

Act II – Guest Room

SCENE I - STATICS

Act II – Vacuum

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In the driveway, Jack found himself face to face with a new Danny, as if proximity to his refuge had refashioned him, wrought him from memory into a Still.

—It has always seemed to me that everybody’s present tense has a home;

—Danny’s, naturally, here:

-

—Increase in velocity dilates (coagulates) Time.

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Glad to be out of the car, Jack stretched his legs. The night was getting colder, brighter, Danny’s home sinking into its seat, the weight of remote light’s touch exposing its age, its immobility, like a chapel in ruin.

“I live upstairs,” Danny said. “But the side stairs are all broken.”

“Is it a duplex?” Jack asked.

“Yeah. My landlord used to live downstairs. But he’s in rehab.”

The trees surrounding the duplex grew taller with proximity; maybe not physically, but certainly in their impression Jack felt enclosed, caught within the property like an insect in a bedroom, and yet simultaneously sealed off from the outside, protected from its elements, hidden away but not blinded. The second story stood like a crow’s nest, Incitatus perched within, watching the outside world spin inside its own reference frame. Incitatus did not spin: he knelt, transfixed in passing, isolated from movement, watching through Time’s slowest pace as reality itself orbited around him. Jack felt a little nauseous.

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—I could talk myself into seeing this place for the first Time, all over again.

—After all, I see now only its first impression:

—as with anything, the outside is witnessed before the interior:

—Old Man Jack stands just like I did, a long Time ago,

—seeing now for the first Time the same sight I first saw:

—an exoskeleton of something deeper, something hidden in its walls:

—whether the building’s pneuma,

—or a simple vacuum.

Danny looked at his home for the first Time, all over again.

“How long have you lived here?” said Jack.

“A while,” Danny said:

—constituted of an indeterminate volume of moments.

—(Or are moments measured only in surface area?)

--

“It’s nice,” Jack said. “It looks like Salem.”

Indeed, the white building had a black trim, all its paint just now starting to chip, and shutters on every window, save one panel of glass unobstructed, revealing Jack and Danny’s reference frame to their deixic observer, Incitatus, perched within, peering out.

“It’s nicer out here than inside,” Danny said.

“At least it’ll be warm,” Jack said, words made visible by the warmth of his breath.

“I haven’t paid my heating bill,” Danny said. “But you’re lucky summer’s over. It’s hot as hell in summer.”

Danny pulled himself along the wall around the corner of the building to an unpainted wooden door, light brown made sumptuous by the night-Time's glow, windowless, locked.

"Thanks for having me," Jack said as Danny checked his pockets for his keys.
"Don't thank me yet," Danny said. "You might sleep better in your car."
"No, really," Jack said. "It's nice to be somewhere new."

— "New" is frame-dependent.
— Non-deixic.
— Like empathy, whose intrinsic value is dependent on
— the independence of the observer.
— Where the fuck are my keys.

"I don't have a lot of guests," Danny said. He lifted the corner of the doormat and grabbed a spare key from underneath.

— Is it the Door's job to prohibit entry?

"Then why the Guest Room?" Jack asked.

— or to grant it?

At last the door swung open, the interior—

— spilling out of its aperture like stars over a winter scene.

— No, no,
Jack closed the door behind him.

— You must seal—

— Perhaps a Home is a Time capsule.

"I like the extra space," Danny

lied.

He flipped a light switch and a weak bulb forced itself to life, revealing a profoundly uninhabited living room, a leather couch sealed by plastic and made matte by dust, every door closed, every closed door shut for so long they became surrogates for geologic structures, their lack of movement permitting the spinning of countless webs, undisturbed for so long.

— The Door's job is frame-dependent:
— considered through a spider's eyes:
— to be as still as can be:
— for as long as a Still can be.

The lower duplex was whitewashed, undecorated. A rolled up rug sat at the foot of the leather couch. An empty glass stood on a nearby coffee table, a faint residue narrating its history of occupation, once filled with undistilled water, evaporated under a moment's sunlight each day for

—A while.

--

No plants; no living things.

—Underneath God's floorboards.

Immediately to the right of the front door was another closed door, a step above the landing. Jack could not tell whether the web in its corner was host to dust or to a spider.

—Perhaps to both?

Danny stood just beyond the front door's threshold, staring into the dim light. Jack stood behind him, eyeing the spiderweb.

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Danny turned around and saw Jack eyeing a cobweb.

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"He's been gone for a few months," Danny said.

"Is that nice?" Jack asked. "Or is it lonely?"

"I've got my cat," Danny said.

—And me.

Independent of the second floor, the lower apartment exuded an emptiness like a vacuum, sucking the whole interior inward, seeming to call for the collapse of Danny's very floor, as if the building might crumble into itself, held in place by emptiness itself, like the apartment were host to some gravitational anomaly: a false vacuum, seemingly vacant, occupied only by homogenized dust and Time.

And yet, that same force, instead of stretching Jack towards the center of the apartment, propelled him upwards, as if Danny's floor and the ground below the building had once been inextricably fused, cleft apart by the intrusion of this empty space, but instead of reining Danny's loft back to the ground, Danny's loft seemed to lift the ground, the earth itself, a sliver off its own weight, quivering under its own weight, neither force strong enough to reunite the house with its home (the ground below [the text]); either one's gravity approximately equivalent, succeeding only in conjuring a strange friction between the upper refuge and the world from which it had closed itself off.

Danny opened the door to Jack's right and began up the stairs, Jack close behind him.

-

—As different a guest from my last as can be.

—No, no,

—As different a guest from I as can be.

As different a guest from I as can be

--

—Not such a different taste than me:

—sealed off, suspended, like a young mind

—legs dangling off the roof, wondering about the weather.

—No, no,

-

"Sorry," Danny said, Jack's shivering audible behind him.

"It's okay," Jack said. "It's not that cold."

—What else but frozen water, in all its forms,

—makes one shiver?

Danny wrapped his fingers around the doorknob at the top of the stairs.

—Age, I suppose.

--

Two steps from the second story, the imagined presence of an Other made itself known to Jack: pursuing him: silently, as though with a puppy's paws, hidden by the darkness, chasing him up the stairs. He dared not look back;

—What Other could reside in so empty a space?

And yet as Danny's wrist twisted counter-clockwise, Time seemed to coagulate: the moments before the door opened stretched themselves thin, inhabiting a much larger real estate of Time, slowed so far down that every sensory input was frozen, stuck in place, like all passage into the future was halted, but the mind continued to function, unchanged, and instead of wonder Jack felt panic: the sensory input was wrong: behind him, something's gaze pierced the Still, Jack's legs refusing to move any faster than Time's slowest pace, much slower than the unseen predator, stalking, step by silent step, up to Jack's exposed flank, his neck too caught in frozen Time to turn and look, the stairway too dark even if he could, counting coagulated seconds down and down until—

Whatever light gave form to Incitatus' silhouette spilled through the open doorway into the stairs, restoring his movement.

—Like stars over a winter scene.

-

“This is my home,” Danny said.

—And in a fruit fly's reference frame, yours as well.

--

Danny's Apartment was lit only in contrast to his landlord's, by one light so feeble Jack couldn't decipher the colors of the walls. At once they were nearly black, but a gloomy resplendence like molten brass slipped off their sheen. The aura was sumptuous; pleasantly cool, like a New England winter day—no different in temperature than outside, though inexplicably more comfortable.

Danny walked right by the light switch over to the cupboards, grabbing a bottle of wine.

—Who so late? esp. when

—in luce veritas?

“Can I turn on the light?” Jack asked, having already flipped the switch. Nothing happened.

“It's dead,” Danny said. “There's another lamp in the living room. It's probably unplugged. I'll be right in.”

-

Danny grabbed his only two Bordeaux Glasses out of the dirty sink, wiping them clean with his shirt.

—And maybe another cab.

He uncorked the wine and filled both glasses.

—One little drop—

--

Jack groped in the darkness for the lamp cord, which he found resting beneath one of two couches, a chaise lounge, and stuck it into the outlet.

Danny's Apartment materialized before him.

“Here,” Danny said, walking through the doorway from the kitchen into the living room, holding out a glass.

“Thanks,” Jack said, putting it down on the coffee table.

Deliberately, Danny sipped his wine.

“I love your chaise lounge,” Jack said. Danny looked down at it for a moment before taking a seat.

—It’s called a fainting chair.

“Cheers,” he said,

—to used Victorian furniture.

Jack raised his glass in response and took a sip.

—Best wine I’ve ever tasted.

—Aged like Scotch Passed.

“It’s the glass,” Danny said. “It’s a Bordeaux Glass. Designed so all the flavor goes right to the back of your mouth.”

Jack looked at his glass.

“I didn’t know that.”

“They’re only for bigger wines. Full-bodied wine. If it’s more aromatic, you want a bigger bowl, so it can carry the smell better.”

“Is this not very aromatic?” Jack asked, looking at the wine.

“I don’t buy wine to smell it,” Danny said.

—Less evocative that way.

“It’s good.”

“It is.”

Jack smelled the wine.

“It’s a cab,” Danny said. “I’m just about out of Merlot.”

His eyes rested on the coffee table, and then rose to meet the walls. Jack followed his gaze to few and strange decorations: Incitatus’ window, directly opposite Jack like midnight on a clock, was partially covered with a lavish curtain, gold with four panels, the middle two tied in the center of the two glass panes, like a right eye and a left, and a flowing valance above, strung with tassels, tangling the glow of the light outside into slivers, piercing through the fabric. The windows were dirty, but through the glass the outside took on the impression of a late fall night, made light by a fire in a fireplace, its orange reflection like a wall to hold out the night’s darkness, fading through Time into Dawn, as if a rising sun met the fire’s reflection on glass and both were homogenized, fading through Time until the sun’s light took over and the fire went out, the window made clear again, revealing nothing but slow life: wind, trees. The illusion of Dawn faded and Jack shifted his eyes to the left.

Between the edge of the window trim and a closed door, one large grandfather clock read eleven forty five.

“Is that right?” Jack asked, motioning at the clock.

“It’s an hour slow,” Danny said.

It stood some five feet tall, made of faux mahogany, its face the color of parchment, its Roman numerals engraved from bronze, and three delicate black hands ticking round, the tick of each passed second singing like a clockwork soliloquy.

The door to the left of the clock was shut tight, but a trace of light spilled out from the edges and from through a keyhole.

—Danny’s room?

To the left of that door was another, shut and locked, no light escaping from within. It fit its door frame better than the other, no pregnable crack nor crevice unoccupied by the whitewashed wood, so even if the room inside were lit, Jack wouldn’t have been able to tell. The paint seemed the freshest of any surface, a vibrant eggshell white, bright as the sclera of a young woman’s eye, glaring through the dark living room like snow under an evening sky, white made into an indistinct grey by the darkness, an imperceptible shade, hues stretching out of their absence like life out of matter as the door absorbed the room’s light, swallowed it up into its impression, fused into the grey that defines what is grey.

The door was only a few feet from Jack. He turned his head further to the left, over his shoulder, looking at the wall behind him. He shifted forward on the couch to get a better angle.

“What’s that?” Jack asked.

“Those are the Pillars of Creation,” Danny said.

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—Baby Jack hangs at his mother’s breast.

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“Beautiful,” Jack said.

“Terrifying,” Danny said.

Jack returned to the depth of the couch and looked down at his hands.

—What old hands—

—Might as well be reading a book.

He turned to the right and looked into the corner of the room. On his side of the wall was a framed photograph of a young Danny next to a girl the same age, his arm around her shoulders, Danny gazing beyond the view of the lens. Jack shifted to the edge of the couch to look closer. The two still characters sat against a wall, bordered by an expanse of ocean that stretched as far into the distance as the sky itself, coalescing into an indistinct horizon like a thread woven right through Danny’s chest and the girl’s head.

“Who’s that?” Jack asked.

“That’s Merlot,” Danny said,

-

taking a sip of wine.

--

“She’s a close friend of mine.”

Between the corner of the room and the chaise lounge Danny sat in, the lamp Jack had plugged in gave light to the room’s color, a deep shade of gold, and a photograph of another young Danny, maybe around eleven years old, standing outside a Victorian house with a woman Jack presumed to be his mother. She was young, casually dressed and looking tired, as though she had jogged to where the picture was taken, given only a moment to catch her breath and wipe the hair that had fallen from her bun out of her face. Danny’s head was down and his gaze was caught just below the lens, inches from the perpetual eye contact of a portrait taken head-on.

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—Less vocative that way.

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Right next to the lamp was the foot of the chaise lounge, its arched back flat against the wall, Danny sitting all the way on the other side, leaning against the chair's one arm, his feet extended onto the rug, tapping the base of the coffee table near the center of the room with his toes.

In the far corner of the room, next to the doorway to the kitchen, a small table was nested nearly out of sight, a six-slotted triangular wine rack with only one bottle sitting on its surface.

--
—Should have gotten more today.

--
Between the wine table and the window, out of which Incitatus continued to stare

--
—at Time's slowest pace,

--
an elbow of shadow from the arm of the chaise lounge

--
—fainting chair

--
broke the wall into two pieces: three fourths of it illuminated, empty golden walls, but the southeast quadrant mired in shadow, barely distinguishable from the hardwood floor, hiding most of the small table in its obscurity.

Jack carried his eyes once more to the window, directly opposite him like midnight on a clock.

--
Incitatus leapt from his perch on the sill down onto the floor and fled back into the room.

--
—The looking glass:

--
—like cat eyes:

--
—watching Time move as quickly as

--
—a cat dropped into water.

--
—One little cat, and the whole glass turns—

--
“Do you always keep it so dark in here?” Jack asked.

--
“It's the middle of the night,” Danny said. “Everywhere's dark right now.”

The rug more than anything else caught the whisper of light. At its center was a black circle, which seemed to be in the exact center of the room. Like a mandala, rings extended out of the black dot, dilating outward to the rug's edge like the wake of a

--
cat dropped into

--
water, indistinct ripples swimming to the room's shores.

Jack scanned the room again. Danny had faded deeper into the chaise lounge, the colors of his layers absorbing any distinction between his cloth and the couch's, the pale but deeply toned skin of his face fashioned by the lamp into a moon against the golden walls, and at once his body seemed an extension of the living room itself, like he were a piece of its furniture, belonging to the room as some integral component of its architecture, without which it surely would collapse. It seemed to Jack that Danny's presence gave sense to his

home's matter, as though his force was responsible for the derelict building's perseverance through Time, and that if he were to abandon it, only a moment would pass before the ground consumed it once more into the dirt that borne it.

"Do you smoke?" Danny asked.

—Old Man Jack and his Old Man Joint.

Jack looked confused for a moment before saying, "I don't."

"Do you mind?" Danny asked.

"It's your house," Jack said.

Danny leaned forward from the fainting chair and opened a drawer in the coffee table, pulling out a jar.

Danny took a mason jar out of the coffee table and unscrewed the cap, releasing a pungent and unfamiliar odor throughout the room.

—A skunk—

—beneath a pine tree.

He pressed a finger nail against a tiny shimmering leaf, breaking it into two, the aroma released by its severance gripping to Danny's scarf, crawling up its tiny threads like a moth into his nose, fluttering beneath it so his upper lip could feel the wind of its wings, the scent of home like candles and sweat, like a window left open during a snowstorm, only warmer, quenching the thirst of his breath, filling him like a soured amber fluid.

He worked his fingernail deeper into the bundle, carving out its organs, which fell in flakes of dust and soft fibers, a salad of feathers, shed by the sun.

Deliberately he ground the dried plant into his palm, his fingernails sticky, the smell overpowering any others until its presence consumed the rest and became invisible, —the way anything does when freed from contrast.

Danny took a cigarette paper from out of the same drawer and emptied the contents of his palms into its fold.

He tore the edge off of a paperback book that was facedown on the table. With his right hand he held it by the middle, using his left to fold a tiny sliver over once, and then over again, wrapping it around itself until it materialized from a two dimensional plane into a coil of cardstock, which he lay snug in the rolling paper. He pressed his fingers against either end of the paper and joined them at the top, rolling it over and under between his fingers, the plant matter condensing into a perfect tube.

He licked one side of the paper, shuffling his tongue along the sticky end, and like a craftsman sealed it tight.

Then he lit it, pulling hard with furrowed eyes, and sucked the breath of smoke deep within him, leaning all the way back against the chaise lounge, holding it in, looking up at the ceiling and then shutting his eyes before letting the light smoke fall from his nose and undulate up and into nothing.

—Mother Earth, and all her sweet distractions!

"What's it like?" Jack asked. Danny offered the joint but Jack refused.

“I don’t know,” he said. He examined the joint for a minute. “It’s like having a glass of wine by a fire.”

—A flask of vodka by a dying campfire.

“It’s got a strong smell,” Jack said.

“I can hardly smell it anymore,” Danny said, dismissive, taking another drag.

-

—Less evocative.

He tapped the ash into his empty wine glass.

—Ash like Wine Passed.

“I like your place,” Jack said. “It’s just how I thought a place like this would look on the inside. I always imagine Federalist houses having big rooms, like chambers. And with a lot of doors.”

“You should see my friend Connor’s place,” Danny said.

—No, no....

“What’s it like?” Jack asked.

—Like a great big snowglobe in a room with no lights on.

“He’s got a Victorian mansion on the New Jersey Coast,” Danny said. “I haven’t been there in a while but I used to go see him every summer. It’s massive. And it’s beautiful. It’s three stories, he’s even got a ballroom on the second floor.”

“Must be expensive,” Jack said.

“He inherited it. But yeah, he’s fucking loaded. I lived with him for a few months one summer. I swear to God he never leaves the house. He used to make me get groceries so he wouldn’t have to go outside.”

“They’ve got great beaches, though,” Jack said.

“You’ve been to the Jersey Shore?” Danny asked.

“I’ve seen most of the East Coast,” Jack said.

Danny took another drag and extinguished the joint, leaving it on the coffee table, a single strand of smokethread steadying itself into a motionless stream, rising up and away.

“He lives in Cape May.”

“Cape May is beautiful,” said Jack,

—and his Old Man Travels.

“It is beautiful,” Danny said. “The houses, the ocean.”

“There’s nothing quite like the sea,” Jack said,

—from distant opposing shores.

--

“Where’s the bathroom?” Jack said.

“In the kitchen, on the right.”

Jack rose off the couch and felt immediately dizzy. He held onto the arm of the couch as he worked his way through the living room and into the kitchen, passed the door they came in through to the kitchen window, and opened the door beside it.

-

—Jack like Jack Passed.

—Danny like Danny Passed.

—Like a sweet syrup.

—Empty living rooms

—living in empty rooms

—living empty in a bedroom.

Danny heard the toilet flush, but no stream of sink water following it.

—Filthy!

And when the sound of the bathroom door opening echoed into the living room, a tingling anticipation crawled up the back of Danny's neck, footsteps through the kitchen ringing like the

—*Pat pat pat*

of patrons of his memory, through a remembered kitchen, under a remembered doorway, onto a remembered couch, right next to his remembered self.

—Old Man Merlot.

--

"Thanks," Jack said.

"You want to help me finish my wine?"

That isn't for sharing.

-

"Why not," Jack said.

—Indeed.

Danny went to the corner of the room where the wine rack was and pulled out the last bottle. Incitatus leapt onto the table and pressed his nose against Danny's fingers while he uncorked the wine and filled both glasses.

—One of these days I'll get a whole set.

—These days.

"Here," he said, and they drank.

--

"I thought I drank a lot," Jack said.

"I'm having a hard week," Danny said.

"How come?" Jack said.

"A friend of mine's having a hard week."

-

Danny looked at wall to his left,

—No, no,

and then back into his glass, where suddenly the wine had lost all its viscosity, and for a moment it looked like a luminous red gas. He took another sip to feel the liquid, and as it went down it felt like the same temperature as his mouth, and he lost track of its volume, spilling down his windpipe, making him cough the sip out onto the coffee table and the rug.

Jack laughed.

"Fuck," he said between coughs, trying to pull in a breath of living room air but failing as each respiration was met with little drops of Merlot, streaming down his lungs, refusing to vacate.

Jack went into the kitchen and filled Danny a glass of water.

"Thanks."

—Water is vital.

—I heard this, somewhere.

—Like cold air breaking in through an opened door.

—Like warm air spilling out through an opened door.

—through an opened mouth.

"Wrong pipe," he said. "That word always freaks me out."

"What, pipe?"

“Shit going down the wrong pipe. When I hear it it’s like I can feel it. Like a hole in a scuba diver’s tube or something.” He shivered. He took another sip of water and coughed one last Time. Warm air collected inside of him, in his chest, down the wrong pipe.

“You good?”

“Yeah,” Danny started, pausing and looking at the glass. “Just got the spins.”

—As one does when one

—does one when falls down and out and into

—down itself like down’s a place

—where all one does is fall

—vertigo of the brain in darkness—

He opened his eyes and restored his balance. He pulled in a deep breath and let it out, took a deep sip of water, emptying the glass, and looked at the joint, like an antidote to its own effects.

He took it off the table and lit it again, taking a deep drag, and the fit of coughing returned.

“For fuck’s—”

—old Dad’s smoker cough—

“—sake—”

—dead Dad’s smoker cough—

“I’ll—”

—gagging on his—

“—be right—”

—slowest—

“—”

—white porcelain—

--

A violent retching echoed from the open bathroom door into the living room, where Jack cringed at each heaving, audible between a voiced gag and a cough from emptied lungs.

—One two three four

—one two three four

—one two three four

-

—Puke like Wine Passed

—like white—

--

“You all right in there?” Jack called, almost nervous to ask, and heard no response even after the intermittent flux was cut off by several loud swallows.

-

—Emetology for example—

—emetic weed like

—emetic wine passed like

—emetic scotch passed like

—rainwater into a Lifeguard’s Boat—

—No, no,

“Yes,” he called from the bathroom floor. “Some more water,” he said in as few words as possible, between loud swallows, the closure of his throat too dry and too

—emetic—

without the rinse of water—

—is vital.

“Here,” said Jack, standing in the bathroom doorway, eyes wide, surprised, holding out a glass.

—I heard this, somewhere.

--

Jack left the bathroom to give Danny his privacy, shutting the door behind him. He poured himself his own glass of water and finished it in one protracted chug.

He looked around the kitchen and the strange and unfamiliar walls suggested suddenly that he was somewhere he ought not to be.

—Might sleep better in my car.

—I heard this, somewhere.

-

The toilet bowl looked like it was filled with blood, as if Danny had a stomach ulcer, and he briefly panicked until the wave of being stoned passed and he remembered he'd been drinking wine all night.

—All day.

—All the way into last week.

—Just last week, he remembered.

—Been a hard week, he laughed.

—Prettier that way.

The pretty blue eyes of the beholder.

-

The toilet filled with blood again.

—It's wine, Danny.

What's the difference.

-

He drained his glass in one protracted chug.

“Well now I'm stoned,” he said to nobody.

--

“What?” Jack called through the door.

A dismissive noise came back from within.

-

—What's more familiar than this.

He ran a finger along the inside of the toilet seat in a perfect oval.

—White porcelain—

—& white chipping paint—

--

—the same as the walls outside—

-

—& red chipping letters—

—“Patusan”—

“Cape May”

—What’s more familiar than this.

—“You took too much you
—took too much you took
—too much you took too
—much you took too

much—”

—O, to be young!

—Leave?

Jack looked at the magnets on the fridge. The freezer door at the top had several rectangular magnets with words written on them, arranged into sentences.

—“ | One | shift | two | shift | red | shift | blue | shift | ,” said the fridge.

—What kind of magnet set has four that say “shift”?

—As one does one when one falls up

—and into up like up’s a place

—where all one does is

—fly into space.

Feeling better, Danny opened the bathroom door, still sitting on the floor, and as it opened he looked to where the kitchen was about to be revealed, and as the width of the opening expanded,

Danny’s eyes appeared, first the right one and then the left, right where

he was staring,

and their gazes met, locked, vocative for a moment,

before Danny looked away,

back at the floor.

“Smoke too much?” Jack laughed.

“Drank too much,” Danny said.

He stood up and brought the empty glass to the sink, adding it to the pile of dishes.

—Should probably do the dishes.

Old bowtie noodles stuck to the inside of a black pot, glazed in congealed butter, soaked in dirty soap water.

“You hungry?” Danny said.

“No,” Jack laughed.

“I’m gonna make something.”

—Toast? pasta? No, no,

—eggs?

—Eggs.

“I’m gonna make eggs.”

--
Jack leaned against the counter while Danny dug through clinking dishes and pulled out a grimy frying pan. He turned on the water and held the pan beneath the stream. Dried flakes of eggwhite clung to the metal even under the

—rinse of water—
-

--
He grabbed a knife from the sink and scraped it against the egg crusts, crushing them into a powder that sponged up the water, like the consistency of wet silt, burnt brown scraps and clear shavings whose color suggested the last Time he'd made eggs was

-
—last week.
—No sponge.
—I guess there's sandpaper.

--
—Should probably do his dishes.
“I'm gonna sit down,” Jack said.
“Go for it,” Danny said.

Without its host the living room lost all its comfort, a sinister sheen fusing against its sumptuous aura, like a fabric of chaos that in Danny's presence was focused, directed, sustained like matter, but in his absence was unfettered, permeating, rather like light, or its absence.

Narrated by noise detached from its source, Jack could see the kitchen in his head: the stream of water stopped and a few quick ticks like a prologue called to life a flame in a single flourish, smothered by the still-dripping pan. The fridge opened and then closed, and the shell of an egg tapped against the rim of the pan twice before cracking, all its embryonic goo spilling into a pool of bubbling olive oil, hissing through the silence.

-
—One little drop and the whole pan turns white—
—like white porcelain—
—like the whites of her eyes,
—hissing through the silence,
—bright like a fried egg in a pan.
—Another!

--
—*Tap tap*
—*crack*—
—*hissing*—
“Mother fucker,” said the detached noise.

-
The sun spilled from its perfect orb into the white sky,
—made intricate by imperceptibly whiter clouds,
and they coalesced; punctured light devoured by the sky like it was a sponge, and when a filthy metal spatula slid beneath and peeled the whole scene away, broken sun and yellowed clouds and everything in between, all that was left was a burnt black face, the vacuum where, once, light had been.

—Light moves in a vacuum—
—basil—

—whatever.

--

Jack smelled basil.

Danny returned to the living room with his eggs still in the pan, which he set down on the coffee table. One of the yolks had broken, coloring the whites around the other yolk a faint yellow. The smell nearly overpowered Jack's loss of appetite from seeing Danny's sink, but he still couldn't find hunger within him.

Danny forked off geometric chunks of yellowed whites and scooped them into his mouth, dissecting the nearly perfect circle bite by bite until all that remained was the intact yolk in the center of the pan. He stuck his fork through the membrane and the yellow goo flooded around the fork's points of entry, draining into the pan, until the yolk's empty husk floated in a pool of its own spilt interior.

-

—Multimedia self-portrait.

Danny left the emptied yolk in the pan and put it aside.

—For later.

“Better?” Jack asked.

“Yeah, great,” Danny said.

He lit a cigarette right there on the couch, ashing it in the pan.

—Short half-life, anyway.

“May I?” said Jack. He nodded and then Jack lit one too, and Danny moved the pan to the corner of the table between them.

—Ash like eggs passed.

--

As Time shifted, Jack saw it like a spotlight moving in a straight line, where Now was the illuminated matter at any given moment, never the same as Before and never repeated, but eventually, everything will have been lit once, contained within the borders of the light's presence.

The living room's light was more comfortable to him now, as his eyes adjusted, and Danny's face looked ever more like a moon against the gold walls.

“Is that your mother?” Jack asked, pointing at the picture on the wall next to Danny. The glare of the lamp obscured most of her features, but somehow, Jack could still tell.

“Yeah,” Danny said.

“What's she like?”

“She's dead,” Danny said.

-

—Mrs. Silver like Time Passed;

—one Mrs. Silver two Mrs. Silver three Mrs. Silver....

“She died when I was eighteen,” he said.

“How?” Jack asked, delicately.

“Not really sure,” Danny said. “I'd already moved out, they found her dead in her house. The autopsy said she had a bunch of benzodiazepine in her blood when she died, but when they found her body it was already decomposing and they said they couldn't be sure.”

“Christ,” said Jack. They each ashed in the pan.

—She'd been dead for years already.

—One Mr. Silver, two Mr. Silver, three Mr. Silver....

“It's all right,” Danny said. “It's been a long Time.”

“What’d you do?” Jack said. “What about your dad?”

Danny looked at the picture of his mother to his left. The glare of the lamp obscured most of his body, and for a moment she seemed to be wrapping her arms around a frozen shard of light.

—Dead even then.

—Dead since I was ten.

—No, no...

“I was pretty much supporting myself by then,” he said.

—Both Danny number one and Danny number two;

—two mouths to feed,

—toast? pasta?

—eggs;

—four eggs for Merlot and I, not long after Mom’s funeral, and as we fell asleep

He always fell asleep first

-

—she’d recite my own memories back to me, like lullabies:

Do you remember being young? Danny—

do you remember Time spent down by the sitting tree?

painted red walls tangled behind all the branches, and cool clouds?

Do you remember home?

Come home to where you’re sitting, in the chaise lounge,

warm in all your layers, wrapped up in your own arms.

Do you remember the statuette you broke? when you were nine—

you said that’s the first thing you remember, that the inside of the broken figure was white

even though the outside was colored,

and you thought that must be what people look like, too, when they break open—

—white porcelain—

you felt like you weren’t supposed to know, like you shouldn’t have seen it,

so you hid it in the kitchen drawer under the old phone books, because no one ever looked there.

Do you remember tiptoeing into her room? chasing the light beneath her bedroom door,

fleeing from whatever nightmare chased you there?

Do you remember when she put socks on your feet before school

and you couldn’t stand it when you felt the stitching between your toes?

Do you remember the dinosaurs, eating your piggies?

-

—and her voice turned into a dream, narrating my dreams,
even still.

—Bordered by the windowsill.

I told Merlot it was all right, that she’d been dead for years already.

Don’t lie to yourself,

-

she kept telling me, but I insisted:

“It’s all right.” I told my dreams not to mention her, and then it was like she never even left. Like the impression sank into the scar that was already there, eight years healed, and they fused together as one, eight years healed.

Don't lie to yourself,
-

she said, repeating and re repeating,
re and re and re repeating.

And I kept telling her she'd filled
whatever void was left, zero sum,
"It's no different now than when
I was ten," I said, as if ten was my
origin on the *t* axis, as if any value
below it was needless and forgot-
ten, and she kept trying to tell me,

You didn't stop growing up when you were ten,
-

—But I think I did.

—She died in 2002, I was eighteen, and within a year my brain had transposed
Merlot's face over hers in all of my memories. I almost forgot I'd ever known her.

Trauma isn't chronological,
-

she said to me,

and Time isn't symmetrical
-

—She got the picture framed for me, she even hung it on my wall. That way I'd
never forget what my poor mother looked like, so she'd live through my memory,
appearing there as she appears here: split into phases:

In walking counter-clockwise

around the carousel

of my memories,

dialing back from Now, midnight, ticking in reverse—

In my latest memory, she's

the shadow cast by

Merlot's body;

but before she died,

before I ever even met

Merlot, she spent

still and breathless in the rain, in

- the Lifeguard's Boat. Before that, she's

no more to me than a feeling.

eight

whole years

hidden beneath my father's

dead face, white like porcelain, lying

*Feelings are just
memories that are too big
to fit into scenes,*
-

she said, and I asked,

"How do you remember your parents?"

As two clocks at the top of the hill, and an apple rolling down it

-
—So I looked over my shoulder through Time.
—There is Merlot, rolling down the hill (climbing stairs in rewind).
—At the bottom, she looks up at me, her face just like my
—Mother’s, counting backwards, twelve Mr. Silver, eleven Mr. Silver,
—ten Mr. Silver and on, until both clocks reach zero, and then
—I see both my makers, hand in hand, smiling, waving,
—until twelve dream hours bring the clocks once more to
zero.

—That’s when Time stopped and turned around, and I looked ahead, through it.
—The pristine green field, the hill, the stationary apple, all their evoked warmth,
—begin to dissolve from my vision, all matter melting into water,
—seeking its lowest state, draining down a throat,
—drowning it. There’s ten-year-old Danny, and I’m drunk.
—My vision splits my mother in two.
—Both of her bodies quiver in my sight,
—failing to reunite as one, collapsing into themselves.
—But before they disappear, Merlot’s hand
—reaches through the sudden absence,
—and she grapples herself into my moment.
—That’s when I stopped the clock for a little while.
—Her eyes appeared, first the right one and then the left,
—precisely where I was staring, precisely where my mother’s just were,

and our gazes met, locked, vocative for the first Time

-
—She kept saying,

I can’t be everything all at once

-
—But I reminded her that I had stopped the clock. I said,
—“Time only stands still if you’re moving fast as light,
—and light can be everywhere all at once.”

Only until it goes out,

-
she reminded me.

—“Don’t go out,” I said.
Danny recalled a conversation.
—“Where are you going?”
“Out.”
“With who?”
“Stop it.”
—As she walked out the door I saw her reach her hand back outside
the moment she’d crawled into, and grab hold of something on the other side.
—Indeed, my moment was losing balance, like the pristine green field
was bent into itself, no more level surfaces, bodies falling left and right,

gravity itself glitching way up and down, an error in the Universe Code,
—not really sustainable.

—So I just let it take me, rolling me up and down the hill, clocks and apples rolling
with me, all of us suspended in deixic non-gravity, like down's a place where all one
does is fall, down itself (down the place) resting in all directions, so you never stop
falling, the vertigo of the brain in darkness, tossed about in tides.

Danny forced himself back into the living room and restored his balance.

--

Jack started inspecting the photo closer when Danny had closed his eyes. He shifted his
drunk gaze between the face of Danny's mother and the face of his close friend,

—Merlot?

wondering about his father, Mr. Silver, and where his picture might be hanging.

-

—I'll take down every picture and hang a dozen mirrors.

—And as long as I don't look at them, I can pretend they're photographs.

—Merlot's portrait, reflecting the deep gold walls;

—my mother's, reflecting my father's;

—my father's, reflecting my mother's:

—perseverated, re and re and re

repeating

-

—One of these days.

--

“What about your dad?” Jack said again, when Danny had returned to reality.

-

Danny's balance wavered. He grabbed the joint, the antidote to its own effects, and lit it
for a third Time, taking a full drag, coughing it back out,

—like out's a place where

—clouds are nauseous,

—holding back rain, emetic rain spilling out

—into the Lifeguard's Boat—

—white chipping paint—

—like white porcelain—

—No, no—

—emetic thoughts, like

—rainwater in a Lifeguard's Boat—

--

“Haven't seen him since I was ten,” Danny said with closed eyes, traces of smoke
emerging with each syllable, giving form to his words. He offered no further details, so Jack
stopped pushing him and moved his gaze along the wall.

“You said her name's Merlot?” he asked, switching topics to the adjacent photograph, as
though he were an hour hand jumping from three o'clock to four, cocktail hour, when the
shadows are extra long.

“Yeah,” Danny said, opening his eyes.

-

—Restoring my balance—

Sweet as honey
--

Merlot's eyes stared right out of the photograph and met Jack's. She'd been looking directly into the lens when the photo was taken, her gaze caught forever in stationary Time, maintaining eternal eye contact, wrapping her beholders in a vocative hypnosis, the kind of dizzying rush when two fields of vision meet in perfect symmetry, not quite sexual, but—

—Looking at everything all at once; Danny at nothing.

—Like she really sees me.

I'm looking at Danny
--

“Who is she?” Jack asked.

“She's a close friend,” Danny repeated.

—Lucky enough to have a camera.

—Lucky enough to record every bright spot, just the way they happened.

—And if all memory is constituted of bright spots,

—anyone with a camera could capture their whole past

—and glue it inside a scrapbook.

Jack had never made a scrapbook.

—I am a scrapbook.

—Or I would have been, if I were lucky enough to have a camera.

Jack flipped through the unglued scrapbook of his memory, wondering which bright spots he'd photograph during his safari back through Time.

—When I was sixteen—

—No, no—

—It was cocktail hour at Fort Stark that day, when a stranger offered to take our picture.

—The shadows were extra long, and I remember noticing a strangely deep tone in the palette of the setting sun, one strip of clouds a slightly deeper gold than all the rest.

—Merlot was looking right into the stranger's eyes, right through his lens, and she froze that way forever.

—I hung her on my wall like a hunter does a buck's antlers.

“I met her when I was sixteen,” Danny said.

—No, no,

—a long Time ago.

“Is she still around?” Jack asked, delicately.

Danny almost replied—

—Yeah, she's around.

Apt preposition
-

—and then he did:

“She's not dead, if that's what you're asking,” he said. “But she doesn't live here anymore.”

—She moved out of state,
—found a two bed, two bath Bordeaux Glass.

Danny's cigarette had gone out and he dropped it into his wine, both of which he resolved not to finish.

“I didn't think she was dead,” said Jack.

“Some Times it feels like she is,” said Danny. “She used to lived here, till a few weeks ago.”

--

—Merlot the mute siren.

It's Merlot Silver.

-

—Merlot Montgomery.

--

“Nothing hurts like that,” Jack said.

—You have no idea.

-

—You have no idea.

--

“She's beautiful,” he said.

—Who that is young is not?

-

Danny looked at the photograph.

—That's what I thought, too.

—When we first met, outside the pharmacy—

—No, no—

—It was cocktail hour at Fort Stark. We'd been sleeping in the sun all day. My mother said she'd pick us up at five and the long shadows and the strange light told me that'd come sooner than we wished it would. Back then, our deixic world was so fresh that any Time we spent together had momentum proportional to how little Time we'd known each other.

—Time's quickest pace before it was outrun by Mundane Space.

—Back then, we still laughed more often than we kissed: Time glowing, Reveries evoking warmth, some prelapsarian snowglobe of a moment at the precipice of Before and After:

—Before my mother died,

after I graduated high school—

—Before we were in love,

after we started sleeping together—

—Before I was selling drugs,

after I started doing them—

—Before Blazes,

after Connor—

—Before Now,

at cocktail hour—

—The Still upon my wall—

—Those days when Patusan was still alive, those days before I first left, divided into little capsules, little bright spots, which all feel like summer

in my head, sticky when recalled, leaving traces of their color on my fingers, my slide through Reverie too pleasant to wipe them away.

--

Danny took his eyes off the photo and looked down at the coffee table.

“You’re cruising the galaxies,” Jack said. Danny landed.

“What was it like growing up in Norway?” he asked.

“It’s a beautiful country,” Jack said. “I don’t know. I try not to think about it much anymore.”

—It fades in the absence of light,

—shrinks beneath the weight of the whole life beyond it,

—like sixteen was my origin on the *t* axis.

“How come you didn’t go back, after the War?” Danny asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe I was scared that it’d be different,” he said. “Or maybe I was scared it’d be the same and I’d be different. But Narvik’s never called me home. And at this point, I don’t think it ever will. I’m old. Home changes. It’s been a long Time.

“You’ll see.”

“I bet you’ve got a lot of stories,” Danny said.

“I guess so,” Jack said.

—Got, like materials;

collected, like currency;

spent, like Time.

Jack took a sip of his wine and leaned back into the chair, vertigo of the brain in darkness, and then finished it in one protracted chug.

-

Incitatus jumped onto the couch beside Jack and walked his front paws onto the old man’s thighs.

—Cat knows when it’s story Time.

--

—Once upon a Time, all the way across the sea, a little boy found love and violence,

—in that order.

“I smoked my first cigarette when I was sixteen. I guess that might be pretty young to you. My father smoked, he grew his own tobacco when I was really young, outside our cabin. We lived right on the bank of the Ofotfjorden, a little ways North of Narvik, in this tiny little house, just a kitchen and a sitting area and my parents’ room downstairs, my sister and I lived upstairs. You’d say it was quaint, we just said we were poor. All I ever did after school was run around the woods or stay inside. My father was always around, except when he was out fishing. You know, he was actually out fishing all the Time. Now that I think of it—I only started seeing him more after he realized War was pretty much inevitable. Point being, all my free Time, I spent it at home, with my parents.”

-

—Two roads diverged in a wood;

—and I,

—I fell asleep at the fork.

--

“But I wasn’t allowed to smoke, even though my father did, my mother never liked it. She’d always yell at him before I really woke up, I remember her yelling pulling me out of my dreams—she’d say the whole floor was covered in ash, even if she swept twice a day she’d never be able to keep up with all the God damn ash, and I think the smell made her sick, but

only because she threw up the first and last Time she ever tried one. We had no idea the shit could kill you. Well, I didn't, my father was a lot smarter than I ever was. And maybe it's just one of those things, one of those parent kid dynamics, but they were uncomfortable when I asked about it. 'You're too young,' even though all my friends at school smoked. I just wanted to know what it was like. When you're young you notice everything older people do, I think that's how you figure out what's normal, but it has to become normal, you know?"

"Yeah."

"You have to wonder about it for a while before you can just accept that it's a normal thing, right?"

"Yeah."

"I guess I was pretty old by then."

-

"I've been smoking since I was thirteen," Danny said.

--

"Exactly. Even though you know it'll kill you. It's so pretty, too, smoke—when you're young all you think about is what's pretty and what's not—"

"That's true."

"—the way it spirals up and gets bigger and smaller, kind of like it's breathing. And if you look at it long enough you start seeing patterns, even if they're just in your head. I just thought it was—I don't know. It's just smoking. It's like a wave, pretty much everyone does it, pretty much at the same Times. You smoke when you wake up, you smoke before bed. After meals. When you're hungry. When you're stressed."

—When you're evil.

"Yep," Danny said.

"So after school one day, just a few months before the invasion, I came home with my sister and saw all the lights in the house put out. It was still Winter—I guess you wouldn't—it stays dark till February, that far North. So it was dark out, like dusk here—like a Winter morning when it's getting light out but you can't actually see the sun yet. You wouldn't have been able to—you couldn't have seen that picture of Merlot from where you're sitting. It was unusual, all the lights being out.

"When we got inside we found a note from my mother. I can't remember where they'd gone, but they weren't together. My father was probably out fishing—although not in January—I'm not sure where he would have been. My mother—oh, she was in town buying fabric from the textiles. She went to the mills once a year to get materials to make us new clothes. She was gone for hours."

—The Mills—

—where once—

"I can't remember what made me do it, but I went right up into my father's study on the second floor and went through all his drawers and desks till I found a little paper pouch of tobacco. I remember my hands shaking while I untied the bow and opened it up, that sort of adrenaline you get when you're doing something you know you shouldn't—"

-

—Not sure I know what you mean—

Clever

--
“—like twenty minutes to roll the damn thing, being all quiet so my sister wouldn’t hear me. And I ran into my room like I was being chased, shut my door. Realized I didn’t have matches, tiptoed back into his study to get some. He had dozens of boxes of them from the anchorage, sitting in a big pile by his shoes, all of them opened but none of them finished. I grabbed a little pack and took my bag and cigarette and ran down to the bank of the fjord across the road. You could see the water from my window, we really lived right on the shore, and we didn’t have any neighbors, just this dirt road that went all around the fjord.

“Made me sick. I hid behind a tree so my sister couldn’t see me, even if it was light out, and I’d pull in and breathe out as slow as I could, trying to keep the smoke from giving me away. Jumping whenever a stick broke somewhere. Looking over my shoulder down the dirt road three Times for every one puff, making sure my mother wasn’t hiding, watching me, like she’d jump out and yell, ‘You better not be smoking a God damn cigarette, Einar!’”

“Einar?” said Danny.

—Yes?

“I had to change my name,” Jack said. “I was a European refugee. They didn’t just give out invitations.”

—Laughable—

—& get your nose out of my dark spots—

“That’s rad,” Danny said.

—O, to be young!

“Einar.”

“Naturally no one found me, but I did gag over the bank for a minute when the head rush caught up with me. I felt like I was throwing up an ashtray, I couldn’t believe that shit had all the fuss about it. I put it out after probably three drags, smushed it right in my puddle of puke.”

-
—& get your nose out of my dark spots—
--

“So I snuck up the road to my house and as soon as I shut the door to my room, I heard my mom come in, and she yelled at me to come down to the kitchen. All the nausea came right back, I almost threw up walking down the stairs, and I must’ve been shaking pretty bad because she said, ‘You look sick,’ and I told her I was fine but she put the back of her hand on my forehead and said, ‘You’re cold as hell,’ and I said I’d had my window open, and she said, ‘Do you feel okay?’ I kept shuffling backwards, you know, so she wouldn’t smell it, I knew she could smell it because she always complained that my father made all her clothes stink like an alley in Oslo, and he’d go, ‘I haven’t even smoked today,’ and she’d say, ‘You know my nose is better than your memory,’ and he usually let it go after that, because she was right. She could smell when I had to clean my clothes without even going up to my room.”

—She knew a lot of things without seeing them.

“But she didn’t mention any smell, didn’t even seem to notice, just thought I was sick. Even after I convinced her I was fine she said she’d make some soup and don’t forget to wear my frock coat tomorrow, even though it’s tight around the shoulders, she’d have the new one soon, she promised.

“My father came home a little later and I stayed in my room as long as I could. It’s ridiculous now but I think I was scared he’d see that some tobacco was missing, and I suppose I had spilt a whole bunch, such a pain to roll them at first, you know? But there

was no way he'd notice a few pinches missing, and I kept telling myself that, but my head wouldn't shut up about it. What if I put it back in the wrong place? what if I didn't tie it shut the right way? what if *he* could smell it? what if he could—what if he could just tell? Fathers have a way of just being able to tell, some Times, you know?"

"Yeah," said Danny.

—They can just *tell*.

—They just *know* that I took their booze, that the piss weed smell is from *me*.

—They've just got an intuition about that sort of thing.

—*That sort of thing*.

"—didn't say anything, but I held my breath through dinner anyway. He had a way of bringing things up, you could never tell what he was about to say, or when. If I forgot to do my chores, he'd sit all the way through dinner, talking like everything was fine, offering to pass the food, you know, just idle shit, telling stories, being really polite. And then as soon as I was done, a millisecond before I grabbed my plate and left the table, out of nowhere, 'Einar, did you remember to bring in the firewood?'"

"Classic," said Danny.

—Classical, even.

"Yeah. Yeah, he was—yeah, so he didn't say anything but I knew I wasn't safe yet. I remember deciding whether it'd be less suspicious to eat real quick and go back upstairs, say I was doing my reading—he taught me German and English after school, when I was young, by then he just gave me English books or translated books to read, and he'd help me when I didn't know a word, because somehow he knew German and English just as well as he knew Norwegian, and he was so well spoken, he always had an answer, always had a definition. What was I—oh, that it'd be—whether it'd be less suspicious to go upstairs and do my reading, or if I should just eat really slowly, pretend I wasn't nervous at all, like I hadn't done anything wrong.

"After dinner I helped clean up the plates and then we went down to the water, which I'd forgotten about. Every day after I was, I don't know, fourteen or so—every day when he got back from work or a trip, after we ate dinner, he'd take me down to the water and we'd, you know, chat, keep up with each other. It was the only Time of day I ever really saw him, he always left for work hours before any of us even woke up. It's—it was just a thing we did, we'd go down to the water, usually he'd try to make me laugh with stories about the crew on his ship, something like that. When I was younger he'd make up all these wild fantasies about his trips down inland, try to make me think he was some kind of nomad in a mythical land, I don't know. But as I got older, he'd just tell me about people, mostly—friends or coworkers, this and that, asking what I was learning about in school, what was going on with me, you know.

"We didn't go outside after dinner as often in the Winter, it got so fucking cold, but I think he was heading out for a trip the next day, or something like that—he wanted to spend some Time with me before he left.

"Terrified, I went upstairs and put on my coat, yeah, I remember that coat—my mother had made it when I was fourteen, it was just ridiculously small."

"No one's as oblivious as your mom when you're that age," Danny laughed.

"Right," Jack said. "I looked through the crack in the door to my father's study, one last Time, just to make sure everything looked how it should. I couldn't really see anything, but I told myself it was fine, and I met him downstairs, and we walked across the dirt road over to the bank of the fjord again.

“I went right over to the tree I’d smoked behind and deliberately stepped on the half finished fag, so he wouldn’t see it, shaking and all, trying to act normal. I can’t remember what we talked about. This or that. It went on for a while, I wasn’t even listening, just nodding and saying yeah, laughing when it felt like I should, peering down at my feet every few seconds, digging the cigarette into the ground with my heel, burying it so deep the dirt wouldn’t even know what happened to it.

“So after a while, I was absolutely shivering, he pulls a whole different pouch of tobacco out of his pocket, rolls a fag up in his hand, and I laughed at how God damn easy he made it look, rolling it in one hand, just two fingers, probably took him all of ten seconds. He looked back when he heard me laugh, and my heart sank all the way down to the gravel I was crushing that verboten cigarette into, like a deer in headlights, sure those were end Times, but all the sudden, he just says, ‘You want to try one?’”

—After all that.

--

Danny laughed

—the way you laugh when it feels like you should.

“I bet he knew,” Danny said.

—Never considered that.

-

“What’d you say?”

“I said sure,” said Jack. “And then I threw up again, but, you know.”

“Yeah. The answer’s never really as curious as the question.”

“They still mystified me,” Jack said. “Cigarettes. I didn’t figure out what all the fuss was over till they started issuing cartons in government packaging.”

“You got free smokes?”

“It was World War Two,” said Jack. “I mean—”

—Luckies nested in green netting—

“Not, you know—I didn’t. But they were everywhere, everyone was smoking. Kids whose fathers were in the military came to school with their own packs, you’d find them on the streets, half empty pouches on park benches, you know. After 1940, it was stranger if you didn’t smoke.”

“Is that when you started?”

“Around then,” Jack said.

Incitus bolted out of his lap onto the floor and under the coffee table. Danny lit a cigarette and offered his lighter to Jack, who followed.

“Old people’s childhoods sound just like movies,” Danny said, pulling in and letting out the smoke while he leaned against the fainting chair.

“I’m not old,” Jack said.

“Old Man Jack,” said Danny.

“All right, all right.”

They each ashed in the pan.

--

—Old Man Jack.

Jack tried to recall how it felt to be young. In his mind the whole era was subsumed within the patron sunlight of his memories, and the feeling remained nebulous, like trying to recall the touch of warm water after the shower starts getting colder.

—Warm water, Jack pleaded.

Danny was staring over Jack’s shoulder at the picture on the wall behind him.

—Baby stars hang at their mother’s breast—

—Baby Danny hangs at his mother’s—

—Baby Jack hangs—

“Tell me what it was like,” Danny said. “Tell me what it was like living in the War.”

“I left,” Jack said again,

instinctually. “Well—

—it was like—

“—like when you’ve got to wake up early, and it’s almost Time, and you know it’s almost Time. When you’re half awake, half asleep, rolling in and out of consciousness, you know. And it’s almost Time to wake up, but you keep pleading Time to move slower, commanding yourself to suck up all the sweet juice of sleep, the warmth, the waving hand behind everything, beckoning you back to sleep, where you belong, where everything’s as it should be. But then the alarm goes off, and you just—I don’t know. You just sever it, that last hope, the one begging you to reschedule, to crawl back inside. You kill it, and you get up, and it’s cold. You get dressed, you go outside. Sleep’s an old dead memory.

“Except sleep is peace, and the day is War.”

“Jesus,” said Danny.

“It’s ironic,” Jack said. “Few thoughts are so hard to ignore. You want to go back to sleep more than anything. You’d kill for it, in that instant. It’s ironic, you feel like you need it, but when you’re asleep you don’t even know you’re sleeping. You won’t even be able to appreciate it. It’s only pretty once it’s over.”

—Rose-tinted rearview mirror;

“That’s how it felt when the Germans came.”

“Like panic,” said Danny. “The sensation of realizing it’s too late.”

—Baby Danny—

—get your nose out of my dark spots—

—so even panic is a feature of Time

—(or at least its passage).

Jack’s nose crinkled, his stomach flexed, he cleared his throat and leaned forward.

“I’m getting tired.”

—Oh no you don’t—

“I’ll make coffee,” Danny said.

—No, no,

“All right,” Jack said. Danny went into the kitchen for a few moments while he turned his back to the room and investigated the picture behind him.

—Ghost of Space Passed.

The deep maroon of the clouds called back at him like spilled blood dripping out of streams, congealed and clotted, gooey filaments spidering down, like down’s a place—

—outlined by their golden sheen, like skin, too massive to comprehend, the violence of space dust incompatible with the human code.

“Black?” called a detached voice from the kitchen.

“Yep,” Jack said, eyes fixed on the columns. He wondered if any vantage point in space would yield such a sight to human eyes, or whether it’s simply too big: if he were close enough to see it, would he simply be inside it?

He wondered how fast they moved, in real Time. He wondered how long it’d been since they looked how they did in the photograph. Many thousands of years, he figured, —may as well be reading a book.

The stars behind the pillars drew perfectly symmetrical axes of light that shot into space for a while before being consumed by the surrounding darkness. He imagined the perfect beams, in all their perfect angles, both axes of every star perfectly aligned in the same orientation, stretching all the way to the borders of the picture. In his mind, the photograph became tangled in symmetrical strings, smothered by geometric patterns, split into many shards like a jigsaw puzzle of broken glass.

He wondered why all the light beams were at exact forty five degree angles from the picture’s axes.

—Beautiful.

—Brewing—

Danny watched through obscured glass as a steady black stream was sucked into the accumulating pool below it. The machine grumbled and hissed as the pot filled, Danny staring into space, until the final release of steam reminded him to clean out two mugs.

—Just use the wine glasses?

—No, no—

Danny returned to the living room like Jack returning to sleep.

“Here,” he said, offering Jack a mug, sipping from his own.

“Tell me about this picture,” Jack said.

“I thought I did. It’s the Pillars of Creation.”

“Well, what is it?”

“It’s a huge cloud of dust and gas where stars are born,” said Danny.

“Where?”

“Really far away.”

—No help at all.

Jack moved to the edge of the couch to inspect the photo closer. He’d seen it before, but couldn’t remember where.

—Thousands of lightyears from earth, a maelstrom of energy like a stellar nursery, maternity ward for Mother Space.

—The infinite has become an infant;

Danny watched stars incubate in real Time.

“The pillar on the left is four lightyears long,” he said. “Our solar system would look like a pen marking next to it. What’s really interesting, any stars born in the cloud end up burning all the matter that brought them to life. It’s being eaten by its own children.”

“How?”

“You can see it if you look really close,” he said. “Those little filaments sticking out at the top. They’re pockets of gas and dust. All the matter flying around them gets sucked in, gets all condensed inside a shell of hydrogen, which blots out light from other stars. So if the hydrogen blocks enough corrosive UV light, and if enough gas and dust manages to slip inside, it’ll start incubating, and then, only if it reaches the right temperature, it’ll ignite

nuclear fusion, like the Sun. If a baby star makes it that far, it eats up all the hydrogen that kept it safe and turns it into helium, or it evaporates, something like that. I guess—it's like they're breaking out of a chrysalis."

Jack looked on at the Pillars, marveling at the incomprehensible distance of four lightyears.

"And when they ignite—they're almost—they're autopoietic, you know? With just the right mass, just the right temperature, enough energy to convert just one hydrogen atom into helium, that's it—that's all it takes. It's a vivid threshold. After fusion ignites, if it reaches the right temperature, a chain reaction starts—just one atom, under the right conditions. After it passes the heat threshold, the fusion releases enough energy to sustain the temperature, so more can fuse, you know—perpetuating the process. That's when you've got a star, when it's hot enough to produce more energy than it consumes. When it's self-sustaining—when it's autopoietic." He caught his breath and let it out through a sigh.

"Yeah," Jack said slowly.

"The whole thing, the Pillars, they're a huge battleground," he said. "Governed by chaos and through violence. Imagine! four lightyears worth of gas and dust, so hot that stars fly out like champagne corks, all boiling and frothing in this—this massive, chaotic design."

—Entropy, the architect of the clockwork universe;

—& all the deists bowing down to their Almighty double pendulum.

"Bombarded with light like bullets, barraging their chrysalises like planes strafing an army, this constant force conspiring against them, every star for itself—every star responsible for its own survival, its own lifespan—you know, its duration."

"What happens to the rest?"

"I'm not sure. They sort of sputter out, I think, turn into gas giants—like Jupiter. The ones that just miss the threshold, just by a hair—they turn into brown dwarfs. Kind of go limp, freeze up, sit all stagnant—arrested development, you know."

--

—Oh yes, I know.

"It's a War between energies," Danny said. "Stars fighting stars, light fighting light. Everything competing for—what's the word—sustainability—autopoiesis. And the battlefield—just pure, unadulterated chaos, answering to nothing."

—Not all become stars;

—& even those expire.

"Did you study astronomy?"

"No. I just have a lot of spare Time."

-

"Maybe stars are just highly evolved life forms," Danny said.

"What do you mean?"

"They're—the design, it's so biological. Chance and Time, random quilts of matter and energy, everything unfolding the same way. Physically. If the physical environment's just right—you know, just like life on earth, the right atmosphere, the right impurities in the water, given enough Time—some arrangements just work, and some don't. Everything longs to fit together, to find its purpose, its place in the collective, whether it's amino acids in a protein or hydrogen atoms in a star's core. All matter's just flipping through different arrangements, different patterns, trying to hold on as long as it can."

"Hold on to what?"

"Existence, I don't know. It seems like matter's only ambition is permanence,"

—Durology;

“Because of the patterns. Synergetic patterns make survival easier. The synergy of fusion in stars—they’re self-sustaining, so they outlive all their neighbors, just like life—arranged, through Time and chance, so amino acids could metabolize, I guess, learn to regenerate, evolve, persist—molecules coalescing like they’re *trying* to endure, trying to find an arrangement that works, and when they do, you know, they arrange with other arrangements, et cetera, and given enough Time, that’s how we were born. The human species is a Russian nesting doll of molecular sequences. And now, with society and all, it’s a new kind of arrangement. We collect into groups, you know, cultures or nations or communities, and we live better inside them, survive better, because we’re a social species.”

“Yeah,” Jack said slowly.

“And we’re all fighting against that same force, chaos, maybe, or just the vacuum. It’s like a ubiquitous pressure, the same bias towards destruction, all over the place, totally inescapable. You know, humans need oxygen to breathe, but it oxidizes our bodies at the same Time, so the same element that gives us breath simultaneously makes our bodies decay. Stars too, fighting off light, disruptions in their genesis, groping for the—the threshold, I don’t know, millions of degrees Kelvin, and if they can make it that far, they’ll cross the border, and they’ll survive. Fighting against the same force, the same chaos. We’re all alone, all together.”

“So what’s the goal?”

“To survive, I guess. To last”

—the study of lasting;

“because—well, I’m not sure. It’s all a race against Time. Like Time’s the currency of the cosmos, and everything wants more of it. Stars and planets and rocks and dust and life, flying through space, flying through Time, and—all we know, really, is that *we’re* here, lasting, evolving, sustaining. It’s what we pursue. More Time, in every case.”

“What about pleasure?”

“The brain’s built to reward us when, you know, when we do something right. The brain knows what helps us last, and what keeps us from lasting. Food helps us last, so the brain tells the body that food tastes good. Sex, procreation—it only feels good because it lets our species carry on, evolve. You think there’d be seven billion people on earth if having sex just felt like going for a run?”

Jack laughed.

“No way. We’re slaves to our bodies and our bodies are slaves to our brains. And our brains, I guess—slaves to Time.”

“So you don’t believe in free will,” Jack said. “Deliberation. That kind of thing.”

“On the individual scale, sure. But we’re just points in the whole function, cogs in a machine. And where does the machine’s free will come from? The collective will of all its cogs, right?”

“Sure.”

“So we can dance around it however we like, that’s what—that’s why life, no, not even—that’s why matter’s so diverse, because everything’s got its own trajectory, even though it’s all going to the same place. Get a job at a gas station, write a book, fight a War. Call it whatever you like. We’re just lasting.”

—& to fail;

—the tainted pleasure, the dead promise of How to Last;

—that which once was right, a healthy union,

—spoils so easily, synergy turning incompatible;

—the structure of cooperation, the Process, the Function,

--

“Before I left Norway, I met a man,” Jack said. “He’d been serving six years already, enlisted before the invasions even started. And he saw the brunt of it. He was in Poland on September first, in thirty nine, with the front lines. I mean, you could tell. His name was Uwe Lehmann, Herr Hauptmann Lehmann. He was your age.”

—Bottoms up.

-

Jack looked into his empty cup.

“I was younger. He was the first German soldier I met. April ninth, 1940. I was sixteen years old.

“The Germans attacked Norway on April eighth, but it took most of that day for them to advance as far as Narvik. They attacked at Dawn. My family and I—my parents, my sister, we heard news of the attack on Oslo the day it happened, so we fled into the woods. My father and I returned home early the next morning, the ninth, so he could—I’m not sure. He needed to speak with someone in town, and then we were supposed to return to my mother and sister in the woods, to leave—to Sweden, I think was our plan. But we managed to arrive at the precise moment of invasion. My father was gravely injured—that’s when I met him—Lehmann. He stumbled across our cabin, and he—he helped us, brought a surgeon from town for my father.”

“He was a Nazi?”

“Yes, he was a Nazi. But this was before—it’s complicated—the Holocaust, I assume that’s what you associate a Nazi with.”

“Well, I know there’s more to it than that,” Danny said.

“He was a Nazi because he was a captain in the German military. But he was human, he felt empathy, he felt pain. He was so damaged. He endured more than—I just want to be clear: he was not a villain. He was a victim.”

“Okay.”

“And he helped us—he saved my father’s life. I stayed with him after that, while my father healed, to repay our debt. My family stayed home, and for three weeks I wasn’t allowed to see them, Lehmann was afraid I’d flee. The War was in its early stages, the nations hadn’t finished aligning yet, their agendas weren’t all set: nothing was clear.”

--

“You stayed with him?”

“To repay our debt. I could speak German by then, and English, well enough to get by. I knew the town, and I was young. He just wanted me as—a secretary, I guess. A volunteer. I did rudimentary translations for him, ran errands, wrote letters. Bureaucratic things, not much else, but I had to stay with him all day, he wouldn’t even let me check on my father.”

“So you were a Nazi, too,” Danny laughed.

“I got to know him pretty quick, following him around all day, writing his messages, his notes, reading his mail, translating his statements—you become familiar with someone, their motives, their behavior, when you become an extension of their life. He was open, and judicious, and straightforward.

“When I met him, he looked savage, and troubled—they’d been on the move for weeks, he’d been all over Europe—Germany and Austria, I think he grew up in Austria, and then Italy, and Poland, and Denmark, and finally Norway—for six years. He had no scars, no fake leg, no bullet wounds—and he was young. Not to me, back then, but as I recall him now, he was your age—profoundly young. And yet he had this look, a hardness—like if his

face were iron, it'd be rusty. He hadn't bathed in a long Time, and his face was the color of dirt and oil, so I couldn't read his expressions—and he hadn't shaved, but his beard was incomplete, scraggly, sort of a patchwork. His eyes were just like mine, dark as black, and he was tall and well built, had a German jaw, tight uniform—he was intimidating. And you could see it in his eyes—you could see Poland, 1939, written across his face, I swear to God—the experience, the trauma, whatever you'd call it—it was a distinct feature of his appearance. His fingers looked old—I remember that—like yours.”

—May as well be—

“What?” Danny said, looking at his hands.

“Older than the rest of him, I mean. Some people's hands age faster than the rest of them.”

“Oh.” He fingered his rings.

“But he had this way of speaking. I doubt I could affect it, it's been so long—but his sentences evolved like processes. He had to build up to his thoughts, and he was very careful with his words, he chose them—sort of surgically, like an architect, laying the foundation of his idea, building the arguments, then filling in the space. I enjoyed listening to him, his precision—it surprised me. He'd start saying something and you wouldn't realize how clever he was until he was done, you'd never know his thesis until the last moment, when it all clicked. He was thoughtful. But he was also bold.”

—How unlike me;

“I worked with him for—I don't know, less than a month. In the moment it stretched into an eternity, but after I left, it felt so brief. He'd left his platoon medic with my father when I went with him into town, and that evening he sent a surgeon, said I could return to the cabin once my work was done. But in town—the battle lasted a while, back and forth between them and the British, some of our own—but Norway, really, had no military—and some Polish troops, and some French, like a tug-o-war, and my hometown was the rope.”

“Where is Narvik, exactly?”

“Far North,” Jack said. “Norway's shaped like a spoon pointing south. Oslo's in the middle of the spoon's bowl, Narvik's up in the labyrinth of fjords and deltas, around—” he grabbed the fork from Danny's egg pan, which was genuine silver, and pointed to the neck of its handle, where the skinny spindle bloomed into a swirl, the segment that rests on the lower bone of the forefinger when held, “around here, on a spoon. Near the top. Politically, I suppose, you could say it's as far North as Norway reaches, further than Narvik there's only wilderness. At least, back then—the whole county of Finnmark, really, probably has fewer residents than Patusan.”

“Patusan's pretty small.”

“Just farmers and fishermen and miners, and all their sad families. Tromsø's the final stop in the journey North.

“They invaded—well, it's complicated. Norway was neutral. We'd been exporting iron to Germany for years, we'd ship it from the mountains to the east or from Sweden, by railway, and it'd channel through the port, Narvik had a huge anchorage for cargo hulls. The relationship went way back, long before the War. And a country at War needs a lot of iron. Most of Germany's came from us—from our area. So they weren't even attacking us, really—the British had threatened them, somehow, as I recall, and they were concerned about the possibility of losing access to our port, our iron, our lumber, our territory in general, and for good reason, too—the British did try to cut off the trade, that was the whole battle. The Allies wanted to sever the Wehrmacht's access to our resources, the Wehrmacht fought to keep it open, and Narvik was the battlefield.

“But it stretched out way too long. The Germans came early to, you know, prepare, and then the British came on the offensive, and everyone else—oh, it was a mess. The Ofotfjorden looked like an image from a book, this massive Destroyer, what was it called—*Eidsvold*—that was the first to go. The ship had loomed over town as long as I could remember, a behemoth, bigger than you could imagine—sunk in minutes, smoke and fire on the water, dozens of bodies floating to the surface offshore.

“Then the same thing happened again, with the *Norge*. Narvik’s last line of defense.

“They battled with the British on the tenth, mostly on the water, but the fighting eventually moved to the shore. It went back and forth like that, the Germans maintained control for a few days, then the British returned and sank their ships, and they fought in town for a while, but still the Germans kept a pretty loose hold on us. The fighting continued even after I left, the British didn’t really withdraw until June, once the conditions in central Europe had, you know, deteriorated.

“So, yeah, it was scary, living there for those weeks, with Lehmann, Herr Hauptmann. Always vigilant for a shore bombing from the Allies, gunfire in the streets, attacks from anywhere—the bombardment came from all directions, it seemed: the Kriegsmarine fighting our resistance, the British fighting their land troops in town, our troops caught in the middle, generally neutral—and then the French and the Polish mixed in, and obviously nobody except the Germans, really, had any idea what was going on.

“Lehmann’s platoon set up a little camp east of town, in an abandoned mine shaft in the hills, and, you know—he was a captain, I think he knew when violence was coming, and he’d send me to the camp before Narvik was ever attacked. When the city was quiet I stayed in an empty office building they’d occupied, or in a bed on his ship down at the docks, until the British destroyed it during a raid. He cared about me—at least, my wellbeing, I think while my father was recovering he might have considered himself my father’s surrogate, because I was so young—and he wanted to keep me safe. He said he could have made me fight, that it was in his power to do so, but he never wanted to. He told me I was more valuable as a translator than a soldier, and I think he was being honest.”

“Did you ever see combat?” Danny asked.

“I saw it, yes. But I was never in it. I never hurt anybody.”

“I’m not trying to pry—”

“It’s all right. It’s just that I haven’t talked about it, not for a long Time.”

“Got you drunk,” Danny teased.

“Right,” Jack said. “In the lulls, he had me translate all these messy letters from some girl, written in Norwegian. She couldn’t have been much older than I was, judging by her handwriting, her syntax, that kind of thing—she was not educated. At first it was innocent, she’d write the strangest things—I hadn’t met her, either: he’d just bring me one of her letters, a few Times a week, and I’d write it out in German, as best I could, and then he’d write a response in German, and I’d translate it to Norwegian and return it to him. The content of the letters—strange, she—her language, you know, she sounded like she was answering questions, following a script or something. She’d bring up—I don’t know, she wrote about her background quite a bit, as an orphan. Her father was a gypsy, her mother was Jewish, and she’d write about how they met, her experience living with them before they left, what they were like—what her ‘people’ were like.... She took note of her menstrual cycle, her general health, almost like a diary entry, or a checkup sheet you’d fill out every day in an inpatient ward, as though Lehmann was her overseer. And when he wrote back, he was so timid, his language so flat in contrast to his elegant speech, like he feared her judgment, but—he probed her, too, about her family, about her cycle, about, you know, how

she was handling things—the War, displacement—emotionally. I never asked him who she was. He told me she was hiding in Bodø, and he'd take off to see her every once in a while, one day a week or so. And he'd ask me all these questions about girls my age, what they meant by their behavior, what sort of patterns they, you know, that kind of thing.

“For two or three weeks I translated their correspondence. I enjoyed it, I think, opposed to all the documents I had to decipher for him, all bureaucratic noise, dates and locations and numbers, titles of military officers, descriptions of terrain and weather, Timelines of events and descriptions and lists and—you know, the letters felt real, like a genuine dialogue between real people, strange as they were.

“Towards the end, though—I still hadn't seen my father, but Lehmann said he'd been improving, that I'd be free to go any day now. That's when the tone of the girl's letters changed, almost overnight. The robotic impression, answering questions, the sort of feigned interest, all at once shifted into an eerie dependence. Her last few letters were loaded with questions, concerned in their timbre, insecure—and his, he didn't respond to as many as he used to, but when he did, his language was closed off, foreign, the way you'd write to a stranger, almost. I felt so curious but never had the courage to ask him about her, or about what had happened—but something *did* happen, you could feel it, like all their conversation was skirting around the mystery, filling the negative space around it, defining its borders without ever naming it, like that Hemingway story—”

—Pills like White Porcelain—

“And then the letters stopped all at once. Lehmann never mentioned her again. We'd gotten close by then, him and I. I bet I could have asked him—I bet he would have told me. In the afternoons he'd invite me to his quarters and pour me some tea. We'd talk about my father's condition—his leg had been amputated—or he'd tell stories from his youth, ask about my own—how did I spend my Time before the War, was I chasing any girls, what were my parents like, why could I speak both German and English, that sort of thing. Like the I once had with my father, just a few weeks earlier, on the shore of the fjord after dinner every night.

“I remember the last Time I saw him. Just a few weeks after we'd met. Herr Leutnant Dieter, a man in the platoon, woke me up and told me Lehmann was waiting for me in his room. I got up and walked through the long halls over to his side of the old building, to his open door, and found him looking out the window, silhouetted by snowfall, so white outside that the room could have been its own night Time. I greeted him and sat down, and he said nothing. He just stared out the window, minute by minute.

“I said, ‘Herr Hauptmann,’ but he cut me off, all aloof, and asked me in the deadest of tones, ‘Would you like to see me dead?’

“I asked him what he meant, flustered, my stomach dropping to my feet. It came out of nowhere. I was terrified he thought I'd betrayed him, all the sudden afraid for my own life. But he said nothing for a long Time. I stumbled over my words, trying to convince him he could trust me, in broken German, but after a moment I realized he hadn't really meant it. His mind was somewhere else. I thought I might be growing paranoid. It wasn't till someone dropped something in the room next door that he jumped, yelled a curse through the wall, shivered for a minute, and then sat down facing me.

“He said, ‘Can't get one fucking moment of silence here.’ I said nothing, and he kept going, ‘Someone's always dropping books or bombs or laughing in the lounge. They love it. They love the noise. They love the—’ and then he cut himself off, and he punched his

wooden desk, his whole body clenched up, and for less than a moment, when he looked into my eyes, I felt as though he might pull his Luger out of his belt and put a bullet through my heart right then and there.

“Obviously he didn’t. He told me my father was well enough to get out of bed. He told me to take off the uniform he’d found for me, put on the clothes I came with, and get lost. Just like that, too. Not rude, not even annoyed. Just frank. Just get going.

“So I left, and I never saw Lehmann again,” Jack finished.

Danny said nothing.

—Agreed.

-

—Not very Aristotelian, but...—

“That’s it?” he asked.

Jack held between his thumb and forefinger a looped thread of fabric emerging from the seam of his jeans. He wiggled his forefinger into the loop, cutting off circulation above the bed of his nail, and in one swift motion he yanked his finger upwards, snapping the loop as he intended but not before extracting another inch of thread from the seam, further exposing the skin beneath the fray. Danny watched it happen, but he was marginally more absorbed in trying to redirect his focus from Jack’s leg to some specific excerpt of invisible air midway between them, determined to end its protracted interval of remaining unseen by human eyes, like air were some monologically evil patron of a cavern of hell, whispering through a trespasser’s mind, Who disturbs my slumber, expecting a lost and frightened youth, or perhaps a brazen hero, but instead only finding Danny, half asleep against the cave wall, shining a laser into the beast’s eyes.

Jack’s voice slowed when he spoke, like he had to conjure each word from the folds at the foot of his mind as he said it:

“Well, not quite. My father’s leg kept him from leaving with us. My mother would have to work, to keep them alive. I imagine he wouldn’t let her leave without him. I think he believed I’d be able to support myself and my sister. I don’t know. Nobody really knew.”

“What happened to your sister?”

“We got separated in Bergen. Thousands of families were fleeing the country, everyone was looking for a way out. It all happened one night—huddled on the docks, her and I and a hundred others, all yelling, waving papers, passports, waving money in the air—I can’t quite—the memory’s hazy. I mean I wasn’t holding her hand or anything. But we got separated. She was only fourteen. I left without her.”

--

“That was weeks after my last encounter with Lehmann. Before that, my family moved around, my father checking in with all his connections—he knew people in the military, in the university down in Oslo, at fishing companies and docks way down the coast. Searching for escape, at least for my sister and I, and for money—but nobody was giving loans, and—it’s strange, what War does to money. It wasn’t what it had been.

“They took us as far south as Oslo, to a camp of refugees in Sognsvann, all trying to flee the city. My father had enough money to get us to the coast, and that’s it. He said they’d go to Sweden, try and find our family, try and wait out the War, his injury. And they said they’d come find us, as soon as they could. They said be safe, stay together—survive—and wait—
—that’s what we tried to do—

—I didn’t know then I’d have to change my name—

—I didn’t realize in that moment I’d never know if they made it—

—I had no idea how much easier it would seem to not find out—

“On the passage west to Maine, we hid inside a ship, sleeping on beds of newspaper in the cargo chambers. The smugglers brought us fresh paper whenever they could—those days, you saw more newspapers than homeless people. I found this article—I can’t recall the paper, but it was written in German...the Germans sent their own papers wherever they sent their troops. I don’t recall much detail. But it seemed to be an evaluation of what the lead researcher referred to as ‘a Eugenics Laboratory Study on *Lebensunwertes Leben*’—
—‘life unworthy of life.’

“You know, the usual suspects: the disabled, the mentally ill, the gypsies—
—the guilty—
the poor, the oppressed. They sterilized them, isolated them, even killed them—we didn’t know it back then, but you could read it in the language—that was the first Time I heard such words, written so plainly, the undisguised but still ambiguous diction—*unworthy*. Even then it left a troubling itch in my brain, like a dark and rarely recurring sensation that sneaks up through your memory, once a year or maybe less, so specific in the emotion it evokes, but eerily detached from reality—a déjà-vu of pathos—I’m sure you have felt such a thing.

“Even before I read the article, its language... some sentences, it seems—some sequences of words, however intricately defined—symbols containing meaning—

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—Information Capsules—

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—arranged in such a way,

in just the right timbre, by just the right person, at just the right moment—
—can become inordinately moving.

—In a dream, for example, imagine: You’re in a yard, in your deep past,

—kneeling low in deep grass, clutching a ball,

—looking very closely at it—

—the surrounding world blurs, melts away,
along with all its noise—and then you hear

—a lady and her husband speaking on the porch.

—Five of her words reach out and grab you:

—Something
happened—

in
the

—garden—

(*See Act V*)

Something happened in the garden.

—One more Time?

—Something happened in the garden.

—And that’s all you remember. Nothing but a feeling.

“I saw his name a few paragraphs down the page, Uwe Lehmann, no photograph, no quotes—just one phrase, buried deep in its own context: ‘Recently convicted captain Uwe Lehmann’s deranged relationship with a sixteen-year-old jewish-gypsy orphan, mercifully concluded, exemplifies the dangers of such mixed-race breeding.’ I paused—no way to be sure how common his first name or surname were in Austria—no picture to confirm. I couldn’t quite grasp its language, the science and the theory, the German. I stared at the page for a long Time in the ship’s dim light, sure it was a hallucination. Eventually I tore the page free and disposed of it: eager to silence any recent memory.”

-
“So what happened to him, exactly?” Danny asked.

“A few years later in Maine I read up on it, tried to uncover the rest of his story, through the archives—to figure out what Germany did to soldiers who—you know, in a situation like that. Apparently he found her before we met, while he was sneaking through the Swedish border. He stumbled across a farmhouse orphanage—hers—and took her with him.

“You need to understand, by then he was a broken man. The girl’s parents had been dead for years. He thought he was trying to protect her—in his own way—and himself.

“He gave her shelter, fed her, kept her safe—and then he put a child inside of her.”

—Classic—

“And they found out?” Danny said.

“He admitted to it.

He killed her and their unborn child.

And then he killed himself.”

Wine and silence fill the room.

(vi)

Jack fumbles through his pack for his last cigarette. His hands shake.

“Want to smoke outside?” Danny asks.

“Sure,” Jack says, longing for the cold.

Danny looks at the door to his room. Jack looks into the kitchen.

“I’ve got a balcony,” Danny says. Jack follows his gaze to the closed door, eager to smoke, but Danny remains still. He keeps his eyes fixed on the wall across from the fainting chair, scanning the wall, from the left side of the room past his door, across the wall and past the other door, and back to the left and across (the wall in between... back to the far corner. He sees Jack sitting (the wall ... (the far right corner... on the couch in the (in between ... (the far left corner of the room, legs extended, feet (the two doors... (far room, tapping [the coffee table at the room’s center (right (the couch in the tapping the coffee table at the room’s center (corner far left corner...) against the coffee table at the room’s center] (... all upheld on the wood floor (the rug secured in the center beneath the coffee table), suspending their weight above the empty space of the lower duplex,

(xii)

the

vacuum between Danny’s

living room and its home, the ground below, lifting

the earth a sliver off its own weight, quivering under its own weight, the force

of the vacuum’s gravity too weak to reunite the apartment with its home (the ground below,

[the text]), succeeding only in conjuring a strange friction between the upper refuge and the ground below,

the world from which it has closed itself off, the world atop which it rests, spinning endlessly in a rotation from nine o’clock to three o’clock

to eight o’clock

to four o’clock

to seven o’clock

to five o’clock

to six o’clock

to midnight.

No pregnable crack nor crevice unoccupied

so neither Jack nor Danny know if the room is lit.

Both keep their eyes fixed on the door to Danny's room, its paint as bright as the sclera of a young woman's eye, glaring through the dark living room like snow under an evening sky, white made into an intrinsic grey by the darkness, hues stretching out of their absence like life out of matter as the door absorbs the room's light, swallows it up into its impression, fusing into the grey that defines what is grey.

by the sheer density of the whitewashed wood, no light

escaping from within the enclosed space

Danny gets up out of his fainting chair and stretches his tired back, standing fully upright, grabs his cigarettes and lighter, and walks around the coffee table

and grabs the knob,

door

closed

the

over to

No pregnable crack nor crevice unoccupied

revealing only shadows, as the door swings open.

Both keep their eyes fixed on the door to Danny's room, its paint as bright as the sclera of a young woman's eye, glaring through the dark living room like snow under an evening sky, white made into an intrinsic grey by the darkness, hues stretching out of their absence like life out of matter as the door absorbs the room's light, swallows it up into its impression, fusing into the grey that defines what is grey.

by the sheer density of the emerging darkness, no light

escaping from within the enclosed space

the unlit space

into the unlit space.

Jack gets up off the couch and takes a deep breath as Danny walks into the dark room. He steps around the coffee table and follows

his host to and through the threshold,

Inside the room, Danny fumbles for the light switch and turns it on.
Before Jack's eyes adjust to the light,

it.
through
walk
They
doorway.

Danny scans the familiar space,
reaching for its familiar taste.
At once he wishes he'd left it dark.

His bed is unmade, his sheets lying in a pile
on the mattress, narrating the nature of his
recent mornings, the doldrums promised by
waking up alone, the doldrums that follow
waking up alone, through Time, to now—

Exposed to the light,
all the room's features are bleary,
like they're shutting their eyes,
hopelessly endeavoring to escape observation.

Jack's vision—

—adjusts:

and follows his gaze over to the far right corner, resting on a closed

room,
the
of
center
the
into
wall,
right
the
against
bookshelf
the

On the right
wall, he sees
a bookshelf
laden with
more than
just books:
photographs,
records, pill
bottles both
empty and
full, piles of
letters and
scrap paper,
notebooks,
empty bottles
of wine, etc.

Danny kicks his dirty clothes
out of their path, consolidating them
from a carpet of apathy

into

a pile of
drudgery, resting
beside
his armoire in the corner,
both of its doors hanging
open, clothes spilling out
of its drawers, socks and
boxers reeking of sweat,
jewelry scattered around
the floor, spilled out of a

fallen
box.

Jack follows

to
up
armoire,
the
past
space,
lit
the
through
Danny

Through the doorway is a wooden balcony

<p><i>Light leaks into their deixic moment from Danny's bedroom.</i></p>	<p><i>Another doorway to the right of Danny's grants access to the future (vii).</i></p>
<p><i>Back in the living room, everything remains as though it were paused, save for darling Incitatus, curled up on the fainting chair Danny warmed up for him.</i></p>	
<p><i>Dishes still need to be washed.</i></p>	<p><i>No heat rises.</i></p>
<p><i>Faucet's dripping.</i></p>	

embracing the house.

*The October air is tonic
against their skin, the night darker
than when they arrived, the moonlight sang
to anesthetic sleep, tucked in by a dome of clouds.*

The boys lean against the railing of the balcony and stretch their eyes to see the night. Trees puncture the nearly black sky. No streetlights on this side of the house. A trickle of light breaks through Danny's window and disturbs the unobserved scene's slumber, aided in part by the glow of their cigarettes and the shower of muted moonlight, giving the balcony an ambience like a dark third story attic brushed with color by the streetlights below. It is similarly silent. Neither can think of anything to say. Danny roams his mind for a question, a digression, a parallel, etc., while Jack wonders whether the breadth of silence is obscuring the ripples sent out from his narrative or amplifying them. Both arrive through their respective avenues of thought at the same answer, blatantly manifested in the lightless, noiseless, heatless moment.

Danny imagines the girl of Jack's tale, a tiny bird-limbed acorn-skinned girl with dubiously blonde hair, swaddled in rags, pine needles sewn into her, and suddenly his mental projection assumes a predictable sepia, a nostalgic photographic filter, smothered in rust, its edges deliberately burnt, her clay voice hallowed through an early twentieth century audio recording. He thinks, 'Old-fashioned' is the used car salesman of aesthetics.

Jack looks North, directly out from the balcony, and sees a familiar hueless shade.

'In Narvik, it stays dark all Winter. It's far enough North that when the sun sets, late in November, it doesn't rise again until January. From late morning till early in the afternoon, the sky's a deep blue, the color of the Atlantic, just enough light on the horizon to see the silhouettes of remote mountains, but dark enough that every tree looks black. The snow is the color of the sky. The threshold of night, sustained for the whole season. And the deeper it gets, up until the solstice—Time is evenly split, like the night's gradient, moving from phase of twilight to phase of dusk to phase of night to phase of Dawn. When you live in a place like that you can't help but notice the many quiet manifestations of night-Time. They become familiar to you.

*After the sun disappears,
from ten in the morning till two o'clock,
the night enters civil twilight, when colors
are only recognizable in contrast—when
snow is the color of the ocean from space
but beside the black trees, buildings, dirt,
in their contrast, you know that it's white.*

*The hours preceding
twilight are nautical
light can no longer*

*and following civil
twilight, when sun-
be seen on the horizon.*

*And before and
astronomical
celestial bodies
become visible*

*after that is
twilight, when
(stars, planets)
to the naked eye.*

“But in the Winter it was always overcast, and any light from the moon, the auroras, the stars, was usually blotted out. I lived a mile North of the city, and back then there were no neon signs, no rows of streetlights, so even at night from our house you could find no trace of Narvik’s existence. No lampglow reflecting off the water, no spotlights shining into the clouds, no blinking runways, no distant glow of civilization. And in the Winter, when civil twilight had swallowed all the day-Time, when no stars broke through the dome of clouds, when my parents had gone to sleep and turned off the woodstove and extinguished all the candles, some Times I’d walk down to the shore across the road and lay on my back with my eyes wide open, just watching—but not seeing—this utter absence of light, so dark it nearly assumed another color, some shade just shy of true black. They say that darkness beyond light is darker than in no light at all, because of the contrast. When there’s no light, no contrast, the human eye registers a deep, rich—you might say intrinsic—grey. Even in a vacuum, darkness isn’t perfect.”

“I didn’t know that,” Danny says.

“The sky looked then just like it does now,” Jack says, still looking North, directly out from the balcony. Danny follows his gaze into the imperfect darkness, straining to discern the outlines of trees from the identically dark sky behind them.

“So if I shut off my light and we finish our cigarettes,” Danny begins.

“We’ll see an intrinsic grey,” Jack finishes. “It’s eerie.”

“Like a sensory deprivation tank.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“They shut you up in a tank, totally light- and soundproofed, and you float in body temperature water, to completely free the body of sensation. No noise, no touch, no smell, no taste, just the void of the tank, like a vacuum. It takes a long Time for the body to adjust but when it does—well, you said it yourself. It’s eerie.”

Jack wonders if arctic air (so cold it froze Time itself) could substitute for body-temperature water, figuring that while cold is sensory, its nature is anesthetic to sensation. Coagulation, he ruminates: what is cold is slowed in space; what is slowed in space accelerates in Time; but that which is so cold it slows to a stop will endure frozen Time, preserved through its flux, untouched by decay, like a mammoth in a glacier (so particularly slow that its namesake defines its own pace: glacial).

Danny goes back into his room and shuts off the light. The deepened darkness seems to expand the volume of their deixic unknown, the wood of the railing and the green of nearby trees rendered into ambiguity by the absence of light: Schrödinger’s Mundane Space. His last fleeting glimpse of the room stains the injected darkness with the colored shapes of its decorations, suspended in the void of his vision. His bed dissipates into nebulous layers of hues of blue, too vague to discern, disintegrating into the imperfect darkness like powder into a solution. The light in the center of his ceiling, like a sun, leaves a faint rose residue, the memory of a vision, flurrying down like snow that melts before it reaches the ground. For a moment, he cannot recall the color of his walls. The impression of his bookshelf passes through his field of sight, manifested as a red rectangle with diminishing borders, myriad pigments left by the variant colors of the books’ spines, coalescing into a mosaic of deconstructed reality, and on top, one vertical ray, nearly black, where an empty bottle of Merlot stood on a pile of letters.

“It’s strange how light leaves indentations in darkness,” he says to Jack when he returns to the balcony.

“Indentations of color,” Jack says. “And they fade, in perfect darkness, as your eyes adjust. Once all the shapes and colors dissolve into a homogenous substratum—that’s it: the color of the absence of light.”

Jack finishes his cigarette and tosses it over the balcony. Danny sips on his last few drags, shivering in the cold but seeming to enjoy it nevertheless. The ember of his cigarette leaves threads of light in their eyes, fastening their deixic moment taught, mummifying it, winding it in the ribbons of a (su)stained glow.

“What’s through here?” Jack says, standing to Danny’s right, in front of the other door.

“That’s the Guest Room.”

That’s home.

--

Danny brushed the ember of his cigarette against the railing, extinguishing it: the last stimulus of light was sucked back into the vacuum. He did not wait for their eyes to adjust.

"Here," Danny said, following the wall through the darkness, blindly reaching for the door to the Guest Room, and bumping into Jack enroute. "I'll show you your bed."

"Thanks again," Jack said, following the sound of the opened door. He heard Danny fumbling through the unlit space, bumping into what Jack assumed was the bed, cursing under his breath while he patted the wall in search of the light switch. "You need a flashlight to live here," he said.

"I could have sworn I left it on," Danny said. Jack recalled a trace of light spilling out from its edges and through its keyhole, earlier in the night.

"It was on when we got here," he said.

At last Jack heard him flip the switch, but nothing happened.

"Mother fucker."

"My one and only parting gift."

-

Danny opened the door to the living room, and a little bit of light broke into the Guest Room, revealing an eerily empty space. The walls were bare and the hardwood floors were old; no sheets on the bed nor books in the bookshelf, no lamp on the bedside table, just yellow paint and white blinds on the far window, and one lone bobby pin lying on the mattress.

"I don't have a lot of guests."

—Woe that all this Thought should find its resting place in such a dump;

—& in a dump with such a purpose;

—& in such darkness.

—The mausoleum of all discourse and experience:

--

—Here in the Guest Room:

—bare walls like blank pages, opened up

—(to be written upon) at some Time in the past,

—which slipped by unnoticed, uninspired:

—the author's lone footprint on the page is

—lying on the bed, bent & forgotten; & otherwise, only the unlit space

—is legible (& only to the perfect reader): as a statue which always exists but

—must be exposed by its creator through the sloughing of negative space:

—designed and defined not by sculpting what it is, but by discarding what it is not;

—and such the same can be said of human life, like our own:

-

—perhaps best understood by

—what we are not thinking about.

"When was the last Time somebody stayed here?" said Jack.

—At least seventeen years ago, in Danny Time.

"Just last week," Danny said.

—Unless you count light (which I do) in which case

—about an hour ago.

"Who was it?"

—Horses running through the night: a friend of mine is having a hard week.

“Merlot.”
“In the Guest Room?”
“She was having night terrors.”

*Indeed, picture this:
the bliss (can you find a word more apt?) of sleep.
The bliss! & so too the woe,
the horror of waking: the expiration date of that nirvana—
but haven't you ever woken up too early?
& sipped slowly on those minutes that crave, that yearn for the Return
to Sleep? (they ache for it, even lust after it)—
& enjoyed the horror of waking only because it's premature, because you actually can—
(& such is so seldom the case)—Return to the bliss of Sleep?
to savor the delight you'd always failed to feel, like the rush of escaping a near-death experience: Asylum!
Now picture this: that same moment
opening your eyes and it's still dark, but
instead of the bliss, the rush, the relief,
the progenitorial Still of your waking
(the moment you realize you're awake)*

is infiltrated by fear:

*Now picture this, the plot arc of my
recent nightmares: I give the mic to Jack.*

--

—I can recall few details of my antebellum dreams, in this moment, following Danny
from the unlit Guest Room to where we began, but I can surmise that those *childhood dreams*,
those final fleeting visions of my prelapsarian psyche, asleep beside the window
against whose foggy veil a willowing snowstorm is borne from above;
those childhood dreams

must have been so free—so intrinsically void!—(like the Terror's empty Guest Room)—
of any dark foreboding corners, swept clean of their diaphanous cobwebs—
candlelit at every junct-
ure—so safe from that haunting presence (the Terror), which thereupon
(after April, 1940) has never ceased to lurk just beyond the grasp of
—manifestation; not unnoticed but

unseen, e n d l e s s l y
prowling behind me— nimble,
(like how the word sinuous,
you've just read like a feral cat that
chases the word d a r t s
you're now reading) at any shift
of my timid gaze, so I will never catch
its hidden figure, and yet never escape its itching
ubiquity; stalking my blind side, disturbingly close but perpetually *beyond my*
—Always a fingertip's reach behind my shoulder,
—a slow hot breath's feverish caress between its slit maw and my quivering nape—
—I, Vulnerable Jack, surrounded all sides by its evanescent shade,
—spinning around an *instant too slow to catch it,*
(the Terror escapes, to the

next page)—

—cyclically bound by its arcane horror, paralyzed and

exposed,

stripped of my clothes,
locked forever in
piercingly-intimate-proximity;

—these spectral horrors, these Godless revenants,
these incarnations of Mephistopheles' muted form,
reverberations of his dissonant falsetto, whistling

—sourcelessly in a doorless,
windowless,
(lightless,
heatless)

room:

the psychological discord,

vampiric & ravenous—

an infestation of the past's enduring woes.

—Time persists, and through the years my despair relents, but these! these dreams!

—these are my immortal familiars.

*To wake in the night,
woken by a fear
that came from up Here—*

*To fall asleep, those days,
& grieve the bliss of sleep,
(its tainted pleasure like the dead promise of How to)
& somehow recognize that the horror of waking
(Dawn)
is now a relief.*

*And so what is Now? this moment,
wrought from its Text into a Tale (from sleep into fear)?
A Tale whose ending is Dawn (viii)—
—Dawn, whose very nature is to Begin.*

-

“She couldn’t even sleep. What’s worse than that? It’s so vital—and when, you know, when the going gets tough, sleep is all you’ve got. When you lose that, when your only remedy for exhaustion just triggers anguish—and the worst kind, because it comes from inside her—inside your mind, the only thing you can’t run from, and your only weapon against dangers beyond the physical world. You know, that kind of struggle—fear, jealousy, guilt—there’s no body to beat the shit out of, you’ve got to let your mind heal, you’ve got to train your mind to adapt and overcome, but when a trauma damages your cognitive ability to confront it—what can you do? It’s our only asset—it’s all that separates us from—from that clock in the corner—our minds, our deliberation, our chaos factor. It’s terrifying, what happens to a person when they can’t sleep. Merlot—it gave her PTSD, I mean it was clinical—even if the nightmares went away, she was so fucking terrified of falling asleep that her mind wouldn’t even let her try. She couldn’t lay in bed anymore, she had to sleep on

couches, and silence made her crazy—she always had music on, or the tv, or she'd make me talk to her, but even if she was reading a book and it got quiet, she'd get all freaked out that she couldn't hear—I mean, it was like her brain thought she was going deaf whenever it was silent, and she'd panic, like a real, mortal panic, that if something was prowling behind her she wouldn't hear it coming, like some glitch in her subconscious that turned up the sensitivity of her instincts, the same instincts that kick in when you run upstairs from a dark basement, or when you hear a strange noise in the woods and freeze up and then even the sound of wind petrifies you, that hyper-vigilance that borders on total panic, raw fear of death braced by a murderous will to survive—and it's over in just a minute, usually. But not for her. Not when it was silent, or when she lay in bed—or when it was dark, we always had the lights on, that's probably why they're all burnt out. And some Times the exhaustion caught up with her, and she'd doze off on the bus, and then the same thing—this debilitating, carnal fear would take hold of her, cripple her, some Times just for a minute, some Times not till the trigger was long gone. Some Times not till I came and picked her up and brought her home to do a line of Xanax.”

“What did she have nightmares about?” Jack asked, after a moment.

“Infinity, I guess,” Danny said.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, two mirrors facing each other, being lost in space, eternity, and weird things, too, she had this one recurring dream where she'd be lying in bed, but her mind would change, somehow, split from a singular consciousness into several, like her heart had its own identity, and her lungs, and her skin, and her brain—all squeezed together in one body, this chaos of emotions and impressions and desires, a dozen thoughts for every one thought we have, never agreeing—and then she'd get used to it, but her skin-mind would split into seven skin-layer-minds, her brain-mind into a cerebellum-mind, a hippocampus-mind, a thalamus-mind, et cetera, and then all those parts would split into, I don't know, organelles, tissues, and then down into cell structures and cells and pieces of cells and all the way down to atoms and quarks and after that,

every quark-self would split into more than ever before: the individual constituents, every one of my infinite minds, broke into a stream of particles, like a golf ball instantaneously dissolving into fine sand, every grain another Me, different from every other Me. And once my quark-selves became quark-sand-selves, the whole process started to repeat: every particle of sand suddenly became as large as a galaxy, like I'd entered the reference frame of Quantum Space, and every galaxy split into solar systems, and into planets, and into regions, and communities, all the way back down to the individual, and that was Me, one of countless Merlots on countless planets in countless universes all contained in countless particles that make up the sleeping figure enduring the vision. Once I'd been split so many Times, once I'd shifted through so many reference frames, each frame a universe of individual particles yelling their infinite voices into the ambient noise of my dream—these universal microcosms, from the whole thing all the way down to the smallest piece, like in that episode of the Simpsons, but instead of a television you see it through (all) your (countless) eyes—in real Time, and it doesn't stop: one Everything shrinks into another Everything, and I begin to see it like the millisecond frames of old movies passing by on reels, perseverated endlessly in either direction, like light flying through the infinitum between two opposing mirrors, perseverated, re and re and re repeating, till all that's left is Noise (noun, 2. random fluctuations that obscure or do not contain meaningful data or other information)—this bedrock of infinities like a fractal of endured experience, so vast that it is never seen, its beauty never beheld, but rather it is suffered, like how the Midwest collectively felt the Depression, but could not ever see it. My pneuma becomes such with grains of sand that divide into their own interpretations of reality, but what is truly terrifying:

—

“—and at that point, she said that every, you know, function of chaos—everything that will or can ever happen, every combination of Time and space, every possible interaction of life—she rolled through all of them. It was delusion, obviously, but the sensation—it’s something entirely post-human, the sensation of having nothing left to experience: everything imaginable, everything unimaginable, she saw it all, and existence itself lost its meaning, because everything had already existed in every possible arrangement, and anything—you know, any possible event in any kind of world you could imagine—it’d been done before, seen before. Nothing left to discover, nothing left to create, nothing left to feel, like all things had reached the end of their respective roads, and that’s it. Not even a void left over in its absence: just that: absence.”

“I’ve never dreamt a more-than-human experience,” Jack said.

“It’s chemical,” Danny said. “When the brain has that kind of imbalance, feels that kind of protracted panic, all kinds of holes pop up in reality. You can induce a dimethyltryptamine experience with the power of your brain alone, you just need to convince yourself that you’re dying a traumatic death. And that’s a lot easier to do when you’re dreaming.”

“She really had nightmares like that?”

“I don’t know, she said she did. But either way, cause or no cause, the effect was plain as day.”

--

Jack fixed his eyes on the opened door to the Guest Room and thought about bread. Danny lit a cigarette, and Jack made to do the same but remembered he was out.

“Got another one of those?” he asked. Danny stood up and went into his room, emerging a moment later with an unopened pack of Camels that he tossed into Jack’s lap.

“I’ve got plenty.”

“Thanks.” He peeled loose the plastic and tore out the gold lining paper, smacked the bottom of the pack against his palm a few Times, and lit one.

The living room felt more familiar to him now, after their cigarette on the balcony, like leaving and coming back had divided the night from one phase into two, a remembered phase and a current phase; the past and the present; before and Right Now: three hands wherever: Jack looked at the clock in the corner by the open door to the unlit Guest Room:

—twelve forty five in Slow Clock Time...

—(i.e., slowly, in Old Man Time.)

“It’s getting late,” Jack said.

—One forty five(?) in EST;

—but what says a clock under the dominion of Danny Time?

—

“I’ll make some more coffee.”

—Five past Postmodern.