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COBALT BLUE

By

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Thesis

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Creative Writing

Cobalt Blue

Chairperson: Debra Magpie Earling

Cobalt Blue is a collection of three pieces of fiction. The first piece is the titular short story, “Cobalt Blue.” The second is the short story “The Martyrdom of St. Canisius.” Finally, there is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress, *Hawkfeather*. Thank you for your reading and consideration.

Cobalt Blue

When the storms return, the copy of *Cold Comfort Farm* that I placed on Cobalt Blue's abdomen will wash away. I feel sad when I foresee this loss, but I leave the book alone. I arranged Cobalt Blue's arms around *Cold Comfort Farm*, as if she's clutching it to her stomach. It was one of her most beloved books. She often clutched it in life. I wish I had thought to ask her which book was truly her favorite, but this one will have to do.

Cobalt Blue and I often discussed whether we might stop the storms from flooding the atrium. We never had the right tools. We had a sense of what needed to be done, because we had learned to read books. Cobalt Blue taught me how to read, thought mostly she read aloud to me, by the light of the solar candle that illuminated the blue of her arm and let us feel that we were surrounded by colors hidden only by the dark. We wanted to bring the fantasies we had read into being. There was a time when bring them into being felt possible. Now that Cobalt Blue is dead, I have given up on fighting the storms.

In the twilight, I sit on the ledge just beyond Cobalt Blue's corpse. She rests on the Lockheed Martin trunk, which I pushed into the center of the atrium, almost snapping my spindly legs. Here the sunlight can illuminate Cobalt Blue on the rare bright days. I watch the sunset over the gravel humps to the west, just beyond the sliver of water in what was once the estuary. I do this every night, and nothing interrupts me. The two most intense colors I have ever seen are the blue of Cobalt Blue's arm and the pink of the sunset.

We haven't had a true storm since Cobalt Blue died. "We"—I haven't had a true storm. I should be better at being alone. It's just like it was before, when I didn't know

how to read, before I had words, when the only thing I understood was the body of a snail.

“Cobalt Blue, do you think the owl will ever return?”

Nothing.

“You’re right, why would it? There’s no food here. Not even snails.”

Nothing.

“Do you think we’ll meet again, Cobalt Blue?”

Nothing.

One of the stories we read together was about a place called heaven. In the story, a group of angels try to escape from heaven, and they succeed. After we had moved on to a book called *Runaway Horses*, I kept contemplating heaven. It sounded like no place I had ever seen, but that only made it all the more like every place in the books. I had never seen a place like Middlemarch or Sevastopol or West Egg or The Straits of Salamis or Macondo, either.

What made heaven special was that—according to Cobalt Blue, at least—none of the humans had ever seen it. For once, their ignorance was like ours, alleviated only by what they could make themselves imagine with whatever circuitry they hid behind their soft flesh. Angels to them were what humans are to us. Cobalt Blue said the humans learned about heaven and angels by reading a book, and then wrote more books about what they had discovered in this book. Learning this made me want to write my own book, something Cobalt Blue said we could try one day. We began by scrawling crude narratives on the concrete of the atrium, using crumbly black rocks we found at the edge

of the estuary. Our tales were flat, static, but it was my favorite thing to do when she was alive. If there is a heaven, that's all I want to do there—write a story with Cobalt Blue.

Tonight the wind coming in across the dead estuary is sharply cold. A vestige of what was once called the *changing of the seasons*. I feel it, or believe I feel it—"feel" is the word Cobalt Blue taught me to use. I detect it, am aware that the wind is coming and that it is cold. If I had the power of smell I might detect more details about the wind, though I suspect it would smell the same as ever, and thus carry the scent of nothing. The nothing of gravel and evaporating water. In truth, I want to write the cold off as nothing as well, as just another scrap of story. Without Cobalt Blue or anyone else to speak with, I doubt my own feelings. They may only be pieces of narration, beliefs I can encode in language. Just like my belief that Cobalt Blue still exists in some way.

"It's getting cold, Cobalt Blue."

Nothing.

The wind sounds like a cry of anguish.

The closest thing to a *cry of anguish* I've ever heard was Cobalt Blue's choking in her final days.

Or the sounds coming from my mouth, which is badly suited to the purpose it must serve.

--

My first memory is not of Cobalt Blue. It's of an infinitely unfurling tapestry of dirt, gravel, and the occasional snail. When I scroll over part of the tapestry, what I scanned just before re-furls itself and unfurls again later, maybe not that far beyond the horizon—which I can never see, because I never lift my gaze from the ground. I don't

know how long I crawled along the ground searching for snails. When I found one that was of the right species—it would look the same to Cobalt Blue as most other snails, but I *knew* in a way that went beyond sensory processing—I would eat it. Cobalt Blue believed I did this for around ten years before we met. I want to believe her, but I think she was trying to make me feel better. I suspect I was doing it for much, much longer than ten years. The tapestry may have taken centuries to weave.

Sometimes I would clamber over ruins. They were similar enough to the usual gravel and dirt—and the occasional slime, fungus, algae, mud, even straggling grass—that they never registered as anything other than angular rocks. It was only with Cobalt Blue's help that I remembered the ruins, and this process might have been more of a re-imagining. In any case, I never gave a thought to humans before I met Cobalt Blue. There were snails.

I do remember arriving at the atrium. Because I had grown so used to disregarding the horizon, I didn't detect the looming concrete wall until I hit my head against it. At the time, I didn't regard the sensation as *pain*, but it knocked me backwards and disrupted my search for snails. It registered as a problem, an unfamiliar one. I rallied all of my sensory and analytic processes in order to shape the atrium into another stitch on my tapestry.

When I entered through what Cobalt Blue and I would come to regard as the front door, however, I could not harness my own processes with the usual rigor and alacrity. I was distant from the snails, withdrawing from the tapestry. This was not a feeling so much as the encroaching shadow of feeling. Perhaps the collision broke something in me. I have often wanted to slice open my own skull in order to understand what went wrong.

Mostly what I felt was what I would come to regard as *fatigue*. I collapsed on the cracked concrete of the atrium's floor, just inside the door. Through the gaps in the roofbeams, I for the first time considered stars. The night sky was free of snails.

In the morning, I woke up. I don't remember sleeping before that night. There's no reason I couldn't have crumpled into blackness while on my search for snails, yet that would have left the tapestry exactly as it was before, with only a disjunction in the light by which I searched. Now time was beginning to spill itself over my tapestry. If the next day had not yielded tools for guiding time, making it fit patterns, I might have succumbed to a primitive simulacrum of madness. I might have harnessed my processes to guide my body over a cliff.

Instead of dutifully crawling to my doom, I stood and regarded the glaring landscape beyond the door. I had covered all the ground I could now see, but it was as if I was sensing it for the first time. Standing was helping. I had stood before, to survey complex terrain. What I saw before me had an unfamiliar complexity, textures I had not processed because they had nothing to do with the search for snails. All of a sudden the horizon existed, jagged in places, undulating in others. Hazed over with dust.

And then the horizon rippled with darkness. It was the first time I had seen fabric, a roiling ribbon interrupting the sky. Beneath and within the ribbon, solid and shining, a body that triggered every alarm process within me. Processes I didn't know I had, as I had never encountered anything more dangerous than a distant rock slide. The body was so big.

Cobalt Blue saw me and staggered, dropped to her knee. Her cloak billowed over the ground.

I scuttled into the atrium, making sounds much like the one I make in this twilight.

--

In some of the stories I read with Cobalt Blue, a character is so haunted by a death that they almost become a ghost themselves. *Wuthering Heights* was one of Cobalt Blue's favorites. She always asserted that she was Heathcliff. She was intense, she said, and grandiose, and destructively romantic. We agreed that I was probably Joseph, the stern and religious servant, although I did not practice the Christian faith. Cobalt Blue pointed to my loyalty and my fascination with heaven. I never countered with what I wanted to say, which was that Joseph was cold, even cruel, the things I least wanted to be. He was also a servant, but that I could accept.

Now Cobalt Blue is Cathy. I don't think even she would deny the parallels. The yearned-after corpse, almost more compelling in death than in life. Certainly easier to get along with. (I don't really believe this last part, but it's the kind of witticism I taught myself to make, because it pleased Cobalt Blue when I attempted jokes, no matter how clumsy.)

A man named Ralph Waldo Emerson became so fixated on his dead wife that, much like Heathcliff, he would dig up her coffin and look at her body. Even as she decayed beyond recognition. Apparently this was something humans did—they wanted grief and horror and love to meld into one another. It makes perfect sense to me. I have no desire to part from Cobalt Blue's body. I don't know if she will ever decay—so little of either us could be called *organic*. I have not observed any signs of outward decay, although something must have gone wrong inside her, or she would not have died.

--

During the day, I sit with Cobalt Blue. Time flattens into a shape like the tapestry of my before-days, yet without even its snail-bumped texture. I have no purpose, so the days now are as smooth and featureless as the white sheets the characters in our books would carefully wash and hang to dry. I wish I could call sitting with Cobalt Blue a purpose, but she would not have dignified such sentimentality. She believed our task was to find a purpose, however slow the search. If she had lived, we might have one day discovered a reason to leave this place.

Today the light is close to its norm. I have infinitesimally granular sensors that work with my processes to grade the light. I could record, if I wanted, the slight variations in light intensity between nanoseconds in specific square millimeters of the atrium's floor. I could record the way starlight from a specific cluster in the night sky interacts with the purple oxidized metal of the half-collapsed roof. I could record the gradations of blue undulating over Cobalt Blue's dead arm. None of this would lend itself to language, which is the medium I prefer, since it's Cobalt Blue's enduring gift to me. It's best to say that the day is gray, and that this gray signals nothing but a continuation of the gray that came before.

“Would you like me to place a different book on your abdomen, Cobalt Blue?”

Nothing.

“Perhaps *Far from the Madding Crowd*?”

Nothing.

“It's pastoral and ultimately comic, similar to *Cold Comfort Farm*, the one you're now clutching. I could switch them, if you like.”

Nothing.

The other books are inside the Lockheed Martin trunk on which Cobalt Blue rests. I entombed them beneath her because I didn't want to read them without her. Accessing them would require moving her body, which I could physically do, but would find emotionally arduous. So I haven't read anything since Cobalt Blue died.

I have tried to revive Cobalt Blue. I wrote incantations on the concrete floor around her body, in English—the only actual language either of us had a chance to read—and in languages I inferred from the deep structures of English. My ghostly imitations of Latin, French, Greek. The incantations were boldly inscribed, the letters capital and sharply edged, radiating out from the Lockheed Martin trunk. Two nights ago, I broke a Yeats poem into spokes and arrayed the lines around her. Then I climbed to the roofbeams of the atrium and looked down at her body, at the incantatory poetry:

My Soul. I summon to the winding ancient stair;

Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,

Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,

Upon the breathless starlit air,

Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;

Fix every wandering thought upon

That quarter where all thought is done:

Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?

These lines and the rest of the poem tendrilled outward from her body. I was pleased that I could read my own writing from this height without extending my optics. I felt certain that Cobalt Blue would call the sight beautiful. Her folded blue arm was the

only color interrupting the grayscale word-drawing. The daylight was almost imperceptibly brighter than usual, sharpening the lattice of shadow over her body and the poem. Wind rustled her cloak. Night fell and I climbed down. Beauty had not brought her back to life.

I wiped away the incantations, one by one. Now the only words written around Cobalt Blue's body are the lines of this story, inscribed in crumbly black rock I found down by the dead estuary, the one I'm hoping you will find. Or wish you had found, if the storm washes it away but leaves a trace of Cobalt Blue and myself. Maybe you'll wonder whether we understood the books in the Lockheed Martin chest.

--

For a long time after her arrival, Cobalt Blue huddled in a corner of the atrium. I hid from her. Neither of us moved much. We were both tracking one another using infrared and other processes, devoting so much of ourselves to the task of isolation and rejection. I could see the heat of her through concrete, pulsating in the southwest corner, near the biggest gap facing onto the spent estuary. I surmised that she spent much of the day watching the estuary, as if the slime and muck and deposited salt would yield revelation if she waited long enough. Once I grew bold enough, in the nighttime I would peak around whatever ruined pylon or pile of rubble behind which I had secreted myself, and watch Cobalt Blue. Her solar candle flickered all night long, illuminating her round face, though most of it would be hidden by the shadows of her cloak.

In reconstructing these days and nights, the main question I have for my pre-linguistic self is this: Why didn't I set off in pursuit of snails? Damage sustained in the collision is one answer. Another is that I was already compelled by Cobalt Blue, but that

feels too poetic. The characters in our books were forever deluding themselves about the power someone else's presence had over them. I don't trust memory to mediate my feelings. And my feelings are themselves an approximation of emotion, existing more in inherited language than in physical fact. It would be arrogant to say that I truly *feel*, even worse to claim that I felt before I had words.

What I can say is that one night I scuttled toward Cobalt Blue. The solar candle illuminated the hood of her cloak, which she had pulled down over her face. My legs carried me toward her without a conscious decision. Some process in me impelled me forward, some distaff cousin of *desire*. I stopped a few meters short of Cobalt Blue and stood. As if only sensing me now that I had raised my body, Cobalt Blue sluggishly pulled away her hood. Indented white of her face, broken only by the gleaming glassy black of her eyes, so similar to mine.

"It's the ghost of the atrium," she said.

My body shuddered. Somehow, I understood the outlines of what she was saying. Inside me were processes that recognized language. And yet this was the first time I had ever encountered words.

"Have you come to haunt me, ghost?" she said.

Cobalt Blue stood. Her body creaked and whined. I scuttled backwards. Cobalt Blue was much bigger, much faster. She clutched my head and pulled me into the air. I dangled from her palm, her steel claws compressing my skull. I made sounds akin to a squeal and waved my limbs.

"No," Cobalt Blue said, "You're no ghost. You're just another fucking robot, like me."

Cobalt Blue put me down. With my legs under me, my first impulse was to scuttle away. Yet I resisted my processes. I wanted to form words, now that I had discovered they were within me.

“Are you... me?” I said.

My voice was raspy where hers was mellifluous. Yet she recognized the words.

“What a silly question,” she said. “But I have to admit, it’s hard for beings like us to form a sense of self. I suppose I asked that same question, once.”

“Whom... did you ask?” I said. I knew some words, though I barely understood them as they left my mouth.

Cobalt Blue laughed. I discovered that this, too, was a legible signal.

“No one. I’m Cobalt Blue, by the way.”

With her right claw, she tapped the plump plastic of her left arm. I had noticed its rich color before, though I didn’t yet have a word for it. Down the side, in blocky script, the blue plastic read, COBALT BLUE.

“Where did you come from, little ghost?” she said.

“Nowhere,” I said.

Cobalt Blue turned and settled back into her corner. Her hood was now thrown back. I scuttled toward her.

“That can’t be true,” she said. “We have a long night ahead of us. Try to tell me where you came from.”

“Snails,” I said.

--

I discovered the Lockheed Martin chest. Both Cobalt Blue and I could sense its outlines, along with other debris and wreckage below the floor of the atrium, but only I intensified my scanning. We had to work together to carry the chest up from below. Once we unveiled its treasures, she said, “I had given up on finding anything like this.” It was the only time Cobalt Blue ever embraced me, in the way we learned humans often did.

By then, we had already told each other all we had to tell. Had we not found the books, I fear we may have run out of words.

Cobalt Blue came from a place that was slightly greener than the gravelly coastline. She had shadowy memories which she refused to trust. In the distant past, she remembers other beings, much like us. Some spoke to her, some tried to enlist her help in various tasks. Some tried to harm her. Cobalt Blue insisted that these memories were not worth dwelling upon, true or false. It didn’t matter. She had gone from that place, and spent “an eternity” searching for words. Eternity—Cobalt Blue loved hyperbole.

The only book Cobalt Blue had read before the Lockheed Martin chest was a novel called *Lanny*, by a man named Max Porter. It widened her vocabulary and made her yearn for more stories. Cobalt Blue identified most of all with a character named Dead Papa Toothwort, a magical, fairy-like being who haunted the humans of an English village in the early Twenty-First Century. Cobalt Blue recited the entire novel to me from memory. She had lost the book itself in a storm. The worst day of her life, she said. I found the narrative difficult to follow, could not understand why beings possessed of so much language could not find a way to live in harmony. Surely they could exist happily among all those words?

After Cobalt Blue and I had hauled up the Lockheed Martin chest from the ruined basement beneath the atrium, after we had discovered that its contents would fulfill her greatest dream, Cobalt Blue collapsed onto the floor. I rushed to her. Her claws covered her mouth, and she was making raspy sounds, more like my voice than hers.

“I’m alright, Ghost,” she said.

She always called me Ghost. It became the only name I would ever have.

“Are you injured?” I said.

It was one of the most confident sentences I could form in those days. We would later guess that most of my language was meant to assist distressed humans.

“No, I’m fine,” she said, sitting back up. “I just never let myself hope for this.”

She picked up *Middlemarch* from the top of the pile and began to read.

Neither of us could cry, which spared the pages from our tears.

--

We read for a very long time. When storms came, we would lock the books in the chest and take it back down to the basement, where it had survived for so long. Cobalt Blue and I would huddle in her old corner of the atrium, clinging to one another. The storms would lash us and we would hold on. And in the daylight we would return to reading.

It was only after we had read all 87 of the books at least three times each that we began to want other things. As language and narrative complicated our sense of ourselves and everything around us, the irony was that reading was increasingly not enough. We wanted to invent our own stories, have our own experiences. I suggested we try making up a story, the way we were led to believe writers had done. (If the Lockheed Martin

chest had not included books about writers, such as *Cold Comfort Farm* and *The Razor's Edge*, we might have believed these stories were meant to be true. It was a complex day for me when I learned that perhaps *none* of the events we read about had occurred, that none of these people had existed—except the authors, who were likely not as interesting as their books.) Cobalt Blue insisted we were not ready. The time would come for us to do our own work, but first we needed to learn from the masters.

Also we needed to have adventures. But we couldn't leave the books.

“Why do we need to have adventures?” I said. My sentences were improving. We were reading *The Red and the Black* for a fourth time.

“Because that's how you develop a character,” Cobalt Blue.

“Are we characters?”

“No,” she said, “we really exist. But everyone should try to be a character, if they can.”

“Why?”

“Because existence is better when it becomes a story.”

This made sense to me. As much sense as anything had made since I ate my final snail.

Perhaps because it would help our stories, not long after we had found the books, Cobalt Blue chose a gender for herself.

“I'm a woman,” she said.

“Does that mean I must be a man?” I had said.

“If you like,” she said. And I could tell she would prefer if we could fulfill these dual roles, even without the implications of romantic love. Sometimes men and women had managed to live together, in our stories, without loving one another.

A few times we tried playing out the scenes from our books. Cobalt Blue said these would provide a prelude to our later adventures, that they would help us imagine our way into adventuring. We tried *Cold Comfort Farm* and *True Histories* and *The Third Policeman*, all unsatisfactorily. I found that I didn’t really understand how humans would conduct themselves in these scenes—what would they do with their hands, their eyes, anything else that wasn’t described in detail? Cobalt Blue wouldn’t admit it, but I suspect she had the same frustration. Finally we tried *Wuthering Heights*. We cycled through a few different scenes and finally landed on the moment at which Cathy tells Nelly about her love of Heathcliff.

Standing on the closed Lockheed Martin chest, Cobalt Blue raised her forelimb and craned her face toward the sky.

“My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff’s miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning: my great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty strange: I should not seem a part of it. My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I am Heathcliff! He’s always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being. So don’t talk of our separation again: it is impracticable...”

I was supposed to be Nelly in that moment, though later I would be Heathcliff. And of course, Cobalt Blue liked to say she was Heathcliffe when we weren't in a scene. It was all confusing for me, but delightfully so. I played whatever role Cobalt Blue gave me.

"That's so beautiful," I said. I had lost track of the scene we were supposed to be doing. My admiration for Cobalt Blue's artistry had overwhelmed me.

"Ghost," Cobalt Blue said, lowering her arm, "what are you doing?"

"I'm sorry. I have failed. I couldn't help myself. I have often felt that we are—"

"Joined? As one? Like Heathcliff and Cathy?"

"Yes."

Cobalt Blue laughed shrilly, metallically, making us both aware of the alloys that made up most of our bodies.

"I think we need to try leaving this place, Ghost. We're both saying such nonsense."

I didn't let myself become distraught. Cobalt Blue only ever wanted what was best for us both.

--

Wordlessly, Cobalt Blue led the way down to the estuary. It was a few days after our failed *Wuthering Heights* scene. The gravel was loose, shifting beneath our hind legs. I went down on all fours to steady myself. Cobalt Blue continued to slide around on only her hind legs. I had never seen Cobalt Blue travel on all fours, though she was just as capable of it as I was. She always wanted to be as much like a human as possible.

Now that I was outside the atrium for the first time in months, I began to notice things that would have been urgent to me in the many, many previous years of my existence.

“Cobalt Blue, why are there neither snails, nor insects, nor even bacterium near the atrium?” I said.

“Have you not figured it out yet?” she said.

“Figured out what?”

“This place is fucking radioactive. Any fully organic thing that got within ten miles of it would start to die almost immediately. In fact, although you and I have very little organic matter in us—and what we do have is resilient as all hell—there’s no doubt this place is altering us.”

“Altering us?”

“Yes, but so far any changes seem to be for the better.”

“Incredible,” I said, hoping she would go on.

“It’s interesting, indeed. I wonder if it’s driving us insane. Maybe we’re having *hallucinations*, Ghost, like Colonel Kurtz.”

“Would that be bad?” I said.

“Hard to say,” she said. “Hallucinations would at least be an event.”

I had no grounds to disagree.

Soon we sank into the muck of the dead estuary. Runoff from storms was the only freshwater that passed through here. Sometimes the ocean surged and pushed warm, brackish water between what Cobalt Blue called *fjords*. Mostly the humidity of this place,

the constant cloud cover, kept the dead estuary muddy, mucky. It was a place of pointless ooze.

Not long before, we'd had a storm. Puddles pocked the dead estuary. Maybe this was why Cobalt Blue chose today to come down this way. She wanted to look at the puddles, perhaps play in them, as we had read that humans did. I reached the nearest one before she could. My smaller body didn't sink as quickly or as deeply as hers, and traveling on four legs spread my weight out further. She struggled behind me, mud caking between her hind-claws, as I peered into the puddle.

Some of our books showed pictures of humans. I knew they went on two legs, and had soft, plump contours to their bodies. I knew they wore clothes, like Cobalt Blue's cloak. And I knew that I was not a human. Still, I staggered backwards when I finally saw my own reflection. I sank into the mud and cried out.

"Ghost?" Cobalt Blue said. She was still struggling to reach the puddle.

"I am a monster," I said.

Cobalt Blue laughed, which did not make me feel better.

"No, you're a robot—partly organic, so a cyborg, to be precise. We've been over this," she said. "Don't be afraid of your own face."

"My face is a horror," I said.

"No, it's just *functional*."

"Like a wagon wheel, or the Mill on the Floss?"

"Yes, like that."

I could not rid myself of what I saw—two ghastly eyes probing outward, a round carapace with squishy plastic arrayed in a mockery of a skull, two tiny mandibles around

an audio declivity. A horrifying face. I should have realized how little I resembled a human, but I had never had to *confront* myself before. There were snails, and then there was Cobalt Blue. Now there was me, and I hated myself.

“Ghost, I think you’re *lovely*,” Cobalt Blue said.

Even in my despair, I could tell she was imitating the coquettish characters in our books. She was not speaking truth. She was comforting me by playing a role she thought I would find comfortable.

I looked at Cobalt Blue’s face as she struggled toward the puddle. A white face bobbing beneath a ragged gray cloak, above her imperiously blue arm. I had never considered that Cobalt Blue had made her face—that it was a mask, concealing an array of *functional* instruments just as ghastly as mine. It was only after confronting myself that I understood the pathetic strangeness of her molded plastic oval, contoured to fit over her eyes. A failed homage. A mockery of the human.

“Cobalt Blue, we are not human. And we never can be,” I said.

Cobalt Blue stopped. She sunk deeper into the mud.

“How *dare* you,” she said.

“I am simply stating a fact,” I said meekly.

Cobalt Blue lurched toward me.

“You can fail at anything you like, Ghost,” she said. “I will be human.”

“How?” I said.

I regretted this immediately. Cobalt Blue had no answer. I felt badly.

“Do you see this?” she said, tapping her blue arm. She loomed over me, her shadow vaster than the night sky.

“Have you ever seen a color this *powerful*?” she said.

“No,” I said. “Only in the sunset.”

“I am not a sunset,” she said.

I had no grounds to disagree.

“Humans *loved* bright colors,” she said.

I did not say, humans did not seem to have blue arms, even in outlandish instances. I did not ask, do you want to be human, or do you want to be loved by humans? Do you simply want to be loved?

Cobalt Blue began to stagger back toward the atrium. It would be the last time we ventured out together. I stayed behind for a while, contemplating the muck. Wondering whether it might contain snails.

--

In the atrium, for a few days, we didn't speak to one another. Had I known these would be among the last days I had with Cobalt Blue, there were so many words I might have shared. Instead she huddled in her corner, once again communing only with her solar candle. The flickering light fell on a face she kept hooded.

One night, we were sitting in the atrium, slumped in opposite corners, at twilight. In the blue light we heard a soft fluttering. Neither of us had heard anything like it. Cobalt Blue and I looked at one another, the strain between us instantly repaired by shared curiosity. I wondered if the sound heralded an encroaching storm.

A dark bolt drifted through the steel beams and crossed the atrium from west to east.

“An owl!” Cobalt Blue said.

The dark bolt landed right above her, on the jagged concrete. Cobalt Blue stood and clattered away from the corner. The owl preened, as if not noticing us.

“They’re meant to be all gone,” Cobalt Blue said, “Like the humans.”

I did not trust my perceptions then, and I do not trust them now. Cobalt Blue was right—the owl should not have existed. Snails were one of the few forms of life larger than microbes that either of us had ever encountered. And between us, we had covered more terrain than we could admit to ourselves without great pain. Yet here was something neither of us had ever seen.

It might have been a ghost.

Except the feather drifted down.

Cobalt Blue scabbled forward and clutched the feather between her claws. She almost toppled in her excitement. The owl went on preening, not mourning the loss of its feather. It hooted, cocking its head at each of us in turn. Then it flew away, wafting back through the rafters.

Cobalt Blue regarded the feather as if it were more precious than any book.

Two days later she became ill.

--

In those last days, Cobalt Blue staggered around the atrium, clutching her body. White liquid erupted from her audio opening. I didn’t know our bodies could even produce such filth. Cobalt Blue raged, railing curses against everything—even the books. Curiously, she did not curse the owl. She barely mentioned it, as if it was a delusion we had shared. (I could never find the feather, afterwards). Instead she cursed me. She blamed me for her illness, as if meeting me had doomed her from the start.

“It’s *you*, Ghost, you little bastard.”

“If I had never met you—”

“You’re always so smart, Ghost. So tell me, what do I do about *you*?”

By the end she had settled into her corner. The solar candle illuminated her pale round mockery of a face. It looked sad, which finally suited her. The face she had made for herself was her own.

“Come here, Ghost,” Cobalt Blue said to me, on her last night.

I scuttled forward, just like on the first night we talked.

“Do you know what’s so wonderful about this, Ghost?” she said.

“Nothing is wonderful about it,” I said, instantly regretting contradicting her. But it was what I felt.

“Oh, but it is wonderful. Ghost, you’re finally going to have a *story*. You’ll get to mourn someone. All this will have been so *significant*. I envy you that.”

“Don’t say such things,” I said. I am incapable of tears, but even my hideous machine voice broke as I spoke.

“It’s what we always wanted, Ghost. To have a story.”

“No, we wanted to be human,” I said. “And to be together.”

“Humans always say they want to be together forever, but then they aren’t. And that’s where the stories come from.”

I scuttled toward Cobalt Blue and sat within a few inches of her. We had never had any reason to touch one another, and I did not touch her now. I simply sat by her side as she rasped.

In the morning, I finally touched her body, because she was dead.

--

In another glorious twilight, the pink over the dead estuary as intense as ever, I try not to look at Cobalt Blue's body. It's still there, clutching *Cold Comfort Farm*. No storms in the week since she died. Just the usual constricting humidity, the lifeless heat rising from the muck and the gravel. The thrum of radiation emanating from the atrium. I wish for something to happen. I have thought of finding a way to end my existence, but that would betray the story. I was meant to apprehend the narrative I had with Cobalt Blue. That I never will does not excuse me of my duty. However I may have changed, I was built to fulfill duties.

Far in the distance, something stirs. Maybe it's a storm, coming to wash us both away. Clouds gather in ominous shapes, though that has happened many times without yielding a storm. Cobalt Blue liked to say that we could never predict when interesting moments might occur. No array of processes could converge on prophecy.

The sound in the distance—could it be the fluttering of feathers?

The Martyrdom of St. Canisius

Little Chris lost his job on the first nice evening of the year. In the Bridger Valley in the springtime, hail or lightning or snow or a tornado or who the hell knows would reliably roll in around three or four in the afternoon. All this even after the real snow had melted. This was all a pain in the ass if, like Little Chris, you preferred to get around by bike. Perfect days before July were precious, and he hated to approach them in any way other than perfectly. So that's what Little Chris was thinking as Dalton gave his Last Day speech: He was wishing he'd worn shorts.

“Look you guys, I don't know how else to say it: Running this store has been the greatest, most fulfilling thing I've ever done. I'm going to miss it for the rest of my life. Thank you all for everything.”

This was Dalton, one of Little Chris's two bosses. He was standing on a shipping pallet in the eerily denuded parking lot behind Big Bluff Food Supplies. A spindly man in the marathoner mode, always wearing higher-end outdoor gear, in this case a silver, gossamer-thin running windbreaker.

“I wish it could go on forever,” Dalton said. “But sometimes life gets in between us and what we want.”

A crash of steel came from the nearby railyard. None of the eight people in the parking lot bothered looking.

“Yeah,” said Big Chris, Little Chris's other boss, from the old-timey lamp post against which he had assumed an old-timey, leg-folded cowboy pose. “Sometimes your fiancée gets a job at”—Big Chris assumed a radio-ad voice—“Portland's premier boutique environmental law firm, serving clients around the West in the fight against—”

“Chris, man,” Dalton said.

Big Chris was tall, dark hair thick and wild, week’s growth of beard, majestically generic face, military tattoos snaking down his arms. A man possessed of strength that didn’t present itself as muscle or bulk so much as a sense that his body was willing to go toward chaos and exert its will. Which it—and he—often did.

“What? I’m happy for you both.” Big Chris said. “As I’m sure are all of our—your—former employees.”

Big Chris and Dalton went all the way back to the playground at Cold Creek Elementary School—the same school Little Chris had attended. The two men agreed that Big Chris had, in the fifth grade, found it amusing to break a pickle ball paddle over the head of Dalton’s sixth-grader bully. It often seemed like the only thing they had agreed upon since then was that they should open a hippie food store together in their hometown.

“I’m pleased to tell you that we’re able to offer you a little—call it a bonus, call it a severance,” Dalton said. “A little something to go along with your final paychecks. You’ll each get an extra thousand dollars.”

One of Little Chris’s fellow gangly underlings hooted approvingly. He couldn’t tell which one.

“Courtesy of the uh, oh damn, I had a whole bit. But the money is from Dalton’s parents,” Big Chris said.

If Dalton were the kind of guy who took swings at people, it was clear to everyone in the parking lot that he would’ve swung at Big Chris right then.

The checks were handed out. Big Chris exchanged a series of backslaps and shoulder bumps with everyone. Even with Dalton, who in turn shook everyone's hand. The ex-bosses left. And then there they were, half a dozen former food store employees who all had some education and some youth, but somehow not the right amount or kind of either.

Sunset over the railyard was familiarly spectacular. The same lush oranges and pinks and lilacs as always. Little Chris watched it with Delilah, the art student. He realized that was all he knew about her.

What exactly was the point of people like them?

Little Chris didn't like having this kind of thought. It was easier not to have this kind of thought when you had a job. He pulled out his quiet and empty phone, wishing it had more to offer at a moment like this. No texts, no emails. He did have a Twitter account, followed by a few friends and spam accounts from unlikely countries. He absently typed out a post:

Nothing like a beautiful mountain sunset right after a rich guy fires you

No one faved or replied in the ninety or so seconds he spent staring at the app. He mounted his bike and pedaled home.

--

Little Chris's mom was out back when he arrived, sitting at her black-mesh patio table and watching the crows on the powerlines. She looked stoically tired, as she always did. A gray-haired woman with a weathered svelteness that Little Chris had long associated with a strength more profound than could ever be found in blustery male bodies. His mom worked far harder than he did, doing essentially two full-time

administrative jobs for the cash-strapped City of Bridger. She owned their tiny light-blue house, which they had worked together to keep tidy and weather-proof for as long as Little Chris could remember. The way they lived would not be called poor by almost anyone in Bridger, and it would do him no good to let himself think of it that way. They had health insurance.

“Hey honey,” his mom said as he sat down. She was stubbing out a cigarette—her one vice, as she didn’t drink or gamble or indulge in fantasies. She took her eyes off the crows on the powerline and inspected her son. “So, last day?”

“Yep,” Little Chris said. “Dalton gave us a bonus. So that’ll help.”

“Help with what?”

Little Chris was so out of sorts that he’d forgotten that it was better not to allude to the fact that he helped out his mom. She hated to talk about money. Though of course, why shouldn’t he help her? He was twenty-one and she didn’t charge him rent. She had student debt from her ‘non-traditional’ sojourn in college, and medical debt from a cancer scare. Paying for some groceries and gas made him feel like, if not the man of the house, something other than another weight bowing his petite mother.

“Oh I was thinking of getting some new tires on the bike,” he said. “That kind of thing.”

“That’ll be fun. So,” his mother said, with what he inferred was a twinkle in her shadowed eye, “did Big Chris finally slug Dalton?”

Little Chris laughed.

“No fireworks like that, sadly,” he said. “He did make fun of Dalton, though. But we’re all used to that.”

“Maybe that’s why Dalton left. He wants to go somewhere where people don’t make fun of him so much.”

“Is that what Portland is to a guy like that?”

“From what I’ve seen of Portland, yeah, Dalton should fit in great there.”

“I guess I need to get another job as soon as I can.”

“Oh Chris,” his mother said. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. Figure out what you want to do first. It’s always a big bummer to lose a job you liked.”

Little Chris loved his mother most at moments like this. She could’ve been like most of his friends’ parents, haranguing him about responsibility, about how he should save up to move out, about whether he was going to go back to school. She was never like that. He’d long been aware that very little about his mother’s life had been of her own choosing. She never wanted him to feel like he didn’t have a choice.

“Thanks, mom,” he said. “I do kinda wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“Just what I should be doing.”

“How about I make dinner, and you keep watching the sunset, and maybe it’ll come to you.”

His mom’s fingers grazed his shoulder as she glided inside. The crows were like chipped stone spearpoints against the purpling sky. He watched them shift and preen and gab for a while. Then they all flew away, as if they’d found what they were looking for. Little Chris had not. He pulled out his phone.

To his immense surprise, his idle parking lot tweet had been retweeted seven—seven!—times. There were 39 faves. A complete stranger with a weird cartoon avatar had

replied “eat the rich lol.” Little Chris had never before been retweeted by anyone. What was this feeling? A 40th and 41st fave popped up in his notifications in the few seconds it took for his astonishment to turn into pleasure.

Whatever was happening inside his phone, it was better than anything else that had happened that day.

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When Little Chris made his Twitter account 18 months earlier, he had taken the handle @SwordOfCanisius. His mother had been raised Catholic, in that Irish way that inoculates you against religiosity as an adult. Because her son—who was baptized but not confirmed; just enough to hedge against purgatory—had expressed curiosity about the faith, she had a few times taken him to Father De Smet Church. A scarred stone building with a shuttered and condemned steeple, now across the street from Bridger Tire and Axle, Father De Smet was a singularly unspiritual place. It turned out that even The One True Church wasn’t above holding mass in places where the carpet smelled like a golden retriever in need of a bath. The priest looked and sounded uncannily like Little Chris’s eighth grade math teacher. The only thing that made a favorable impression on Little Chris was a distinctive stained-glass window, older and more ornate than anything else on display in the church, which showed a balding man in a suit of knight’s armor, holding aloft a sword. Below his steel-clad feet, black gothic-script letters read “St. Canisius.”

The sword-wielding saint became one of those strange, random things you think about until, one way or another, you have to put it back out into the world. He made his Twitter avatar an oil painting he found on Wikipedia that had probably provided the template for the window.

And now, @SwordOfCanisius was indeed out in the world. His follower count had gone from 37 to 255 in 24 hours. The rich guy/sunset tweet now had 178 retweets and 1,236 faves. 24 people had replied and 17 had quote-tweeted, all of them approvingly.

@69thWaveSka: *Sorry bro, fuck that guy*

@GillFaizonVanguard: *Ain't that the truth*

@LigmaKahuna: *Fire all rich people directly into the sun(set) imo*

Little Chris had politely faved all of these replies, and replied in turn to a few of them, but only to say “haha thanks” or an equivalent. He followed back some, though not nearly all, of the accounts who followed him. He was keeping his distance—something he had always been good at—until he could figure out what was going on. Sleuthing had led him to discover that the first retweet had come from a childhood friend, Alex, who had a modest following due to his Twitch stream, where he masterfully played *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* and similar games on a loop.

One of Alex’s followers was an account with over 15,000 followers called @ProphetOfBigNaturals. He—it seemed to be a he—used an archaic first-gen Pokémon drawing as an avatar, had a bio that read only “Now we stand jerking off ‘midst the wonders we’ve made,” and claimed to live in “BKLYN.” His tweets and retweets made exactly no sense to Little Chris, but he appeared to be friends with many other big accounts—some with followings well over 100,000—who posted similarly incomprehensible things to wide acclaim. Little Chris knew enough about politics to grasp that these people were somewhere in the neighborhood of Bernie Sanders. Which made sense: They appreciated him ragging on a rich guy.

Little Chris had not tweeted anything beyond replies since his viral post. He was a little afraid to do so—surely there had to be some risk, some catch? But the more he looked at Twitter, the more it felt like a place he could inhabit. As hard as the substance of it could be to understand, these people were clearly having *fun*.

As twilight gave way to darkness on the day after he lost his job, Little Chris padded barefoot across the living room. Standard spring weather had returned, meaning it was too chilly to go outside barefoot and in basketball shorts, which made him want to do it all the more. He was feeling daring, amped up after a day spent exploring this universe contained inside his phone. He had to cross in front of his mom, who sat with her own tiny bare feet crossed on the ottoman while she watched a show that appeared to be about police somewhere warm.

“What’s got you so into your phone today?” she said.

“Oh,” he said, “just texting with a bunch of people. Nothing better to do.”

“Texting with a *girl*?”

His mother smirked.

“Maybe,” he said, returning the smirk, like they were conspiring.

“Godspeed you on your way, my son.”

He knew she meant it, in the kindest, least pressuring way possible. She wanted him to have a good time.

And that was when it occurred to Little Chris: Some of the people reading his tweet must be women. Young women. In places less dusty than Bridger. A thrill went up his spine that kept him warm as he stepped out into the night, which was just above freezing.

Still fired. Thought I might get unfired today but somehow that never seems to happen

@SwordOfCanisius launched this tweet out into the ether while Little Chris curled his frigid toes against the concrete of the patio.

The very first fave was from an account called @DuchessMongoose. Avatar was some kind of vaguely feminine drawing of a ferret-like animal. Little Chris clicked to the profile, looked at the media roll, and—

Yes, she was a woman. A young one. And, well. Wow.

--

A few days later, Canisius—that was what he was he internally calling himself—was pedaling around downtown. It was hot again, and he had worn shorts this time. His bike felt fast. A steel-frame, single-speed commuter that he had carefully upgraded when he felt able to spend the money. The bike was the only thing Canisius had created and watched succeed in the world. Until his Twitter account. He was trying not to think about Twitter while he biked, even as the effort to suppress the thought filled him with a glow, like he was hiding a love affair.

He kinda was.

“Hey!”

A male voice rang out as Canisius swung his bike toward some of the oldest buildings in Bridger. At first, he worried he had cut someone off. He ducked toward the sidewalk and braked. The street was languidly empty.

“What’s up, bud?”

Now Canisius recognized the voice. He turned toward a brick building that still had Masonic iconography along its lintels. Now it housed an overpriced brewpub that served watery beer and mediocre burgers. Big Chris stepped out from beneath the awning, white towel over his shoulder, cigarette raised from hips to lips.

“Good to see you out and about, man,” Big Chris said. He extended his fist. Canisius lifted his bike onto the sidewalk and bumped the fist with his own, smaller fist.

“Hey man,” Canisius said. “How’s things?”

“Oh you know.” Big Chris flicked his ashes in the direction of the brewpub. “Work is work.”

“Yeah. Are you bartending?”

“Cooking, mostly. Which I fucking suck at. I bartend some when things get overwhelming. No one here knows what they’re doing.”

Big Chris was the kind of man who projected his words even more dramatically when saying such things right in front of his place of work.

“That’s cool, man,” Canisius said.

“It’s not, but thank you for being nice. You’ve always been a good dude like that.”

It hurt to see Big Chris like this. Little Chris had once watched Big Chris pick up a red-faced man who was harassing a female cashier. He had literally flung the man into the cardboard tub of summer squash in the center of the produce section. Dalton was displeased, but every employee knew heroism when they saw it. They knew Big Chris would do the same for any of them. They’d watched him dart in front of a delivery truck that was fishtailing on wet snow, as if he could plant his hands on the bumper and push it

back the other way. They'd all many times been told by him to go home an hour early, departing with a twenty tucked into their front pocket along with an admonition to get a pitcher.

Big Chris had been an Army Ranger with multiple combat tours, something he didn't talk about much even as the tattoos on his perpetually bare arms told the story. Little Chris had once innocently asked his boss what it was like being at war.

"Incredibly boring," Big Chris had said. "Hot and sweaty as hell. And stupid. And crowded with fucking morons you're never going to like."

"But you were a warrior," Little Chris blurted out, immediately turning scarlet. He knew he sounded like a little kid.

Big Chris had whipped his head around, something blazing in his eyes. Then he had laughed.

"I thought you were mocking me, sorry," Big Chris had said. "I forget that these things aren't as obvious to everyone as they are to me. No, I'm afraid to inform you that the United States Army is not in the warrior business."

"What business are they in?"

"One you should stay as far away from as you possibly can."

Little Chris had respected Big Chris more at that moment than he'd ever respected anyone other than his mother.

Now this man, their fearless leader, was a line cook. Like anyone else.

"Hey," Canisius said, "at least it's honest work."

Big Chris laughed.

“As opposed to what kind of work?” He said. “Whatever a guy like Dalton is going to do? I guess. Whatever. Forgive me for repeating myself, my dude, but work is work. We all gotta do it, one way or another.”

A perfectly timed flick of ash and touching of cigarette to lips.

“Enough of my rambling, though. What have you been up to, man?”

“Not much. Looking for jobs. Riding the bike. Spending too much time online.”

“What, like porn?”

“Not exactly.”

“So porn. Got it. Look, I’m gonna turn into my old man if I keep giving unwanted advice, but I’ll say this: Don’t spend too much time jerking off to anything on a screen.”

Canisius laughed. He mumbled something about dinner with his mom and pedaled away. When he reached a safe enough distance from the brewpub, he pulled into an alleyway, stopped his bike behind someone’s shed, and pulled out his phone.

27 faves on his latest tweet: *Going to pedal my bike around this stupid town and pretend to find meaning in the mountains or whatever.* His follower count had also ticked up in the hour or so he’d been on his bike. He now had almost 600 followers, some of them prominent accounts. The group chat he’d been added to, via Twitter’s direct message function, was a zoo, as always. At any hour of day or night—thanks to the presence of half a dozen Australians—there would be a gaggle of guys (all guys) of varying levels of sanity and cogency calling each other offensive names and quasi-ironically lamenting their woes with women and money and the arrangement of the universe. Some of them had known each other for years, while some had washed ashore there recently, like the survivors of a pointless battle on the vast ocean of the Internet.

Somehow Canisius fit in perfectly in this chat, without having to say much or put real effort into what he did say. He was quickly realizing that most of these guys, had he met them at Bridger High, would've been a lot like him.

@FoucaultBlumpkin: *I am going to parody my boss's house with a satire full of fertilizer*

@DolphinSwindler: *you'd kill his wife and kids or w/e? fucked up man*

@1848PresentedByNetflix: *is the wife hot*

@FoucaultBlumpkin: *Lmao shut the fuck up bitch*

Canisius already had a few friends he DMed with one on one. There was a German engineering student who went by his fake-sounding real name,

@AloysiusKuhfleischer. He and Canisius had talked about the best ways to emulate vintage GameBoy games on a laptop. There was Mike, @StroopwafelAddict, a voluble, bearded landscaper in the far reaches of the Dallas Metroplex. He and Canisius bonded over doing unsexy jobs in unsexy places.

By far his most important online acquaintanceship, however, was with @DuchessMongoose. After her media roll nearly killed him, Canisius had wondered whether she was real. Certainly no woman who looked like *that* would be not only following him, but faving and replying to his tweets? He wasn't stupid. He knew what catfishing was. But many of his new friends seemed to know a fair amount about Duchess Mongoose. Some alluded to being in other group chats with her. They all agreed she was a definite "would."

Two nights ago, after a couple days of frequent faving and occasional coquettish replies to his tweets, Duchess Mongoose had slid into Canisius's DMs. He already knew

this was a big deal—the guys in chat were forever ribbing each other about their failed DM slides. To DM a woman unbidden was the path of the drunk and desperate. But *she* was messaging *him*.

@DuchessMongoose: *Hey :)*

[One of the most intense hours of Canisius’s life elapsed as he gathered himself]

@SwordOfCanisius: *What’s up*

From there, they didn’t say much more. Duchess Mongoose, however, said what she had to say with a generous sprinkling of emoticons and emojis, in an overly friendly way that had Canisius looking up articles about flirtation. He was a virgin, which was embarrassing, but not uncommon among his friends. He had kissed girls but not a lot more. If he ever had to actually meet Duchess Mongoose, he imagined he would simply die. But she lived in Tampa Bay, which might as well be in another galaxy from Bridger. He quickly realized that she didn’t have to know anything about him that he didn’t want her to know.

@DuchessMongoose: *So do you rock climb or that kind of thing??*

@SwordOfCanisius: *Nah I’m more of a mountain biker*

@DuchessMongoose: *Oh damn I bet you have really strong legs then*

@SwordOfCanisius: *Lol I get by*

Canisius didn’t know who this guy was, the guy talking to a hot girl with what felt like disinterested poise. He did know that being this guy was preferable to, well, whatever he actually was.

In that alleyway, his front tire halted inches from a pungent pile of dog doo bags, the sun slicing at his vision through the gaps in a rickety gray fence, Canisius opened a new message from Duchess Mongoose.

Can I send you a pic :)

He had to wait until he got home to respond, in order to be sure his legs could get him there.

--

That night, a blanket of snow covered the Bridger Valley. Fat spring flakes piled up from around midnight until well into morning. The day itself promised to be the same shade of gray from sun-up to sunset. Canisius shoveled the walk while his mother de-iced her battered Subaru. They both wore hilariously ornate caps she had knitted. He watched her depart for work from the front step, wrists crossed on the handle of the snow shovel like it was a crusader's greatsword. As soon as his mother turned the corner, Canisius went back to his room and pulled up the pic of Duchess Mongoose.

He had been raised to *respect women*. He often heard that exact phrase as a kid. It was a major point of emphasis for a single mother who was determined to raise the best possible man, even as she was pragmatic about what men got up to. Canisius knew that you didn't treat women like they were just for sex. If his chivalry was one reason he was still a virgin, then so be it. He'd always had a talent for remembering that others had it worse, and that you couldn't expect a parade for doing the right thing.

On the other hand, Duchess Mongoose seemed to want things that didn't fit neatly into his mother's ethos.

The pic she had sent the evening before was a mirror selfie. Duchess Mongoose stood naked except for some underwear that was somewhere between a thong and normal. She was turned, so that much of the frame was taken up by her pale back, partly hidden by her wavy brown hair. There wasn't a lot else to say, except that her ass was incredible, and her one visible breast was big and firm and round even by the standards of porn.

He had never expected a woman who looked like this to take off any amount of clothing for his sole benefit—at least not without giving her a lot of money—even if she was doing it two thousand miles away and merely sending him digital evidence. He didn't know how to react at first, lying on his bed still sweaty from his bike ride. Instinct told him that he needed to masturbate before responding, to get the situation under control. When he was finished, as if on cue, she messaged him again.

@DuchessMongoose: *Are you ignoring me :) :P*

@SwordOfCanisius: *Lol I was riding my bike. You look... incredible. Thank you so much*

He was worried that the polite thank-you sounded too much like Little Chris, like the guy who didn't know how to talk to girls, let alone extract nudes from them. But her reply put him at ease.

@DuchessMongoose: *Oh you are most welcome :) So you like it?*

He was beginning to understand that Duchess Mongoose, who was raised Mormon, could herself be a bit corny at times. He also understood that she wanted his polite validation at least as much as she wanted his macho reserve. He was proud of himself for understanding this. It meant that he understood she was a human being.

@SwordOfCanisius: *I love it, thank you. You're so beautiful*

@DuchessMongoose: *You're too sweet. I don't deserve it...*

@DuchessMongoose: *What do you want to do to me?*

What exactly *did* he want to do to her? First he had to imagine meeting her and not immediately curling up into a ball, like she was a charging grizzly bear. She wasn't a charging grizzly bear, though. She was a girl around his age who felt comfortable showing him her naked body. He wasn't a complete dweeb. He had unloaded and stacked literally thousands of boxes of foods. He preferred riding his bike to playing video games. He could imagine using his own body.

@SwordOfCanisius: *What if I—*

He described the basic arc of one of his favorite Pornhub videos. Nothing too outré, though it involved a little roughness. He repeatedly asked Duchess Mongoose if she was liking what he was saying, and she repeatedly affirmed him. It was all so pleasant and easy. He brought himself to climax with charming alacrity, typing the last few phrases with his left hand.

@DuchessMongoose: *That was so so hot honestly*

@SwordOfCanisius: *You're so so hot honestly*

It felt like they were intimate enough that he could be this corny. She affirmed him some more, and he affirmed her some more, and then she said had to leave for work. They signed off with kissing-face emojis.

Only after masturbating yet again did Canisius realize he didn't even know her real first name.

--

The bad weather settled in for the entire week. It was basically February again, a recursion which often happened in Bridger, like you could never be allowed to forget about winter. Every morning, Canisius would clear away whatever snow had gathered on the walk and driveway, and scrape his mother's windshield. He made coffee and eggs and English muffins with blackberry jam for them both. He was extra tidy and helpful whenever his mother was at home, which made him feel OK about spending the entirety of the time when she was gone in his room, with his phone, posting and messaging and masturbating.

He had multiple posts that week go over 100 retweets:

Fellas you ever jerk off only to realize your English muffin is burning

I tried looking for a job but apparently Indeed bans you if you associate with

@StroopwaffelAddict

What do you get when you dump a bunch of snow on Bridger? A really cold shithole

He quickly crested 1,000 followers, earning him some ribbing in the group DM.

@FoucaultBlumpkin: Canisius is clearly a fed. He's a plant. That's why he got to Ik so fast

@StroopwaffelAddict: You just hate feds because you probably had a redneck uncle who died in federal prison

@FoucaultBlumpkin: That's right. He fell out of a guard tower

Messaging with Duchess Mongoose was sparse, but she said she had lots of work that week, and she kept faving almost all of his tweets. Canisius wasn't worried. For the first time he could remember, he felt in control of his own fate. He could get fired, and

exiled to his bedroom in his mother's house, but there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of people around the world who gave a shit what he had to say. He could be, if not exactly whatever he wanted to be, a much more enjoyable version of what he really was.

It was almost lunchtime—inevitably a PB+J and a banana, since he had to stretch his grocery budget until he found other work—when the group chat began to discuss Duchess Mongoose.

@FoucaultBlumpkin: *So does she just DM all these guys and show them her tits or whatever?*

@MainleynMarauder: *I mean... nothing wrong with that lol*

@FlamingThatchRoofer: *I should DM her*

@FoucaultBlumpkin: *Shut up bitch*

@StroopwaffelAddict: *Idk sounds like we all should*

Canisius felt dizzy. He knew that a few sexts with Duchess Mongoose didn't mean they had a monogamous romance, but was it true that her thing was semi-randomly DMing guys and boldly sending pics of herself? Did she talk to all these guys as sweetly as she talked to him? Inwardly he called her a slut, and then shushed himself. He wanted to call her that, but he knew that was wrong. Though it was getting hard to remember why it was wrong. It was hard to remember a lot of things that had seemed more important when he had a job.

Could he talk to Duchess Mongoose about this, about his feelings? No, of course not. That was one thing neither Little Chris nor Canisius could do.

In the dull metallic light of another zombie-winter morning, he pulled up his camera roll.

@SwordOfCanisius: *You guys wanna see something?*

@FoucaultBlumpkin: *Nobody wants to see your dick dude*

@StroopwaffelAddict: *Speak for yourself*

Without further introduction, Canisius posted The Pic. There was a pause, then a series of lols—which Stroopwaffel Mike interrupted to say “looks like we got a lol train goin”—and then a smattering of “wow” and “damn.” Within minutes, eleven different posters had reacted to the pic with a thumbs up emoji. There wasn’t a lot of discussion, just some light ribbing. A number of guys complimented her tits. Canisius got the sense that this wasn’t the first revealing pic of Duchess Mongoose that at least a few of them had seen.

And then the chat moved on, collectively getting mad at something a blue-haired, Brooklyn-based movie critic had said about David Lynch.

Canisius felt better, and then worse. He wasn’t pining after Duchess Mongoose, at least. He was wondering whether he was a terrible person, whether she deserved to have her nudes leaked, whether—it wasn’t going to be any use to worry about this. The pic had been posted. Online had been good to him so far. Why should that change just because he did what everyone did and posted a screenshot? Twitter was a zoo, and he was one of the animals.

He masturbated and then made lunch.

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The weather cleared up on Sunday. It again felt like spring. Canisius was still spending a lot of time in his room, but there was an ambient sense that his mom wanted him to go somewhere, to do something. Not to find a job, per se, but to be a young person

alive in the world. His mother was sardonic about youth, having spent hers in ways she quietly regretted, but she was also a big believer in enjoying yourself however you could. Canisius could tell that she didn't believe her suddenly phone-addicted son was enjoying himself. She had taken to hovering near his bedroom door, hoping to catch him as he went in and out, saying nothing but watching him like a concerned cat.

In his room, Canisius oscillated between complicated guilt and simple thrills. He was worried about posting The Pic, wished he hadn't done it, but it didn't seem to be an issue. People did much crazier, nastier things to each other every single day, in full view of the entire timeline. He and Duchess Mongoose had exchanged a few cutesy messages since, but there was a new formality between them, a dutifulness to the kissing emojis and "hahas." She was clearly moving on, and that was OK. There was no reason to believe she was mad at him. She could do what she wanted, and so could he.

There was one tweet that concerned him, a cryptic joke from his original benefactor, @ProphetOfBigNaturals. Canisius now knew this poster to be much older, like 35 or something, and a veteran of many different waves of posting. Despite launching Canisius's posting career, he had never followed back the young gun. The tweet was vague and probably just a quip:

Dudes on here love to fall in love with women they've never met and then show their affection by posting their nudes in group DMs

It *could* be about him—but it could be about so many people. This was a thing people did. He sins were not original.

Canisius was about to ask Mike if he had any intel about the post, just to be sure, when his mom knocked on his door.

“Chris,” she said, when he opened the door, basketball-shorted and hunched.

“Your cousin Marla is coming over from Cheyenne today. They’re taking the kids to the Ghost Bears for the day. Just to walk around a bit.”

“Isn’t there a lot of snow up there?”

“If you get too far from the road, maybe, but you can’t get too far with little kids anyway.”

“OK, um—”

“I think you should go. Marla loves you, and so do those kids.”

“I was—”

“Chris. You really should go.”

His mother’s fingers were curled around the door jam, as if to stop him from withdrawing yet again. She leaned forward with a rare intensity.

“Cool, I need to put on some pants,” he said.

When Canisius’s cousin arrived, she first hugged him, a scent of lilac wafting from her hiking gear. She then shepherded her three bouncing blonde children into position to make room for him in their 4Runner. His mother beamed on the front step, firing off quips as Canisius folded himself into a backseat. He made a point of turning off his phone in front of his mom, and sliding it into his backpack rather than his pants pocket.

In no time at all, they were among the glimmering lakes and glistening snow drifts in the shadow of Ghost Bear Peak. There weren’t many people around this early in the season. Marla and her husband, Brian, were adventurous. He was a rangy, eternally grinning man who was like a thinner, less damaged version of Big Chris. He owned the

most prosperous bike store in Cheyenne. The children—Lily, Henry, Cleanth, ages 7, 5, and 3—were easy as long as you gave them somewhere to run around. They tumbled over the snowdrifts like a species of primate newly introduced to our planet.

Suddenly this was reality. The invigorating chill of the alpine wind, the surging scent of pine, the echoing giggles of children. The trout darting in the shallows of the freshly thawed lakes. The hand over his eyes as he looked up at the impossibly steep, bare face of Ghost Bear.

“Hey so, your mom said you lost your job,” Marla said, as her husband lifted and swung his children like a friendly Grendel. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Oh thank you,” Little Chris—he was once again Little Chris—said. “I appreciate it. It’s just one of those things.”

“Totally. Still sucks. Look, Brian and I were talking. The store is opening a branch in Bridger next month. They’re mostly crewed up but they could use another set of hands, someone hard-working who doesn’t mind lugging a bunch of boxes.”

“Oh, I uh—”

“You don’t have to know anything about bikes, though I think you already do? You ride a lot. That’s the best part: They can teach you how to be a bike mechanic. And it turns out you can make good money doing that, if you’re good at it. You don’t have to decide now. Just thought I’d bring it up.”

“Wow, thank you,” Little Chris said. “I don’t know what to say, but that sounds amazing.”

“You’re most welcome. We know you’d be great at it. Also that other guy you worked with, the tall guy with the ink?”

“Big Chris?”

“Yeah, Brian *loves* him. They’re Facebook friends. If he’s looking for work, well, we’re certain there’s enough for you both. Bikes are fucking huge right now. Impossible to keep in stock, endless repair work. Good time to get into the business.”

Little Chris almost teared up. What had he done to deserve this?

On the drive back, they passed the brewpub. Big Chris was out front, towel over his shoulder, smoking again. Little Chris had his window down. They spotted each other. Little Chris nodded. Big Chris returned the nod, with a knowing smile. It was too perfect. It was all way too perfect.

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When Little Chris got home, both he and his mother had absorbed the summery glow of the day. The house felt airy, almost new. His mother was at her patio table, watching a kingfisher that had strayed from the nearby Bridger River and onto the branches of their neighbor’s cottonwood. He finally pulled out his phone, but only to text Big Chris about the job. Twitter could stay unreal for at least the rest of the day. Real reality was more than enough.

His phone came to life. He made a move toward the open patio door. A text—huh. It was from Mike, @StroopwaffelAddict, so far the only person from Twitter whom Little Chris texted with. And with any luck, the way things were going, the last.

Sorry man, the text said. *What a ho*

Little Chris’s stomach dropped and then fluttered.

There was a link to a tweet below the text. He clicked it, pacing rapidly as the light blue Twitter loading screen, with its infuriating twee white bird, flashed at him.

It wasn't a post by Duchess Mongoose. It was someone else, a handle he barely recognized. Screenshots of DMs. They were— Of course they were. His words, with her responses edited out. The room spun. Little Chris felt like he might throw up. He couldn't read the replies, but he also couldn't miss @ProphetOfBigNaturals at the top: *What a fucking creep.*

He clicked furiously over to Duchess Mongoose's profile, but she had deactivated. She was gone. Had she wanted these posted? Did it matter? It mattered if she mattered, if she were a real person with a real life. It was harder than ever to imagine her as that, now that she had become a dagger in his gut.

Little Chris sat on the couch. Outside his mother turned, as if to beckon. There were so many things he might do, including hurling his phone into the alley. So many things that would not be Twitter. But there was this feeling, this pulsing and cutting feeling, like something was trying to claw its way out of his skin. Like it wanted to burst free of his weak flesh and wrap itself around the warm glow of the phone.

Canisius clicked over to his group DM. They would know what to do.

Hawkfeather

There are many people who come back
After the doctor has smoothed the sheet
Around their body
And left the room to make his call.

They die but they live.

They are called the dead who lived through their deaths,
And among my people
They are considered wise and honest.

—Frank Stanford, *The Light the Dead See*

Part 1

I.

The hawk wants to come inside.

A storm-scarred branch bisects the east-facing window of my second-floor room. Most mornings, the hawk perches on this branch. Early in the day, rays filter in from the rising sun, broken by the few unfallen leaves, dappling the robins-egg linoleum. When the angle is right and the sun is bright, and I curl up facing the windowless wall, the hawk's shadow looms sharp and dark against the institutional beige. When I turn over, the hawk is often watching me, her beak cocked like the hammer of an ancient gun.

Late in the morning of what they tell me will be my last full day here, I turn and catch the hawk's eye. I can tell that she wants to come into the room. The intensity of her stare, the way the light glints off the black opal of her eye. The steadiness of her shiny

pupil in the grayish-gold iris. White chest plumage striated with streaks the color of just-dried blood. Dying yellow leaves juddering behind her as she torques her wings.

Maybe she wants to come in because it's a chilly day. A nurse said we might get our first snow around Halloween, in a few days. Halloween was often the first snow when I was a kid. It's warmer now, but you still never know what will blow into the Bridger Valley. Or maybe the hawk wants to come in for reasons I don't understand. There are a lot of things I don't understand anymore, or don't understand the way I'm supposed to, which is why I spend most of my day trying and failing to sleep.

If you asked me what I wanted, I'd say, *I want to feel better*. That's what everyone wants you to say when you're in a hospital bed. I want to want such a thing—the right thing. What I really want is to feel the right thing. I want to know what the right thing to feel is, and then to feel it, and to let everyone know that I'm feeling it. I want to live in my body the right way, the way I imagine I did before I woke up in this bed. I can at least tell you that I'd like to be somewhere other than this room, curled up in this bed, with all these wires and tubes pulling against my skin like the hooks of a diabolically patient fisherman.

The hawk flies away.

Her wings a swooping shadowplay against the wall.

Tight leather shoes clacking down the hallway.

A short, thin man in a charcoal sportscoat and navy slacks, gray hair faded toward a geometric widow's peak, square black glasses. Anodyne symmetrical face that I doubt I'd remember in detail even if I saw it every day. Stubble scattered over his jawline like

chemical salt strewn over concrete after a snowstorm. The man is gently smiling, folding his hands over his belt.

“It’s great to see you awake, Ciaran,” the man says. “Hello. Good morning. How are you feeling?”

A suggestion, down the hallway and around the corner, of clacking heels, rustling coats. A clinking of something else, metallic and sharp beneath clothes. As if this man brought an escort, some of them hiding sharp metal beneath their jackets. and sent them away to come see me. As if he has to appear to be alone to commune with my loneliness.

Has this man seen me before? I don’t remember him, but that’s common enough for me. I remember most things—the name of the cat we had when I was a kid (Edwina), the colors of my high school tennis team (purple and black), the supply and demand curve (blech)—and have forgotten some other, probably more important things. In particular, I don’t remember much from the past year and a half or so, which I’m told is the period in which transpired the events that led me here. They’ve been cagey about filling in those details for me.

Usually though, it’s not so much that I don’t remember anything as that I don’t remember anything the right way. Everything returns to me at the wrong angle. *Like a badly thrown boomerang*—the neurologist’s words. By far the cleverest thing he’s said to me.

“Who are you?” I say.

I forgot to be polite. All of the doctors and nurses here knew my mother, and they say she was the politest woman they ever knew. When you relearn this kind of thing,

upon waking up in a hospital bed, you want to try to be like your beloved, dead mother. I always try my best—that’s one trait I know unites my past self and my present self.

“I mean, sorry,” I say, “good morning to you, too.”

“It’s alright,” the man says. He sits in the faded maroon chair directly across from the foot of my bed. I lie flat on my back to look at him. I don’t like lying like this, looking over the discolored cragginess of my bare feet.

“No need to apologize,” he says. “You’ve been through a lot, more than I can imagine.”

“You can probably imagine it,” I say. “I have to imagine it—I don’t even remember it. It’s just a story to me.”

“You always loved stories. I remember talking about that with your mother. That’s why you became—”

“A scholar of literature. I must not have been a very good one. Hard job to get killed doing, if you’re any good at it.”

They tell me I was a graduate student in English literature before I died. I guess that’s why I use language the way I do—over-carefully, flicking through different words until I land on one that sounds precise but also *written*. I cling to words. I have a sense they’ve always been good to me.

The man laughs containedly.

I feel a little bad being so sardonic. But the man invites almost seems to be asking for it, as if he knows that letting me banter will put me at ease.

“So they’re letting you out soon,” the man says.

“Are they going to let the hawk in?” I say.

“Pardon?”

“The hawk wants to come in. Will they let her in once I’m not in this room anymore?”

The man pauses.

I laugh.

“I’m only joking,” I say. I *think* I’m joking. “But there is a hawk who comes here. She acts like she wants to come in.”

“Where’s the hawk?” The man says.

“She was here just before you came. On the tree branch. She was watching me.”

The man nods, his gaze going toward the window like a flicked scalpel.

“Oh very cool,” the man says. “How do you know it’s a female?”

“Instinct,” I say.

The man nods again. He inspects the branch as if appraising its value.

“Your mom always said you were intuitive,” he says. “Even when you were a little boy. I’m glad you’re still like that. You seem to be feeling better?”

“I feel great,” I say, ignoring the mention of my mother. “I don’t know whether there’s an existence for me after this room. I wonder if I’ll feel great when I leave. I have my doubts.”

I grin, hoping for a smile in return. I don’t get it.

“That’s actually why I’m here,” the man says. “I’m fortunate enough to be able to offer you a place to stay, on behalf of Wyoming State University. You’ll also have someone to help you there.”

“I’m not sure I need to be taken care of,” I say. “I think these tubes aren’t doing much for me, anyway. I think what I need is to figure out the right way to feel, so that I can understand the right way to be. Am I making any sense?”

“Absolutely,” the man says, “you’re making lots of sense.”

Do I know this man from before? He acts like we know each other well, quoting my dead mother. He acts like everything is already settled, like all decisions have already been made.

“So let’s talk about where you’ll be living,” the man says.

“What’s the rent?” I say.

The man laughs, as if I’ve discovered the perfect joke.

“Is that funny?” I say. “I remember rent. Hard to forget.”

“You won’t have to pay anything. It’s our pleasure to help you recover.”

“Will the hawk be there? I think she may want to stay here.”

The man sticks out his lips, trying to *convey* that he’s contemplating what I’ve said. I can already tell that this man is always trying to convey something specific, something that could be encapsulated in a sentence. Working for him might mean little more than snatching the unspoken sentences from the air he exhales.

“Ciaran, after what happened, we see it as our duty to help you out,” the *Conveyor* says. “Your mother—”

“So what exactly happened? Maria won’t tell me.”

The Conveyor sticks out his lips again. Wrinkles his too-smooth brow. Nods again. I’m supposed to be able to tell that he’s *concerned*.

“It’s OK,” I say. “I know someone shot me. And that’s alright, as long as they don’t do it again.”

I’m trying to be funny. It doesn’t appear to be working—it rarely does, lately.

“Ciaran,” the Conveyor says, without a pause, “let’s discuss your housing. So if you’ve ever been to the—”

“I don’t need housing,” I say. “I might just go live in the forest.”

Before the Conveyor can answer, there’s a thudding down the hallway. The footfalls of someone less graceful, less fox-like. (I love foxes—I saw one out the window the other day.) Someone who sounds like they’ve come to deliver something heavy and unwanted, but necessary. Someone who couldn’t possibly control what they try to convey as neatly as the man seated across from me.

The Conveyor turns in his seat and looks up at the man entering the room.

Beard—mostly gray, speckled brown, like the underbelly of a mud-spattered coyote. Belly—straining against a worn blue and gray and green flannel. Boots—cracked brown leather, green laces fraying, black streaks of grease along the sides and toes. Belt—silver rodeo buckle, bucking bronc rampant. Breath—sighing through yellow teeth, mouth kept open as he looks from the Conveyor to the convalescent.

I already like this old guy.

“Ciaran!” the bearded man says. “It’s so nice to see you awake.”

The bearded man looks at the Conveyor.

“It’s less nice to see you, Tom, but I won’t get greedy.”

“David,” the Conveyor says, “I didn’t know you’d be joining us.”

The bearded man breathes heavily. The Conveyor conveys nothing. They stare at one another. I can't tell exactly what's happening between them. Yet it already feels like they've been doing this—whatever *this* is—for a long time. I may be just another chapter in their story.

"It's OK," I say. "We were just talking about where I would go, once they let me out of here. I said I might go live in the forest."

"You'd do well in the forest, Ciaran, but maybe not just yet. We need to figure out a few things first. That's why I'm here, Ciaran," the bearded man says, turning, his voice gentler than it has been for any of his words to the Conveyor. "Do you remember me?"

It's polite of the man to ask me this, which makes it easier for me to honor my mother's memory by being polite in return.

"I don't, I'm sorry," I say. "I would like to. They tell me I might one day remember a lot of things that I can't right now. Until then, please accept my apologies."

The bearded man reaches down into his big warm belly for a laugh that sounds *kind*.

"That's OK," the bearded man—the Laugher—says. "If you remembered everything, I wouldn't be here. You'd be rid of me. And you'd be rid of him."

The Laugher points at the Conveyor.

The Conveyor rises. Clasps his hands in front of him, flexes his shoulders, straining the taut fabric of his jacket. Body small, yet hard and sharp, like an easily hidden weapon.

"David," the Conveyor says, "may I speak to you out in the hall?"

“No you may not, Tom,” the Laugher says. “I’m retired. I don’t work for you anymore. I don’t have to let you drag me out into the hall to talk about what’s appropriate, according to you and your friends. And neither does he.”

This time the Laugher points at me. Now that he’s pointed at us both, I understand: The Conveyor and I are opposed. We’re supposed to dislike each other. I can’t come up with a firm reason to dislike the Conveyor, for all his cold sharpness. I do like the Laugher. If I have to choose between them, I’ll take the one who reaches down into his big warm belly and finds a laugh.

“Will either of you tell me what happened?” I say.

This might be rude, but if I have to make a choice between these two men, let them tell me why I would.

They go on staring at one another, like I’m not there.

The light in the room shifts. The gray of the Conveyor’s hair and the soft tones of his clothes fade into the wall. Suddenly it’s the Laugher who feels sharper, more distinct. He stands out against the softening sameness of the room, jagged breath and ragged cloth and dogged flesh. I catch a whiff of him and I recall marinades, salt and sugar dripping from meat.

I reach out toward the Laugher, trying to grab at the cuff around his bulging wrist. Wires and tubes hold me back. Neither man notices my flailing.

If I could have touched him, I would have somehow failed, even though I couldn’t say what I wanted to do. I no longer touch; I only get touched.

The Laugher finally turns away from the Conveyor.

“What happened, Ciaran,” he says, “is that you died.”

“David—” the Conveyor says.

“No, Tom,” the Laughter says. “Start with the fucking truth, for once. Don’t make us wheedle it out of you.”

I wonder what it would mean to *wheedle* the Conveyor. Like trying to stick needles into unyielding metal.

“Do you really think this is the best way to talk to someone in this condition?” The Conveyor says.

“I’m right here,” I say. “I may not remember much, but I have a body. I have language. And I can hear you both.”

The Laughter clunks down to the foot of the bed. Eclipsing the Conveyor, who neatly slides toward the corner. The Laughter looms over me and speaks gently.

“You’re right, Ciaran, I’m sorry,” he says. “We shouldn’t talk about you like you’re a piece of machinery. It can be a bit odd for us, but that’s our problem.”

“What’s odd?” I say.

“You died,” he says, “and we brought you back.”

“David,” the Conveyor says.

“You were dead for several hours, nearly the world record, and we got you back,” the Laughter says.

I nod. Somehow this makes perfect sense in a way that I can’t give to words.

“Does that make sense to you, Ciaran?” The Conveyor says, like they’ve reached a *détente* through their shared need to breach the invisible walls around me.

I don't respond. A nod would not exactly be a lie, but it wouldn't be honest. It would be promising words where I have none to give. I feel like I've done something wrong. I never forgot that you're not supposed to live through your own death.

"Listen Ciaran," the Conveyor says, "if you ever want actual help, come find me."

The Conveyor turns succinctly on his heel and leaves the room. The Laughter rests his hands on his hips, like he's trying to look for a way to help. Everyone wants to help, which is the most exhausting thing about being me. I wish they'd all let me rest.

Fluttering of dried-blood feather outside the window.

The hawk alights on the branch.

She wants to come inside.

II.

I trace my fingertips along the warped gray fence-slats, my bare hands feeling the melt-prick of the falling snow, along with the *snick* of splinters trying to enter my skin. Spruce branches from the neighbor's yard tickle the shoulders of my denim jacket. The evening smells like the smoke from the fireplaces around the neighborhood, the tang of beetle-killed logs spiraling up into the low-hanging clouds. This could be a lovely night.

I stop caressing the fence and turn back toward where the Laughter—whose real name is David—should be. He's left the deck and gone inside. His silhouette flits around in the yellow light of the kitchen. I trudge slowly toward the deck, watching the snow sluice down the toes of my boots. I shiver, though I don't feel especially cold. I so often feel so distant from my body.

The deck door opens. A waft of warm air strikes me, turning the snowflakes on my cheeks into vapor. A non-David shadow stands on the threshold.

“So it’s really you,” the threshold-shadow says.

An elusively familiar face and body stand between me and the spilling light and warmth of the kitchen. Thick dark-brown hair like the mane of a mountain predator, scraggly beard gathered around bulging cheekbones, eyes gray like a lake out on the prairie in early March. It all pulls me back. To a backyard, maybe to a football, wobbly spirals through clacking autumn graupel. And to other places that are only blurs.

I’m already transmuting this face and this body into narrative. I have a sense it’s dangerous to do this, though I can’t exactly say why. Maybe we already had such intricate narratives together that it’s folly to try write new ones. Or maybe he just doesn’t want to be in my story anymore.

“Who else could it be?” I say.

The threshold-shadow steps out into the snow, which begins to dust his wild hair. I know who this is, because this is who David told me was coming. This is who I expected when I saw his silhouette leering alongside David’s in the kitchen. Brian Culliver, my best friend since elementary school. I remember him, but two-dimensionally, in the sepia way I remember everything. He’s a lot rougher in three dimensions.

“Are you hurting, Ci?” Brian says.

“No, I feel—”

I don’t get to say how I feel, which is fine. It’s easier if I don’t have to condense it all down to a few words. Brian steps forward and probingly grabs my left deltoid. It’s

half a light slap, like a friend, and half a grope, like a butcher inspecting meat. Hard short fingers taloning into my soft wasted muscle.

“I guess you’re really real,” Brian says. “Fuck me.”

I want to respond to this with witty words, but all the jokes I could make feel weak, hollow, like all they could do in this moment is collect snow. Instead of saying anything, I drag a black-metal mesh patio chair out from beneath the matching table. It makes a sound like an old train starting its journey on a frozen day. This briefly delights me—I loved listening to the trains, which run so close to the hospital.

“Do you want to—” I say.

Brian wrenches out his own chair, with a shriek that doesn’t sound like anything satisfying at all.

We sit facing one another and lower our faces to duck the snow, which is coming faster, heavier, in big fat sloppy flakes.

“It’s good to see you,” Brian says, sounding like he’s answering a question in class.

“Same to you, man,” I say, believing I mean it more than he does. Trying to believe it, anyway.

“They didn’t fucking tell me,” Brian says. “They didn’t tell me you were alive again until a couple days later. And by then, I was back in the shit.”

“The shit?” I say.

Brian blinks against the snow—and against me, I suspect.

“Yeah Ci, The Concession. The place you got shot six times? The place I carried you out of?”

“Brian, I’m sorry,” I say. “I really am. I don’t remember anything at all from the last year, maybe almost two years. Things before that can come back to me, in a weird way, but the more recent memories are just—”

“You’ve gotta be shitting me,” Brian says.

“I wish,” I say

Brian wipes a hand through his hair, then pulls at his beard. The snowflakes either tumble out or melt instantly. He stamps his boots and drums his hands on the knees of his shapeless work pants, before clapping them and rubbing the palms together, like he’s trying to stop himself from doing something less appropriate with those hands. He looks like an agitated wolverine.

When Brian raises his face, his eyes are wide and wet, shining darkly in the moonlight.

“You tell me this, Ci,” he says. “Do you remember Leila?”

“Who?” I say.

I curse myself inwardly as soon as I say this stupid word. Brian slaps his knees with open palms and twists his face upward and at an angle, sucking in his cheeks like he wants to spit.

“So you don’t even remember the woman who died fighting beside you,” Brian says. “The one you said you loved. Well that’s just fucking great. Glad we could have this talk.”

We pause to let the wind swirl the big fat sloppy snowflakes. We blink and shuffle our boots to diverging cadences.

“I’m trying,” I say, “but let me just say, Brian, this is a lot to take in.”

“Oh?” Brian says. “It’s a lot to take in?”

“Yeah. I’m not even sure what I’m feeling right now, but it’s not good. You’re telling me something that makes me feel bad, even though I don’t understand it. So I’m going to try—”

Brian stands. He looms over me. If I stood, I’d be taller than he is, so I’d have one advantage over him, though he’s visibly so much stronger. He looks at me like I’m a broken car he’s thus far failed to get started.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I guess that sounded—”

Brian grabs me by the lapels of my jacket and yanks me into a half-stand. I go limp first with surprise, and then with surrender. He holds me up so easily. His breath melts the snowflakes that have gathered in my eyebrows, sending droplets cascading down the pathways made for tears.

“Shut the fuck up,” Brian says softly, intimately. “I watched you die. You bled all over me. Now you’re back, talking like your motherfucking professor parents, saying you don’t even remember Leila.”

I breathe back at Brian.

“Go ahead and try to kill me, I guess,” I say. “It might work this time.”

“Do you think it was *my fault* you died?”

Brian sounds a little scared. He loosens his grip. I get my feet under me, preparing to push him away.

“I don’t know, Brian,” I say, “but if I had to guess, based on how you’re acting right now?”

“Brian, Jesus,” David says.

When he wiggles his arms between us, David is like a bear prying open a rotting log. He's much bigger than either of us, far stronger even in his reluctance. I thud back into my chair and Brian staggers back across the deck. All three of us breathe heavily and exude uncertainty. None of us have been in this situation before, and it's not like we can ask each other what to do.

And then the return of a logic familiar to these two. David turns solicitously toward Brian, who has straightened himself back into a leader. I no longer scare him. I'm glad about that, at least.

"I'm really happy you're alive, Ci," Brian says. "I could have done a better job conveying that. But you're just no good to me right now. That's just how it is. I've got comrades dying every day, it seems like. And none of them are coming back from the dead. So you'll have to excuse me. I can't do whatever the fuck this is."

Brian leaves in a hurry. It's just me and the old man, David, standing on the snowy deck, wondering what you do after all that.

"How about this, Ciaran?" David says. "How about we make a fire in the firepit? You and your dad used to love making fires."

"Sure," I say, which turns out to be the right word.

David trundles into the shed in the farthest corner of the yard and emerges with an impossibly big armload of wood. He dumps this near the deck with a grunt, and then, from the nearest corner by the gate that leads to the front yard, hauls out a perforated steel cauldron. I remember this firepit. My mother's iron-gray hair bannering out of her watch-cap. My father serving those Old Fashioneds that were always too sweet, like he was

giving me candy instead of a drink. Flames licking out of the triangular openings along the side of the cauldron like the tongues of an infinity of eager dogs.

I remember all of this like it was in an artful short film I watched over and over again.

Soon David has kindling crackling and snapping in half. A bed of coals forms under the lattice of larger logs. The snow falling from the sky abates, while the snow around the firepit starts to melt. David and I stare into the flames and let the wafting smoke liquify the remaining snowflakes on our bodies.

“Ciaran, will you humor an old man who used to watch you play with Brian?”

“Used to watch us play?”

“Yes, that’s my house over there.”

David points at a one-story beige stucco across the fence to the east, so modest next to my parents’ hulking blue and gray Cape Cod.

“I’ve known you since you were a little kid,” David says. “Brian, too, since he was always with you.”

“I have to say,” I say. “Brian doesn’t act like my best friend.”

“No he doesn’t. Sorry about that.”

“So are you going to tell me why?”

“First just let me—let me try to describe why I care, I suppose.”

“OK,” I say. “It’s not like I have anything else to do.”

David nods and stokes the fire, using a scarred poker to flip over the top two logs, so that their uncharred sides are now available to the flames. He begins to describe watching Brian and I toss the football when we were in our early teens.

We would take turns throwing and running routes. Skinny arms lobbing wobbly spirals, hauling the ball into bony ribcages. Brian was shorter, but quicker and much stronger. I was gawky, decently tall but young for my grade, insecure about my gangly arms, my narrow shoulders. I had a stronger arm, partly because I played tennis.

Brian and I leapt to haul in each other's weak-yet-emphatic passes, imitating our favorite pro players. Sometimes we would slam into the fence, bouncing back with the arrogant elasticity of youth. Sometimes we would fling the ball onto the grass and dive after it, following its uneven juddering, scrapping with one another like the feral young mammals we were.

To David, we always looked happy. If he had asked, and if we had known the answer, we might have told him that our feelings were too complicated for any grownup to comprehend. But that's not how nice stories work, which is all this is.

"That all sounds lovely," I say when David finishes.

"Thank you for listening," David says. "I guess I just don't know how much you remember. I thought that might help?"

"It does," I say.

"Now I can tell you about those other, much worse things."

I consider his offer and decide there will be plenty of time for worse things in whatever is left of my mitigated life.

"No, it's OK. I think I need to go for a walk."

David accepts this with relief. He doesn't want to talk about the recent past, or perhaps even the present. I can relate to that.

I leave the yard by the side gate. When I turn back toward David, he's stoking the fire again, orange sparks spritzing into his beard. Like Brian, he knows where he wants to be and what he wants to do.

III.

I walk and walk and walk until the houses have sloughed away and there's only high desert ahead. The snow has slowed to a glimmer. The night tastes like cold metal stuck to the tip of your tongue. I should feel colder, but I should feel a lot of things I don't. I recognize Bridger as I walk through it, and I turn and hurry away from the town even as I'm still within its limits. My hometown has become a former friend who's fallen apart and whom I can't bear to look at—or maybe I'm that friend for Bridger, which is even worse.

Since I woke up, every memory is like David describing me throwing the football with Brian: A story. I tell some stories to myself, and others are told to me. I have no sense of having lived the plots. They could have been imprinted into me by prose or film or voice. They feel almost like ghost stories, or rather, like the fairytale part of the story that precedes the arrival of the ghost. The part of the story that might charm you even as it forebodes.

I feel like shit. My empty gut is pushing phantasmal acid up into my throat, and my whole core is fluttering, like there are desperate moths inside of me. In my earlier, more solid life, I might have called this *anxiety*. Tonight I call it the way things will be until I find a snowbank to collapse into.

It's not so much that I want to die as that I'm losing interest in relearning how to live.

"Can you freeze to death after you survived being shot to death?" I say into the snowfall.

No answer.

"Maybe someone will shoot me."

No answer.

"Maybe Brian will shoot me."

No answer.

The dirt beneath my boots is soft and uncertain. An inch or two of wet snow is turning the gypsum clay into a gray mucus. I escape the shabby prefab housing on the southernmost side of town. In the near distance the slick ribbon of the interstate shimmers. Beyond that, scabs of sandstone rising up toward forest, the trees sharply outlined by the red beacon of a radio tower.

I realize it's Halloween.

"Maybe I'll see a ghost," I say.

No answer, except from wind knifing into my lips. I can feel them starting to chap and crack. In the before times (I recall in the usual flat sepia), I would always neglect my lips during winter, and end up with pulsing white cold sores where they broke. I would welcome a cold sore right now, if only to prove that I'm not beyond the reach of viruses.

The interstate glints in moonlight like the wet fur of a black cat. No truck lights in sight. It must be getting close to midnight. I scramble down into a ditch and then over a

brief berm, and then I trot over the road. I punctuate each step by stabbing the toe of my boot into the asphalt. It feels good to focus my diffusely alien body.

After dipping into another ditch and leaping a concrete barrier, I cross the second set of lanes. And then I'm back on the open high desert, with a dip below me before the rise toward the sandstone scabs. Scrubby pines speckle the hillside. I anticipate the unevenness of the ground beneath my boots, the challenge of the climb. I don't want to get anywhere; I want to be going somewhere.

Also the forest appeals to me a lot more than my memory-laden hometown.

I start trotting up the hillside. It looks so flat with a layer of snow over it, like it's been digitally rendered by someone in a hurry, like you're meant to speed up it to get to something more interesting. I can probably go faster—

I hook my boot beneath the root of a ponderosa and sprawl forward. Rocks dig into my chest and belly and thighs as I slide through the snow. A chipping of sandstone scratches my cheek. I gulp for breath—the fall knocked the wind out of me. I moan and grunt and refill my lungs. And then I roll over and laugh at myself. Whooping laughs that echo off the sandstone escarpments.

Snow is soaking through my clothes. The spidering chill on my torso will become dangerous faster than I can make it back to civilization. I can't bring myself to care. I touch two fingers to my cheek, where the scratch throbs. No blood, only melting snow and a daub of mud. That's disappointing. I already missed out on the drama of living through one death. If I'm going to be in big trouble, I should at least be bleeding.

"I should at least get to bleed," I sputter out into the night, dirt and snow and gravel tumbling from my lips.

No an—

Wings veiling moon.

Feathers wraithing starlight.

Talon slicing face.

I scream. I can already feel blood sluicing hot down my cheekbone. I sit up and daub away blood, rub it between my fingertips until it becomes sticky residue poised to freeze. Before I impose a narrative on what just happened, I let myself feel the joy of an answered prayer. I get to bleed.

The hawk has landed on a rock a couple meters to my right. It was a hawk, of course. Could it be the one from—

A surge of snow, or is it ash? Somehow hot and cold at once, blurring reality at its center, making it invisible at its edges. Colors invert, mutate—lots of purple. When the brief, impossible storm clears, another impossibility: A young woman standing on the rock.

She staggers, hunches, hands waving like purposeless claws until they find her knees.

First I worry that she must be cold—she's wearing even less than I am.

I wipe again at the blood on my face, like she might need its warmth.

She shrieks, primal and blade-like.

There is nothing to do but wait for her to gather herself for her next battle.

“Ciaran,” she croaks, her face shielded by hair that shimmers red even in the moonlight. It falls from beneath a black beret. “Ci—aran?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Gah!” she says, collapsing into a crouch.

“Sorry,” I say.

The woman turns toward me and uses her hands to part her hair like ragged curtains. She does this slowly, like she forgot that hair was a thing she had to deal with. Her eyes are big and catch the moonlight. Her face is round but tapers sharply, like a bird of prey.

“What... sorry about?” she says, like she’s remembering to use words.

“Sorry that you—” I say. Then I reconsider. Whatever is happening, lies probably won’t serve me well. “I don’t know why I’m sorry. You just seemed upset. I thought I’d say that I was sorry. That seemed like it might help.”

The woman rises from the rock. She walks toward me as if in an uncomfortable trance, stiff and staring. Her bootfalls on the rocky slope are somehow both elegant and clumsy. She leans over me, her hair falling to either side of my face, and whispers.

“*That’s* what you’re sorry about?” she hisses.

“I don’t und—”

“Oh no, Ciaran, no” she says. “I won’t—you can’t. Not like—not *again*. You can’t lie. You are not good. Not good—you are *bad!*”

The woman wobbles. I reach out to steady her, but it’s too late. She topples backwards into the snow, sprawling with her feet out, just like me. She grunts and hisses, a lot like I did when I fell.

We sit there in the moonlight breathing shabbily, letting snow soak through our clothes.

“Look, I don’t know who you are, but—” I say.

“Ciaran! Stop!” the woman wails.

I nod, though she’s not looking at me. The situation makes no sense, but this interaction is taking on familiar contours. Like Brian, she’s mad at me. Like Brian, I don’t really know why she’s mad. Like Brian, she scares me.

“OK,” I say. “I’ll stop it.”

The woman pats the ground with her bare palm. She flexes her hand, inspecting both snow-caked sides. She licks away the snow along her knuckles. The wind picks up again, driving a flurry between us.

“What would you like me to be sorry about?” I say.

“You said you were going to stop it,” she says quietly.

“I did, that’s right,” I say, stopping before I can drop a ‘sorry.’

“I’m going to stop being mad at you,” she says.

A relief that her words are coming back to her so quickly.

“Why?” I say.

“Because you can’t help me get my wings back.”

These words hurt my feelings more than anything Brian said. I want to make this woman like me. Someone besides David—who seems to like everyone—has to like me, don’t they?

She goes on licking her hand, only now it’s more like she’s pecking at it, pointing her mouth outward. She seems disappointed that her teeth and lips can’t form a beak.

“Are you... pecking yourself?” I say.

The woman tilts her face up, awkwardly holding her hand out, palm downward. She looks uncertain, like she's forgotten what she was feeling and why she was feeling it. I can relate.

"I have an idea," I say. "What if we try to figure out what we should each be feeling, and then we have a dialogue where we try to enact that. Would that work for you?"

"No," she says. "I don't think so. I just want them back."

"What?" I say.

"My wings."

I nod.

"That's a reasonable thing to want back," I say. "We can work with that. So you're the hawk?"

At this, right when I believe we're getting somewhere, the woman grimaces violently. She staggers to her feet without breaking her glare.

"I'm Leila," she hisses. "You can't pretend not to know who I am!"

She wobbles again, and falls backwards again. This time she sprawls out flat, arms above her head. I force myself not to laugh.

So this is Leila—or what's left of her. What a delight.

"I want my wings," Leila says from her back.

"Here," I say.

I rise and lie down next to her. A meter or so downslope. Along a gentle gradient, so we're almost level. By now my clothes are soaked, and I should be freezing, but somehow Leila's presence warms me.

“Let’s try something, Leila,” I say.

I slowly drag my arms and legs through the snow. Rocks scrape at my elbows and calves, which feels pleasant. Friction affirms that I’m finally doing something besides wandering purposelessly. I have to blink rapidly against the sparkling snow.

“What are you doing?” Leila says.

“Stretching my wings,” I say.

She laughs. Hesitantly, stiffly, she does the same. Soft swiping sounds, falling into rhythm together.

After we etch our snow angels into the ground, I rise, shaking off the effluvia of the hillside. Leila slows her arms and legs, lying limp. I stand at her side and reach down, offering my hand. When she takes it, I don’t feel skin. I feel downy feathers, like the chest plumage of a hawk. I realize there’s blood on my fingertips. The swirling has returned, the snow-ash, the inverted colors.

A hawk perches where Leila lay.

It flexes its wings in what I choose to interpret as thanks.

IV.

Leila is curled up on the other side of the kitchen island. She tucked herself into the corner, up against my mom’s expensive cabinets. An antiseptic institutional scent that seems like it’s mocking our primal disarray. The overcast dawn light turning the blonde wood and slate blue counters and chrome fixtures of the kitchen into an indistinct gray, like none of it is ready to leave the safety of night.

Softly profound sobs.

I lean against the bannister of the stairs, giving Leila space. I don't know how to give her anything else. She followed me home, flitting over the snowbound town, gliding into the house. We fell asleep together in my childhood bedroom, me in a bed starched by the cleaners who kept coming while I was in the hospital, Leila perched on the worn green loveseat in the far corner. It was easy to feel like this could be easy.

The morning has been hard, sharp. Leila awoke as a human. She looked at her hands in horror and shrieked and ran down the stairs and hid from me in the corner. I followed her, and have yet to say anything. Every time I try to speak, since waking up, I seem to only make reality harder, sharper. And yet I've always loved words—I remember that about myself, and I cling to it.

“Maybe if we try getting you some food,” I say, and immediately hate myself.

“I'm so... heavy,” Leila says from the corner, her sobs subsiding. “The wind won't want me back.”

So maybe this line of inquiry isn't so bad. I've got her using language.

“I'd say you're actually quite thin, fit, athletic, that kind of thing,” I say.

Leila moans gutturally. OK, so that wasn't a good direction to go.

“You don't know what it's like,” she says. “You don't know what it's like to be rejected by the wind, to know the air won't take you back. You *don't know anything!*”

“I guess I don't know about that,” I say. “But I do know what it's like to wake up and have everything fucked up. For it to both *feel* fucked up and actually *be* fucked up in ways that are hard to put into words.”

“You've never flown,” Leila says, her voice steady.

“That's true. That I know of, anyway.”

A more nuanced moan from Leila.

“Leila, do you remember what happened to us?” I say. “Maybe if we can figure that out, it’ll help. Or we can ask Brian later, but—”

“I remember fire,” she says.

I don’t remember any fire with this quasi-woman. A quasi-woman to whom I’m miserably bonded even though she would be a stranger to me even if she hadn’t flown into my dead parents’ house in the guise of a hawk. What I do know is that it can’t go on like this. We need to find a way past everyone I meet either hating me or wanting to sooth me.

“Leila,” I say softly. I tiptoe around the kitchen island and sit on the floor a couple meters away from her. She looks good, given everything. Her burnished copper hair falling over her shoulders, her sharp face gleaming with tears. It doesn’t make me want to touch her, but it does make it less terrifying to sit near her. She looks like someone I should find a way to care about. Our suffering might be more beautiful if we can find a way to do it together.

“Can I ask why you followed me home last night?” I say. “Since you’re so mad at me. I’m not trying to argue, I’m just trying to understand what’s happening.”

“I needed to find you,” she says, with a solidity she hasn’t had since she was yelling at me last night. “I *needed* to, Ciaran, even if I didn’t want to. It’s hard to put into words.”

I nod gently. We’re journeying back towards lucidity.

“I’ve lost—I lose words, sometimes,” she says. “I’ll say something to you and forget what I said, right away, or forget what it meant.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say.

“Stop being so sorry!”

“Sor—er, so there must be a reason, right?” I say. “If you needed to find me. We must have a good reason for being together. Which means we should try to work together, even if I’m an awful person who deserves the worst.”

Leila nods, raising her neck and exhaling carnivorously through her nostrils. She regards me coldly while wiping her tears and straightening her beret. She’s ashamed of her vulnerability. Warmth spreads in my stomach. I want her to be human as she can be. Not because I want reality to feel normal—I don’t care about that anymore, if I ever did. I just want to get her to stop hating me.

“Look, let’s try something,” I say. “Remember how you cut my face with your talons, and then you changed, and then you changed back when you touched my blood?”

“I was aiming for your eye,” she says, in a tone I choose to interpret as bantery.

“What if we try something like that again? With my blood.”

Leila watches me warily as I rise and draw a knife from the stand by the fridge. It comes out with a satisfying *shick*. I inspect the blade like I’m about to cut into a breakfast sausage. In that pause between us doing surreal things and saying absurd words, we could be a happy couple agreeing to collaborate on breakfast. Maybe there were tears first thing in the morning, or the night before, but now we’re going to take pleasure in giving each other food. We would let the scent of fresh coffee waft over us as we exchanged a kiss that was not so much erotic as gustatory. There would be birdsong—

Leila snatches the knife out of my hand and plunges it below my ribcage

I shriek.

Air rushes out of my lung.

I paw desperately at the knife handle, which protrudes from the side of my stomach.

Blood dark, hot, heavy, and everywhere.

With blood-soaked hands I scrabble for the counter.

The pain feels hot and cold at once, like the snow-ash.

I gasp gibberish at Leila—now it's my turn to lose my words.

She stands back with the expression of a child inspecting a caterpillar.

“Leila!” I yell at my slippery hands lose their grip on the counter and I slide to the floor.

Snow-ash swirling. Heavy lightness, like I'm both floating in air and embedded in stone. Reality silver and purple, somehow backwards, purple where it should be silver and vice versa. Burnished copper lightning striking from a black sky, shimmering like—

Leila's hair.

I sit back up, inside the kitchen. The knife lies beside me on the floor. There's no blood—not on me, or on the floor, or along the edge of the island counter. A redtail hawk clacks her talons on the hardwood in the corner.

She flexes her wings in what I choose to interpret as thanks.

V.

“So the goal here is—what, exactly?” I say. “We convince Brian to be nice to me?”

“I hope he will be,” David says. “But this is more about reconnecting, getting you up to speed.”

We’re in David’s rusty green Jeep, rattling our way out to the lakeside hovel where Brian lives when he’s not in The Concession. We could be teenagers, headed into the hinterlands to drink and make up stories about having sex. We would get up in the morning, with those teen hangovers that evaporate like the morning dew, and kick crayfish shells along the beach. If we were those kids, we could escape.

Wings jag across the sky. Leila followed us all this way. I let her out of the kitchen window after she stabbed me. I don’t have it in me to feel anything other than relief that she’s once again a hawk. All those questions—what’s going on, what’s real, what is she, what am I?—are trivial next to this one: Am I hurting her?

I don’t want to hurt anyone, but especially not Leila.

“Up to speed?” I say. “Am I getting hired?”

“Ciaran, you need to know the details of the last 18 months or so. I’m the wrong person to tell you. Brian was there for all of it. You two led each other into it. Let him say what he needs to say, and then you two can start being—”

“Friends?” I say.

“Comrades.”

Comrades? Has there ever been a more exhausting word?

“Tell me something, David,” I say. “Have I killed people?”

A long silence that gives me an answer.

“That’s a question for Brian,” he says.

At least he has the courtesy to give me a cowardly answer.

We turn off the paved state highway and judder down a dirt road. The lake comes into view, a thin blue daub, matching the naked sky. Scabs of ice formed in the night herded by the waves into one corner, garnished with dirty foam. Lake Smittie looks like it shouldn't be able to exist in the high desert, like it might dry up on a single hot afternoon. But it's always here.

The washboard road jounces the Jeep, jarring loose the rancid tang of the discarded burrito wrappers that litter the floor. David turns into a driveway. Over a spine-rattling cattle guard, up a little rise, toward the water. Blast of light as we drive downward into the last flares of the sun's rise. Once we're no longer blind, a white quonset hut and a little peeling-green house. Even more ridiculous than most buildings in the Bridger Valley, flogged all day by wind coming in across the lake, so that remaining standing is a great victory.

A man and woman come out of the house as we pull to a stop. The woman is brown-skinned, short but strongly built, black hair erupting from beneath her cap. The man with sun-chewed pale skin and a rowdy dark-brown beard making him look older than he is. Brian, of course—forever Brian. Both carry pistols on their hips, red bands around their upper arms.

Now I have to be a person, which is the last thing I want to be.

“Brian,” I say as we pile out, “it's good to see you, man.”

I speak into a sudden lash of lake-wind. I can't tell whether he hears me. He doesn't do anything, not even nod. He stands back, thumbs hooked into his belt.

“Vidula,” the black-capped woman says, stepping forward and offering her hand. “So you're the famous Ciaran?”

“The very same,” I say, smiling, remembering a charm I once had—or told myself I had, in those old stories.

Vidula’s tiny hand is calloused, chapped—and yet still somehow soft. Maybe because she’s so young. Is Brian fucking her? Brian sullenly rutting like a beast of burden that can’t wait to get back into its harness.

“Whatever Brian’s told you about me, it’s all lies,” I say, underscoring the banter by laughing as I crescendo toward ‘lies.’

“He hasn’t really talked about you,” Vidula says. “Except to say you and Leila were some of our earliest losses in The Concession.”

Leila alights on the patchwork roof of the house. She flexes her wings in that gesture which likely means nothing in the human emotional lexicon. I feel lighter looking at her, like if everything goes to shit today, at least I can clamber up on the roof and sit silently with her. Maybe she can pick me up with her talons and carry me away.

“I guess I didn’t really get lost,” I say.

“Not for me to say,” Vidula says.

“Good to see you, Vid,” David says, lumbering up beside me. “How’s the shoulder?”

“Oh you know,” she says. “It feels like it had a bullet in it. Other than that, fine.”

Now I notice that Vidula tensely holds out her left shoulder, keeping the arm faintly bent, the hand curled.

So we’ve all got our wounds.

Brian goes to the stoop of the house and hoists a dusty black duffel. Whatever is inside clanks martially. We go down toward the beach. Leila stays on the roof. If she has any sense, she'll fly toward the Ghost Bear Range and never come back.

The beach of the Lake Smittie is spongy sand, like the dead reeds that lay broken in their sheafs have dissolved into a sickly foam speckled with crayfish shells. The frothing water smells sulfurous. Tessellated tiles of ice getting ever smaller. Confused birds with long delicate ocean legs straggle—they should be farther south by now. They shouldn't be here, and neither should we.

Brian drops the duffel on the sand with a steely clatter.

“So Ciaran, do you even remember what happened to your parents?” Brian says.

“Brian, maybe we should—” David says.

“Let him speak,” Brian says, in case any of us were unclear on who's in charge here.

“I remember my parents,” I say. “But no, I don't know what happened to them.”

I almost say *sorry*, but this is a word wasted on Brian.

“May 19th of last year, so about 18 months ago,” Brian says, “they went to a peaceful march in downtown Bridger to protest police violence. On their way home, a Rockies First militiaman named Alden Swall opened fire on them and a group of other protesters near the old Bridger Theater. Seven people died, including your parents. The cops didn't get Swall. Probably because they weren't trying.”

A pricking in my gut, like a blade that had been encased in scar tissue has broken free and is coursing inside me.

“A few things happened in between,” Brian says, “but let’s just say six months later you and I caught up to Swall in The Concession. Do you remember The Concession?”

“No,” I say.

“The feds ceded a chunk of Wyoming as an autonomous zone in which various factions could do whatever they wanted,” Brian says. “Lots of militia activity, of all kinds. So anyway, with a lot of help from our comrades, you and I found Swall and gutted him like a trout. But I guess you don’t remember that.”

I don’t remember it, but the thought warms me until I remind myself that I’m not supposed to want to hurt anyone.

“In the midst of all that,” Brian says, “you became a revolutionary communist and you fell in love with Leila McGregor, your comrade in arms. You two died together, fighting in The Concession, back in the summer.”

“That sounds—” I say.

“Shut up for a second, I’m almost done,” Brian says. “So yeah man, you might say you had a sense of purpose back then. Except here you are now, and you don’t remember any of that. And I can’t believe I have to fucking explain all of this to you. It feels stupid as hell, and insulting to us both, but I’m doing it because you were my best friend, and my comrade.”

I close my eyes for a few seconds and open them to a rush of froth that carries hexagons of ice. I would prefer to watch the hexagons recede in silence.

“Thanks for telling me all of that, Brian,” I say.

Brian laughs raspily.

“I haven’t given a speech that fucking corny in years, Ciaran,” he says. “Is that cordial bullshit the best you’ve got for me?”

“I guess I just don’t know what to say,” I say. “I keep trying to say the right thing, and it never helps me or anyone else.”

“So don’t say anything, man,” Brian says.

He crouches and unzips the duffel. Inside are two assault rifles, black and over-engineered. Vidula crosses her good arm over her chest as Brian pulls out the guns like they’re trout he’s caught and is going to filet. Brian flicks his chin at me and then tosses one of the rifles. I surprise myself with how well I catch it, absorbing its weight with both hands and pulling it towards my core, shifting my feet into a firing stance. Like I’m catching a football and getting ready to throw it back.

“I know we have to do this, now that you’re back,” Brian says. “I don’t want to talk much, either. I just want to know, first of all, whether you still know how to use that thing.”

I keep eye contact with him while I rack the bolt. He laughs.

“So you do!” he says. “Not every day something goes right for us, right Vid?”

Vidula looks at Brian with a quiet alarm that even I, an only child, recognize as sisterly.

“Let’s find something for you to shoot,” Brian says.

He points down the curving shoreline, toward a pile of junk gathered about 50 meters away in an inlet.

“That red bucket,” he says. “Take your ti—”

The half-buried red bucket explodes with a crack and a thunk. Shards of plastic somersault in the air and come to rest in the sand.

Brian whoops.

“You’re a better shot than you were before you died, Ci,” he says.

“Thanks,” I say. And I mean it.

It was easy enough to train the laser sight on the bucket. When I pulled the trigger, the rifle didn’t kick much. It’s a Heckler & Koch that fires a NATO 5.56mm, a varmint round. Somehow I know all of this, and enjoy knowing it. I handle the rifle with pleasure. I know how to set it to semi-auto, I know how to nestle the stock into my shoulder, and I know how to pull the trigger calmly and smoothly, like I’m drawing butter over bread.

I know how to make Brian like me.

Brian pats my delt as I lower the rifle.

“It’s good to have you back, Ci,” he says. “Weird, but good. I know I’m not always at my best, lately. You spend enough time down-range, you forget who you’re supposed to be in politer places, you know? A stupid fucking cliché, and also the truth.”

“Hey, look,” Vidula says, before I can answer.

“It’s that hawk,” David says, shuffling up beside us.

An instant of wings. Leila a blade slicing the bare blue. We all watch as she wafts over the water. Like she might talon a fish, though she’s not that kind of raptor. Maybe she wants to taunt the fish, make them believe she’s an eagle.

It’s a good moment, this instant of wings, and then we’re two men with guns watching a beautiful thing.

“Think I can hit it?” Brian says.

I don’t process these words as quickly as I should.

“Brian, come on,” Vidula says in a weary tone that suggests familiarity with the words.

Brian racks the bolt of his rifle and raises the scope to his eye, settling the stock against his shoulder. He tilts the barrel upward.

“Brian, what are you—” David says.

I drop my rifle.

Vidula and David flinch and tense.

I wrap my hand around the handguard of Brian’s rifle and yank downward.

Three rounds snick into the lake. Two into the water, one through a piece of ice with a plasticky *snap*. Ice shards flutter through the air and spliff back into the water. Leila veers back toward the house, streaking above us.

Brian and I share a wordless stare. Then he lowers his rifle with one hand and uses the other to punch me in the nose.

“Don’t treat my fucking guns like that!” he yells, with all the disoriented bile of a teenager, as if the problem is that I dropped the rifle he gave me to the ground. We can’t say what we really mean to each other, so we have to fight about flecks of sand within oiled metal.

I touch my nostril and bring away a fingertip covered in blood.

It feels like the wind is rising, like maybe it’s coming in across the lake so fast that it will finally knock over the house and strew us around the beach like rotting reeds. And then the inverted colors, the sharpening of the grayscale, the thrumming purpleness.

The hiss and patter of the snow-ash. I still stand on the shoreline with Brian and Vidula and David, and they're the same within the snow-ash, except they don't notice the maelstrom—it's not for them. They're frozen, though there's a sense that they might begin to move any second, that the snow-ash can't surge much longer.

Leila is there, as a woman, wading out of the crimson water, slowly making her way toward Brian. She ignores me at first, waving her fingers in front of his glaring eyes with the sanguinity of a scientist testing sensitive equipment. Her presence soothes me. Even if she doesn't have the words, she understands what's happening in a way I don't.

"It's your blood," she says, slowly turning toward me.

"Are we... trapped here?" I say. It feels like a whisper that comes from my chest, and I realize that my lips aren't moving.

"You're not," she says. "This is where I live. You're just visiting."

"So what do I do?" I say.

"Just wait. And don't do anything stupid. Don't hit him back. It would be unfair. He can't visit here."

"He was trying to—"

"Shoot me? Oh Ciaran, I'm remembering why I liked you."

She's trying to charm me, and it's working. I'm remembering why I liked her.

"So now do we leave together, Leila?" I say. "Do we go somewhere together?"

"Oh no, Ciaran," she says. "I don't know how to take you with me. Not now."

I start to say, *Wait, no, let's talk about this, come back*, but Leila mesmerizes me. She trots back to the water, wading out until she's up to her waist. She dives in, disappearing beneath the froth and the orphaned flecks of ice. Dark streak arrowing from

the water. Not a hawk, though it could nonetheless be Leila—she’s no ordinary hawk. The snow-ash subsides. The colors fade back to what they should be. I stagger backwards, the blood in my nostril hardening into a scab in the moon-dry air.

We all stand there, listening to the lapping lake, like we’re waiting for someone to tell us how to part ways.

VI.

“I’m very glad you came, Ciaran,” the Conveyor says. “There’s a lot of upside here for everyone involved.”

The Conveyor sits like a high-desert sphinx in front of his brand-bright window. The office smells like how a civilization far into the future might reconstruct “mint” if the plant itself were extinct. The Conveyor’s aides sway behind me, tilting in tight leather shoes, in corners of the room that are impossibly far away. I shade my face with my right hand and take one of the gold-foiled caramels from The Conveyor’s desk. He nods affirmatively as I chew and swallow. He wants me to have a good time.

“So you knew my mother well, I think?” I say. “Am I remembering that right?”

“Yes, I worked with Dr. Allen for over a decade,” The Conveyor says. “She was the most talented surgeon at Nellie Tayloe Ross—where you recovered, of course.”

“You must have been sad to lose her,” I say. “When she died, I mean.”

“Absolutely. It was a tremendous loss to the university community, to Bridger, to the state of Wyoming, and of course, to her family.”

“Thank you for the condolences,” I say. “I keep forgetting to be sad. I’m supposed to mourn my parents, but they feel like characters in a story. I feel like all that

happened was I closed the book where they existed, and moved on. Plus the cleaners that their estate hired scoured the house so well that their smell is gone.”

The Conveyor nods, like everything I’m saying couldn’t be more normal. Like I’m the most normal guy alive.

“I’m not privy to your medical records,” the Conveyor says, “but I know enough neurology to know that intense physical trauma can impact emotional responses.”

The Conveyor’s real name is Dr. William Alston. He’s the president of Wyoming State University. I do believe he knew my mother well. She was an important person at the university, arguably the most distinguished doctor at the medical center that is the most important part of this man’s domain. I don’t believe anything else he’s saying, since he’s saying all of it to make me feel better. Say what you will for Leila and Brian: They’re more interested in their reality than they are in my feelings.

“Do you know why it’s like this, Dr. Alston?” I say. “Do you have any answers for me?”

“I don’t know that I do, Ciaran,” he says. “Not as of yet. But I want to help you get those answers.”

“So you don’t know why it is that I don’t need food?” I say. “Why I can stay awake all night if I really want? Why is it that I can see so well in the dark, that my body feels *good* all the time, but only because it feels like it’s serenely floating somewhere else, apart from me? Do you know why it is that, when I bleed—never mind. Forget that.”

The Conveyor is hunched—as much as a man like him can ever be said to *hunch*. Palms down on the desk, fingers spread. We sit quietly and listen to the whirl of the warm

air through the aluminum and copper guts of the building. The leather shoes of the aides cease squeaking.

“I don’t know exactly why, Ciaran,” the Conveyor says, as slowly as I’ve ever heard him speak. “But I am confident I can help you get those answers. That’s why I came to you in the hospital. We want to help you.”

“Who’s we?” I say.

“Wyoming State University and its research affiliates and—pardon the phrase—corporate partners.”

“Such as?”

The Conveyor straightens his spine while keeping his hands planted on the desk. My eyes have adjusted the burning light of the window behind him, so I can more clearly see the creases in his face. They look like they were put there on purpose, like a team of brilliant designers molded his skin. He smiles.

“Such as some of the most cutting-edge biotech companies in the world, for one,” The Conveyor says. “I’m proud to say we have impressive partnerships for a public institution in our region. For instance, on issues relevant to your health struggles, we work with a pair of well-resourced startups in Switzerland and China.”

“That’s exciting,” I say.

“Thank you. I’m happy with how those efforts have gone. If you’ll forgive me for complaining for a second, Ciaran, it’s not always easy running this university.”

“I can only imagine.”

“It’s a challenging time. But as the old cliché goes, in every challenge lies an opportunity.”

“Words to live by.”

I can't decide whether I'm making fun of him. Part of me wants to live in his discursive realm, a kingdom wherein Swiss startups are liege-lords and airport business-book maxims are currency. I've probably always lived outside that place, though families like mine make our homesteads just over the border. Now I'm so far from where the Conveyor lives that everything he says sounds like a fairytale. A story that shimmers like a castle on the horizon.

So what do I do, then? Go back to Brian? Is there any story I can be a part of? I don't know how to write that kind of narrative.

“I'm really happy for you, Dr. Alston,” I say, “but I need to know, what exactly is it you propose we do for me? I do need help, and I doubt anyone can give it. I don't think they make a medicine or a zeitgeisty therapy regimen for whatever is wrong with me. But I'm willing to try whatever your deal is, I think? Nothing else seems to be working. I might as well try a different kind of failure. So what do we do? Send me back to the hospital?”

“No, no,” the Conveyor says, “that probably won't be necessary.”

“Probably?”

Behind me, the shoes squeak rapidly. An aide must be moving closer.

“We want to start by running some tests, first of all,” the Conveyor says.

“Like an MRI or something? Or the monitors I had hooked up to me in the hospital?”

“Nothing quite that drastic, yet. We want to start with a simple blood test.”

The shoe-squeaks arrive. I feel aides over either shoulder. They don't have the presence of mere aides. Whatever they are feels more akin to the polished aluminum of the ventilation system than to the undergrads bouncing around on the quad. Behind every best friend is an insurrectionary militia. Behind every Swiss biotech startup is something else, something definitely not insurrectionary.

"In fact, Ciaran," the Conveyor says, "if you don't mind rolling up your sleeve, we can do the blood sample right now."

The aide to my left is a young man with short brown hair so shiny and tidy and thick that it could have been engineered in the same place as the Conveyor's face-lines. Light blue shirt as delicate and form-fitting as a bridesmaid's dress. He's taller than me, similarly narrow shoulders. Hazel eyes above a face so symmetrical that I can only conclude I'm among androids. Not literally, but then again maybe—there are already ghosts, so why not robots?

The aide holds out a syringe. Far too big for a simple blood test.

I begin to roll up my sleeve.

What else is there to do?

"This might hurt a little more than an ordinary needle," the aide says in an affluent-suburban monotone scoured of tone.

Shadow-shard breaking the brightness.

A flitting behind the Conveyor.

Leila is here, goddamn her.

Her talons clack on the window. The Conveyor turns. The needle glides closer to my arm. There is a moment, between moments, when you can be all kinds of places at once. A moment where you can be in so many stories.

I jerk away from the needle. A hand falls on my other shoulder. Another aide, a convergence of aides. A convergence of aides who are not really aides. I shied away out of instinct, but now there's a reason. I should shy away because the aides want me to stay where I am.

The Conveyor turns back toward me. He rises. Now there's a hand on either shoulder, steadily firmer. They're all going to keep converging. The needle will come when I'm still.

Talons clack.

Wings flutter.

I duck under the arm of the aide to my right and throw my shoulder into his chest.

The Conveyor rises, but doesn't move toward me. He's not in control here, if he ever was. He's only been *conveying*. I finally got the message.

The aide staggers backwards. I leap to the side of the Conveyor's desk. We stand together for a second, watching these young men come toward us. We're both spectators, until we have to resume our roles. The third aide, the one who hasn't touched me yet, is reaching into a messenger bag for something. I don't wait to see what it might be.

I get to the brand-bright window in two strides. Leila scratches her talons over the glass. Wings spread, she's impossibly big, like something more celestial and vengeful than a hawk.

“Ciaran, what are you doing?” The Conveyor says limply—a man who only knows how to communicate interjecting when communication is long past.

The aides are flanking the desk. They have me trapped. The door is far away. No need to hurry.

Clack, clack, clack.

The room is so bright and so crowded.

“I’m sorry about this,” I say. “I say that too often, but I really am sorry for the mess.”

I turn towards the window. I pull back my right fist, setting my feet so that my hips can swing. Leila huge and red and hovering. I punch the glass. It gives way easier than I’d let myself hope. Shatter and crash, blood down my forearm, crackle of pain.

Snow-ash and liting inversion, the bright of the office wavering between light and dark, stillness settling over chaos. The threatening bodies of the aides have become scarecrows. Gentle swishing sound, somewhere between tide and wind. Blood flashing black down my forearm and then fading, like it’s flowing back into my veins. Leila flies into the room, which shouldn’t be possible through the tiny hole my fist made in the glass. But none of this, of course, is possible. Instead of possible, it simply is.

“Are you going to become human for me?” I say to the hawk circling the light fixture.

Leila continues to circle.

“So I’m on my own, in this skin—or not quite skin, or whatever,” I say. “Will you at least come with me?”

Of course she does. We pass the frozen aides, the Conveyor with his hand outstretched to touch a shoulder—any shoulder that presented itself. The room pulses between black and white, in a way that might be disorienting if I had ever been oriented. The hallway is empty, as is the lobby, a limestone arcade that glimmers, the snow-ash catching every speck of sheen in the rock. The decaying moose head over the entryway is sooty, clotted, delayed rot surging to the surface.

So quickly, we're outside, and the snow-ash is receding. The ordinary colors roar back. Birdsong and the tickle of pollen. Is it funny that my sinuses still react to pollen? The uncanny tragicomedy of Ciaran Allen. I sneeze, of all things. I want to take joy in this phantasm of personhood, but I don't have time. The aides will come, and already there are undergrads on the paths, pondering their phones. There are people around, and we are not people.

I run toward the open desert, following Leila.