the left, heard crunching and popping in the fender, felt stiffness in the wheel. "Fantastic. One more fucking thing I can't afford." She drove backwards to the house with one hand on Troy's headrest, her face close to his. "I feel like a race car driver," she said. "Just had a bad wreck on the old straightaway. I'm pulling into the pit stop now. The crowd's going nuts because I'm still alive, cheering because I haven't given up."

Troy rolled down his window and threw out his beer.



“I don’t mock your dreams,” he said.

“That’s because I don’t have dreams,” Em said. “I’m not six years old. She switched to her idea of a redneck voice to show Troy he didn’t bother her, “I’s just trying to pay dem bills. I’s just tryin’ to suhvide.”

Troy didn’t laugh. His eyes were as dead as Sloan, and Em got the feeling he was waiting for Y2K to snap its fingers and wake him up. The gun, the tent, the plan to sleep in abandoned homes through the worst of it all. “Squatting’s the new train hopping,” he’d told her. Maybe he believed a disaster would make him a more necessary man, activate some primitive version of himself tucked away for a moment just like this. And her? A night or two in the old house, beers and silence under stars and sharp country air. It was the closest thing to rest she would have in a long time.

\*

The house was one-story. White wood, black roof, particle boards over the windows and door. A lattice of bare tree branches framed the facade at odd angles like bird bones, and a thick limb laid across the crushed roof. The smell of campfire hung in the air, and a shred of smoke passed through a hole in the house like it was giving up the ghost. Troy asked if the place was on fire, but Em said she didn’t know. She had a bag of food and a water jug in her hands, and Troy carried a kerosene heater and a pry bar with a flashlight taped to it.

A board stood propped against the door’s frame. A fistful of wood screws laid scattered on the porch. Troy put down the heater and pry bar and moved the wood aside. They went in and Em slid the board back over the opening like it was the lid to a flimsy sarcophagus. The carpet Em remembered as a child had been ripped up, and she could see black stains on the floorboards. The ceiling dipped in the center where the tree limb had fallen, and the walls bulged in spots like

souls of people trapped inside. There was guitar music in the next room and the sound of fire clicking. Em patted Troy's gun in the back of his pants and he walked into the kitchen ahead of her with his hand behind him.

An older man with a beard crowded a fire on the edge of a lawn chair. He was large with oily hair that reflected bits of light from the flames. His coat was long, goat-like, and dirty-white. An assault rifle was on the floor beside him. He had roasted a rodent on a stick and was tossing bits of meat to an old dog on a blanket. Another rodent hung from a cabinet's handle, skinned and splayed in a crude wire-hanger frame. The kitchen was tight, its floor soft and uneven from tumors of rot growing underneath the linoleum.

"Want some squirrel?" the man asked. There was no need for names.

Em could see the linoleum melting in bubbles around the coals. She looked through the hole in the roof where the tree had pierced the house. The fire was small and not too bright, and she could make out a few stars between the streaks of smoke rising.

"Squirrel in winter?" Em said.

The man opened his arms, looked left, looked right, as if to say, *Ask and you shall receive*. "Don't you know?" he said. "They nest in homes for winter. Kind of like us." He laughed and kicked a cage-like trap near his feet. "Best time of the year. All fattened up with nuts."

Em studied a mess of electronics on the kitchen counter. Black cables snaked from a car battery to a power inverter, from the inverter to a record player. There was a box next to it, a vinyl record case. On top, an album with a picture of a light bulb on the cover. The Bee Gees'

*Idea.*

"No reason to live like barbarians just because computers failed us," the man said.

*Barbarians.* Em almost laughed. The squirrel on the stick. The animal coat. The gun. He

looked ready to survive any number of apocalypses, but Em didn't know if that was a good thing, if he was a man or a beast.

A new song was about to play, and everyone waited for the needle to pick up the music so they could talk again. A soft bassline came over the static, then an acoustic guitar. Troy asked the man how he'd made it to Sloan, and the man threw a thumb over his shoulder, said he had a van out back. Em could hear nerves in Troy's voice. He spoke softly, too kindly, like he wanted to make small talk with the man but worried he might offend him. She listened to the song while they talked. It sounded familiar, but she knew she'd never heard it before.

*I started a joke, which started the whole world crying  
But I didn't see that the joke was on me, oh no  
I started to cry, which started the whole world laughing  
Oh, if I'd only seen that the joke was on me*

"Most people think of the Bee Gees as disco," the man said. "But I like to think of them as soft rock or easy listening."

He leaned back in his chair and nobody spoke. Em wanted to ask what the hell he was doing in her grandparent's house, what made him think he could start a fire in the middle of their goddamned kitchen. But the man had her thinking about the Bee Gees and squirrel meat. And there was the rifle. This was all necessary. The politics of squatting. Show no aggression. Show no weakness. Walk the line. Wait and see.

The man pointed to their kerosene heater at Troy's feet. "What the hell are you waitin' for?" he said. "Crank the son of a bitch up. It's colder than a witch's titty in here."

Troy started the thing with the push of a button and a series of hard clicks. The oily smell of kerosene filled the kitchen, and the man breathed in the fumes like they were a fine wine. He nodded at their bags of food and water.

"You got more stuff in your car?"

\*

They walked to the car on dead grass, long freshly-frozen laid-down grass. They faced the gloom of a low crescent moon and bouts of their own cold breath.

“This is my grandparents’ house,” Em said.

Troy gave her a look, and the man kept walking.

They stood behind the car with the trunk open. Troy handed Em their tent and threw two sleeping bags onto the ground. He slung a backpack over his shoulder and walked to the side for the beer cooler.

“You better hope Y2K ain’t real,” the man said. “You won’t last two weeks with this shit.” The wind was still blowing hard, and Em could see more of the man’s face. He looked less prophetic away from the fire. The coat was a prop, something to make him look bigger, fiercer.

“You got a radio?” the man said.

“Just gonna use the car’s,” Troy said. “Tonight’s temporary. See what happens. Head back to the city if things ain’t too bad. Go west if shit gets ugly.”

“The *city*? There’s more than one of them around.”

“Indianapolis,” Em said.

The man repeated the words in a serious voice – *the city* – then shook his head and smiled. Troy looked at the ground and ran a hand through his hair. Em could tell he wanted to impress the man, the way he switched to *ain’t* to sound more country.

“Come on,” the man said. “I got me a radio.”

\*

The van was black and lifted with a row of lights over the cab. There was a ladder on one side and a flag pole on the other, a rack on top with stuff roped down under a tarp. The American

flag in the flagpole snapped with the gusts of wind, and Em noticed a black trash bag taped over the passenger-side window. A bald eagle was airbrushed on the front fender, its talons open in mid-flight to grab some prey. It reminded Em of those pictures on the sides of bombers and fighters.

The man opened the back doors and said, "This is me." Em saw the pile of blankets and pillow and felt some relief that he wouldn't be sleeping inside. She watched him crawl into the back of the van. It smelled like wood-smoke and motor oil. Around the blankets were boxes of bullets, a tire iron and a spare, black boots on a hotplate, a stack of nudey magazines and a cordless drill, a few army-green canisters with rings on top, smoke grenades or tear gas, Em wasn't sure which. She noticed a calendar on the inside of the van. *December 1999*. It was taped upside-down and the *1* had been crossed out, so it looked like the number of the Beast, or *6664*. The man handed Troy a radio with a hand-crank and told him to turn it on.

"Go on," he said. "Check the news."

Troy cranked the handle like a jack-in-the-box, and the man told him to turn it faster. Troy's arm worked hard at making fast little circles. His face became tight. "It ain't working," he told the man.

"Faster. You ain't going fast enough."

He watched Troy for a while and started laughing. He was still on his knees in the back of the van. "I'm just fucking with you. The thing's got batteries." He took the radio from Troy and pushed a switch to one side, turned it on and dialed through the static for a bit before turning it off again. "Fuck it," he said. "It ain't midnight yet."

\*

Em left Troy to rebuild the fire with the man. She wanted to see the rest of her grandparent's old house. The rooms all looked smaller. It was hard to remember things without the furniture, or maybe she was just forgetting. There used to be pictures on the wall, but she couldn't say of what. The smells were gone. No perfumes in glass bottles, no vapor rub, no cornbread and beans. The memories of her grandparents felt locked away, and these lost objects were the key. It was sad. She wondered if people were little more than the things around them. Take everything away and what's left but words and touch, two things that embarrassed her family the most.

Troy was looking spell-bound into the flames when she walked back into the kitchen. He didn't know it, but he was rolling his gold chain between his finger and thumb. Em saw the man eyeing Troy's chain, then saw him look away. She grabbed a beer from the cooler and sat on the floor. The flickering of the fire was an anchor for her mind. The shadows twitching against the walls. It was pleasantly quiet until Troy asked the man how he ended up in Sloan.

"You ever been to Muncie?" the man asked. Troy shook his head no. "Of course not. Why would you? It's a city, not *the city*, but a city. Anyway, the place is dying a slow death. Like watching a heifer die of mad cow."

"Jesus," Em said.

"Meat packing, glass, automotive. All dead or dying. Fucking robots and cheap labor overseas. The plants close. There are layoffs. Truckers lose work. Truck parts companies close. It's like a line of goddamned dominoes. I'm gonna wander a bit, make my way down to Texas, work in oil or gas."

"You're not out here because of Y2K?" Em asked.

“Y2K is a rich man’s problem,” he said. “People with money to lose and property to protect.”

The man’s dog stood up on legs like twigs. It walked toward Em and stood in front of her wagging its tail. She saw a tumor on its eyelid. The growth was black and looked like a blue-berry. She scratched the top of its head and asked about the calendar in the van. “1999,” she said. “Upside-down? 666?”

The man laughed himself into a wet cough, spit into the fire. “What makes you think the coming of the Beast is a bad thing? I say fuck the computers.” He looked at his dog and said, “Listen, I’ve been thinking about it. I had a dog when I was a kid. Spent her whole life cooped up in a camper with me and mom. When that bitch was a puppy, she carried on like *everything* was the eighth wonder of the world. A toilet paper roll. Socks. The smallest things entertained her. Then one day she gets old. Hobbles to her food like it’s chore. You know, just lies around, sleeping-like but not. Mom puts her down, gets a new one.” He waved his beer around, jabbed a finger at Troy and said, “That’s the fucking world, man. It’s time for a fresh start. I say bring it on.”

Troy sat cross-legged nodding *Yes* with his whole body. He was getting drunk. Up in his chair, the man looked like the founder of some cult, and Troy, rocking back and forth on ground, his first follower. Em could see Troy searching for something clever to say in response, and she didn’t want to hear it. “I’m going to bed,” she said. “Don’t burn the goddamned house down and kill us all.”

She set up the tent in her grandparents’ bedroom. She remembered standing in the doorway as a girl, seeing her grandpa staring into space in his wheelchair by the bed. She’d always say *Hi, grandpa*, but he would just look past her like she wasn’t there. She thought of her

grandma taking him to the bathroom every day, of that time she saw her grandma through a crack in the door. She was on her hands and knees crying, cleaning up a pair of bare legs and a mess on the floor. Em lay in the tent with thoughts still shimmering from uppers and memory fragments and nerves about Y2K and the man. Her feet were sticking out the opening, and she felt the smallness of everything. She realized how tiny she was, how fragile people are and their small worlds, how people can be reduced to nothing, even before they die.

\*

The morning was a blue-gray dementia. Em crawled out of the tent, stood up, sifted through a tangled mess of what happened yesterday, what was happening now, and what would happen later. Troy was wearing a backpack and picking up the kerosene heater. There was a hole in the wall that had not been there last night and a small pile of debris beneath it.

“Kerosene fumes,” Troy said when she asked him. John said we’d die in our sleep without ventilation, so we drilled a hole from the outside last night. He’s got a core bit for his drill. Didn’t take long.”

Em held the sides of her head together as if they might collapse. She pointed to the boarded-up window. “Why didn’t you just drill a hole through a board?”

“Too high. John said the vent needed to be close to the floor next to where the heater sits.”

Em knelt on the floor and looked through the hole. It was a perfect circle. She could see the trees behind the house, and she felt like Alice glimpsing a garden beyond the tiny door, except she knew from the look and smell of the air that the day was cloudy and stale, the light muted and starved. She held out her hand and told Troy to give her something, she couldn’t think straight, she was exhausted. She swallowed the pills dry by stretching out her neck and rubbing



them down her throat. They felt lodged behind her breastplate, and she didn't know if they were stuck or if it just seemed that way.

She walked outside and stood on the porch. The man's van was parked by her car, and her car was on a jack with the front tire off. The man was picking up tools from the ground, tossing them into the back of his van. Em walked across the yard a bit shaky. Her throat was more swollen and she was feverish. She yelled *hey* with a coarse voice to get his attention.

"Fix it," she said. She pointed to her car and said, "Fix it now."

"You messed up that wheel real-bad-like," he said.

"It was fine last night."

"Your boy said you had to drive backwards."

"The tire just rubs against the fender. It's fine. I drove it backwards 'cause we were close to the house and the wheel was hard to turn."

"I don't know about all that," he said. "I just know *that* ain't safe."

Troy was standing behind Em with a hand on her shoulder, telling her John was just trying to help. The man shut the van's back doors one at a time and told Em, "Don't fret, little missy. We're on our way to a gas station as we speak. Gonna call a tow truck." He opened the driver's door and stepped onto the van's sideboard, picked up his dog off the front seat and moved it to the back with a groan. He laughed and said he must be getting old.

Troy walked to the other side and opened the door. "Everything's fine," he told Em. "Y2K ain't real. It's all fake. We heard it on the radio last night." He shut his door, and Em imagined him telling the man that she'd be fine, that she just needed some time to cool down.

The van started to pull away, and the man honked. Troy leaned over and yelled through the driver-side window, "Be back soon."

Em put up her hood. She was shivering. There was a coldness at her core rippling out to the ends of her body. She started walking back to the house but forgot where she was for a moment. She stopped and crossed her arms in a panic. The house seemed so unfamiliar, the boards on the windows, the tree limb caving in the roof. She tried to remember how the place used to look so she could start walking again. *This is my grandparent's home*, she thought, but it wasn't. She rubbed the feeling back into her face and walked into the shallow treeline behind the house.

Her body carried her head and its thoughts like a weighty afterthought. Beyond the trees was a field in a coma, and, in the distance, a wall of trees, and she knew beyond those trees was another comatose field with another treeline in the distance, and so on, to the ends of the world. She stood at the edge and made fists in her pockets.

She waited for her knees or mind to give out, but her body was a balloon tethered to the land, strung up and floating above desolate fields for miles. She was closer to the stars but only by a laughable distance, like an astronaut spacewalking on treetops. The moon was still crescent and she could see the man named John alone in his van, crawling slowly over corn rows like a tank in a field, squashing husks into the frozen mud, coming for her with his search lights on and the American flag at attention in the wind. And there was her grandpa below her in the trees, disappearing and reappearing in the openings, but she knew it wasn't really him the same way she knew that the house was no longer her grandparents' house. And she saw Christmas lights in the distance blinking on an old farmhouse. *Let the fuckers sweat*, she thought, then remembered the line from the song and laughed. *If I'd only seen that the joke was on me.*

## Two Philosophers

Not long before doctors diagnosed Kennedy with narcolepsy, his father Ira accepted the Earth was flat and not spheroidal. This was in 1997. Kennedy was twelve. A table slid Kennedy into an MRI machine and he heard rockets and birds. He heard the construction of a chorus – *wooby-wooby, wooby-wooby*. To calm his nerves, he imagined birds on branches. Branches split into more branches, split into twigs, split into stems. Stems bore leaves and seeds. Seeds fell and died. Underground, a seed split open and branched into the soil. Kennedy recalled zygotes, embryos and endosperm from science class. Smelled formaldehyde and pig parts. Saw the magnesium strips he stole and burned, the white crescent moons the magnesium's light etched into his vision. He saw the periodic table as a beautiful painting evolving over time. He returned to the seed in his mind, watched it grow, branch and produce more seeds. The cycle continued on a loop until Kennedy's eyes closed and he fell asleep to the *wooby-wooby* of the machine.

Kennedy's father Ira waited nervously in the lobby. His long body formed to the chair like a honky-tonk Lincoln to an upholstered memorial. His ponytail protruded from the back of a trucker cap which read *Hoosier Daddy*, and dirt from his work boots stained the carpet around his feet. He flipped through a magazine. Past the Hubble Telescope. Past megatherium. Past the Human Genome Project. He stopped at the foldout, tried to make sense of Darwin's tree of life, Haeckel's tree of life, a phylogenetic tree, the Hillis Plot, but could only think of tree rings. Past an iMac ad. He stopped at a picture of Lucy and furrowed his brow at the artist's rendition of *Australopithecus afarensis*, scoffed at the idea of evolution. He turned the page and was about to learn a flowstone is a type of speleothem until the man next to him interrupted.

The stranger read beaky and appendagey, registered egret-mantis. He reminded Ira of a puppet he once saw but could not recall when or where, a smart-looking puppet with glasses and

a brown suit. The man introduced himself as Jules, then added *Jules* was not his real name.

“People call me Jules because I dig for the truth,” he said.

Ira did not know what that meant and wondered if the man was a maniac or a genius and if there was a difference. Ira told the man he was a driller, he dug for dirt.

“Dirt’s in my blood,” Ira said, and he had never spoke truer words having come from a long line of farmers and heavy equipment operators drawn to strip mines and the scars of quarries. Ira had been shaped by a pocket of the Midwest where people felt more comfortable plumbing subterrains than exploring the depths of life on the surface, where people paid lip service to the Christian God but served the ancient gods of rock and dirt, evident in the priestly discoloration of their hands, nails and knuckles creased with earth, fingers gnarled like the root vegetables harvested by their ancestors.

Jules nodded at the magazine Ira held, pointed to the picture of Lucy.

“I can see you’re a man of science. Let me ask you, do you believe the Earth is a sphere?”

“You mean round?” Ira asked.

“Well, no, not really. The Earth can be flat and still be round.”

When Ira said, “I guess,” Jules smiled and said, “Prove it.”

Ira shrugged his shoulders and Jules started talking rather quickly. Ira half-listened politely as Jules said something about domes, maps, and cherubs on globes. Ira quickly flipped past an erectile dysfunction ad. He lifted his eyebrows at the right times and nodded in agreement to Ira saying something about “Earth encircled by ice,” “Earth’s lack of visible curvature.” Ira stopped listening to read two cartoons.

In the first cartoon, a caveman gnawed on a bone at the mouth of his cave. He wore an

animal skin exposing a hairy shoulder. The sun had just set, and the sky had begun to grow dark. A speech bubble from inside the cave read, “Honey, the power’s out ... AGAIN!” Ira chuckled and shook his head in agreement.

The second cartoon showed a progression of bar brawls. A young college student pushed a man and called him Cro-Magnon. Cro-Magnon pushed a man and called him Neanderthal. The Neanderthal pushed a man and called him *Australopithecus*. *Homo habilis* sat at the bar and said, “Hey, what am I? Chopped liver?” The bartender rolled her eyes and said, “Frat boys.” The second cartoon disappointed Ira.

When Jules produced pictures and diagrams from his bag, Ira put down the magazine and leaned in for a closer look.

“Is that a purse?” Ira asked eyeing Ira’s bag.

“It’s a satchel.”

The answer satisfied Ira, so he continued to listen. Jules showed him the flag of the United Nations and claimed the flag was actually Illuminati code for a flat Earth. Ira said he had never heard of no Illuminati.

“A network of powerful people who control the world for personal gain.”

“You’re talkin’ about government.”

“No, more shadowy than that.”

Ira shrugged his shoulders. Jules showed him pictures of Earth from space. Jules put finger quotes around “from space.” He claimed the photos depicted discrepancies in North America’s scale and size (and probably other continents, too, but Jules only knew of North America).

He handed Ira pictures from skydivers to prove a lack of curvature on the horizon. Ira was mildly

interested. He stared at the photographs, but his thoughts wandered to Kennedy. The doctor assured Ira the MRI was safe, but he still worried the machine could do more harm than good.

When Ira realized Jules was holding a picture of an astronaut, he perked up. Jules had transitioned into moon landings. Ira listened intently as Jules illustrated point by point how NASA could have faked every moon landing. To establish motive, Jules started with the Cold War and Space Race.

“American needed to stay ahead of the Russians, yes?”

Ira conceded.

Jules moved on to NASA’s ineptness as an organization during the Space Race.

“Remember Vanguard TV3? Flopnik?”

Ira did not.

“Well, it was a rocket, and it didn’t make it ten feet off the ground before exploding.”

Jules then argued the government hired Stanley Kubrick to create a Hollywood set and film a bogus moon landing. He lost Ira.

“*2001: A Space Odyssey*? Look, Kubrick filmed it in 1968. And when did Buzz Aldrin first walk on the moon?”

Ira had forgotten the year.

“1969, man, 1969.”

Kennedy resurfaced in Ira’s mind. He pictured his son’s head encased in a head coil stuck in an MRI machine. The doctor said the coil worked like an antenna, but to Ira it looked like a homemade space helmet.

Jules showed Ira more pictures, rekindling his interest.

“Allegedly,” Jules said, “it’s believed that some people think the CIA or Illuminati –

same difference – assassinated Kennedy because he discovered the Ranger 4 mission – America’s first unmanned moon landing – was phony and the Earth was actually flat.”

The mention of John F. Kennedy flipped a switch in Ira. As a young man, he obsessed over the assassination of JFK. The fascination started when he was twenty-three. It was 1983 and a televised special proposed various theories for JFK’s assassination. Afterwards, Ira hunted down old news clippings and photographs. He collected documentaries, films, and TV specials on VHS. For the better part of a year, he became a reclusive, amateur armchair sleuth, testing a variety of theories, beginning with Lee Harvey Oswald, whom he dismissed as a patsy from the outset. For a while, he favored the grassy knoll theory, until a second shooter only complicated the matter. After months of poring over slow-motion video footage of JFK’s motorcade, Ira experienced an epiphany of manic proportions when he concluded Secret Service agent and Kennedy’s chauffeur William Greer shot Kennedy one-handed over his shoulder while driving.

“But why?” Jules asked.

“The why ain’t important. It’s the who and how.”

Jules scribbled something on a business card and handed it to Ira with raised eyebrows. He crinkled his lips as if to say, *You ain’t seen nothing yet, mister*. The web address sent a rush through Ira and he asked what to do with the code. Jules looked slightly annoyed. He didn’t know Ira lived in a camper in Paragon, Indiana surrounded by cornfields and gravel roads. He didn’t know people still lived without Internet in 1997. Jules told Ira about the World Wide Web, explained how *They* could no longer hide the truth now that people could freely share information across the globe.

“Did I say globe?” Jules said, “I meant world.”

Jules blushed at his mistake, poked Ira with his elbow, and chuckled, “Old habits die

hard, eh?”

Jules’ theories washed over Ira’s brain like a subtle film of liquid ecstasy. Back in his youth, the conclusion of the JFK assassination had left Ira empty, a feeling he had not anticipated. He missed the detective work and part of him regretted resolving the assassination. Jules’ new ideas seeped and settled into the cracks of his mind where they fermented and stewed. The secrecy. The centuries-old cover-up. The thrill of special knowledge. Ira felt hoodwinked by a lifetime of fake science but also reinvigorated with a new sense of purpose.

Later, Ira would dream of a professorial Jules, the egret-mantis man, floating across the Great Plains, moon documents in hand like giant leaflets of stone tablets, spreading the Gospel of Flatness. He would dream of himself kneeling before the Earth’s edge ready to touch its liquid dome, afraid to push through, unsure of what waited on the other side.

After the MRI, Kennedy and his father drove home in relative silence. Through his peripheral vision, Kennedy watched his father’s lips move as if he were having a conversation with himself. He had never seen his father lost in thought before. Kennedy stared out the passenger window of the pickup truck. Power lines hung from criss-crossy towers like sleeping killer robots. The power lines branched off into more power lines which broke off into homes. Kennedy imagined the MRI pictures of his brain. He saw black tree lace against a pale moon, Rorschach tests, cauliflower, and ocean coral. There was a maze, though he preferred the term labyrinth. Outside he saw a river. He pictured the river branching into streams branching into brooks branching into creeks. River water evaporated into the atmosphere, cooled, condensed, became clouds, returned to the Earth as rain which filled the creeks, which filled the streams, which filled the rivers, and so on until Kennedy’s eyelids closed and his head rolled into the window’s glass



with a little thump. When Ira finally spoke, he looked straight ahead and said, “We need a computer. And we need the Interweb.”

\*

Before the doctors, and for the better part of Kennedy’s childhood, Ira approached his son’s narcolepsy with skepticism first and blunt prescripts second.

“Boy, you better cut that shit out. I didn’t raise no lazy son,” he would say.

Like most fathers, Ira learned fathering from his father, a man who once called Kennedy weak.

“That boy’s weak,” his grandfather said, apropos of nothing.

Kennedy was eight when his grandfather said this. He was sitting between his father and grandfather at the dinner table. Kennedy and Ira stopped eating and stared into their plates. Kennedy poked his mashed potatoes, and Ira adjusted his jar of iced tea, then the napkin in his lap, then his iced tea again. As a family, the Humphrey’s relied on peripheral vision in awkward or tense moments. It was a Midwestern instinct – avoid conflict but stay alert. To move the meal forward, Ira shook his head in agreement and said, “Yep.” Then everyone returned to the work of sawing through boiled roast beef with butter knives and forks.

Kennedy looked sickly and bony when his grandfather called him weak, so the comment was not untrue, crude as it was. Kids called Kennedy “mouth-breather” because his mouth hung open. He suffered from chronic sinus infections. In Paragon, cottonwood seeds and pollen bottlenecked between cornfields to descend upon houses like a plague of misery. Farmers and townspeople burned leaves and trash until a black haze shrouded what little beauty flat fields and granaries offered. For miles, Paragonians rubbed bloodshot eyes, hacked, coughed, and ignored head-

aches, never once complaining. To complain would have showed weakness and served as an indirect judgment of a neighbor's actions, and in a town of less than six hundred, you never showed weakness and you never rocked the boat.

As an only child, Kennedy spent most of his time reading, drawing, or working puzzles his father brought home. Ira traveled the Tri-State area setting wells and collecting soil samples for geologists. And in every town, Ira rummaged through dumpsters for treasure, often returning from jobs with side tables or lamps or most of an entertainment center. He salvaged fake Christmas trees, bracelets, necklaces, and most contents of boardgames and jigsaw puzzles, which frustrated Kennedy who could only complete 99% of half the puzzles he received and 98% of the other half. When Kennedy complained about the missing pieces, his father said things like, "That's life." or "Get used to it." or "This world don't owe you 100%."

Many of the items Ira found he sold in yard sales, but the smaller more unique finds he kept. Kennedy first lost consciousness at the age of eight when he looked at an old lunch box Ira had rescued from a roll-off dumpster. Ira stored bizarre rocks in the lunch box which he liked to study while sitting on the toilet. The lunch box was metal. On the front was a picture of a hand holding the same lunch box, and in that picture was a picture of the same hand holding the same lunch box, and in that picture was a picture of the same hand holding the same lunch box, and so on suggesting infinity. When Kennedy first picked up the lunch box, he studied the pictures inside the pictures until perspective broke down and his imagination took over. And when the thought of infinity splashed in Kennedy's mind, the ripples spread out in all directions; his brain shut down, and he simply fell asleep.

\*

Kennedy's grandfather lived alone in a two-story home a stone's throw from Ira's RV.

The house was light yellow and Kennedy wondered how such a hard man could love such a soft color. He would never forget the day his grandfather said the words “lemon chiffon.” It was summertime. He had just turned ten. Ira was still asleep. Kennedy sat on the floor eating toast and working 94% of a Noah’s Ark puzzle Ira had found in a dumpster. When Kennedy’s grandfather pounded on the camper, the whole place shook.

“Get out here and help me unload these cans of lemon chiffon,” Kennedy’s grandfather hollered.

And those words “lemon chiffon” pierced the camper’s shell and Kennedy’s brain like sharp lace. *Lemon chiffon. Lemon chiffon.* No matter how a person said those words they sounded gauzy, sounded like a cool hand on a hot forehead. A madman could hurl those words, a drunk slobber them, a banshee shriek them, and the phrase would turn airy just before reaching the ears. Kennedy didn’t know what chiffon was then, but he knew it had no place in Paragon, so when his grandfather used those words, it felt pleasantly strange.

But on that same day, Kennedy also realized how terrified Ira was of his father. Ira was a large man who tensed his forearms the way vain men sucked in bellies, but whenever Kennedy’s grandfather yelled, Ira became like a child. Kennedy stood in the doorway of their camper that day and watched his father scamper around in his underwear like a rodeo clown. Ira yanked paint cans from the truck, turned left, turned right, until Kennedy’s grandfather finally shouted, “Christ on a stick, boy, get in there and put some clothes on. Good Jesus!”

And that was the first time Kennedy felt embarrassed for his father and the first time he loved him out of pity. But he also felt ashamed because he tucked that scene away for the future. If Ira ever scared him, Kennedy could think of his father in his underwear, half-asleep and hold-

ing cans of lemon chiffon paint, unsure where to set them, and Kennedy's confidence would return.

\*

When Kennedy was nine, Ira tried to move them into his father's house, but Ira's father refused.

"This ain't no charity," he told Ira, "you gotta learn to make your own way. What are you gonna do after I die, knock on doors until someone takes you in? This ain't France."

Ira didn't understand the France bit, but he haggled with his father until they agreed Ira could park the RV in the backyard for \$50 a month, granted Ira paid back-rent for the weeks they called *visiting*. Ira was smart to haggle with the old man, knowing the sport to be his father's greatest weakness.

Before negotiating with his father, Ira tried fishing for an invitation. He asked him to dinner in the camper, then coached Kennedy to look sad but not too sad, to talk about the lack of space but not too much. But when Ira placed a picture of his dead mother on the table for his father to see, Kennedy escaped to the bathroom to avoid the awkwardness.

Once in the bathroom, Kennedy saw his father had just hung a large mirror on the bathroom door, so when he looked into the mirror above the sink, he saw the mirror on the door in the reflection. And inside the reflection of the door's mirror, he saw the reflection of the sink's mirror. And inside the sink's mirror, he saw the door's mirror, and so on until Kennedy realized he had fallen into an infinite tunnel of mirrors, an eternity of reflection. A slight giddiness overcame Kennedy first. Then a warmth under his sternum, the same warmth he would feel when a girl lay her pinkie across his pinkie at a school play. And last, before collapsing into the corner, came the sensation of falling in a dream, the uncontrollable tumbling down a steep hill, a broken

high-dive, a car driving over the edge of an unfinished bridge.

When Kennedy walked out of the bathroom, the camper was quiet, and the picture of his dead grandmother still sat on the table, which led Kennedy to believe his father's desperation to move from the camper to the house superseded decorum. But all of this – the sad faces, the picture of Ira's dead mother – was lost on Kennedy's grandfather who, when he opened the camper's door, scanned the inside through squinted eyes and said with little interest, "Christ on wobbly crutches. There's barely enough room to whip a cat in here." And that was the extent of his sympathy.

\*

After Ira's road-to-Damascus moment in 97 with the mysterious Jules, whom Ira revered as a prophet, Ira spent evenings and weekends studying the history of a flat Earth versus an oblate spheroid Earth. He started with the ancient Greeks, worked through the middle ages, read and analyzed the works of Samuel Rowbotham, also known as Parallax, the father of modern flat Earth theory. Ira investigated the Bible's take on the matter. Starting with *The Book of Genesis*, he noted the mention of a vault separating the waters above from the waters below. In the margin Ira wrote, "Firmament?" With the Internet's help, he noted every instance of phrases like "the ends of the Earth" and "the four corners of the world."

After Kennedy showed Ira how to navigate chat rooms and Internet forums, Ira befriended flat-earthers from around the world, several of who lived in Indiana. Ira chose the name *john\_flat\_kennedy* as his online alias, although he preferred the term handle over alias. With Kennedy's help, Ira posted regularly to an Open Diary he titled "On the Level," which would later cover sundry conspiracy theories, Y2K, and the End Times.

As *john\_flat\_kennedy*, Ira started his own chapter of a Flat Earth Society for southern Indiana. Nobody residing in, or north of, Indianapolis could join Ira's chapter, partly for logistical reasons – practically speaking, he could only meet the needs of the southern half of the state – but also because Indianapolis represented something of a dividing line in Indiana. The implication being for Ira – northern Hoosiers were a bunch of liberal, uncultured suburbanites and city-folk, “Chicago and Detroit wannabes” who preferred mimosas and sushi to sweet tea and down-home biscuits and gravy.

Ira's chapter met quarterly – once every three months for every corner of the Earth – the first meeting of which occurred in 1998 at the Eleventh Annual Flat Earth Conference in Indianapolis. Ira hosted subsequent meetings in his father's house, although his father charged Ira \$10 per use and refused to listen to any explanation of the group. Members arrived with tuna casseroles, Jello Molds, and angel food cake. The meetings centered around food, flat-Earth theory, and the conference. Members discussed who planned to present what – Biblical cosmology perhaps, the scientific implications of a non-spheroidal Earth, or an exposé on flat Earth cover-ups.

Ira's circle consisted of a core group of four men and three women. Bob from Wheatland was Ira's age, a pastor with a penchant for biblical cosmology and the Apocalypse. Jane from Terre Haute was the group's academic, holding the only degree – a B.A. in political science. Allen was an awkward and excitable young man from Jasper who rarely spoke on flat Earth matters and whom Ira suspected of joining out of sheer loneliness. The others – a clerk, mechanic, bus driver, and public school teacher – came from the small towns of Salem, Nineveh, Popcorn, and Gnaw Bone.

Standing in the living room of his father's house, Ira sipped punch and joked boisterously with fellow flat-earthars about “unearthing” evidence, about the Earth's flatness being in “plane”

view. He said he was speaking “plane” English and the theory couldn’t be any “planar.” Everyone belly-laughed when Ira said people needed to expand their “horizons,” when he joked that, sadly, he could not attend the conference because he was “flat” broke. Ira leaned into the group and over-exaggerated each pun for maximum effect, elbowing the person next to him to ask, “Am I right? Eh? Am I right? Tell me I’m not right.”

\*

Kennedy loathed his father’s meetings and the steady stream of flat Earth jokes. The only reason he accompanied his father to the following Twelfth Annual Conference was to see Indianapolis. This was in 1999. Kennedy was fourteen, and despite Ira’s best efforts, he could not persuade his son the Earth was flat and not globular. On the way to the conference, Kennedy watched his father drive his pickup truck with no power steering. The steering wheel was the size of a manhole cover and instead of gripping the wheel at 10 and 2, Ira kept his hands at 8 and 1, or as Kennedy could not help thinking, at Chile and New Zealand if the steering wheel was a flat Earth map.

When his father turned, he manhandled the steering wheel, muscling one hand over the other like a sailor opening a submarine hatch. Everything about his father seemed old and crusty, the graying ponytail, the mutton chops, the trucker hat which read, “Are You Working Hard Or Hardly Working?” The Ronald Reagan t-shirt which read, “Reagan ‘80: Let’s Make America Great Again. Are You Better Off Than You Were Four Years Ago?”

Kennedy stared out the window at the Indianapolis skyline. He entertained the idea of a flat Earth as an experiment in confirmation bias. Indianapolis’s skyscrapers should be close enough to a flat Earth’s center of gravity to allow for vertical or near-vertical construction. But what about skyscrapers at the southern tip of Argentina and Chile? They would have to be built

at an angle to compensate for the gravitational pull at the center. Kennedy pictured Newton's cannon on top an enormous skyscraper firing cannonballs at different velocities. The first cannonball, fired at a slow speed, quickly fell back to Earth. The second cannonball, fired at a faster speed, traveled much further but still fell back to Earth. The third cannonball reached orbital speed and began to circle the globe.

Inside the hotel lobby, flat-earthlers rubbed shoulders with scientists, mathematicians, and computer scientists. A sign in the lobby read, "INDIANA SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY: Y2K, WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW." Ira cracked his neck to one side when he saw the Y2K sign. To prepare for the calamity, Ira had stockpiled in his father's basement thirty gallons of gasoline, fifty jugs of water, and a hundred cans of green beans, corn, and canned spaghetti.

The Flat Earth's keynote speaker was a woman from Ft. Wayne, Indiana who planned to present on the problem of gravity in light of a flat Earth. But Ira was more interested in hearing about the mysterious disappearance of the airship *Italia* near Nordaustlandet, Svalbard, Norway. Ira and Kennedy approached another sign that read, "WELCOME LATE FART SOCIETY." When Ira saw the sign, he mumbled something about half-wits and assholes. He quickly rearranged the letters to read, "WELCOME FLAT EART SOCIETY." He checked the floor for the missing "H," then scanned the lobby for a guilty face or someone snickering, but whoever had changed the letters had moved on. Ira raised his voice at no one in particular. "Atheists," he said, "Heathens!"

Kennedy lied about needing the restroom. He left his father with the sign and found a large room emitting bleeps, mechanistic whizzes, and the crunchy grind of dot-matrix printers. On a huge screen overlooking the convention, a Mandelbrot fractal zoom played to Jimi Hen-



drix's "Purple Haze." Kennedy stared into the hypnotic animation, watching spirals and psychedelic swirls of lightning collapse into self-similar patterns until he fell asleep and crumbled to the floor.

The next thing Kennedy saw was an older woman standing over him. As she helped Kennedy to his feet, Kennedy told her he was okay, that he was narcoleptic. Without looking, Kennedy pointed to the fractal zoom on the screen and said the video seemed to shut down his brain.

"Sometimes I fall asleep when I get overstimulated," he told her.

The woman nodded and said that sounded like a fork bomb. Kennedy shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a computer process that infinitely repeats, eating up a computer's memory until the machine crashes or freezes."

The woman pulled a pen from her pocket and wrote a fork bomb on the inside of Kennedy's wrist.

```
%0|%0
```

"I'm assuming you use Windows," she said. "Don't type this into your terminal. Although I can't say I've never issued the command to another person's computer."

The woman smiled and wrote another command on the inside of Kennedy's forearm.

```
:(){:|: & }::
```

"Here's a different kind of fork bomb," she told him. "This works on Unix-like systems."

The woman introduced herself as Judith but said most people called her Jude. She invited Kennedy to her booth. She told him to take it easy and placed a bottle of water and a laptop in front of him.

"Maybe we can test your theory of a narcoleptic episode triggered by over-stimulation,"

Jude said. “Conway’s Game of Life might do the job. I don’t know. Maybe not. You might like it nonetheless. It’s a cellular automaton. Each cell – or square if you like – can either be alive or dead.”

Jude pointed to the screen and explained, “A live cell with fewer than two living neighbors dies. A live cell with two or three living neighbors survives to the next generation. A live cell with more than three living neighbors dies. A dead cell with three living neighbors comes to life again.”

Kennedy folded his arms on the table and rested his chin on them. He saw a screen that looked like graph paper. Jude pushed enter on the keyboard, and Kennedy moved his chin back and forth over a muscle in his forearm.

“Here’s a Gosper glider gun,” Jude told him, “a pattern that supports infinite growth.”

The grid came to life with oscillating black and white cells, and Kennedy saw what looked like two birds flying into each other to create smaller birds. The smaller birds flew away while their parents bounced back and forth forever, colliding every so often to produce more baby birds.

Jude then showed Kennedy how other life patterns could emerge from a simple set of rules – oscillators, spaceships, puffer trains, rakes, breeders – all unique in their shapes, actions, and reproductions. But it wasn’t until Kennedy saw the beautiful workings of a “puffer train” glide across the screen that he fell asleep on folded arms at the table.

\*

Leaving the conference, Ira focused on navigating the one-way streets of downtown Indianapolis. Kennedy could see his father was angry that he missed the flat Earth conference. Kennedy looked for a peaceful way into conversation.

“How’s your friend Bill from Wheatland?”, Kennedy asked.

“Bill has lupus,” his father replied.

The conversation flattened. Bill’s lupus hung in the truck’s cab like an imaginary contagion. Kennedy wiped dust away from the dashboard and cleared his throat.

“I’m going to college,” Kennedy said.

Ira turned a corner with forearms thick as logs.

“The hell’d you just say?”

“I’m goin’ to college,” Kennedy repeated. “I want to work with computers.”

Ira chuckled and said no Humphrey had ever been to college.

“What am I supposed to do in Paragon?”, Kennedy asked.

“Take over my rig. Keep the drilling business goin’,” Ira said.

“A narcoleptic driller? Jesus. The augers will grind me into hamburger the first time I fall asleep,” Kennedy said.

“Watch your mouth,” Ira snapped. “And how do you think you’re gonna pay for this college? Cause I sure as hell ain’t coughin’ up hundreds of dollars so you can listen to a turtleneck rattle off Shakespeare.”

“Scholarships. Grants. Loans. Work study. Part-time jobs. I’ll make it work. You gotta make your own way, right? Isn’t that what grandpa always told you?”

“One of the biggest rackets ever there was. Payin’ someone for a piece of paper. College ain’t education. It’s just a bunch of mumbo jumbo. A man should educate himself in the ways of the world.”

“You mean like you? The other day you taught me airplane manufacturers distort the windows of aircraft to trick people into seeing a false curvature of the Earth.”

Ira hammered his fist on the dashboard. Kennedy heard something crack. He didn't look at his father, but he could feel a pair of rabid eyes.

"I said watch your goddamned mouth," Ira said. "Talk to me like that again and I'll knock you upside the head so hard you won't wake up for a month."

The dashboard jostled and squeaked the whole drive home, and Ira wondered if another punch might fix the maddening sound. Like his father, he'd kicked and pounded a number of problems away. He had smacked televisions and punched freezers, kicked generators and lawnmowers. And it only took one coincidence – one motor to purr at just the right time, one rattle to stop right after a strong blow – for correlation to become causation in Ira's mind, and he believed forever his solution had righted a wrong.

\*

Once Ira accepted his son's medical condition as real and not an act of fakery, Ira tried to be more supportive of Kennedy. Ira had turned to the Internet for answers and a quick search for "narcolepsy" had confirmed Kennedy's diagnosis. When Kennedy shied away from high school sports for fear of losing consciousness, Ira told him, "You gotta get in there and grab the bull by the horns, son." Ira's stock encouragement. And whenever Kennedy awoke from a narcoleptic episode, Ira would shake Kennedy's bony shoulder and say, "Way to snap out of it, boy. Way to show it who's boss. You hafta let it know who's in charge." *It* being the narcolepsy.

Instead of sports, Kennedy spent high school summers surfing the web on a dial-up connection, which had become embarrassingly slow by the year 2000. After Kennedy's grandfather passed, Kennedy chose to live in the house, but Ira grew to prefer the camper, forcing Kennedy to cross the lawn to use the computer, sometimes in rainstorms or snow.

A telephone line of extraordinary length stretched from the yellow house, became lost in

the limbs of a large willow tree, and reappeared on the roof of the camper, which sat on a dirt patch like an aluminum breadbox on wheels. Simply on merit of enduring the boredom of rural Indiana alone, Kennedy reached a level of patience many will never know. However, the rate at which his computer loaded webpages pushed his patience into a yogic, almost supernatural, realm of virtue as he measured time in the graphical interfaces of hourglasses and progress bars.

In the coolness of the air-conditioned camper, Kennedy fell into encyclopedic rabbit-holes on biology, code cracking, quantum physics, multiverses, and his guilty pleasure – crypto-zoology – which Kennedy justified with pseudo-scientific claims.

“Nessie could simply be an extant plesiosaur,” he told Ira. “And Bigfoot could be an undiscovered species of primate, a taxonomical enigma.”

At fifteen, stumping Ira with sesquipedalian terms was enough for Kennedy to separate himself from his father. Still, like his father with JFK, flat Earth theory, and Y2K, Kennedy developed his own obsessions. He became preoccupied with proving the existence of Bigfoot and disproving the existence of God. He considered joining a secular organization like American Atheists but opted instead for the parodic Church of the SubGenius. From the comfort of his kitchen table, Kennedy joined Greenpeace, adopted a whale named Margot for \$5 a month, started a blog called “The Ethical Atheist,” and honed his computer skills by frequenting the websites *Our Daily Hack* and *Hallowed Be Thy Hack*.

\*

For money, Kennedy worked at the cemetery for his father’s friend Hank. Every summer during high school, Kennedy maintained the grounds and assisted with the occasional burial. Most days he simply walked the grounds and turned over flower vases so Hank could cut the grass. Kennedy collected the fake flowers in one bag and the dead, real flowers in another. He

tossed the dead ones in a dumpster and piled the fake ones behind the maintenance shop where they sat for a customary two weeks for people to reclaim.

While working at the cemetery, Kennedy only lost consciousness once. Standing in a freshly dug grave, Kennedy and his boss used sod spades to carve out the grave's corners and shave away rough patches left by the backhoe's teeth. As they were working, Hank stopped, leaned his shovel against the grave's wall and cursed the heat. More than a few times, Hank had claimed cigarettes lowered a person's body temperature.

"I ever tell you how cigarettes lower a person's body temperature?"

"No."

Hank lit a cigarette and blew smoke through his lips a little too hard, then looked at Kennedy and said the word "Death" with a deep tone of finality.

Kennedy tightened the grip on his shovel and continued to shave away at the grave wall. He watched his boss closely through his peripheral vision. The silence inside the grave thickened.

"Death," Hank repeated. "Sure is a strange business."

Even more silence.

"So what do you think happens after we die?", Hank asked.

Kennedy cut away at the grave's wall. He started cutting too deep, almost tunneling. He picked up a chunk of clay and tried to fill the divot he'd made. He smacked the clay with the back of his shovel to make it stick. Kennedy didn't believe in an afterlife. He considered how to answer Hank's question. Like most people, he'd thought about death, but in Paragon, anything beyond the standard Judeo-Christian response could make a splash and send ripples throughout the community. He also worried about Hank's friendship with his father. Kennedy faced his boss

and and decided to test the waters.

“Well, you gotch yer heaven and you gotch yer hell,” Kennedy said.

“Right.”

The clay Kennedy had used to patch the divot fell at his feet.

“Sooo, then, I guess you gotch yer other views,” Kennedy continued.

“Okay. Right. So what do you think?”, Hank asked again.

Kennedy calculated a nontraditional response. He would be in college soon, relatively far from home. Without telling anyone, he’d applied to two schools and received an acceptance letter to a university two hours north of Paragon. If he answered his boss truthfully and things turned sour, he’d be living in another city by fall. Kennedy settled for an indirect approach.

“Well, what was life like before you were born?”, Kennedy asked.

“How the hell would I know? I wasn’t around to think about it,” Hank said.

“Well, maybe that’s what death is like,” Kennedy said.

His boss squinted and forced smoke through his mouth as if he wanted to speak quickly before forgetting something.

“So what you’re saying is ...”

Kennedy’s heart raced. His mouth turned dry.

“... maybe death is just a bunch of nothing? For forever? But you won’t know it cause you can’t think about it? Huh.”

Hank flicked his cigarette against the grave wall, picked up his shovel and returned to smoothing the grave’s edges. What Kennedy wanted to say was people were walking heaps of stardust, the junk of supernovae. That their particles would be recycled forever, or until the uni-

verse collapsed back on itself, or until the universe expanded so much it ripped apart at a subatomic level, and all the matter froze itself silly.

Kennedy wanted to share his frog analogy, “Think of the universe as a frog, Hank, as a frog’s vocal sac inflating and deflating, inflating and deflating, banging and crunching, banging and crunching, for all eternity, giving life plenty of time to evolve into something worth all that banging.”

Hank scratched his ass. The *err-eee* sound of his fingernails on polyester pants filled the grave, the rhythm of the scratches bouncing between the walls, echoing in Kennedy’s mind until his vision narrowed to a thin horizon and he collapsed under a soft weight like a tent with felled poles, his body folding neatly into the corner of another person’s freshly dug grave.

\*

When Kennedy returned from college for Christmas break, Ira was drinking wine coolers by lamplight and reading *The Book of Revelation* for insights into the end of the world. The camper twinkled with colorful, bulbous Christmas lights, which Ira had stapled around the windows, door, and top of each wall. A tabletop Christmas tree with blinking lights sat next to Ira’s reading lamp lighting the left side of his face. A United Nations flag hung behind Ira’s head. The tiny foldout table where Kennedy had once eaten cereal as a boy was covered with papers revealing timelines, diagrams, and prints of old paintings.

Ira’s computer sat like a sleeping brain waiting to be queried. The screensaver bounced an image of Orlando Ferguson’s “Map of the Square and Stationary Earth.” Kennedy knew the map well. Orlando Ferguson was a South Dakotan man who’d crafted a flat Earth map in 1893 along with a lengthy document outlining his own theory of a flat Earth based on Biblical cosmology. Kennedy grabbed a piece of paper next to the keyboard and scanned it.



## End of the World

### I. Tribulation

#### A. White Horse

1. Conquering

#### B. Red Horse

1. Destroy Peace

#### C. Black Horse

1. Justice

- a. Pair of Balances

#### D. Pale Horse

1. Death

- a. By Sword

- b. By Hunger

- c. By Beasts

### II. God's Wrath

#### A. Earthquake

#### B. Meteorites?

#### C. Hurricanes?

### III. The Dragon

### IV. The Beast

#### A. 666

### V. Plagues

### VI. Whore of Babylon

### VII. Wedding

### VIII. Abyss

IX. Judgment

X. Heaven

A. Sing Forever

Ira looked at Kennedy with peeled eyes. “Get your house in order, little buddy, cause 2012’s a comin’ and Hell’s comin’ with it,” he said. “You got about nine years to get right with God. It’s all right there in your hands. Well, there and in the Mayan calendar.”

Kennedy expected his father to *Yee-haw* or *Woo-wee*. He looked at the bottle in his father’s hand.

“Since when do you drink?” he asked.

“Since the gas station started selling wine coolers,” Ira said.

“What flavor is that?”

“Pink.”

Ira squinted through the Christmas lights and asked Kennedy what his shirt said.

Kennedy stretched out his hoodie and read it, “*My other computer is your computer.*”

“I don’t get it,” Ira said.

“That’s okay. What’s your shirt say?”, Kennedy asked.

“*Trust No One,*” Ira said. “I don’t know if you can see it, but there’s a pyramid and an eye.”

“I see,” Kennedy said. “And your hat?”

Ira tipped the bill of his trucker cap. “*I’m Not Tired, Just Retired.*”

“But you’re not retired,” Kennedy said.

“So. It’s still funny,” Ira said, then asked Kennedy how long he was staying.

“A few days,” Kennedy said.

“Few days? That’s it? What, you too good for us country-folk now, Mr. Hot-Shot College Boy?”

“I have to be back before New Year’s Eve,” Kennedy told him. “I have to prepare for a talent show. “

“Talent show? What the hell you doin’ in a talent show?”

“Stand-up comedy.”

Without hesitation, Ira bent over and wheezed with laughter. He slapped his knee and slapped it some more. He exhaled a tipsy *Woo-wee*.

“Well, holy shit,” Ira said, “I do believe my boy just said stand-up comedy.”

“It’s just a hobby,” Kennedy told him.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Let’s hear some jokes. You got jokes, right?”

Kennedy hesitated. “Yeah, but you wouldn’t like ‘em,” he said.

“Bullshit. Let’s hear ‘em.”

“No, really. You wouldn’t like ‘em. They’re for a certain audience.”

“A certain audience? What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”, Ira asked. “What, you think I’m too dumb for your college jokes. Well if that ain’t some bullshit.”

“The routine’s for a younger crowd,” Kennedy said.

“I tell you what, Big Man on Campus, you tell me your college jokes and I’ll quiz you on the Bible and we’ll see who comes out on top.”

Kennedy looked at his father with his anti-Illuminati t-shirt, his joke cap, his pink wine cooler, Bible in lap, UN flag behind him like a badge of pride, and he felt embarrassed to be a Humphrey. He no longer felt sorry for his father. He felt angry. He pictured his father as a

mouth-breather in yellow underwear; he pictured Christ on a stick. The conflation of his childhood memories haunted him again, but the strategy remained the same. Remembering his father's embarrassment, Kennedy's confidence grew.

"Alright," Kennedy said, "I'll give you a few warm-up jokes. But don't start bitchin' and moanin' when you don't get them."

Kennedy stood under twinkling Christmas lights and launched jokes at his father with the flattest expression he could muster. He started with a joke about turning on a computer – he said you had to rub a computer's CPU gently and whisper sweet nothings into its microphone to turn it on. He said if you think your computer is hot you should probably call a therapist. He transitioned awkwardly into a bank robbery joke about an alchemist who demanded silver and bronze instead of gold.

Ira buried his head between his knees, held his hands up, and signaled Kennedy to stop.

"Stop. Stop. You're killing me. Please. Wait. I can't breathe."

Ira mimicked the breaths of a woman in labor.

"Those are your genius jokes I wouldn't get?", Ira asked.

"They're starter jokes," Kennedy said. "They're meant to loosen up the crowd and lower expectations before the power jokes."

"Oh, well, by all means, please continue," his father said. "Don't let me stop you from telling your *power jokes*."

Kennedy waited for his father to suppress tiny snorts of laughter. He continued to perform with the straightest face possible, shooting jokes from the hip of his darkest mood.

"Two philosophers walk into a bar," Kennedy said, "a solipsist and an humanist. The solipsist raises his glass to the humanist and says, 'A toast – to your happiness and health – and by

*yours* of course, I mean *mine*.”

Kennedy paused for effect, then continued.

“Two philosophers walk into a bar. One philosopher turns to the other and says,

‘Did you hear the one about the two philosophers who walk into a bar?’

‘No.’”

‘Two philosophers walk into a bar. One philosopher turns to the other and says,

‘Did you hear the one about the two philosophers who walk into a bar?’

‘No.’”

‘Two philosophers walk into a bar. One philosopher turns to the other

and says ...”

“It’s recursive,” Kennedy explained, “I can take it as far as I like. I think I’m going to take it pretty far, maybe until I fall asleep on stage.”

Ira was no longer laughing. He leaned forward in his chair and rested his forearms on his knees. He stared at Kennedy with wide, unblinking eyes. “Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy, what in Christ’s name are they teachin’ you up there? Are you in a cult? You sound like a lunatic. You can’t go around talkin’ like that.”

“Why not?”, Kennedy said, “People go around talking about football, celebrities, and politics. Or in Paragon – tractors, Jesus, and heartburn. Why should I have to listen to other people’s

bullshit and they not mine?”

“It’s different,” Ira claimed. “This is America. Everybody knows heartburn, football, and Jesus. Nobody knows whatever the hell you just said, except maybe a few nerds.”

“Like I said, ‘certain audience,’ Kennedy said. He grew uneasy. “Come on, old buzzard. Now it’s your turn. Quiz me. Quiz me on your silly Biblical cosmology, or better yet, the end of the world.”

Ira tilted his head back and pointed his chin at Kennedy. He pulled at his neck beard in anger. “Alright, you little shit,” Ira said. “I’ll go easy on you. What’s a firmament and where is it first mentioned in the Bible?”

Without hesitation, Kennedy responded, “A firmament is an imaginary celestial surface and the Bible first mentions it in *The Book of Genesis* just before God reveals he suffers from schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder.”

“What in Hell’s name are you talking about?”, Ira demanded.

“Did not God say let *us* make man in *our* image,” Kennedy said.

“You’re crazy. He was talkin’ to angels,” Ira responded.

“Let me guess, next you’re going to ask me about the “four corners of the world,” Kennedy said, pressing his father. “I believe that reference first occurs somewhere between the talking donkey and a man being stoned to death for picking up sticks.”

Ira shifted in his seat and was about to speak before Kennedy interrupted. “And then you’re going to ask me about ‘the ends of the Earth.’ I believe that first appears somewhere between God commanding genocide and God sending his ghost to knock up an engaged woman.”

Ira dropped his wine cooler and threw off his hat. He appeared inches from Kennedy’s face. His bullish breathing filled the space of the camper. Kennedy looked down at his father’s

balled fists, then in his father's eye. Adrenaline felt like the inverse of a narcoleptic softness. Kennedy saw the appeal of the rush; the Christmas lights flooded his dilated pupils and shined brighter; he heard every background noise, the squeak of his father's recliner, the icebox hum, the train crossing Highway 45 near the artisanal cheese shop. Ira's words bounced around in Kennedy's head, the screensaver of his mind, "You gotta get in there and grab the bull by the horns." Kennedy imagined ramming his knee into his father's balls. His adrenaline sizzled so strong, Ira could mold his face into a collage of blue-black bruises, and he would feel nothing until morning. Instead, Kennedy inched toward the door. He kept his eyes locked with his father's. When he finally reached the camper's door, he reached behind him, opened it, and stepped down, bringing the scene of gross machismo to an end.

\*

The next day, Ira woke up with, what he would call, a Texas-sized hangover. He squinted through the morning sunlight and yawned. Sleeping in the recliner had left a painful kink in his neck, and he felt both hot and cold. He rolled his head in circles to loosen the muscles, but it didn't help. When he stood up, an empty wind cooler bottle rolled onto the floor. He shuffled to the sink, poured himself a glass of water, and chugged it. He eyed an old piece of pizza but turned away because of heartburn. When he fell back into his recliner, he stared into space and recalled bits of the night before. The result was strange, something about two philosophers and an alchemist. There was a tractor and a man picking up sticks. There was Kennedy's blasphemy. The standoff.

As Ira collected himself, he noticed a white box next to his computer. He hated the thought of standing again and considered drinking a wine cooler first – a little hair of the dog – but decided against it. He sighed and dragged his body to the other side of the camper. The box

felt heavy. He used the tip of an ink pen to cut through the box's tape. Inside, he saw a small envelope and a tall stack of papers. He set aside the envelope and turned the box upside down. The paper felt new but looked like old parchment. When he thumbed through the pages, he saw beautiful but bizarre hand-drawn pictures. He flipped past suns with vexed faces inside swirls of yellow fire and rays of red and blue light. Past nymphs bathing in pools of green water. Past diagrams of cupped flowers with thorny roots and amoebic-shaped leaves. Past blue zodiacal wheels, tiny castles, and tubes like organ pipes. Ira ran his fingers across a page hoping to feel a texture in the paper, in the curvatures of the calligraphic letters. He set the manuscript down and opened the envelope he'd set aside. A note from Kennedy:

*It's called the Voynich Manuscript. It's a codex of unknown origin, written in an unknown language by an unknown author. The parchment dates to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It took hours to print and more ink than I care to think about. Start with Yale's online Beinecke Library and work from there.*

*P. S. I noticed your computer was pretty slow. Open a terminal like I showed you and run this command `%0|%0` It'll clean your hard drive and speed things up. Happy Holidays.*



## Some Beast Always Groaning

The summer after I graduated high school, I started sleeping in my backyard in an old tree house. I kept a sleeping bag in there, a pillow, lantern, and space heater, which I plugged into the house with a long orange extension cord. I wanted my own place after turning eighteen because I was trying to be my own man. Our backyard was all dirt because the tree blocked the sunlight from reaching the ground. I felt lucky to have a tree in my yard. The more my hometown grew, the more trees they knocked down. My city was a town in southern Indiana that had become a city, then wanted to become a town again. I'd tell you the name of the city, but some people get mad when you say bad things about a place, even if they're true. Those people are too sensitive.

Anyway, my city had paved itself over to make way for miles and miles of strip malls. But most of the stores closed after a few years, so all those strip malls ended up being big empty parking lots with busted-up concrete and the ruins of weird places like pet stores, Chinese buffets, pizza barns known for their hot wings, wing huts know for their hoagies, and these weird little shacks that developed 35mm film in 60-minutes. At night, the street lamps in those empty lots colored the sky a dirty yellow. But it wasn't long before everyone's needs were provided for in two new liquor stores and a tobacco shop, corner gas stations that shot pillars of white light into the night sky, and four Dollar General stores – one for each side of town.

That was the also summer I found my mom cooking a can of butter beans over a flame on the old gas stove. "They taste better this way," she said. She was alone and talking to herself again. She didn't see me waving away mosquitoes at the back screen door, which was really just a mess of chicken wire and wood. I walked inside and felt the way I always did about our house – anxious – like the place was a kid's fort made of refrigerator boxes. But my mom did a good

job of making the house feel homey. The place was stuffed with ceramic figurines and doilies from second-hand shops, knickknacks from garage sales. The walls were covered in cross-stitch art that my father did. He picked up the craft in prison after an armed robbery. Cross-stitching is all I have of my father because he died of lung cancer when I was two.

I knew my mom was sick, but I didn't know it was brain cancer yet. She had headaches and memory problems, and her childhood stutter returned. She also drove around the city on a scooter in flannel pajamas and a brodie helmet she bought at an army surplus store. She went from school to school and tried to catch kids smoking. She'd tell them about dad's lung cancer and why they shouldn't smoke. Sometimes she'd get lost, and the cops would bring her home. Once, the cops brought her home and said they'd arrest her if they caught her in a school bathroom again. That was also the summer I found a cure for my mom's cancer.

We didn't have money for a doctor, so my Uncle Lloyd worked extra when he could. He hauled junk and cut grass. Once, when I was riding my bicycle to the corner gas station, I saw my Uncle Lloyd mowing someone's yard in the dark. He'd taped two big flashlights to the front of his push-mower to give it headlights. I thought that was pretty smart, and I respected him for being clever and for busting his ass to help the family. But I still worried about him sometimes. He had bags under his eyes that reminded me of those fancy surrealist paintings our art teacher showed us in high school. His skin was loose and tight at the same time. Loose because he was so old, and tight because he spent too much time in the sun. He must have known how rough he looked because he liked to joke that he looked like a deep-fried turkey. And even though I hated to do it, I had to agree.

My Uncle Lloyd saved a good deal of money that summer, and we were able to make a doctor's appointment for mom. She never liked doctors. She took me to a 24-hour care place

when I was little, a doc-in-a-box as she called it. My eyes had turned red and swelled up after eating frozen popcorn shrimp. The doctor said it was an allergic reaction and told me to take Benadryl and put a cold rag on it. “That rat bastard,” my mom said in the parking lot, “200 bucks and he says put a rag on it.” She thought he should have at least given me a shot. We stood in the middle of the parking lot for a while, and my mom dug around in her purse for her keys. Then she nodded toward an expensive car. “That’s gotta be his,” she said, and she walked over and keyed the side of the car. I hoped that she was right, that it really was the doctor’s car and not some innocent person’s.

But even though she hated doctors, I knew she needed help. I didn’t recognize her in the kitchen that day, cooking beans over the stove. When I asked her why she was doing it that way, she said it reminded her of camping. “The trip to the G-g-g-g-g-arden of the G-g-gods was my favorite,” she said. Our pastor didn’t like it when I imitated my mom’s stutter. He called the house sometimes to check on us, and I stopped by the church every once in a while because he said I had issues that needed working on. He always asked about my life, then got mad when I told him how it was.

“Porter,” he said, “it’s not nice to make fun of your mom’s stutter. It’s not cool to rag on people for their disorders.”

He called me Porter even though my name’s Porter Lee. My mom said that my dad wanted to call me Jesus, but she wouldn’t stand for it because it would sound like blasphemy every time they yelled at me in public – “Jesus, get down from there!” or “Jesus, watch where you’re walking!”

“I’m not making fun of my mom’s stutter,” I told my pastor. “That’s how she fucking talks. It’s the G-g-g-g-goddamn truth,” I said. I stuttered and cursed just to annoy him but felt

terrible as soon as I did it. He didn't like that. He sighed a real deep sigh and little tears welled up in his eyes. He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a hand-held mirror. He handed it to me and told me to look at myself and repeat after him, "I am lovely. I am loved. I am worthy of love." I felt bad making a grown man cry so I took the damn thing. But I started laughing when I looked at myself in the mirror. Not a big laugh. Just a little one. I told myself I was lovely but giggled when I saw how milquetoasty I looked. I learned that word *milquetoast* in English class. My high school English teacher was a nice guy, but I didn't like the books he gave us. He was always giving us stories with no plot to read, just stuff about people's feelings and thoughts. My favorite book was a book called *Where's Buddy?* It was about a little diabetic boy who got lost and needed a shot. His brother spent the whole book searching for him. In the end, he found Buddy curled up in a cave. Buddy's brother stuck Buddy with a needle, and that bought Buddy some more time. That book had a strong plot and a good moral to the story, which was – you should take care of weak people because they can't take care of themselves. The only problem with the book was how unrealistic it was. The brother was constantly thinking about Buddy, worrying about Buddy, but life's not like that. People have other things to worry about like friends and work. I think about my mom a lot but not every second. I try not to think about her every second.

\*

I buried a kid from my school that summer, the summer I found a cure for my mom's cancer. I got a job at the cemetery but not the one where my dad's buried. They let me cut the grass and bury people. The dead boy's name was Brandon, and he was a year younger than me. I didn't know him, but I knew who he was. They said he wrapped his car around a tree after jumping an intersection called Serenity Hill. Killed him and three other kids from another school. I

guess they'd all been drinking Purple Passion and smoking dope. One kid said they'd been drinking antifreeze.

Serenity Hill was just a four-way stop outside the city on Serenity Drive. If you hit it going 60 or 70 you could get some air. The roads out there were narrow, and the cicadas buzzed so loud it felt like a drill to the brain. It was all a bunch of small cornfields tucked between clumps of trees and a few rich people's farm houses. My uncle said he had no patience for farmers because they always talked about losing money but still lived high on the hog compared to most people.

We buried Brandon in Section 6 of the cemetery. Some people called it St. Thomas. I called it Section 6. Across from Section 6 was the Garden of Angels. That's where they buried babies and kids. It was a small strip of land along a tree-lined ditch. I went over there once and there were little toy airplanes, helicopters, and boats on the monuments. I also saw a stuffed monkey and a stuffed bear, and I wondered if those were gifts the kids never got or ones they left behind.

You might think as gravediggers we dug a lot, but we didn't. The backhoe did all the work. We just filled in the graves with sand and water and dirt. It was like setting a patio brick. You didn't want the concrete vault moving around or popping up. The movies never show the concrete vaults, only the caskets. The first time I buried someone I thought death was like one of those Russian dolls. There was a hole in the ground. Then the vault went into the hole. The casket went into the vault. And the body went into the casket. That's why I hated zombie movies. The dead could never bust through a casket like that, let alone a vault and several feet of dirt. It's not realistic.

Some days Ernie and I took smoke breaks to watch the vault guy unload vaults off the

back of a flatbed truck. We would stop weed-whacking and sit on our golf cart and watch him move a vault with a machine that looked like an engine lift on wheels. He started the lift's motor like you would a boat's, by pulling a cord over and over until a puff of black smoke appeared and a neat little purr filled the air. It took him forever to move a vault to a grave because he had to drive the thing over grass, up and down hills, between monuments and markers, over tree roots and around trees. The vault hung suspended in air, and if he went too fast the vault might start swinging and he could tip the whole damn thing over.

I liked watching the vault guy because when you work inside the walls of a cemetery all day, it feels like there's no outside world, but the vault guy reminded me that there was still a land of the living. At least that's why I liked watching him. Ernie was just a lazy bastard who took smoke breaks any time the wind changed direction.

I hated Ernie. He looked like a man the earth had belched up. He had yellow teeth and a scruffy face, a greasy mullet and an underbite that gave him a caveman frown. The thickness of his glasses made his eyes look like painted ping-pong balls, and he smelled like B. O. and stale crackers because he ate crackers all the time. He called peanut butter on crackers *cookies*, and he read porno magazines on lunch breaks, right out in the open, unashamed. Can you believe that? When he talked, it sounded like he had marbles in his mouth. It got old asking him to repeat himself. I'd say, "What?" or "Come again?" or "How's that?", and he'd accuse me of being hard of hearing. "What's the matter," he'd say, "are you fucking deaf?" Except when he said it, it sounded garbled like, "Warls da marter are you farking dyef?"

One of his eyes was extra lazy. I couldn't tell which one. But it looked like he had control over each eye, and I wondered if he saw like a whale. My English teacher was always going on about *Moby-Dick* and how whales saw the world differently than human beings because their

eyes were so far apart. Whale brains must work better, I thought, since they could see two different scenes and make sense of it all. That made me wonder how a whale might tell a story if whales could talk. Their perception of the world would be so different, we probably wouldn't get it. We'd call it nonsense and move on even though it was brilliant. I tried splitting my vision once, but it hurt and I got dizzy. I wanted to see if I could move my left eye independently of my right eye. Then I tried moving them both outward like a whale, but that hurt too. I bet Ernie saw the world differently with his big lazy eye, and I wondered if he might actually be a genius underneath that dirty exterior. This made me hate him a little less, and sometimes I looked at him and thought good for you, Ernie. Good for you, whale man.

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The cemetery had more trees than the whole city put together, and at the back of the cemetery was a big hill. From the top of that hill, I could see the zoo across the street that no one ever visited. There were two ivy-covered cages for eagles, a pirate ship for monkeys, and a grass-less den with a lot of holes some poor animal probably dug out of boredom. The concrete paths between it all were cracked and busted. I never saw a living thing in there, but the wind still carried animal cries over the cemetery walls. Some beast was always groaning. There was a bird cackle or two. One day I heard a shriek that sounded like death. Every time we heard an animal groan, Ernie laughed and said at least somebody was getting laid. I wanted to tell him to shut up with that dirty talk, but when you have to work with someone every day, sometimes its best not to rock the boat. My mom taught me that. She was a good teacher. When I was little she gave me Spot the Differences worksheets. There were two pictures that looked the same but really weren't the same. Maybe there were two pictures of a kid on skis standing in the snow wearing a scarf, coat, and hat, but if you looked closely, one kid's hat would have a fluffy ball on top and

the other kid's hat wouldn't, so I'd circle the difference. As soon as I got good at spotting differences, my mom started slipping me two pictures that were exactly the same, and I'd spend hours trying to spot differences that didn't exist. It drove me crazy. I made up differences and circled random things on the page, but my mom didn't buy it. After a lot of these fake worksheets, my mom finally came clean. She said she tricked me for a good reason. "What's that?" I asked, and she said, "Never trust no one, not even the people you trust, because at the end of the day you can only trust yourself." And I thought that was pretty clever.

I could hear an animal groaning that day I buried that Brandon kid. I was standing on the cemetery's highest point shoveling dirt and sod off a trailer, down the backside of a hill and into the cemetery's dump. The dump was a wasteland of cracked earth hidden away behind the trees and mausoleums so mourners wouldn't have to see it and feel even more depressed. But the actual cemetery reminded me of the Garden of Eden pictures from my children's Bible. There was green-green grass, wild flowers, huge oaks and maples that shaded rows and rows of stone monuments and benches. It was all so beautiful. But standing on that hill listening to that beast groan, looking out over the dump and that sad zoo, I thought of my mom and the state of our city, and I realized that we treated our dead better than we treated our living. I felt pretty good about myself for thinking that because it was true but also clever, and I figured no one else had thought of that before so I should write it down.

But in the end, my cleverness didn't change nothing, so I kept shoveling dirt down the hillside and into the dump. Ernie just sat on the tractor and leaned against the steering wheel. He was smoking a cigarette and using his pinkie to dig for earwax. After I cleared all the dirt from the trailer, Ernie walked over and handed me some papers from his ass pocket.

"What's this?" I said.



“Just read it,” he said.

There were four pages stapled together, and each one had a list of movies on it. They weren't even in alphabetical order. It annoyed me that Ernie was so lazy he couldn't be bothered to put his movies in order. But I don't think he ever made it past the 6th grade.”

“You like movies?”, Ernie asked. “I can put three movies onto one tape for \$10,”

I told him I liked movies, everyone likes movies.

“Not everyone,” he said. “My wife doesn't like movies. She says movies are like sleeping pills.”

“Is that right?”, I said.

“Yeah, that's right,” Ernie said.

“Well, she's entitled to her opinion,” I said.

“Damn straight she's entitled to opinions,” he said.

“It's weird your wife don't like movies,” I said. “But I guess it takes all kinds to make the world round.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” he said. He moved closer and pointed his lazy eye at me, and I wondered how we went from movies to this awkward standoff. I knew I had to be the bigger man and avoid unnecessary conflict, so I asked him if he liked movies. He relaxed when I said that, and he said, “Yeah, I like movies.” He pulled his cigarettes from his shirt pocket and smacked the box's ass a few times, then offered me one. We faced the dump and blew smoke at the city, and when we were done, we flicked our butts out into the dump like we were old friends.

Ernie drove the tractor back to the shop like an escaped mental patient. I stood on the

trailer's hitch ready to make a jump for it and do a barrel roll if necessary. Instead of downshifting to slow the tractor down, he stood up like a cowboy on a horse and mashed the clutch and brake at the same time. I thought we might die if he lost control. His mullet flew in the wind, and the tractor skidded to a stop. He looked scared when he jumped off the tractor, but said, "Hot damn," and shook like a dog. We went inside the shop, and I looked over his movie list. I wrote down *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*. The last page was all porno movies. Ernie tried to sell me three of those, but I said, "Pass." I gave him his ten bucks, and he'd said he'd give me my movies the next day.

\*

After burying that Brandon boy, the first thing I did that night was pick up my friend Stuart and jump Serenity Hill. I'd been thinking about death a lot because of my mom and Brandon, and I wanted to see how a car accident like Brandon's could have happened. Stuart was my best friend. He was skinny and had long hair on one side and a shaved head on the other. He brought spray paint, and we tagged some stop signs on the way. My tag name was *Gravy* and his was *Train*, that way we could tag as individuals or as a team. Stuart stood on the hood of the car and painted over the "S" on a street sign that said Serenity Drive. "Eternity Drive," he said and laughed. He had a reading problem, so I had to tell him that the street sign didn't spell Eternity it spelled Erenity. He looked embarrassed, and I remembered what the preacher said about being sensitive to other people's problems.

Me and Stuart got high before jumping the hill because we wanted to see it how Brandon saw it. Stuart hated bongos and bowls and all that fancy stuff, so he brought a fat joint, and we stood in the corn and smoked it. The cornstalks were monstrously tall. It was hot, and bugs kept flying into our faces. I told Stuart I couldn't hang out tomorrow night because I had to go to the

doctor with my mom and uncle, and he asked if he could come too. I said, sure, but I knew he wouldn't go. It was just his way of being nice.

I drove my dad's old Pacer. It was Slurpee blue. The speedometer vibrated on the 60 mark the whole time, but it felt like we were going 100 because we were stoned. We skipped over the hilltop like a stone on water, and my body felt light. The engine and tires got quiet, and I waited for space to open up and swallow us into hyper-speed, but we plopped to the ground like a turd and rolled past the tree that killed those kids. There was a big patch of bark missing from the trunk, and I saw a deep scar in the wood. I got angry that nobody had cut the damn tree down. There was a farmhouse right there, and I pictured an old man inside drinking whiskey and reading a newspaper. He was eating a BLT, and he had bacon grease and mayo on his fingers. He wiped it all on his jeans and told his wife that he'd decided not to cut that tree down because it was a warning to all teens everywhere never to jump Serenity Hill. That bastard, I thought, and I decided I was going to come back and chop down his mailbox with an ax some day.

After jumping Serenity Hill, me and Stuart snuck into an old Indian burial ground called Angel Mounds and waited for it to get dark. We sat on top of a mound and did whip-its and drank gin. That made me feel weird, like a balloon but also heavy. I laid on my back and started sinking into the ground. I could see dirt and skulls. Then a skeleton hand reached for my throat. I tried to yell, but dirt filled my mouth and I couldn't breathe. Stuart said my name, so I looked up, but he was really far away. He had a whale flipper for an arm, and he reached down and smacked me with it.

"You crazy son of a bitch," I said, "What'd you do that for?" Then I rose from the dead super fast and could breathe again.

"Lets go," he said, "this ain't right. This ain't right sitting on these mounds."

After that, I drove us to the zoo, and we climbed over a fence near the back of the place. Inside the zoo only one building had a light on, and there was an old rhinoceros laying in there on its side. We could see the enormous beast through the door's window. His eyes looked sad like he'd given up. I imagined he must have been born free in a nice desert somewhere until some people kidnapped him. Now he was just stuck in a big box waiting to die.

Me and Stuart watched the rhino for a while, and Stuart got mad and punched the wall. His knuckles were bleeding, and he said he might have broken a finger. I figured he was upset because the rhino was lonely and caged up with no parents or friends. Then I wondered if I was the rhino, an only child living in a tree house, stuck in a dead town, with no dad and a sick mom. Then I thought Stuart was the rhino because he was also an only child in a dumb town with no dad and a sick mom. Or maybe my mom was the rhino because she was losing her mind and maybe all she could do was wait to die. That hurt to think about, so I tried not to think about it. Instead I thought about a worksheet on metaphors and similes that my English teacher made me do. The rhinoceros is a metaphor, I thought, because I didn't use the word *like* to compare it to people. If I would have said *like*, it would have been a simile. And that's the only difference between similes and metaphors.

\*

I drove us to Stuart's house, and my car started to smell hot. I got nervous because the last time that happened, my car wouldn't start. Me and Stuart didn't talk the whole way back to his place. It was one of those days we drank and did drugs to forget about things instead of for fun. Stuart stared out the window, and I could tell he was thinking about busting that rhino free. When we got to his house, his mom was sitting in a recliner in sweatpants and a bra. She was

smoking and eating a bowl of mac and cheese. She had fat ankles because she had a heart problem, and Stuart worried she might die. There was a TV preacher on television and a 1-800 number on the bottom of the screen. I heard the preacher say people were born to die, and the earth was created to be destroyed. That depressed me. He was trying to get people to touch the screen so they could get healed. Stuart's mom didn't touch the screen, but I'd seen her do it before. She was on her knees once, crying with one hand on the screen and one in the air, and I thought if God didn't heal her, then he'd have to be the biggest bastard in the world.

Stuart hugged his mom and said, "Goodnight, I love you." We went to his room, and I laid on the floor. I felt pretty sick. Stuart gave me his pillow and a blanket, and I wondered if Buddy felt like this in the cave. I fell asleep thinking about the TV preacher and how everything eventually falls apart. I wished someone would find a cure for death and that we could live in a world full of starships. We could all live forever, and whenever the earth got too full, some of us could hop into a spaceship and find another planet. I imagined boarding a ship with my mom, Uncle Lloyd, Stuart, and his mom. We'd take the rhino with us, and I'd fight Ernie off with a stick because he wouldn't contribute anything to our new society. I told my uncle about this fantasy later, and he said the last thing the universe needed was people like us planet-hopping and joyriding in starships. He made it sound like it was the same thing as barhopping and drunk driving.

"Look around," he said, "and tell me what you see."

I looked around and said I saw a burned down Pizza Hut with a sign that said Pizza Slut and a billboard warning people about the flames of Hell. I told him I saw two men fighting over a chainsaw in a gas station parking lot and a woman digging through the trash next to a gas pump. She was feeding something to her three-legged dog, and ...

“Stop, stop, stop,” he said, “I proved my point.”

“What point?” I asked.

Then he said maybe it was better if the earth had an expiration date because it was full of idiots and suffering, and all I could do was shake my head and say, “Goddamn, Uncle Lee.”

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My car wouldn't start the next day just like I feared. I figured something busted when I hit the ground after jumping that hill. Stuart's mom drove me to work, and when I got there, Ernie said he'd forgotten my movies. “Great, that's just great,” I said, but I didn't really think it was great. I was just being sarcastic. Ernie told me to relax. He said we could knock off work early, and I could stop by his house to get my movies. I almost said fuck that, but I needed a ride home, so I used Ernie's mistake against him. “Fine,” I told him, “but you have to drive me there and give me a ride home because my car's dead.” Ernie didn't like that. He said he wasn't running no taxi service. I panicked for a second, then asked myself, *What would my mom do in this situation?* And I figured she would stare Ernie directly in his lazy eye and demand her money back for those movies. “Okay then,” I said, “give me back my ten dollars,” and I held out my palm like I was waiting for my cash. Ernie rubbed his hand over his face like he was trying to wipe his skin off. He was thinking really hard, and I could tell it hurt his brain. He went at his face so hard, I could hear the scruff on his cheeks and chin. It sounded like construction paper rubbing against more construction paper. That's a simile because I used the word *like* to make the comparison. “Well, what's it going to be?” I asked, and I stared at him with my best poker face. Ernie stuck his hand out for me to shake like we'd just completed a serious business transaction. I didn't want to shake it because Ernie was a filthy animal, and I didn't know where his hand had been, but sometimes you gotta do things you don't like to get ahead in life. After we

shook hands, I wiped my hand on my ass, and we went back to work. But I swear I smelled like crackers for the rest of the day. That dirty bastard, I thought, and I wondered how a maniac like Ernie could function in the world.

After work that day, Ernie drove us to his place in his old pickup, and I joked that the truck sounded like it was from 1902. “If you’re going to talk shit,” Ernie said, “you can get out and walk,” and he started to pull over to the side of the road. I told him to relax, there were no trucks in 1902, that it was just a joke. But he didn’t laugh. When I saw the thickness of Ernie’s glasses from the side, I said a little prayer for my safety. How he got a driver’s license, God knows. I didn’t want to die at the hands of a lunatic. People with glasses that thick shouldn’t be allowed to drive, I thought, and said to myself, Whoever gave him a license must be as blind as he is.

We pulled up to a shotgun house with mint-green aluminum siding, and Ernie said, “This is me.” I asked him to hurry it up because of my mom’s doctor’s appointment. “You’re not coming in?” he said. I told him I hadn’t planned on it. He looked a little hurt, and that made me feel weird. “Just come in for second,” he said, “I want to show you something.” For fuck’s sake, I thought, I hate my life. I followed Ernie inside. All of his walls were wood paneling, and the place smelled like canned soup. We walked to a back room, and when Ernie opened the door, all I could see were eagles. There were so many eagles, I felt dizzy. All those eagles only proved how crazy Ernie was, and I worried he might have brought me to his house to murder me. There were eagle statues and eagle figurines. Pinned to the wall were eagle posters, bald eagle t-shirts, and bald eagle trucker caps. He had a collection of eagle pins stuck to a cork board and a few eagle feathers hanging from the ceiling. I saw a La-Z-Boy recliner with an eagle blanket draped

over it. “Dear baby Jesus,” I said, and I took a step back in case I needed to make a run for it. Ernie walked into the room and pointed to some ceramic eagles. “I painted those,” he said. He picked up an eagle that had been carved from wood. “I got this one at a truck stop near Washington, Indiana,” he said. He looked like a little kid showing off his stuff, and he reminded me of myself as a boy, how I used to always give my grandpa a tour of my room whenever he visited.

I decided Ernie wasn't going to murder me, so I went in for a closer look. I saw a picture of Ernie and a woman holding a baby. Of course the photo was in a frame shaped like an eagle. A younger, less ugly Ernie stood next to a giant woman who must have been his wife. She was a whole head taller than Ernie. In the photo, they were all standing in front of a fake background that looked like a desert at night. There were some flat mountains like the ones in Arizona or New Mexico and a wolf on a boulder was howling at a full moon. The moon was too big to be realistic and that annoyed me. Ernie saw me looking at the picture. “That's my wife,” he said. I knew Ernie was married, but I didn't know that he had a kid. I felt like he was waiting for me to compliment his wife, but I couldn't bring myself to do it, so we just stood there for a while staring at that picture. He didn't say anything about the baby, and I thought was strange.

In the corner of the room, I noticed a small television, two VCRs, and stacks of VHS tapes. He must have collected all those movies over the years. I told him he should get one of them new DVD players, but when I said that, he just stared at me with big eyes and an open mouth like I was talking French.

I also saw a bunch of mason jars and vials filled with dark liquids stacked in another corner of the room, so I asked him what those were. He said his wife was a witch and those were her healing potions.

“Your wife's a witch doctor?” I asked.



“She’s not a doctor,” he said.

“It’s just a phrase,” I told him. “Like how a person can be a doctor of math and not really be a doctor. That’s how it is with witch doctors.”

But Ernie wasn’t listening. He didn’t care about learning new things. He’s what my Science teacher called an anti-intellectual.

I asked if his wife had any medicines for the brain because I figured something was wrong with my mom’s. He picked up a mason jar full of black liquid and handed it to me. I opened the lid and took a sniff, and that black stuff smelled like the end of the world, like a hog farm on fire.

“What’s in it?” I asked.

And he said, “This and that, plants and roots, and some animal parts.”

“Which animal parts?” I wanted to know, but he told me not to worry about it.

When I asked him how much it was, he said \$10 and I knew it was a sign from God. God was asking me to sacrifice my movies for my mom just like he’d sacrificed his boy for all those bad people. But it was also His way of telling me he was going to cure my mom. He led to me to Ernie’s so I would see that medicine and buy it.

I did some wheeling-and-dealing with Ernie for a while, and after a shouting match, he finally agreed to let me return my *Star Wars* movies in exchange for the medicine. He was angry because he’d already used up a tape, but I knew I had him when I told him my mom was dying.

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Ernie drove me home like we agreed, and I went to the doctor with my mom and uncle. My mom looked better. She wasn’t wearing her helmet, and she had on jeans and t-shirt. She looked like her old self. My uncle drove us all in his truck. I sat in the middle so my mom could

have the more comfortable seat by the window. We had to hurry because the doctor's office closed at six, and it was a thirty-minute drive. That really pissed off my uncle. "People have jobs," he said, "how do they expect a working man to make it to the doctor when they shut down so goddamned early." My mom must have been feeling it because she perked up and said, "Sons of b-b-bitches." We all laughed at that, and it helped lighten the mood.

A woman behind a glass window at the doctor's office made us pay \$275 up front since my mom didn't have health insurance. My uncle shook his head and said, "Highway robbery." We waited in the lobby for ten minutes. I tried looking at magazines, but they were all about golf or running or fancy furniture. My uncle had brought a marijuana magazine as a joke. "Found it while hauling junk," he told us. He put it on top of the other magazines, and I thought that was pretty hilarious even though we wouldn't be there to see someone's surprise when they picked it up.

We waited *another* ten minutes in the back room, and a nurse took my mom's blood pressure and temperature. When the doctor finally came in, he smiled and shook all our hands. He seemed nice enough, but I didn't trust him. Something about him reminded me of a used car salesman. He asked my mom a bunch of questions, and my uncle told him about the stuttering, the helmet, all her trips to schools on the scooter. The doctor said he wanted to run some tests, and my uncle asked what kinds of tests. The doctor said MRI, and my uncle said that's just one test. "Let's start with a scan and go from there," the doctor said. When my uncle asked how much an MRI costs, the doctor said probably around \$1,000. That made me see red, and I told him nobody could afford that.

Nobody joked or laughed the whole way home. My mom's eyes looked blank, like she was staring at something on the inside of her mind. I put my arm around her and told her I loved

her, but she didn't really respond. I wondered who would take care of her all day since me and my uncle had to work. Maybe I could get a night job, I thought. That way I can spend time with my mom during the day, and my uncle could help at night. I remembered my favorite book *Where's Buddy?* and how Buddy's brother took care of Buddy even though Buddy fell asleep in a cave and worried a bunch of busy people. I knew I'd have to take care of my mom like that. I'd have to work hard like my uncle and stop fooling around. I didn't tell my uncle about my broken-down car. I didn't want him to worry or feel like he had to work extra hours for repair money. I decided me and Stuart could figure out how to fix it on our own. But I did tell him about the medicine I'd bought from a witch doctor, and he just shook his head and said, "Porter, Porter, Porter."

The next day, I worked by myself at the cemetery. I weed-whacked around monuments and markers all day. The weather was nice, and I tried to enjoy the trees and flowers and hills. The cemetery really is a peaceful place, I thought. But I was still in a bad mood because of my mom and her doctor's appointment. From where I stood, life outside the cemetery's walls looked pretty shitty. My mom was sick. Stuart's mom was sick. My uncle was getting old and was always tired. That Brandon boy and his friends died. I thought about the rhino and wondered if it would be better off dead. Then I felt bad for thinking that because instead I should have thought that rhino would be better off with a better life. I was too young to feel hopeless.

We had a baby funeral that day, but luckily I didn't have to do the burial. Ernie did. Baby graves are too small to dig with a backhoe. You have to dig them by hand. I was weed-whacking in Section 6 when I saw Ernie barreling down the hill on the tractor. He was driving like an insane person again, standing up and mashing the clutch and brake at the same time. "Fucking asshole," I said. He was pulling a trailer full of dirt, too, and the weight of that load was pushing

him from behind. I must have told him a dozen times – “The heavier the load, the more time you need to stop” – but Ernie never listened. The tractor jackknifed, of course, and he skidded to a stop in front of the Garden of Angels. He hopped off and studied his surroundings like he was a lost time traveler. Moron, I thought. I turned off my weed-whacker and watched him dig a small hole in the ground. After he was done, he put a blue tarp over the fill dirt and set a dirt clod on each corner to keep the tarp from blowing away. He picked up a toy airplane from one of the monuments, and I thought he was going to steal it, but he started flying it around in the air like a little kid. “Dumbass,” I said. He put it back and straightened up a stuffed monkey. He stood next to the grave and ran his fingers through his greasy hair. He just stood there doing nothing, just looking into the hole. I felt a little pressure in my chest, so I pulled out a cigarette and lit it. I wondered how long he was going to stand there. It was making me nervous. Then I remembered the picture of Ernie and his giant wife holding their baby, and I knew something bad must have happened. That was the last day I ever called Ernie a filthy animal because I realized he wasn’t that bad, even though he did try to sell me pornos, at least I was eighteen. Ernie was just a hard-working guy like my Uncle Lloyd and myself, and I knew I’d met Ernie for a reason. My mom’s been drinking his wife’s stuff, and I’ve been checking her for signs of improvement every day.

## The State of Delaware

It was 3 o'clock in the morning, and I was on the edge of my bed hugging a ball of bed sheets and a coarse comforter. A woman was fighting with two men outside our motel room near Red Cloud, Nebraska. They were slamming doors, shouting, calling each other rat-bastard and redneck-motherfucker. The motel was one of those single-story deals where people park in front of their rooms so that when I peeked through the blinds, I saw a saggy-skinned woman and barrel-chested man right in front of my window. They were wearing blue football jerseys and cowboy boots. That's it. Nothing else. A small man was running away from the couple. He sprung into an old pickup truck, backed up in a rage, spun around, and pointed his headlights toward the half-dressed couple. When he gunned the engine, the truck jostled from side-to-side. I should move, I thought. I could die if he crumbles the wall. But I didn't. I wanted to see how things played out.

The woman was wielding an ear of corn, shaking the vegetable in the air and cursing at the man in the truck. What is she doing with an ear of corn at this hour, I wondered.

"You sick fuck, God knows where you live," the woman screamed, "You hear me, he's gonna *geet* your sorry ass."

The truck spun its tires at the woman's words, a move I saw coming. The man was about to speed toward us all. If I've learned one thing in my thirty-five years, it's that the world is full of predictable sad-sacks. What I didn't know was whether the truck would swerve at the last second or plow into us all. I was also unsure if the couple would scatter or stand their ground, if I would retreat or take the truck head on.

The truck was finally in motion, and I kept waiting for the woman to say *geet* again. I badly wanted her to say it. The word ignited a rush of warmth across my belly. But not just the

word, the force with which she belted it, the pronunciation she achieved from a clenched jaw. *Geet. Geet. Geet.* I thought I might tear up at the word. Since I was a boy, sounds have been like drugs, or magic spells, or parasites that clung to my brain. Some sounds tasted like raw radish. Others like blue cheese. A sound might invade my thoughts like a blast of cold freesia or cut grass. Some sounds floated calmly across my mind like dandelion seeds on air. Others raced in frantic loops like electric balls of yarn. Some were two-dimensional. Others three. They built themselves into small or grotesquely large geometric shapes like living crystals. But the woman's *geet* was unique. It started as a tiny kernel of metallic light beneath my sternum which bloomed into the ends of my body, a brilliant silver fractal of self-same petals tickling me into an angelic state.

The truck's high-beams pierced my eyes, so I focused on the backs of the couple's jerseys. They were staring down the oncoming truck. They weren't budging, and neither was I. From where I stood, the corner of the truck's bumper seemed to graze the woman's hip, but in reality, he probably missed her by a few feet. After he swerved, the man started doing donuts in the parking lot, and it occurred to me I didn't care if I died or not, that the saggy woman and enormous man didn't care if they died or not. I supposed the world was filled with apathetic people like us, people who'd stare down death and sigh in a non-suicidal way, "Let's get this shit over with."

The truck finally straightened out, cut across the two-lane highway, and disappeared into the darkness of an open field, bouncing and bucking over the Nebraska plain like a cartoonish bull. The enormous man loomed over the woman's left side. He tried to squeeze her shoulder – a gesture I found rather tender – but she chopped away his hand and pointed the corn at his chest like a dagger.

“Don’t you touch me, you dumb son-of-a-bitch. Don’t you fucking touch me,” she said.

She jabbed each syllable into his breast with the end of her corn. The man stood there with a puppy-dog face, and I got the feeling he was one of those gentle giants, maybe a little slow. The woman probably loved him but wished he would show a little backbone once in a while, kick some ass when some ass needed kicking. Maybe the man in the truck was an ex-lover and the giant man tried reasoning with an ex who couldn’t be reasoned with.

These were the moments that made life worth living, I thought – these moments of realness and uncertainty. They were like sandpaper to the soul. I felt crisp, clear, and alert, ready for anything. My lungs opened up, every breath full and deep. My eyes were hyper-focused. The lights outside lit up the room enough to see my brother Owen in the bed next to mine. He was unfazed by the commotion and sleeping the sleep of the dead, even if he was grinding his teeth. He’d forgotten his special mouthpiece at home, which sucked because home was about eight hours behind us in Casper, Wyoming. He’d have to buy an athletic mouth-guard from Walmart. He hated those. They were too bulky. The sound of my brother’s teeth drove me mad. Like metal hooks scraping porcelain. He looked naive lying there. But don’t we all when we’re asleep. Still, something about him reminded me of the gentle giant outside, and I wanted to shake him awake and tell him to stop, just stop grinding your goddamned teeth.

I say Owen, but since his return last year, he started using his middle name Marlon. I don’t know why, at forty-five, he decided to change his name. Maybe it was his way of marking a new start. He’d fallen into a deep depression after the Air Force discharged him. Paranoid delusional disorder, they said. Although another doctor said schizophrenia. Either way, something triggered a breakdown while he was stationed at Ramstein Air Base. He said he couldn’t tell me what happened. Something about security. Or maybe he was just lying because he didn’t want to

talk about it.

I watch too many movies, so I pictured a younger, handsomer Owen in fatigues, pistol in hand, locked in a top-level room. There were file cabinets against the door. Red lights swirling overhead. The clang of klaxon alarms swelled in my brother's brain until he slid down the wall in an upright fetal position and cupped his ears crying. When I shared my version of events with Owen, he told me to stick to computers.

"All I can say," Owen said, "is they told me I should never own a gun."

Jesus, I thought, what happened? Was he suicidal? Did he go too deep with his conspiracy theories? He'd always been something of a doomsday fanatic. He liked to read survival manuals and make bug-out bags for fun. Then again, doomsday was about as American as apple pie. Even I kept a hunting knife, crossbow, and hundreds of seed packets on hand. But after Ramstein, when I looked at Owen, I saw a man who was my brother and not my brother. Every time I visited his apartment, he was slouched over a dim-lit desk, staring into the glow of his computer, chatting online and posting to conspiracy theory forums. He always rested his chin in his palm as if his head were too heavy for his neck. And at the motel in Nebraska, I definitely didn't recognize him. He laid there on the bed's comforter in American flag boxers, legs spread eagle, sweating through his undershirt. He was a lot heavier now. He said it was the meds. On the night table next to him were two different blood-pressure medications, an anti-psychotic, an anti-depressant, and a bottle of anti-anxiety pills which I bought for him on the dark web. His sleep-apnea mask clung to his face like an alien parasite, its tube resembling a weevil's long proboscis, and I could see orange earplugs in his ears. His phone was propped up against his pillow playing ocean sounds on a loop. There was something cyborg-like about him. Good Christ, I thought, is this what it takes for him to sleep?



The scene depressed me, and the room smelled like feet, so I got dressed, gathered up my bedding, and headed for the car to sleep. Outside, I saw no sign of the corn woman or giant. Even with a heavy coat, blanket, and comforter, I shivered violently. I started the engine, reclined the driver's seat, and watched my breath disappear. The November sky hung low in waves of waxy clouds the color of undeveloped film, and through the dense overcast, I could see subtle pulses of green luminescence sail through the sky. I had first noticed the lights in Casper while packing for our trip. I'd put everything down and just stood there in my driveway in awe of the display.

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We were headed to Delaware, a trip I'd planned to teach Owen a lesson, but he wanted to stop at the geographic center of the United States outside Lebanon, Kansas. It was a gray morning, and I could see Owen inside the gas station buying the same thing he always bought – mini-muffins and coffee. I could also see him asking the cashier if he could take a gander at the quarters in her cash drawer. He always said that, “take a gander.” He thought it was funny. He started collecting coins when his therapist told him he needed a hobby. Over the past few months, he'd gone from photography to creative writing to coin collecting. On the wall in his basement is a black-and-white photograph of a couple wrapped in an American flag making love.

“Why did you make the picture black-and-white?” I asked, “You lost the red, white, and blue of the flag?”

“Shit, I didn't think about that,” he said.

Owen's first and only short story was about a scientist who invents a time machine which takes five years to travel one year into the past or one year into the future. The scientist is forty-five years old when she travels one year into the past to the year 2017. There she is fifty, and she

meets her past self who is forty-four. Then, when she returns to 2018, she is fifty-five years old. She becomes severely depressed when she realizes, even if she lives to be ninety years old, she can only travel seven years into the future to 2025. In the end, she chooses to destroy the time machine she spent twenty-five years building.

I tried using the story to psychoanalyze my brother, and I concluded that the time machine represented his midlife crisis. If he were younger, there would be more time to experience more of the world, but now that he was older, like the scientist, it was too late. Not much changed in his life, and every day was the same. Maybe he felt like he'd wasted his life on something that did him no good.

"If the scientist was smart enough to build a time machine," I asked, "why did it take her so long to realize she could only travel seven years into the future before aging so much? And what does a person do in a time machine alone for five years?"

"I see your point," he said, "I guess I could add a cryogenic sleep chamber to the inside of the time machine upon revision."

Owen also collected "America the Beautiful Quarters" and placed them into a book of felt slots. Only Ohio was missing, and it drove him crazy.

"Just buy the damn thing online," I told him, but he refused.

"You don't understand. It's about the hunt," he said, "I'll only accept an Ohio found in the wild."

"The wild?" I asked.

Before our trip to Delaware, I'd purchased an Ohio quarter online for \$2.25 and planned to engineer a scenario in which the coin seemed to appear naturally. I was tired of him harassing strangers and cashiers because of the damn thing. It was embarrassing.

As he walked out of the gas station, an elderly man in overalls stopped and shook his hand, undoubtedly thanking him for his service. Everywhere he went, he wore an Air Force cap or t-shirt, and people constantly stopped him to shake his hand.

“Another member of the Owen fan club?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, little brother, defragmenting hard drives at Best Buy is an important job, too,” he said.

“You know the true center of the United States is located near Belle Fourche, South Dakota,” I told him, “It takes Alaska and Hawaii into account. We’re going to the center of the 48 contingent states.”

“You mean 47 contingent states,” he said.

I expected this answer. He was subtracting Delaware. He was into geographic conspiracy theories about sinkholes and Google Maps anomalies. And he’d recently read Australia did not exist. This inspired his own theory – Delaware doesn’t exist.

“Think about it,” he told me one day, “nobody’s from Delaware. Nobody talks about Delaware, not on TV, not in the news.”

“Nobody talks about Wyoming either,” I told him.

“Yeah, but we’re *from* Wyoming,” he said, “so we know it’s real. Look, I’m not saying Delaware was *never* a state, just that at some point in history, it ceased to be a state, and I intend to discover why and when. Right now, I’m investigating the idea that bankers paid the U. S. government to secretly secede Delaware so corporations and investors could use the land as an “off-shore” tax haven.”

He put air quotes around “offshore.”

“What about the millions of search results you’ll get if you Google *Delaware*?”

“Anybody can post anything on the internet. It’s the wild west of information,” he said oblivious to the hole he’d poked in his own argument since every conspiracy theory he subscribed to, he found online.

“You do realize you’re posting your own theories online, that you believe Australia doesn’t exist because somebody posted it online?”

“It’s all about power and money,” he said, “the websites I read are authored by average Joes, not some corporation or billionaire or government. Average Joes have no reason to mislead people. Powerful people do.”

Back in Casper, every weekend, Owen put on dress shoes, khakis, and a collared shirt and tie. He surveyed people outside restaurants, strip-mall shops, and Walmarts.

“Have you ever been to Delaware?” he asked.

“Can you name any celebrities, politicians, or famous athletes from Delaware?”

“Can you name a professional sports team from Delaware?”

“What is the capital of Delaware?”

“Which states surround Delaware?”

“Is Delaware landlocked or on the coast?”

The responses were not surprising. People’s ignorance of Delaware only helped fuel his theory. When one woman demonstrated her knowledge of Delaware, Owen suggested she’d caught wind of the survey and studied in advance. “Maybe she was part of the whole conspiracy,” he added, “You never know.”

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The long drive to Kansas was uneventful, and we arrived at center of the 48 contingent states a few days before Thanksgiving, Owen photographed me sitting next to the the geographic

center of the United States, which was technically a symbolic landmark. The real center was nearby on private property. To protect the landowner's privacy, the state moved the center to a nearby field by cementing a flagpole into a wonky pyramid of rocks. A green bench had been plopped beside the monument, and there was no flag atop the pole. It was 10 AM, but the sky looked like the beginning of evening. The wind traveled in aggressive bursts across the plains. When I called the scene depressing, Owen told me to show some respect. The two of us stood awkwardly in the middle of the Great Plains unsure what to do next. I looked up into the cloud cover for the green lights, and Owen pushed a stick around with his foot, wondering aloud where a stick could have come from when there were no trees in sight.

"It's a mystery for the ages," I told him.

He picked up the stick and placed it into his coat pocket.

I decided to ask him about the lights.

"Hey, have you noticed any meteorological anomalies during the past few days?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Weird green lights in the sky."

"Then just say 'green lights' for Christ's sake. Don't say 'meteorological anomalies.'

You sound like an asshole."

He peered into the sky for a while and rubbed his belly.

"Now that you mention it, I think I did notice a few blobs of green light the other night.

Sometimes my meds mess with my memory, but I'm almost positive I saw them."

I regretted saying anything. I got the feeling I had planted the idea in his head.

"Shit, I think I just saw a green light glide across the sky above the clouds," he said.

I couldn't tell if he was fucking with me or not, which always irked me. I wrote a paper in college once arguing excessive irony and sarcasm was America's greatest mental health crisis, how our humor had become so steeped in ironic ruses, we had collectively lost touch with reality. I claimed such humor was sadistic, a form of schadenfreude since people delighted in another person's confusion or discomfort. My Canadian friend agreed with my theory, claiming Canadians were, on the whole, a much more ingenuous people.

There was a tiny white chapel near the geographic center's monument, but it was only the size of a few outhouses. The inside was so tiny each pew only sat one person. I took a seat near an old woman and she said, "Aren't these tiny pews the most adorable thing you've ever seen?". Her grandson was darting from pew to pew, ducking and diving, pretending to shoot us all with a toy machine gun. When he pointed the gun at Owen, my brother's face went pale, and I wondered if something similar happened during his breakdown at Ramstein. Owen turned around and walked to the front of the chapel in a bit of a daze. He stood at the pulpit and thumbed through a gigantic Bible. After a while, he looked up and began reading Genesis 1:1 out loud, and as he read, his voice got louder and deeper and more zealous. After he stopped, the older woman removed her gloves, clapped, and said, "How quaint!", as if Owen were part of the installation.

"Thank you," Owen said in an Elvis voice, "Thank you very much."

Behind Owen was a wooden plaque on the wall. It was shaped like the United States and painted like an American flag. The stars covered Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, and the rest was of the plaque was all red and white stripes. Someone had nailed a Christian cross to the center of the plaque marking the geographic center. This fucked with my head for a moment because that made the U. S. the cross on which Christianity was crucified. But it also looked like the country was in the cross hairs of Christ, as if Jesus had America in his sights. The plaque was

meant to be inspirational and patriotic, but it also looked like America was the place where Christianity had gone to be crucified.

\*

For the next leg of the trip, I pretended to be asleep while Owen drove, but that didn't stop him from talking to me. "Did you know Delaware was named after Thomas West, Baron De la Warr," Owen said, "which means something like 'of the war.' When we reach Pennsylvania, I say we set up camp near the border. We can rent a canoe and take the Delaware River into the area of the former state Delaware. ... Hey, are you asleep?"

Even though the trip was my idea, I was tired of hearing about Delaware. I started to lose faith in my own idea. If Owen could just spend some time in that state of Delaware, I thought, maybe he would realize how ridiculous his theory is. I wanted him to see a sign on the side of the highway that said, "Welcome to Delaware." I wanted him to see our Hampton Inn receipt with a Delaware address printed on the front. I was even planning on getting a speeding ticket on purpose so he would have an official state document to prove the existence of Delaware.

I continued to pretend I was asleep. My head was propped against the window, so I had to endure the pain of the glass against my scalp. I breathed slow and steady and planned a natural-looking maneuver to reposition my head against the headrest. I hoped Owen was watching the road, but I worried his eyes were on me. I imagined him studying my face and breathing, searching for signs of faking. After a couple of minutes, I murmured a sleepy whimper, rolled my head off the glass, and exhaled softly to signal that I'd never actually woken up, just shifted positions. Owen must have bought the act because he started singing Bad Company and Iron Maiden songs which eventually put me to sleep for real.

When I woke up, we'd just passed a sign for Evansville, Indiana. I took over driving outside a town called Santa Claus. It's amazing, the number of places tucked quietly away in the United States. You could spend a lifetime studying them all and never make a dent. Once we got on the interstate, Owen and I decided to find a place to eat. As we were talking, I looked over and saw a driver-less car in the lane next to us. A metallic sphere on a tripod was attached to the car's top. In the passenger seat, a woman typed away on a laptop, and in the backseat, a man in a virtual reality mask and gloves enacted driving motions.

"Holy shit," I said pointing, "Look at that!"

Owen turned to his right and looked out the window.

"My God!" he said, "I've seen it all now! Get off at the next exit. We have to go there."

"Go there?," I asked, "What are you talking about?"

"The Ark," Owen said pointing in the distance, "that's the new Noah's Ark Theme Park. The second one in the country. It cost 9 billion dollars and took four years to construct. Doubt it floats though."

I looked up and saw an enormous rectangle perched on the horizon.

"I was talking about that driver-less vehicle."

I slowed down, so he could get a good look inside the car.

"I think that guy's driving the car using virtual reality," I said.

But Owen seemed unimpressed, which disappointed me. All he could think about was the Ark, and I knew if we didn't stop, I would never hear the end of it. "At this rate," I said sarcastically, "Delaware really *will* be gone by the time we get there." But then I remembered that my sarcasm was my brother's reality, and I wished I'd never said it.

\*



Inside the Ark, we found what one might expect. Some real animals, some fake animals, animatronic dinosaurs, a Boston Market where we stopped to eat. To pass the time in line, I predicted my brother's order – meatloaf with green beans and corn. But I wasn't sure if he would take the cornbread or rolls. I went with rolls. I was correct on all accounts. When the guy at the cash register handed Owen his change, I realized how I could sneak my Ohio quarter to my brother. I would pretend he dropped it, then simply hand it to him after we sat down.

We took our trays and sat near the entrance. Behind my brother, I could see the head of a baby pterodactyl peeking over its wooden stall. It moved back and forth mechanically, and its beak opened and closed every thirty seconds. I counted.

“You dropped this up at the cash register,” I told Owen handing him the Ohio quarter I'd bought online. I threw a dime and penny into the mix to deflect suspicion.

“Oh, thanks,” he said and put the coins into his pocket.

Jesus, I thought, the guy molests the entire countryside looking for a quarter, and he doesn't even inspect his own change.

“I think there was a quarter in there,” I said, “Aren't you going to check it?”

“Nah, I'll check it later,” he said, “I'm famished.”

I watched him as he used a plastic spork to scoop corn into his mouth. With nearly every bite, one or two kernels of corn missed his mouth. They fell onto his plate, disappeared into his lap. One rolled onto the floor. I'd never seen anybody unsuccessfully eat corn. He either didn't notice or didn't care. Both possibilities depressed me. My brother looked eighty years old. I imagined him in a nursing home with only me to care for him, only me to feed him lukewarm green beans and corn. I know I should have felt bad for him, but all I could think about was chaos theory. Maybe one kernel was on the floor because of the way the kernel hit my brother's t-shirt.

Maybe another kernel was on the table because it hit his beard first. I took other variables into account. Was the corn buttered? What kind of material was my brother's t-shirt? How oily was his beard? I considered the atomic and subatomic levels, the particles and subatomic particles at play in a single hair from my brother's beard and how they interacted with the particles and subatomic particles of a piece of corn. All of these things determined the course of each kernel's path. This is how the world really works I thought, entire fates determined by a chaotic orchestra of invisible electromagnetic forces. We think we're in control, but our lives are no different than kernels of corn falling from a spork and onto a conspiracy theorist's beard or chubby belly. Some of us end up on the floor. Some of us get eaten. There are no lucky ones. We are, all of us, planted, raised, harvested, and consumed by a maniacal universe.

Jesus, I thought, it's almost Thanksgiving, and I'm sitting in a replication of Noah's Ark watching my brother fumble with a spork in front of a robotic dinosaur philosophizing about corn. I wished the truck at that motel in Nebraska would have ended me. I was annoyed at first, then angry. Owen should be able to eat a bite of goddamned corn. For fuck's sake, where's a cob when you need one, I thought. Then I noticed my brother's hand trembling, just barely, causing the corn to vibrate over the edge of his spork and onto his stomach and lap. It occurred to me that the trembling could be a side-effect of his medications, or maybe it was just his nerves, or maybe he had a health problem he didn't even know about, like diabetes or Parkinson's.

After dinner, we'd had enough smelly animals and people in robes and fake beards. We walked across Noah's parking lot which stretched across the land forever. The sulfuric smell of new asphalt rose into the air and cut into my nose. Owen looked up into the darkness and asked if I saw the green lights. I did. But only one. It was surrounded by a body of clouds shaped like an ancient beast, and the light beat slowly in one place like the pulse of a dying leviathan. "There

has to be a logical explanation,” I said. But Owen wasn’t having it. I could see the wheels spinning in his mind and he stared into the night sky with a smile. He was constructing a narrative, piecing together his own theory about the lights and what they might be, and I knew that even if I proved to him the existence of Delaware, there were at least ten other myths to dispel and Christ knows how many more lurking around the bend.

FOR REVIEW ONLY

## They

The same dark bedroom lit by the television's same blue light. Reid's disgust. His dad is in bed again with his back against the wall, eyes on the TV screen. Mom's oil spot is on the wall beside him – the shape of her head and broad back – leaked long ago from her skin, through worn shirts, into the beige paint. It's the only thing left of his mom. The old afghan is draped over his dad's legs. Brown, yellow, and orange. Smells like it's never been washed. He tries not to look at the scar tissue around his dad's nose and mouth, the part that's dark-red and tough. His upper lip is burnt off, his nose-skin melted down. The fire nearly finished him. And here he is smoking with O2 again, the end of his cigarette lighting up the tubes in his nostrils, the cylindrical tank on the floor beside him. The man's soaked in oxygen and alcohol. He'll find his dad's charred corpse melted into the mattress someday, reduced to nothing but bones and teeth.

Reid unbags a bottle of vodka and tosses it onto the bed. Until now, Reid hasn't left his apartment in weeks. His beard is dry and patchy, and he can feel the yellow on his teeth with his tongue. He's wearing his mom's old army jacket. It doesn't keep him warm, but it symbolizes him as a person – disciplined, camouflaged, apolitical, stoic. He sits on the edge of the bed and studies the TV's light pulsing against the walls. It's an old habit, looking for patterns in a television's lights. They always read like code, these bursts of bluish flashes with short and long rests in-between. Like music for the eyes. He used to think the light meant something, that They were streaming messages to people through televisions. Now he believes it's all brainwaves and mind control. The constant, arrhythmic flashes hypnotizing people into states of apathy, anxiety, depression, paranoia. Keep the masses paralyzed and distracted. First, it was television – a year after Roswell and a million Americans have TVs in their homes. It couldn't be a coincidence. Then

computers. Now smartphones. Next will be microchips in the brains, digital parasites in the nervous system. But it won't be the government. People will pay money for it.

Reid half-turns to his dad, says, "I need the car."

His dad has the vodka now, is cracking it open. He pours some into the glass on the nightstand beside him.

"What for?" his dad says.

It's that horror-movie of a voice again. It must hurt his dad to talk, the fire still in his throat. The man'll have an electrolarynx someday like mom – those chilling and mechanical demands from him to sit for a while and talk, sit for a while and watch TV, sit for a while and stare out the window at nothing. Eyes taking up the bitterness lost in her voice. All those machines keeping her alive at the end. Beeping and blinking. How her skin spilled through the cracks of her hospital gown, and Reid read the images in the stretch marks of her fat – a dead tree, the antlers of a roadkill deer, rivers on a map.

Reid tells his dad the truth about the car. He hates lying. He hates liars.

"I'm going to a limestone quarry," he says.

"The fuck you doing with a limestone quarry on Christmas?"

If Reid says it out loud, it'll sound crazy. It makes sense in his head. The pictures online. A limestone monolith at the bottom of a quarry with inscriptions carved into it. He tried to magnify the letters on the stone, but they were too small. He could only make out a  $\Delta$  and  $\Theta$  spray-painted on the limestone wall in the background – the pyramid  $\Delta$  and the eye  $\Theta$  – or the Phoenician dalet and tet – the door and the spinning wheel – or maybe the  $\Delta$  and  $\Theta$  are references to delta and theta brainwaves. Maybe it all overlaps. Maybe it's like the Georgia Guide Stones – instructions for the end times. Maybe They're preparing the Indiana Guide Stones in secret.

Maybe the monolith was discovered by accident and that's why the man in the pink was there. The Man In Pink is everywhere – hazmat sites, sinkholes, meteor craters.

“Are you gonna give me the car or not?” Reid says.

“No.” His dad takes a drink and goes back to the television. He's watching a comedy show with apes. There's a magician mesmerizing a chimpanzee with pictures of peanuts on a tablet, tricking the chimp into believing the nuts are in the device. The chimp is obsessed, agitated. The audience thinks it hilarious. The magician calls the chimp a monkey, and Reid becomes irate.

“It's not a monkey,” he tells the TV. “It's an ape.”

He points to the television and turns to his dad. “It's not a monkey,” he says. “It's an ape.”

He pulls a twenty from his pocket and throws it at his dad's feet, tells him he'll have the car back by tomorrow.

“You ain't taking my car to a flippin quarry,” his dad says.

Reid stands up and pockets the twenty, walks over to the nightstand and picks up the vodka cap. He smells cigarette juice at the bottom of a somewhere-coke-can. There's a bowl of dried-out oatmeal on the stand, and he can see bits of gray stuck to the corners of his dad's mouth. His dad clinches the vodka to his chest with one hand and mouths a soft *Don't*, but Reid grabs the bottle anyway, and it becomes a silent tug-of-war. Reid can take the vodka if he wants, but he toys with his dad for a while, lets the old man think he can win. He pulls harder and his dad beats his forearm, burns the top of his hand with his cigarette. Reid yanks at the bottle, and his dad screams like he's being stabbed to death. Reid's heard it before, has been burned before, clawed before. He thinks the scream's an act. He's never screamed, never cried, so people who

do so must be faking.

“Give me the keys,” Reid says.

His dad tries to take a deep breath but can't. He pulls the keys from the pocket of his shorts, throws them across the room. Reid caps the vodka bottle and tosses it onto the bed. His dad's laughing a rough laugh now, looking for his cigarette in the folds of the afghan.

“33 and still driving daddy's car,” his dad says.

Reid picks up the car keys and puts the twenty on the television. There's a person in a gorilla suit beating its chest on TV. It's surrounded by people passing basketballs back and forth. *The Invisible Gorilla Test*, the screen says. Reid turns off the television and leaves his dad in the dark. It's not good for the man, these lights stimulating his brain's lambda waves. It's warping his mind. It's the reason his dad is the way he is, Reid thinks. *If thy right eye offend thee.*

\*

Reid drives north toward downtown Indianapolis. The snow has started to melt and the city's only sound is the sigh of salt and slush under tires. Every block is sick with Christmas lights. They spread out like alien vines, wind up lampposts and trees and crawl along rooftops and gutters. They never stop blinking. Reid stops at a red light and sees a nativity scene that's been violated. Joseph is on top of Mary in the manger, and the wise men are lying face-up in the snow like hypothermia victims. The Christ child has been laid at the feet of an inflatable Santa Claus which wobbles over him like Godzilla. Only the donkey has been spared. It smiles from its bed of plastic hay, unmolested, next to a one-armed Frosty the Snowman. The scene angers Reid, this desecration of religious icons. Everything is out of order. The message has been lost, de-based, defiled. He puts his hazard lights on and gets out, runs across the street and into the yard. He arranges the biblical characters so that the scene makes sense, so that the nativity's grammar

is correct.

When he gets back into his car, people honk and go around him. He's entranced by the weirdness of the city's skyline before him. He finds the lowness of the clouds ahead disturbing. The clouds, they're digesting the tops of tall buildings downtown, swarming and swelling and inhaling themselves into themselves. He rolls down his window and looks up. The clouds drift over the city like jellyfish-gods dragging tentacles, dense blooms muddied by an orange-gray glow from miles of trapped light. He opens his door and grabs a fistful of slush off the street. The ice helps reconnect him to reality. The internet told him to touch something cold or hard if he experiences derealization.

He didn't have a name for it until recently – derealization – until he searched it online. *Life feels like a movie or a dream ... People seem far away ... Seeing through a fog ... Invisible wall between me and others.* It started when he was 13. Sitting in class, the other students looked like props. The teacher's words were faint and faraway. He felt afraid at first. The tiny Reid in his head had slid from the forefront of his mind to the very back where the lizard brain sits. It was like looking out onto the world through a haze, across an abstract chasm of indescribable breadth. Life around him played out like a film. Now, he can only try to forget these feelings of derealization. He keeps his mind busy, drinks, sleeps for 12 hours with the help of drugs.

He drives through downtown Indianapolis's Monument Circle, and there are giant toy soldiers holding candy canes everywhere. He sees Indianapolis, the Circle City, as part of a larger puzzle. Designed by Alexander Ralston, the heart of Indianapolis resembles a  $\Theta$  when viewed from above. And Pierre L'Enfant, whom Ralston assisted, embedded a giant  $\Delta$  into the design of Washington D. C.. One road from the White House to the Capitol Building, another from the Capitol Building to the Jefferson Memorial, and another from the Jefferson Memorial



back to the White House.

Reid needs to go home. He needs his duffel bag before he can leave for the quarry. He passes the Scottish Rite Cathedral on the way to his apartment on 38th Street. Every angle and curve of the Cathedral is divisible by 3 or 33 to represent the levels of Freemasonry. There are zodiac signs and biblical references embedded in the limestone, the Freemason's sign of the compass and square. Reid believes this sign is a combination of Lambda  $\Lambda$  and Gamma  $\Gamma$ . Lambda with its numerical value of 30 and Gamma with its value of 3. The highest level of Freemasonry is 33. The G in the middle of the symbol stands for Great Architect of Society. This is the key for Reid, the idea of architecture and design. Angles and curves. Limestone, lights, and mind control. Engineering and code. Maybe he's living in a simulation, Their simulation. If he could just decipher these codes, interpret the signs, put everything in the right order, what revelations might be revealed.

\*

There's no furniture in Reid's apartment, just a mattress on the floor beneath his window and some little things here and there – a broken reading lamp, half a gallon of cheap wine and a carton of menthols, a laptop with a bible on it. Stashed in the corner is a ham radio with air traffic control headphones. The walls are papered with movie posters, some of them from the theater where he worked as a projectionist. Until two months ago when they called him into the office and told him cinema's going all digital – make a playlist and hit play, a monkey's job really – but they were truly sorry and it wasn't nothing personal. The office floor was coated with an uncanny stickiness, like flypaper for humans. And that boy in the corner with the acne. A new hire. A warm body to man the soda and the popcorn. Did that kid have to be there? They said the kid

had anxiety and needed a quiet place to calm down. The kid was leaning against the wall, sucking on a sucker, watching videos on his phone. The clackity of that candy against his teeth, the slurping of his tongue and lips. The smell of fake butter. It all made Reid sick. After eight years, they no longer needed his hands to lace up the projectors, no longer needed his trained ear to listen for disaster in the reels.

Being a projectionist was the only job that made sense to him because it reflected the way he experienced the world – sitting in the soundproof booth of his mind alone, watching people act out their lives. He half-expected to see his life on the screen one day while working the reels – the tragedy of his mom’s death, the drama of his dad’s alcoholism, him as the hero beside a movie projector unlocking the secrets of the world, taking notes on hidden signs in films – scenes with pyramids and triangles and eyes, the numbers 33 and 3 and 6, references to 9/11, owls. The camera would zoom in on his journal as he wrote. *They lurk in a hidden dimension – these Beings – but light travels through all dimensions. They use light to project a false reality onto the screens of our eyes. They use light to inscribe code onto our brains, to program us. To control the eye is to control the person. My dad is an alcoholic because They made him one.* The camera would cut to the audience watching his life, and they would gasp at this as if it were some revelation.

At Reid’s apartment, an envelope has been slid under the crack of his door. It has been there for weeks. Something from his landlord. His duffel bag is there too, packed with a bundle of coiled climbing rope, two headlamps, and a Polaroid camera. On top is a moleskin journal filled with hieroglyphs, Phoenician, Greek, and Cyrillic characters, his thoughts on secret societies, quantum physics, extra dimensions, mind control, derealization. His theory of Them. He flips through his sketches of the Eye of Providence, the Eye of Horus. Through his notes on the

similarities between Horus and Jesus, on Set gouging out one eye. There are clippings of celebrities flashing the OK sign over one eye, which to Reid resembles the number 6. He thinks this is a sign for stigma  $\zeta$  which has a numerical value of 6, which means *puncture* or *dot* or *mark*.

There's a drawing of a face with three dots on the forehead, or three stigmas  $\zeta \zeta \zeta$ , or 666.

There are two notes in the margin that simply say *Microchips* and *Mark of the Beast*. There are quotes from articles on television's role in triggering lambda waves in the brain. A diagram of the lambda craniomatic point at the back of the skull. Gamma units of magnetic field strength. Gamma correction curves in photography next to architectural curves next to delta and theta brainwaves next to misfolded proteins in the brain. Notes on Theo and Thanatos, God and death, afterlife and extra dimensions. Reid's illustration of how extra dimensions work – an ant crawling up a flag pole, geometrical diagrams of arrows and lines and curves, the note: *An insect can only see the part of the pole on which it's walking, nothing of the world on the other side.*

Reid pours some vodka into a coffee-stained mug. He picks up a pair of toy binoculars on his windowsill and looks out over the city. The man in the apartment above him is playing cards by himself again. Reid can hear the man tapping the deck on the hardwood floor six times and shuffling, six times and shuffling, and the way he does it sounds like the man must have twenty-six fingers. Reid has only seen this man once, a year ago after moving in. It had just rained, and Reid was smoking on the sidewalk in front of his building, staring at the sky's reflection in a puddle of black street water. The moon looked flimsy and bright on the water's surface. He gazed over the puddle, thinking how some things could never be truly known. He would never touch or smell or walk on the moon, only see it plastered onto the sky like a hieroglyph, or reflected on the surface of a puddle like the word *moon* written on paper. When he turned to look at the sky, he saw a strange man with an eyepatch standing in the window above his. The man

was tossing cards from one hand into the other like a street magician, mixing up the deck so fast his hands were a blur. Reid looked away after catching the man's eye. He pretended to study the building's facade instead, then realized the building must have been a hotel once, in the 1920s perhaps. He had never noticed it before, but now it was all he could see – the shallow mote of grass and weathered brick, the wrought-iron fence, the nightmare-long corridors of black and white tiles stretching from Meridian St. to Pennsylvania Ave., lights on the walls that flickered in clam-shell coverings dimmed by fake frost and the silhouettes of dead moths.

Reid studies Indianapolis and drinks the last of his vodka. He looks down at the street below. He focuses his binoculars on a black van parked in front of an abandoned duplex. He's never noticed it before. He documents the plates in his journal, notes the date and time. He wonders if it's Them, if They're watching, listening. Maybe They know he knows. He steps back from the window, out of the light. He hears three knocks at the door, then three more. The number combination seeps into his brain. 3 and 3. Or 6. Or 33. Walking toward the door is like moving through a thick gloom. He looks through the peephole, and all he can see is another eye. Someone is looking through the glass from the outside. Reid wonders if he looks incredibly small to this person on the other side. He hears whispers in the hall and a muted laugh. It's Brother Michael and Brother Gabriel from his old church. They have fun-house-mirror smiles from the peephole's distortion. Gabe is wearing a *God's Army* sock hat, and Mike is in Santa Claus earmuffs. Reid hasn't seen them in months, not since he questioned his belief in God one day after roundly concluding that:

Everything is like something else.

Only nothing is not like something else.

God is like nothing else.

God is nothing.

Reid unlocking his door is a ceremony of paranoia, beginning with the humble turning of the handle's lock, up to the unclacking of the deadbolt, then the frame-mounted doorstop good for 800 lbs of pressure, and finally the cross-like motion of the chain at the top. When he opens the door, Brother Michael looks like he's trying not to sniff the air of the apartment, and Brother Gabriel is holding a casserole dish topped with a pyramid-shaped tinfoil covering.

Are they fucking with him? Is that a pyramid? A tinfoil hat?

Mike holds up the casserole dish and says, "Merry Christmas, buddy. You made the 'Nice List' this year."

Gabe pulls back the tinfoil pyramid from the casserole dish – solemnly, respectfully – like he's uncovering a body at the morgue.

It's a lasagna.

"It's a Christmas lasagna," Mike says.

It's lasagna with a Christmas tree on top.

"You know what they say," Gabe says, "*You eat with your eyes first.*"

Words keep tumbling out of Gabe's mouth, but his voice sounds far away. Reid taps the duffel bag with his foot to reconnect himself to reality. He takes the casserole dish from Mike and grips the hard ceramic edges, sinks his thumb into the lasagna to feel something concrete, something real.

"You want us to sing you a carol?" one of the men says.

The only person Reid has seen in weeks is his dad. The sight of other people – it almost makes him want to weep. He gets paper plates and plastic forks from a drawer, apologizes for not having chairs. He sits cross-legged on the floor and sets the space around him like he would a

table. He invites the men to sit, tells them to make themselves at home.

Mike and Gabe look at each other and talk with their eyes. Gabe bends over and puts a hand on Reid's shoulder, says they're sorry, but they can't stay. They have other people to visit. Then Mike says in a perky voice, "How about a prayer for the road, buddy?"

They each take one of Reid's hands, then take each other's hands. Their arms form an upside-down triangle to Reid who is sitting on the floor. They bow their heads and close their eyes, but not Reid. He stares at the wall behind the men, sees that they're standing in front of John Carpenter's movie posters. *Starman*. *In the Mouth of Madness*. *They Live*. *The Ward*.

"Dear Jesus, happy birthday," starts Mike, "Thank you for visiting Earth in human form on this special day. You are the Word become flesh. Open our eyes so that we may see the truth. Be a counselor unto us all. Search our every thought and make us whole again. Amen."

Reid is astonished. Every part of Mike's prayer lines up with the plots of the John Carpenter films on the wall. John Carpenter's initials are *JC*. Jesus Christ's initials are *JC*. Jesus was a carpenter. John's last name is Carpenter. Maybe They've been feeding us the same story for centuries, Reid thinks. First Horus, then Jesus, now *Starman*. Storytelling – the world's oldest cult, one which nobody can escape.

Michael and Gabriel leave, and Reid watches them cross the street below through his binoculars. They're laughing. They're laughing at him. There was never any "Nice List." The tinfoil pyramid was a joke. He picks up the lasagna and peels back each layer of pasta, inspecting the dish for anything unusual. He thinks of Jesus and Mike's prayer. The lasagna's red sauce reminds him of blood, the cheese leprosy, the noodles strips of flesh. He throws the dish in the trash and grabs his duffel bag. He walks to the end of the corridor and goes up one floor to the apartment above his. He wants to see the card player's apartment before he leaves.

The card player has removed his door and replaced it with a piece of black wood. It must be screwed to the frame from the inside. Reid is not surprised. The building is full of people who wish to remain unseen. The corridors are always empty, and the place is silent during the day. At night, the rooms come alive with little noises in the ceilings and the walls. The man's entryway looks odd in its dull blackness, like an absence, or a portal to some other place, some other dimension. Reid places a hand on the wood and feels for vibrations. This barricade is a level of paranoia he can't help but respect. It tells him the card player, who trusts no one, is a man to be trusted, though realizes if he only trusts people who trust no one then trust is of no consequence.

\*

It's a 78-minute drive from Indianapolis to the limestone quarry near Bloomington. The roads are clear. Reid drives with the windows down to stay awake. This makes him shiver. His teeth chatter. He sees the city's gray skyline slouching in his rear-view mirror, sees the network of red lights blinking on the hospital's rooftops, the hospital that he once saw as a hilarious labyrinth of white tunnels curving and sharp-turning and folding back onto themselves. An M. C. Escher drawing of an M. C. Escher drawing. And when the doors to the "Stress Center" finally opened? They were the mouth of a giant cuckoo clock, arched and split down the middle, revealing a tongue of mauve carpet inside lapping up the screams of a bronzed bodybuilder and the monologue of a woman who was lifting up her bra. Space itself seemed to vibrate, and everything split into grotesque-angular planes of competing tilts. An ungodly giddiness. He couldn't stop chuckling. It was all he could do, laugh and cup his eggshell-of-a-skull to keep it from cracking.

Too bad the doctor was cold-blooded, dead in the face, mouth like a land-abandoned fish. Dr. McKinzey. The guy had an office phone with over-sized buttons he liked to push, clown-

sized buttons for keying in secret codes. He refused to look Reid in the eye. Reid explained his situation in a slow and controlled voice. “Look,” he said, “I read this article online. They took a bunch of healthy spiders and injected them with the blood of schizophrenics, and the spiders spun messy webs. Did you read about this? About the webs and the blood and the spiders?” Reid spoke with his hands when he talked. He pretended to inject an imaginary spider with an imaginary syringe. “Maybe They injected me with something,” he said. “When I was young. Maybe They inject all of us. Maybe humans are *Their* spiders.”

But the doctor was unmoved. “They have medicine for that now,” he dismissed, which Reid took to mean that brain problems could be cured with pills that cleansed the blood. But the pills they gave him, they just liquefied him. And he was already a man of undrinkable water. It was why he’d always thirsted for meaning outside of himself – his own well had been poisoned. That was his Hell – a lifetime of drinking water that only made him thirstier. So the doctor pinned him down to a hospital bed like a bug collector’s specimen. Those pills were a chemical paralysis with no restraints. Control the mind, control the body. Reid commanded his feet to move, but they refused. His tongue had disintegrated. Words marched up and down, back and forth, across the inside of his mouth but never left his tongue. He was a brain in a jar laughing to himself, laughing at the button missing from his shirt, at his pale and hairy bellybutton peeking out from his shirt like an eye dying to scream, at the Shakespearean orangutan on television typing random characters on a typewriter, waiting for order to come out of chaos.

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The quarry sits off a wooded back-road that sits off a wooded two-lane highway. Reid leaves the car on the road’s shoulder and ducks under a barricade blocking the entrance. He car-



ries his duffel bag over one shoulder and checks the night sky. There are no clouds, just the anxiety of black space, stars, razor-cold air, a quarter moon perched like an owl in the tangle of the trees' limbs. The service road leads to a stonemason's workshop. Outside are limestone monuments, benches, pillars, gargoyles. Reid walks between two life-sized lions sat on pedestals like guards. He stops and shines his flashlight on two stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. He sees a cornerstone that says, "Indiana University *Lux et Veritas* A D 2018," except someone has spray-painted FUCK over the Latin. He doesn't know Latin, so he takes a Polaroid of the inscription to translate later. For once, he wishes he had a phone on him, then thinks better of it, carrying a tracking device in his pocket.

He follows a concrete path deeper into the woods. Everywhere, there are limestone blocks and rocks capped with snow reflecting the moonlight. He passes a spent quarry with water pooled in the base. The quarry is a rectangular void of dizzying depth, the resting place of some giant mythical beast. Young trees and brush crowd the quarry's edges, and the moon lays lonely on the dark water's surface below.

The active quarry is deeper still in the woods, down a curved path and around a sharp bend. The quarry is bone-like in its pale dryness, another rectangular void. Reid doesn't need the rope. There is a slope for heavy machinery. He walks down the slope into the belly of the quarry, a small man ready for big truths. The night sky is framed by the limestone walls around him so it feels like he's standing one eyesocket of the earth's skull, staring up at the dead gaze of a nothing-god. He turns in slow circles with his flashlight, as if it were a ritual, and looks for signs of the monolith. He recalls the picture he saw online, but it's dark, and the photograph was taken during the day.

Walking the perimeter feels like a bad dream of never-ending sameness. Until he comes

to a corner shelf of uncut limestone twice his height. He feels like the ant on a flagpole, tiny and blinded by the surface of rock before him. After he walks the edge of the entire quarry, he comes full-circle to the slope. He sees a massive stone slab leaning against the quarry wall at a 60-degree angle. He can't believe he missed it. If he had turned left instead of right at the path leading into the quarry, he would have seen the slab and not had to walk the entire perimeter.

He photographs the monolith in a hurry, as if it might vanish, and the flash from his camera fills the void with light for the tiniest of seconds. He approaches the limestone with his flashlight and runs his hand over the surface. There are no inscriptions, only smoothness. He ducks into the triangular space behind the stone and checks the back for markings, but there is nothing. Without symbols, it is just a rock. Reid no longer feels dwarfed by the stone. The online photograph must have been faked, the characters superimposed. He searches the wall behind him for the  $\Delta$  and  $\Theta$  signs. They are there, but there's a  $\Phi$  in front of the letters.  $\Phi \Delta \Theta$ . Phi Delta Theta. He thinks to reach for his journal and check the etymology and numerical value of  $\Phi$ , but he knows it is a waste of time. It's a fraternity. Probably the same people who defaced the cornerstone's Latin. There's a shard of glass at his feet, a piece of a liquor bottle, an inglorious artifact. Reid can make out part of label. *Dark Eyes* vodka, the brand of vodka his dad drinks.

Reid notices a  $\Psi$  spray-painted on the wall near the glass shard, but he knows it's not Psi. It's the logo for Indiana University, the letter I on top of the letter U. He's seen it a million times, sitting between his mom and dad as a boy watching Indiana basketball on television. His dad sitting cross-legged in bed, leaning against the wall with a glass of warm vodka and a cigarette. His mom against the wall with a beer in her crotch chain-smoking. And then there was the light. The forever-flashing light of the television pinning them all to that blank, beige wall. It was like they were stuck in that room for eternity, that dark and tiny box, cursed to repeat the same actions

over and over. But not him, Reid thinks. He refuses to let himself be trapped in a web of ever-repeating sameness. There are still ciphers to decode, signs and symbols everywhere with no end in sight. He laughs to himself at the *Dark Eyes* and the  $\Psi$  logo. It's the first time the signs have spoken to him directly, personally, but because they are no revelation, it must be a coincidence. All these building blocks of letters and words being tweaked and shuffled and reshuffled for centuries, used up and depleted like an abstract resource, coincidences like these are bound happen. He stands in front of the monolith for a moment, feels the cold-hard fact of the bare stone and decides the facade is a matter of no consequence.