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Back of Beyond

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by

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To Mommers,
because you taught me to love writing
And to Emmet,
for always making me a little bit happier

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"John Cleves Symmes, Jr and His Hollow Earth" by John J. Audubon, 1820.

Written on the back: “Symmes – the man with the hole at the pole – drawn, and a good likeness it is.”

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Chapter One

Gillow was once a man of sound. Sounds were things to be devoured and then belched back out. By age twelve, his fondness for a particular brand of sound-production had, in fact, become quite a worry. The year was 1792, and Gillow had developed a voracious appetite for literature. He'd flown through Goethe and William Blake, Friedrich Schiller, Voltaire, Kant, Aristotle and Homer and Rousseau and Hume and Montesquieu like the whip-por-will trills through the air, lissome and wistful. Gill had read the complete works of Shakespeare in a matter of only four months and seventeen days. Don Quixote followed shortly thereafter. He'd even taken the Marquis de Sade into the chastely hollowed cellar late one night with a lantern and all the sexual curiosity befitting a twelve-year-old boy, though that had resulted in his stirring in a soup fraught with confusion rather than one whose cream was any form of satisfaction. To be sure, Gill wasn't any sort of boy genius or savant. Rather, he'd developed an acute fascination with those looped and gilded symbols commonly referred to as letters. He couldn't believe that one man or woman could sit down at a desk and produce thousands and thousands of these codified flat figurines, whose dance was the shape-shifting of ink, and that these – looped only a bit differently moment to moment-- could then be deciphered by any learned person, and the words of that man or woman who may have written them in silence could then be spoken aloud by somebody entirely nameless to that original author. It was unimaginable that he could speak aloud the language of Shakespeare nearly two-hundred years after the genius had put his pen to bed. That he, still with his own inflection, could move his mouth and speak Shakespearean-ly. Speak not as Gill, but as Shakespeare.

Gillow's mother was a rounded woman, with large, creased hands that Gill admired. She was both a seamstress and a terrible cook, but mostly she was a person for whom solitude was a

great torture. Evenings, while she sewed, she always insisted that Gill sit by her side. She would stitch absently, and he would watch with silent astonishment as she poked into her calloused fingers again and again, never wincing or making a catch in the fabric. Sitting beside her, he soon grew accustomed to reading aloud many of the aforementioned authors, and since this was an activity she enjoyed considerably, she never insisted upon asking her son, "how is it that you've come to amass such a swelling of titles?"

In truth, Gillow had developed more than a few friendships with the servants of wealthy households who frequented the Sunday market. Poised over a cluster of tomatoes, he might ask, "Has your mother been feeling any better, Ms. Goosehorn?" or "How're the forget-me-nots blooming this season, Mrs. Dripps," or "Oh, Miss Mercy Pepper, do tell me more about the new lad whose come to work at the Blount estate. I recall you mentioning how handsome and charming you find him."

And so Gill would engage in a light conversation, his curiosity not entirely insincere, and at some point, being the chatty young gentleman that he was, he would always offer to walk whosoever he was talking to home after they'd each finished their shopping. And so he came to know where much of the wealth of the city resided, and he passed a fair amount of time in the innocence of daylight figuring and assessing the architecture of these residences. Eventually, it became not at all difficult to guess at where the books were kept. Thus, many nights, far past the time that the moon has slipped silently beyond the horizon, he would squeeze his willowy, insignificant body through some window left cracked for the breeze and then tiptoe through glittering ballrooms and splendiferous dining halls until he came upon his treasure. In these plush houses, the libraries were positively plump with books – books shelved floor to ceiling, books of white vellum and brown calf, books of every age, so that the ancient pressed un-

groaning against the new, such a book plenty that one needed to scoot about on a sliding ladder to navigate the continents of books, elephant folios boasting bodies heavier than his own young body and spines so thick and calloused that he imagined them stronger, even, than his own mother's unfeeling hands. Yes, these mansions were so full of books that Gill felt certain that the relocation – this is what he called it – of only one or two at a time, from this or that library to his own, always went unnoticed. And a thing gone unnoticed, he reasoned, will not be mourned. Thus, in due time, Gillow began to accumulate a bit of a library himself.

Language – the iterations of language through literature – became his obsession. He could hardly utter a sentence that wasn't some cross-pollination of idiosyncrasies belonging to five or six different authors, some still alive, some hundreds of years dead, such that his own language, even when he wasn't invoking other voices directly, plucked idiomatic phrases and phrasings from all across written time. He even took to conjugating verbs differently depending on the moon's position in the lunar cycle. Each cycle began with ancient inflections, tenses, and word endings, and finished with all of the modern nuances, so that if one were to meet Gill at the end of a month, he would be unrecognizable by new month's beginning. Still, he felt that there was some gap separating him from written language. It had come to consume him with such strength and voracity that eventually he decided to try consuming it.

He started with something small – a book of hymns. Very early on a Saturday morning, Gillow sat down at the kitchen table with the book and a bowl of water. He ripped out the first page, tore it widthwise into twelve strips. Then each strip was lubricated with water, placed between hard front teeth, and slurped belly-wise. They went down easily, he noted, and in a frenzy of consumption, he followed suit with the remainder of the book. By lunchtime it was gone; Gill was satisfied and full. He belched and stood up for a midday walk. As he was

walking, though, a low rumble rose out of his stomach, and he began to sing. He sang through the first six hymns, and when he returned home, where his mother was frying eggs and boiling cabbage, he continued to sing. He sang through all two hundred and fourteen hymns, and when he was finished, he started again, this time on page two. It seemed that as Gill's stomach and intestines absorbed each letter on each page, the twelfth strip, which was only a page number, determined the frequency with which the aforeconsummed page must be repeated. So, each time he'd finished singing the whole book through, he'd start all over again, one page beyond his most recent starting point.

And since the first day after he'd eaten the book was a Sunday, Gill's mother had a word with the chorus director before the Sunday service began. During the sermon, Gillow sat at the back, singing gently under his breath, and when it came time for all to sing, Father John looked at him with intent, his gaze latching onto the boy's voice box, pulling the volume higher, the flick of his eye denoting a transition; a didactic contraction of visionary muscles. Gill raised his voice obediently – "All creatures of our God and King –", and all then followed his song.

By Tuesday evening, Gill finally finished singing his little book of hymns. Though all the repetition had exhausted his voice, and he had to sleep with an ice pack on his neck that evening, still Gillow was elated. He had never felt so intimately connected to a written work in his life as he then felt to that little book of hymns. It was as though every drop of ink contained by the deep red woven binding had dissolved outward from his belly, infecting every extremity, dancing through veins and arteries and systems of delicate capillaries spun like brilliant spider webs. This, Gillow felt, was the marriage of mind and body that man has dreamed of for thousands of years. That which once lived solely in his eye and in his mouth-- the great

language of others -- now lived everywhere within him. And he felt it – Gill was now a pocket book of hymns as a pocket book of hymns was now Gill.

So, of course, he needed more. He ate Shakespeare, and so he became every person and every spirit Shakespearean – from Aaron the Moor and Abbess and Abbot of Westminster to Young Lucius, Young Siward, and Young Talbot. He became these characters, these iterations of Shakespeare, in order to become Shakespeare, just as he felt sure Shakespeare had once become them in order to become Shakespeare. Cervantes was eaten slowly, a consumptive mimicry of the incremental newspaper release of Don Quixote, and during part two, at the sacred breaking of the fourth wall, when Quixote addresses his audience with the recognition of his fictionality, Gillow lay down weeping because he realized that he, too, was only a work of fiction. But then later, when he consumed Descartes, he became a solip, certain only of the truth of his existence.

By this time, his little library had significantly diminished in size. He had developed a more practical method of ingesting his literature, which involved the removal of every twelfth strip, so that page number was no longer a determinant of literary magnitude. Full pages became the wrappings for any assortment of vegetables, meats, and cheeses, and strips were favored for dipping into soups and stews before being slurped out of sight. Thus, the written word became like grain to Gillow, the essential base of his diet, and he no longer took any from the loaves of often-burnt bread that his mother prepared on Sundays for the coming week.

All those acquainted with him became accustomed to hearing him narrate, pontificate, emote, denote, connote, synecdochize, metonymize, dogmatize, sermonize, and moralize solely in the language of others for hours and days on end. And since it was not widely known that the reason Gill was capable of reciting, say, the entire philosophical renderings of Immanuel Kant,

was simply that he had eaten an anthology of his works, there were many who came to believe that he was a young savant, a boy genius with a photographic memory unlike any other. People frequently came to his mother's shop hoping they might encounter Gill in the midst of some recitation. And when they did, which was often, they'd sit down and listen to this strange boy speak awhile before being on their way. And because money was always tight, Gill began using his ability to their advantage, standing outside the shop like a street performer and gathering money from the passers-by. He even got an offer to join a traveling circus, to which his mother swiftly responded with a firm and unhesitating 'no.'

This was all well and good for a time. Gill was happy to be bringing in some business for his mother, and he still felt an unmatched closeness to words, to sounds, to literature. But at a certain point, Gill began to feel that the closer he got to literature, the farther from himself he became. He had wept so heartily after ingesting Don Quixote, seeing the fictionality of himself, had even began to encounter a reality whose truth was him as myth, when suddenly, through Descartes, the actuality of himself was all that he could be sure of. Each time he consumed a work of literature, he became it, so frankly, so profoundly, that in later becoming some literature replete with an opposing ideology, he experienced a pain greater than anything he'd ever suffered before. It was as if his own blood were running against itself.

He no longer possessed any identity but the multifaceted identities of others, he was incapable of forming an original though, and he'd grown pale as the moon from a diet primarily consisting of variegated shades of white. And so Gillow took to his bed with the firm resolution to quit his literary gluttony. For weeks, his mother nursed him with thin soups and strips of only the lightest writings – fairytales and nursery rhymes -- until finally, Gill was consuming only a page or two a week, and then, at last, nothing.

Chapter Two

The renunciation of his literary gluttony forced Gillow to strategically reconsider how he might remain close to literature in the wake of his reformation. Like the drunkard who turns away from the bottle and finds passion renewed elsewhere, uses a pallet cultivated to the variegated flavors of vodkas and sherries, bourbons and wines, to produce the most complex array of aromatic sauces, the most delicately roasted meats, the pastries whose stuff is fluffed to perfection, Gillow, too, now wanted to become a producer.

And so he began to write. It took nearly a year for the gunk to be flushed from his neural pathways – a fatty buildup consisting of the muddled infections, sentence structures, vocal ticks, and dramatic sequences of other author's and their characters – but finally, he began bringing words together in ways that they had never appeared to him before, stringing together sentences that boasted of original thought.

Since he'd never been a schoolboy, and he was no longer raking in money by acting as a boy savant, Gill took to wading in the shallow waters along the shoreline with a pair of tongs and a long rake and collecting oysters, which he then sold to a little streetcar vendor every Saturday morning. He liked the job for its quiet. After so much speech spewing, he had grown to bask joyously in quiet, to let it surround him often like warm water releasing muscles tensed from overuse. It was quietude, his mother and much quietude, who had nursed him back to a form of life that is full of thought, and so he remained grateful to them both.

The water at the shore was clear and cold, such that Gill always felt awake while picking oysters. And in the wakeful quiet, he produced in thought most of what was to become his written works. Then, in the evenings, he would sit quietly, again, by his mother's side, recording what he had conjured, and then he would read her his progress. She was a warm woman, who

was always pleased just being in the presence of another, and this meant that she loved inherently everything that Gillow read to her, if only because she couldn't not love something in a moment of togetherness. But Gillow's characters also became her daytime companions, the people whom she thought about and conversed with while she sat and sewed, and with them, solitary days became altogether less unhinging. And so a number of years passed in this manner. Gill did most of his oystering between September and April, when the cool water makes the oysters' meat grow thick and fat. In the summers, he worked as a barman at a pub. It was much less enjoyable than raking silent oysters, but eventually he learned to utilize the boisterous drunkards' conversations for his writing, which took the edge off of the hours.

In 1800, he married a woman for infiltrating his writerly wandering thoughts with such force that, for a while, he could not write, but could only spend his time thinking of how he might possibly win her over. Her name was Lydia – like Lily but with more woman to it. She had a steady voice, though she was not unexpressive, but still, she never forgot how to whisper. And she was soft in places that most people are hard – knees and elbows, wrists. Even her temper had a softness about it.

In 1802, she gave birth to a son, who they called Gray. His ambling infant eyes were gray indeed, though they brightened as he grew into a young boy. For a few years, they were all happy together, and the happiness was uncomplicated, as it can be for brief shimmering moments. Lydia worked in the shop with Gill's mother, who received the extra company blissfully. Gill bought a little stand to sell oysters himself, which he and Gray alternated running. Gill taught the lad to read, though he made strictly sure he never attempted to eat the stuff of books. Instead, they ate a great many fresh oysters, and Gray taught Gill to skip flat stones.

In 1815, on a Thursday in September, the pale autumn sun ducked gracefully beneath the horizon in the early evening, and the air was crisp and tasted of apples, wood smoke, and sea salt. Gill fell into a motionless sleep, identifiable the next morning by the faint imprint of his body upon the mattress and the sleep which remained in his left arm, having been lain stiffly upon the whole night through. This was the night that Gillow received the vision of his masterpiece. It could not be called a dream, for a dream is an abstraction of the waking reality. This was a reality unto itself. It lasted exactly from the moment he drifted to sleep until the moment he rose back out into the morning light. Every word was pronounced loudly and sharply, so that all words seemed divinely spoken, and every scene was a pristine etching, the clarity of the detail saturated, nearly overwrought. All of life became a blur in comparison to this spectacular clarity. And when he woke, there was nothing more important than the production of motion, the movement of pen against paper. So he sat down at his small wooden desk, still in his night clothes, unwashed and unfed. But when he lifted his black pen, clutched it with the familiar triangulated grip that caught the instrument between thumb and finger, when it speared downward to strike the page, he found that that first word, which had given itself to him so loudly and with such significance, was lost.

For hours, he sat, searching the crevasses of his brain, but that first word could not be found. He tried moving on, beginning at some other beginning, but this work that was to be his great work, in a sense his only work, had already begun to fade. He could recall portions of the language, but it came out muddled, clearly unsure of itself, filled with holes and gaps. The people became unreal, became characters in the dirtiest sense of the word. They were incomplete, there were things about them now that were impossible to know, either because they did not exist or because they could not be accessed. The lines of their hands, their earliest

memories, the smells and textures of their skin and hair. They could no longer be represented because there was no wholeness to them, and no wholeness to him, to his language, his poetry, his metaphor. For days, he sat at his desk, scribbling incoherent notes, weeping in frustration, exclaiming over small victories – the recollection of a name, an anecdote, a vocal tick. He spoke very little, thinking that the more language he produced that was not the language of his masterpiece, the more he allowed himself to think of anything outside of his night vision, the farther away from him it would continue to move. He hardly ate and almost never ventured outside of his room, until one morning, after nearly three weeks of this, Lydia came in, eyes cast down to the floor.

"We're nearly out of food, Gill. And I've got no money left for the market."

So he finally trudged back to the shore, sending Gray to work the stand. In the silent still water, he recalled the first time he'd plucked an oyster from the morning tide, how he'd torn it open with all the unyielding force he could muster, all in the anticipation of that perfect opalescent white sphere which he knew would poke its hardened head through the delicate folds of oyster flesh and deliver itself, heretofore untouched, to him. Gill knew that this little ball of white would become a token so often rubbed between his course fingers that it would lose its delicate sheen, lose it to the lines which collide and spear through one another, forming the nationhood of a hand. In this way, they would become one another. He would take some of its small wonder—its delicate sheen --in exchange for a semblance of permanency-- a dullness, like that of a rock or a callous, or the eyes of a bitter man. But when the sacred oyster was finally pried open, Gillow found that it was empty of content. It bore only a slime of grayed flesh, no hint of a sheen or an opalescence. Now, at the shore again, he felt as empty as that first oyster – for he had expected, after that night of crystalline dreams, to awaken full and pluck that fullness

out of himself, but when he went in for the plucking, there was nothing to be found, nothing that he could lend permanency to in exchange for its wonder.

Back at the stand and at home, he was moody and restless. He exchanged no small talk or formalities with his customers, only looked at them with a weary and probing expression, so that they would announce what it was that they wanted without him having to say a word. He fired and salted oysters briskly and handed them over with such brash annoyance that he began to lose customers. At home, he was not much better. He was snappy with Lydia and disengaged from Gray. One morning, over silent eggs, which, as usual, he had barely touched, Lydia announced with a hardness in a place where most people are soft, "My worry for you has begun to transform itself into resentment."

There was a pause. Couldn't she understand, thought Gill, that outside of herself and little Gray, it was only Gill's artistry that gave him any value? His artistry had come before the two of them and for so many years, itself and literature, the consumption and then the production of literature, had felt like his only meaningful connections to the rest of humankind. What was he but an aimless speck of dust if he never knew anything of those who came before him, those who had attempted to compile their wanderings into something tangible – the written word? What was he if he never tried to build upon that tangible something, grow it even just a speck bigger? This was the fabric of his life, fallen away, and his life after death, and now Lydia resented him because he couldn't put up with small talk in the face of that loss, because he needed time to properly unravel himself and find where the thing had got away to?

"I need some more time," he pronounced slowly.

"What you need," she answered sharply, "is to recollect that there are things outside of yourself. You need, after all of this, to *remember* your family."

Chapter Three

Gill couldn't be a man capable of forgetting his own vision. But if his vision was the fabric of his life and his life after death as well, then it was necessarily his wife and his son as much as it was his work. And so he tried to remember each of these things simultaneously. He skipped stones with Gray again and brought him home brick-sized pieces of rock with colors that seemed to quietly brag – charcoal infused with burnt umber, eggshell white with cerulean flecks, for Gray had taken to cropping stone, with a nail and hammer, into likenesses of hands and teeth, little woodland creatures, even human faces. Gill sat again in the evenings with Lydia and his mother, watching the gesticulations of their hands as they conversed with laughter, a certain lightness of being about them. Still, he was mostly very quiet, and often, though he was present in body, his thoughts were still traversing that lost dreamscape.

He took to gathering mugwort, a plant known for precipitating crisp, often profound dream-sequences, frequently steeped in oddity or absurdity. Each night, he brewed it into a potent tea, which he drank before going to sleep. When that didn't work, he tried replicating the day before the dream entire. He ate the same foods in the same quantity, revisited the places he'd been, the people he'd spoken to, the thoughts he'd indulged. But the dream would not come close again. Oh linear time, how capable you are of striking man down! So it went. And so, through his heaving depression, he made a determined decision. If, after one year, the vision had not returned to him in any significant way, he would force himself to abandon it, fully and completely. He would not allow it to perplex him and spread him thin for the rest of his days.

As the final night of the year approached, Gillow held onto one particular shred of hope. He believed in the potential for the cyclical motions of the earth and the cosmos to act upon the human mind in unique ways. There are animals, he reasoned, that travel north and then south

and then north and then south, year after year, always approximating a paralleled moment in time for departures and arrivals. Humans follow cycles of light – we sleep in the dark and wake with the dawn, rest on Sundays, and harvest our crops and animals with the seasons. We, like the animals and the months and the spinnings of the earth, exist cyclically. And so, as that night in September approached, Gillow held onto the slim notion that the cyclical mirror of that first night of dreaming, after the earth had completed one revolution about the sun, would call the thing back to his consciousness in some form or another. He fed himself well in the weeks leading up to this night, and he made sure to sleep just as well as he ate. On the day of September sixteenth, he replicated the life he had lived on September sixteenth one year previous, and then he went to his bed to sleep. But he had rested too much weight on this day's potential, and so he tossed and turned nervously the whole night through, barely catching a wink of sleep before the dawn came. And so it was over, it was lost, and it was done.

Gillow returned to his wife and to his child. And, in fact, he was able to recreate some semblance of the happiness they'd had before, although he was no longer capable of writing, and so he carried a void that felt, most of the time, quite similar to a very empty stomach. Life moved along, as it often tends to do. Gray's body, perhaps in reference to and refutation of his father's perpetual feeling of hunger, stretched itself higher and higher, until he reached nearly the height of his small mother and quite average sized (but perhaps shrinking) father, combined. Thus, Gray became a recognizable figure in the small town of Wellfleet, always retaining a sense of compassion for those not gifted with length of limb, and thus frequently lifting things off high shelves, or helping dust off the tops of windows for those less capable than he. There were even a few times when a sickly or hurt neighbor called upon Gray and he bounded upon string-bean legs to fetch the doctor, his extraordinary speed perhaps, once or twice, facilitating the saving of

a life. And, of course, Gillow had gained notoriety from his book-consuming youth that was never quite forgotten. He had become a living myth. As such, stories were always being spun about the kinds of things he had done as a spitter of words. There were some who claimed that he had, in his youth, frequently traveled abroad, participating in oration festivals and competitions and returning with many grand prizes. Others spoke of a time when, just before a young boy was to be publically hanged for a series of pick-pocketing ventures, Gill had climbed atop the town post office, which was proximal to the gallows, and there he had voiced his bellowing protest in the form of a recitation -- the United States Bill of Rights followed by the entirely of the Constitution. Legend has it that this set the crowd to rioting and that the boy behind the noose escaped through the mosh pit, never to be heard from again. One or two even proudly claimed to have not so mysteriously lost the money from their pockets amidst all the ruckus.

Gossip mongers, disbelievers, magic seekers, fanatics of history or mythology, and curious children alike, often approached the man himself, steaming hot oysters in the cold winter, and posed their queries directly.

"But how did you do it, how did you remember all of those books word for word and page for page?"

Contrary to the self of his youth, Gill wasn't a man with any desire to make a spectacle of himself, and thus, he answered with the truth -- "I soaked the pages in water and ate them" -- which often resulted in the brisk departure of the curious customer, who did not possess the patience to wait and listen to anything else Gill might have to say, and thus was likely to return a few days later spouting insults. "What the hell are you getting at, I ate a two hundred page book, and I haven't belched out a single word," or "You sick sadist, you sonofabitch, nothing's come

out either end in a week, and I can't eat without contracting the most terrible pain in my gut!" To which Gillow would always shrug, having gone through it all before. People never stuck around initially to hear Gill say how, "Some people seem to be getting sick from consuming paper and ink. Maybe it's not for everybody. Not really sure, honestly." So eventually, when asked, "Is it true you were born with every written work internalized in your baby brain, and by the time you could speak, you could recite them all?" or "Does the little boy from the riot still really send you letters and bits of stolen gold every month?" or "Is it true your blood is made of ink?" Gill would just nod his head slowly, without saying a word, and hand over a plate of hot fried oysters.

Since Gillow wasn't fond of this type of chatter, and Gray's newfound height and relatedly scant levels of body fat made him more susceptible to cold, it became that Gray mostly ran the stand while Gillow raked at the shore. One afternoon, as occasionally happened when he wanted to surprise the family or desired a brief repose from his work or a bit of socialization, Gillow hitched a ride with some local fisherman to try his luck with a rod and line for a couple of hours. He liked the unsteady water, how different its feel was from the water along the shore.

The men he went out with were tough and grisly – men who might've even known the sea better than the land -- but they were not drunkards like most seamen he'd come across. They were a hearty crew, and they often sang sea-shanties -- matched their deep grumbling voices with the deep grumbling voice of the water-- and Gill supposed that the singing was expressive of a collective nostalgia for long passages they'd all taken, years ago, across the sea. One evening, in the post-singing silence, in the still waiting, with lures and tanned feet poking into the water, Gill's line received a sharp tug. He tugged back, hard, bracing against the side of the boat. She was eighteen pounds, a great King Mackeral. She came aboard flopping so vigorously that Gill and two others of the men had to jump on top of her to keep her still. Gill began right away to

gut her. He sliced her straight down the middle and pulled her insides to the outside. From the first inward thrust of his hand, though, Gill could tell by the granulated texture of her innards that there was something abnormal about the old girl. When he drew his hand back out, it was filled, amongst the slick of gut, with a curled and wetted pale something. He oozed the guts aside and unfurled the wetted pale only to discover that this great fish, perhaps his sea-dwelling double, was a consumer of pages! He looked into her still widened eyes, but all of the light had already faded from those floating orbs. He turned, then, to the pages themselves. Using the thin metal edge of his oyster tongs, he produced between one page and all the rest a slight crevasse, away from which he then peeled, slowly and methodically. The process was repeated until each page lay upon the salted floor, individuated, autonomous. Torn portions were pieced together, and though the letters were faded and blotchy, Gill's eyes were well-trained, and he was able to recognize a word often read by its shape and form alone, and rarities could always be parsed, for nearly every word is a derivative of some other or a conglomerate of suffixes and prefixes from many ancient and contemporary words alike. He read the first sentence slowly. There was something familiar to it. He continued. Perhaps he'd read it before, he thought. The language felt incredibly close, and he wondered if, like the fish, he, too, had once consumed these pages. By the end of the first paragraph, he was wracking his brain, for the resonance of it. The words were resounding physically, such that he could feel them pulsing with his blood and circling around his body. He began to grow anxious, and by the end of the page, it dawned on him, and all the terror of his life compiled into one moment where the body could not move, could not breathe, it and the mind had disappeared simultaneously to spend a brief moment in the fiery nocturnal scape of hell.

Upon his return, Gill skimmed quickly through the six remaining pages, barely allowing his eyes to touch the words, only letting them glide distantly above the page. He needed to be certain it hadn't all been a hallucination. But it was as he had thought. In the whetted belly of a fish swimming only a few miles from his own home, Gillow had found seven pages belonging to the manuscript he had never written, but only ever dreamt of. Now, long after he'd stopped searching for them, here they lay before him on the sun-whited bottom of this rickety little fishing boat.

Gill forgot how to speak. If previously his quietude had stemmed from a desire to disengage and search for his lost dream, now it was there only because he could not recall how to engage in the wake of his discovery. His life became a dream. He caught hypothermia one day at the shore because he stopped moving for too long. He was constantly trying to wake himself up. Certain that he'd never created any written version of the pages he'd found in that fish's belly, Gillow convinced himself of two things, alternately and simultaneously. The first was that he was asleep, caught in some never ending dream like those that shamans and opium-smokers speak of, and that within the dream, a portion of that original vision had come floating back to him and presented itself in the most unexpected way. The second was that he was awake now but that the manuscript he'd dreamt a few years ago and spent one full year agonizing over had never actually been his own. Instead, it had perhaps been something he'd eaten in his youth and long forgotten, though all of the frenzied wanderings he took up now through old book pages never bred any match. Each option individually, but moreover both simultaneously, were enough to drive Gillow to the place of maybe madness in which one becomes absolutely silent, and no amount of coaxing or begging or angry indifference will ease one's voice-box back into submission, for one has truly forgotten how to speak.

Chapter Four

John Cleeves Symmes, Jr. rolled, rollicking, into Wellfleet on a mid-November afternoon. He wore his moon-silvered hair at his shoulders, and his grey-blue eyes shone with an earnest calmness that rarely aligned with the rest of his demeanor. Symmes was always an excitable man, but his arrival in Wellfleet in particular precipitated such jumpiness and speed of speech that he became almost laughable to watch. He walked briskly about the town, gesticulating all the while with a violent urgency that likened him to an orchestral maestro. Already, he had assembled a crew of thirty men, most of whom showed very little interest in Symmes's theories or his notoriety. They were simply strong seamen hoping for a fruitful adventure to reward them with great sums of money. These took right away to the pub where they spent the next few days waiting for Symmes to finish up whatever business had necessitated the roundabout journey to Wellfleet.

Symmes arrived at Gillow's door at exactly eight a.m. the day after his arrival, a Saturday. He always got to a place exactly when he intended to get there, though he frequently forgot things upon departure and had to turn back or else was distracted by something he observed along his way. Thus his timeliness was only achieved by such hindrances acting to counterbalance his excited briskness and vice versa. Symmes rang while Gillow, Lydia, and Gray were sitting with coffee and eggs, Lydia and Gray discussing the neighbor Celia's persistent cough.

Gray pulled the door open slowly, and Lydia and Gillow peered through the spaces not crowded by their son's strikingly narrow body. They weren't expecting anybody. Symmes wore tall black leather boots, although the rest of his clothing – breeches, topcoat and waistcoat – was all very lightly colored. The cream of yellow, the gray precluding dawn. He carried a hand-

carved walking stick with a muskox inscribed just below the rounded top. His clothing was spotless, indicative of his wealth, though he didn't resemble any of the wealthy whose faces Gillow recollected from his pre book-snatching architectural surveys. He had come alone.

All of this took each member of the family only a moment or two to surmise, and then life began again a bit flustered as it always does after any sort of shock or surprise.

"Come in, come in," stammered Gray. "I'll take your coat."

Already, Lydia was up, clearing the table and preparing both coffee and tea, unsure which the man might desire.

"Oh stop all your hustling and bustling," intoned Symmes as he strolled cheerfully inside and began poking about. "After all, it's you –" now he turned and looked directly at Gill, his brows hitched up to mid-forehead – "that's of the upmost importance here. Not me." Then he looked to the others. "Of course, it's so nice to meet you both as well, Lydia, Gray," he said, nodding in turn to each of them. "But Gillow, before I explain myself," now he approached the breakfast table, pulled out a chair and sat down beside the man in question, "you must tell me right away if they're true. The rumors that I've heard, that have led me all the way to Wellfleet," – his voice was beginning to rise in excitement – "and finally to the doorstep of your lovely home. Is it true that you are capable of eating written language and then orating it in great quantities? And is it true," – now he was nearly shouting – "that those orations are always exact facsimiles, from one word to the next, of the original text?"

But Gill only cast his gaze down in response, lifted a hand and began picking at the wood of the table.

"He can't speak anymore, and he refuses books," came Lydia, suddenly, her own voice shaking and jolting. "Doesn't want his voice back if only to speak in the language of others.

He's done all that before. In any case, it doesn't work anymore. He's had a few scraps here and there, but the only words that consistently come back out are those he's written down himself, and then there's not much point in going to all the trouble of eating them, digesting them just to translate them into sounds. He'd rather just pass them along uneaten. Anyway, the point is…" She drifted off a second, now nearly in tears. "The point is, yes, he once had a talent for eating books. But that was a long time ago – long before he met me and long before he forgot how to speak without eating some part of himself first."

Gillow draped an arm over her shoulder, even this slight touch an intimacy he'd been forgoing for weeks, a sudden reminder that if, in fact, this was reality and not some strange endless dream, he was sure to lose everything soon enough. Aloof to the thick emotionality clouding the room, Symmes carried on with the same jubilance.

"Ah, but this doesn't ruin anything at all!" he exclaimed. "It works just as well if he's the one writing the damn thing. In fact, maybe that works better. It'll give me more time to contend with other matters on board --" now he seemed to be talking more to himself than anyone else "-- preparing for the arrival, and then, of course who knows what we'll encounter when we do arrive, and, oh, yes, this might just be perfect."

Lydia was glaring at him now, ashamed at having let herself go bleary-eyed for a moment, but disdainful, too, of the complete lack of empathy Symmes was displaying.

"And besides, I hear that writing is already an interest of yours, so--"

"*Was,"* Lydia cut in. "It *was* an interest of his. Again, it's something he gave up a few years back."

Her arms were crossed tightly over her chest, and all at once Symmes saw her with a dawning recognition. "Oh, Mrs. Glove, I'm so sorry. I've offended you with all of these

assumptions. I'm always getting ahead of myself in this way. Forgetting, I suppose, that although I've learned so much of your family and coveted the potential of your realness ever since I began imagining the expedition, you, of course, know nothing of me. Please, please," he stammered, "allow me to explain myself."

And so he began his story, which would, in turn, become Gillow's story as well. Here was the beginning that was perhaps the true beginning, but not necessarily the best place in which to *begin*.

"I have found out some incredible secret about our Earth," he told them. "And it is a secret which aligns with and propels or perhaps even syncopates our current understanding of two great forces – Mother Nature and God. The thing I have found out is that the earth is hollow with wide openings about the poles, and not only that, but also that it is habitable within!"

There was a pause, though none were certain whether its motivation was awe or confusion. All only silently agreed to partake in its performance. Then, Lydia said, "It's an amazing conjecture you've developed, Mr. Symmes, but I don't quite understand what it has to do with our family."

"Don't you see," said Symmes, his enthusiasm returned, "I've gotten the expedition funded! By the United States Congress! We set sail for the Interior of the earth in just a few weeks, and I would be exalted if you, Gillow, would agree to come on board and keep the log of this adventure of all adventures. And when we return cloaked in riches, you will become the great first orator of the story of the New New World. It's not westward expansion but expansion into the Interior – this is the true manifest destiny. Think of all of the land and resources, all that untapped potential – the potential to build a new democracy removed from the history of humankind as we know it, from the history of surface-walking civilization."

"But how can the interior possibly be habitable," asked Gray, "Isn't it true that the earth becomes hotter and hotter toward its core, the very center being a devilishly hot sphere of molten? Where do you mean to be habitable? The backside of the crust? And does that mean gravity pulls us in the opposite direction on the interior, so that we walk upside down upon exterior mountains become gorges, and valleys become great plateaus, us as reversed images of our exterior selves?"

"And what about light," said Lydia, "Wouldn't the interior regions be so black as to render them impossible to navigate?"

"Wonderful questions, both of you. And ones that I happily assure you I have the answers to. I have brought along copies of a great stack of my notes that I will leave with you all to leaf through. But to begin with those immediate queries, let me demonstrate upon this little model I always carry with me for just these sorts of occasions." Symmes reached in his pocket and shuffled around for a few moments. He checked one breast pocket, then the other, and then his briefcase after that.

"I'm sorry, I'm always doing this. I must have left it back at the inn. Damn it…"

He kept looking until Gray said shyly, "You could borrow a mold I've just finished. It's for a likeness of our neighbor's new baby. It's only a hollowed out sphere at the moment, I haven't added any texture to it, but I've left a small opening at the base since I'll need to fire it again."

"My dear boy," said Symmes, "Do you mean to tell me that you are a sculptor of hollow likenesses?"

Gray nodded timorously, “It’s not much, just a technique I use to save on resources. Hollowing keeps the structures thin and light, so I can sell them at reasonable prices, and they’re not too much trouble to transport.”

Symmes had sprouted a wide grin. “Any youngster,” he began, “who recognizes the innate intelligence of the hollow object is a certain friend of mine. There are so many naturally hollow formations --,” he continued, gesticulating wildly, “the hair follicle and the bird’s quill and the stalks and bodies of so many flora. Throughout all her many works, nature has wisely assigned to every thing just matter enough for strength and usefulness, and has in no case overburdened it with unnecessary and cumbrous weight. Any wise creator would evidently see the vastly greater potential for development of life, nature, and civilization that a hollow earth offers. Beneficial not only in terms of maximization of space, but also of surface area, which is valuable to all variety of scientific and earthly happenings. The point is, young Gray, you’re truly a man after my heart. So now, I’d like to ask you, along with your father, on board my ship, where you will be my sculptor!”

It was Lydia who answered decisively, for she resented Symmes’s brash and impulsive style, the way he seemed to brush over the knowable in favor of the unknown, so that the everyday frequently eluded him – and he was unable to detect nuances in emotion, or to consider, even for a moment, that Gray might be too young to partake in such a dangerous endeavor.

“Thank you for all of your kind words, Mr. Symmes,” she said. “You’ve given us all quite a bit to think over. Perhaps it would be best now if you could leave us your notes and give us a few days to come up with our questions, think all this through? Does that sound agreeable to the three of you?”

Symmes and Gray nodded vigorously in deference, but Gillow had floated off somewhere else. Perhaps this might be it, he thought. The way to come back into the world. If a journey to the center of the earth couldn't wake him from his despair, bring him back into the reality of his life, solicit some kind of answer, even just allow him to speak freely again, he was sure that nothing could.

Thus, his decision was resolute. And Gray, being nothing if not a young dreamer, perhaps yet underdeveloped – lacking caution or fear, supposing that familiarity and comfort could be found in any place if one only looked, and that people should never be feared, only understood, was just as quickly convinced as his father. Thus, it was really only Lydia who spent the next three days pouring over Symmes's notes and scrawling questions in the margins and then crossing some of those questions out when she found their answers and then sometimes writing them again when those answers became muddled. She spoke severely to the boys.

"Please, you must exercise caution. One cannot face life's most important decisions with no inhibitions."

But truly, Lydia believed that Gillow should go. He had been living so long in unreality, and if the hollow earth was true, she reasoned, the witnessing of that reality untold, of that place heretofore unreal, might be enough to bring him back. And if he was successful – ultimately capable of carrying one dream back to the surface in the form of the written word, might he not then be capable of recalling that other yet untold dream? Really, it was only Gray that she was so unsure about.

"He's too young," she stressed to Gillow, late in the night, hours after Symmes's departure. "It's too dangerous."

Gillow nodded slowly. Both were imagining what might happen if the voyage was unsuccessful, if they never made it back to Wellfleet. Still, it was clear that Gillow wanted his son with him. *You're right*, he scrawled in slow black letters across a bit of parchment, *He will stay here with you.* But Lydia was a selfless woman, strong in places where most people are weak.

She went to Gray early on the third morning after Symmes had come, a few hours before he was to return. "I don't want you to go, Gray," she said. "I know that being young means that curiosity and the grand potential for discovery overshadows fear, but this trip could mean the end of your life. So I need you to promise me that you are thinking about this very deeply. Your father is going. There's nothing I could say that would change his mind, and I wouldn't want to if I could. And that is the only reason I'm allowing you to weigh in on this decision. His mind is so frail right now." She paused, swallowed. "I worry that he may not be able to take care of himself -- that he won't eat enough, won't interact enough to keep him sane. So, if you go, you promise me that you go primarily with the intention of taking care of your father. Gray, I love you both so dearly, but I can take care of myself. I can go and live with Gillow's mother, keep up working with her in the shop. She'll give me somebody to look after. Still, think first of your own life. I would not have you go myself, I'm only telling you the reason that I will allow you to make the decision for yourself."

Symmes, Gillow, Lydia, and Gray sat, one to each side of the cracked wooden table in the kitchen, for four hours on the evening of Symmes's return. Lydia moved carefully through her list of questions, though she had already resolved not to intervene. She just probed, trying to make Gray see the journey as less of a wispy abstraction – as tangible, a series of days, one following another, for the unknown, she knew, is always a beautiful swirling eddy until one sees

how it exists in time just like all other moments and places, and how the self in the unknown does not simply move ethereally, through cascading light, but instead remains the self – experiences hunger and thirst and frustration and often a sense of displacement. At the end, Symmes turned, first to Gillow and then to Gray,

"So, what do you say, boys?" he asked, "How about a trip to the center of the earth?"

Chapter Five

On the evening ship, when it no longer pierced the eye or strained the neck to do so, Gillow and Gray rested duplicitous gazes upon the evening round dangling above the ceaseless flow. On the solitary ship, ebb and flow were the company that wouldn't ever leave, got drunk off their own dry humor and stayed the night and all the next morning, until they became like shadows – attached to the body and impossible to part with. Thus, the evening round – the moonish sun or the sunnish moon -- often seemed the only thing in the universe with any penchant for silence. The quiet orb, always inscribing a slow circle around them whose graceful end was darkness.

The crew were a rough bunch, who'd mainly elected to join Symmes's quest because they had little left to lose in the world and nearly everything to gain. They passed much of their time drunken rough-housing and arguing about the best ways to spend their earnings once they'd returned.

"I plan to build meself a big old castle in the trees that's so high it touches the bottom of the sky. Figure I've spent so much time on water that I'm no longer a man of the land, but perhaps I could be one of the sky. Look down on all of ye from my high perch like you was clusters of ants. Drop acorns down through your thick skulls whenever the mood strikes."

And then Repps would growl, "Hows about I crush an acorn into your thick skull right now?"

And the two men would jump to their feet and eye one another menacingly until Symmes might bumble in humming some jolly tune or another and pronounce, "Violence, my men, is the vice that most relates us to our animal predecessors. It is through violence that we lose our essential humanity. Remember, we must always practice *non*violence if we are to call ourselves men." Then he would stroll out, and the two would drop, scoffing, back into their chairs.

They'd begin a game of cards and such vicious and impulsive bets would be thrown that, within a few weeks, many had already accrued large debts reliant on the unsure promise of riches to be seen at the journey's end.

The belly of the ship contained a room arrayed with maverick-spirited assortments of plants – nonconformists in method and rate of growth, eccentrics of color, boasters of bulbous oddities and petaled peculiarities. There grew clusters of pointed leaves, each four feet in length and with electric blue veins, the cluster's center featuring a long yellow protrusion which resembled a sword, for it was razor thin and tapered to a sharp point. Dubbed Sworded Vines, they grew rapidly up the walls and outwards, quickly moving to inhabit many rooms. Though Gray's responsibilities included helping Maximillian tend to the plants and animals, he let the Sworded Vines grow in plenty because they emitted a strong citric smell, which kept the ship's udder from reeking of musk and invisible rats. Additionally, there grew 'Cup o' Colored Siren' plants. Gathered on Sable Island, just east of Nova Scotia, their leaves feathered tightly over one another, forming a sturdy viridian bowl which slowly filled itself with a liquid that, though transparent, swirled copper-toned, amaranth, blue lagoon, and minty eucalyptus. And the constant swirl cast shadows of singing women upon the walls. All were tempted to drink the liquid, and so Symmes had the plants locked in a small cage where they were watered through bars, for he knew all too well the fate that meets those who dare to indulge the will of a siren.

Beside the plant nursery sat a series of cages reserved for the collection of strange animals. Few were taken on board, though, for the sustenance needed to sustain them was generally unknown, and Symmes was of the belief that, "Humans make themselves more animal than even the most animalistic creatures when we lock one another, and others of differing species, in cages. To kill another for sustenance or through the escalation of aggression is one

thing. Though terrible, it is at least not entirely unnatural. But, to cage another and force continued life that no longer resembles any natural form of life at all -- is closer to a heaving nightmare than an existence -- that is more beastly than the basest actions of the most vicious beast."

However, being both an altruist and a scientist, Symmes often had well-developed opinions in opposing directions, which made him altogether less polarized than might be expected of such a man. Though thoroughly opposed to life in a cage, he did also promote "vigorous scientific study of anything and everything both foreign and known, for how can humankind engage philosophically with a world that we do not know essentially, both inside and out?" And so a few specimens were gathered now and again.

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Gillow nestled each morning between the sharp metal edges of two or three cages, wires protruding into his ribs, and there, while listening to the tiniest cerulean beaked sparrows whose songs mingled with gauzy grunts belched from the bellies of red-footed eagles, he wrote his log of the day previous. The writing was stark and dry – exceedingly technical. *8:30 am – crew consumes foodstuffs, 9:00 am – coal supply down to seven-ninths of start-weight,* etc. He still believed himself incapable of writing, and so he could only produce language that ticked with a mechanized, mathematical accuracy. Thus, writing it did not feel to him like writing 'proper,' but more like taking calculations or book-keeping. He couldn't allow anything beautiful to slip out, so he let the wires poke into him, reminding him to remain sharp. And the physical pain allowed his soul, if only momentarily, to forget all of its other hells.

But Gillow had not truly lost his penchant for beauty, so he sat with the birds, allowed them to sing him their effervescent songs, and if they ever became catalysts to a stirring of

emotion, he could leave them to walk the many lengths of the ship and listen to the men slap ugly language at one another.

"Bespwaler bobolyne, dew-beating smell-feast! I'll throw rat flesh in your stew if you spill my gruel again."

"You fustilarian! You klazomaniac! Gruel is just the word for this gob-filled gnash. You call this goop precious? Rat flesh would serve as an improvement to your crimey cooking!"

He'd listen to them gallivanting, and though he despised the mad ravings and short tempers, he began to develop an affinity for life on the ship. At home, he had felt like such a weight, to Gray, yes, but to Lydia in particular. Each time he failed to utter a sound, make the noise that his wife so longed for, he propagated her sorrow. Youth is different, though. Gray was resilient; he thought clearly in spite of his father's silence. Sometimes Gillow even felt that the more withdrawn he became, the more Gray insisted on growing taller and taller and establishing an unbreakable spirit through the appearance of an unbreakable body. Gillow knew that his silence still pained Gray, but the failure of this pain to manifest in Gray's daily demeanor allowed Gillow to find a shadowy sequestered space on board that he quite enjoyed. He became an observer and a calculator. He paid acute attention to the men's mannerisms, relationships, and emotional oscillations, such that he could accurately predict when an especially hostile fight was ready to break out and thus clear Gray out, send him running for Symmes, who'd burst in, having already begun spouting another monologue on nonviolence, and when that was finished, he'd threaten those involved with the loss of their commissions. In this way, Gillow gained a great deal of respect. Many came to regard him like a priest or as a father figure, there to keep trouble away and provide all with a receptive ear.

It was an interesting position for Gillow, who had, years previous, developed a tendency to narrativize the lives of others. At the pub, every man and woman was a character, and so he watched them indulge in their constituent vices without judgment. He recognized that there could be no motion produced in narrative if everybody lived according to a set of altruistic principles, and so vices became precipitators of motion rather than generators of disgust. But, aboard the ship, drunkards and brawlers became the men of his life. And quite possibly, they would be the men with whom he met his death, depending on which night-dipped chasm they ventured into on the great Verge before the interior abyss or whether the arctic boasted an icy-blooded hydra lying in wait. These were not men he could narrativize and then abandon, and that gave them a humanity he had previously failed to recognize.

Soon, he had developed vested interests in nearly every member of the crew, even Repps, who owned the quickest temper of them all. Every night, he sat up late in the refectory, thinking mostly of Lydia, and most nights, he'd receive some visitor, who would duck in quietly, head down, to read off remorses.

"Was in a bad brawl while she was losin the baby. Don't even remember what set it off, but me eyes were all swollen, an I felt me ribs was broke. Couldn't see to find me way home, so I jus slep in an alleyway near two whole days. Come home an she's jus been lyin there in a pool of blood all the while, cryin and cryin. An she jus' screamed for me to get the hell out, get the hell out."

And Gill would just nod, silently, sometimes bring a hand to a shoulder. In a sense, he became a vessel of truce. Every man was aware that nearly every other man had confided in the silent ship-log man and so, residing in him was all of their remorse, the dissipation of so much anger, and such a desperately long desired sense of understanding.

Repps was a few years older than most of the others, and he matched his advanced age with heightened gruffery. He was broad-shouldered and thick around the waist. One could always tell when he was approaching because he crashed one foot down after, the succession of his footsteps a cacophonous chorus like the prolonged guttural 'boom boom' of a samba drum. His quick temper was perhaps only matched by the speed of his malicious wit. He was exceedingly strong, and though he lacked any respect for his peers, he knew how to hold his tongue before figures of authority.

About a month into the voyage, Repps and Gray played a game of cards in the refectory. Repps was not fond of Gray, who was always using his absurd stature to be annoyingly helpful and was constantly enthused over matters that did not merit enthusiasm. As they played, he began to tell Gray a story.

"Of course, we weren't invited, but once I'd got wind there was ter be a voodoo ceremony in the village we'd been docked at a week's time, of course we wanted ter go. There was no pubs about and no liquor ter be found, and we was getting real bored stayin there. Well, it was easy enough ter find where they was going for the ceremony, cause round midnight, everyone in the village gathered outside the house of the dead man's family. They was all real quiet, and a few carried torches and led everyone else. So me and my mate, we jus' followed a little ways behind em, holdin our breath and tryin not to step on any branch or dried up leaf. Once we'd walked near a mile, we came to a clearing. There was a big bonfire, and the body of the dead man was laid out naked. And, placed direct on the nude belly was a great steaming meal that would certainly have burned any living flesh. There was bunches of cooked vegetables and glazed meats, all simmering on a thick bed of rice. Once the whole village had gathered round, some woman showed up from I don't know where – out of the trees on the far side, I

spose. Hair was all matted and full of sticks and her cloths was torn and she was missing a whole lotta teeth. Looked in a much worse way then all the rest of em. Anyway, she walked up to the body, and everbody set to singin. I'm not sure what they was saying, was in some language I'd never heard. Well, as soon as they'd finished their song, that scraggly lady stepped right up next to the dead body and you know what she did?"

Nervously tapping his foot, Gray slowly shook his head no.

"She reached out, tore a piece of flesh off one of the meats on his belly," – Repps made a tearing motion and a ripping sound – "and she ate it right up. And then she took another bite and another after that. She ate that whole meal off the dead man's belly while everyone looked on, and when she finished, they all cleared out jus as quick as they come and the lady –surely burstin at the seams – she lef, too. So me an Fran – thas me mate -- we decided to take a closer look at the body. And when we got up close, we saw how the lady had forgotten to eat a few grains of the rice. Well, figurin as we did that the food mus be infected with magical powers, we pocketed all the grains we could find, seven for me and six for him, cause I'd had the idea to come in the firs place."

There was a grayish sheen developing on Gray's forehead, and Repps got right up in his face, nose to nose, to finish telling his story.

"An' I tell you, we wasn't wrong. As it turns out, that lady was what they called a sin eater. Now, usually sin eaters is people already set to be condemned to hell for one reason or another. Some are murderers, some thieves or adulterers or what have you. Usually, after the crime were committed, they'd be cast out of the village, sent into the jungle to try to survive all by their lonesome. Otherwise, they might be executed. But, if the criminal aims to be partially

absolved – allowed to stay near and use the old huntin spots and berry patches and have association with other criminals, they could become a sin-eater."

Gray was nodding, eyes wide and glassy.

"Nasty trade-off, though, cause the sin eater's hell after death burns ten times hotter, and the demons treat the eater much more cruel – stick hot iron nails through the memories of their flesh, even eat the recollections of loved ones, so no peaceful or happy memories of life can remain. And this all happens cause of the food they eat off of dead bellies. See, the meal gets put on the belly to absorb all the whole life's sins out of the body, so that the food gets filled up with evil. Then the sin eater eats up all those sins, which then become their sins. The deceased get an easy journey upwards, and the body rests in a peace the sin eater will never know. So anyway," he concluded, "Im still hangin onto these grains of rice, got em reserved for some man who truly does me wrong – figure I'll toss 'em in his Sunday brunch to give 'em that much more a change of wakin up in hell after this world's end."

Gray was crestfallen. He knew that Repps had only been trying to spook him, but the notion of undeserved condemnation, that the terrifying process of death, only made approachable by the surety that if one is good, in life, through and through, the afterlife, too, will be a place of goodness – the despicable idea that that finality might be decided by another, and not just that, but decided unknowingly, such that during the passage following one's last breath, that final heaving of the chest, one suddenly experiences the sensation of the soul falling and falling, through every darkness until the ultimate fiery darkness is reached, rather than rising towards unimaginable paradises -- that this could happen, even to the most pious of beings, well it was a knowledge which began to corrupt young Gray's mind.

Repps could act at any point. He could distribute a grain of rice easily into any bowl of soup or cup of coffee, or he could even make a gamble of it by tossing one or even all into the vat from which they were all served, and nobody would be any the wiser. Where Gillow had begun to silently thrive on board the ship, feel himself, finally, to be in some way purposeful, Gray now fell into decay. He became obsessive, started pulling bits of his hair out in his sleep, until it became such a fine patchwork that he looked, with his young face, like a virused infant vastly overgrown. Much of his vitality was lost, though bursts of youthful energy still happened with sporadic frequency. Heightful help was only offered when he was certain his desire to stretch and put length of limb to use would not be reproached – viewed as a form of snobbery, for only those who haven't experienced, and through experience been hardened, can keep awake any genuine desire to help.

Soon enough, Gray decided that the only solution was to find the seven grains of rice and toss them overboard to drift and dissolve or get caught between some soulless fish's teeth and thereby be nullified. Or, if they were ingested by some wicked hydra or aspidochelone or leviathan, that creature's already singly certain damnation would become doubly certain. But then, thought Gill, what if they're eaten instead by a mermaid or some other angel of the sea? No, he finally decided, when the rice is found it will be burnt or else fed back to Repps himself, so that he feels in the afterlife what it is like to have one's soul unwittingly destroyed by another, as had been his earthly intention, long before he lost the stolen grains of rice. But Gray was perhaps incapable of such action, so for the time at hand, he focused solely on the search. He was slow and methodical, all too aware what the consequences might be if Repps caught him snooping around his bunk.

Gray would work a few hours on one of many in-progress likenesses of Symmes – Symmes with a telescope to his eye, Symmes deep in scientific or philanthropic though, Symmes mapping the journey, Symmes shaking hands with the chief of the Minnehaha village -- and then, when he was certain Repps was away from his bunk, on coal-hauling duty, he'd slide lithely through the gruff man's door and carefully remove and replace every object within another square foot or two of Repps's belongings. Each floorboard was unscrewed and re-screwed, the lining felt along every bit of cloth, and every pocket, too, was turned out. Gray even made a little hole in Repps's mattress and systematically pulled out, sifted through, and replaced all of the fluff within. But the search was always fruitless. Eventually, resigned to the realization that the grains were not in Repps's bunk, Gray began to search the vast ship at large.

But the ship was a croaking creature in its own right, filled throughout with a complex myriad of capillary-like compartments and hidden passages that sprouted off and wove back into one another. It often grumbled in the night, slightly shifting the varied contents of its bodily weight in order to find a more comfortable resting position upon its bed of waves. Six or seven times, Gray had tripped on an inconsistency in the floorboards and then pulled up at the protrusion to find a compartment filled with what appeared to be transparent pinecones, or else the floorboard might lie along the edge of a trapdoor and lead down to a tiny compartment brimming with hundreds of exquisitely drawn maps displaying all of the known world in every dimension and iteration it had heretofore been perceived to exist, such that one might connect the shoreline renderings of a single country – say China – and they would be far reaching and varied enough to outline some entirely new and mystical Earth -- China's ghost framing the Pangaea of a time-spanned map of human memory. Or, Gray might brush along some disguised knob in the wall and pull at it to find an empty drawer, forgotten, perhaps, by Symmes himself and now only

waiting to be rediscovered and given some purpose more fulfilling than this prolonged emptiness. But purpose is honed in emptiness, too. Air gathers in pockets and whispers of potential, there is a surge of adrenaline in anticipation, and it became Gray's fear that some place on board the vast ship, Repps had felt the heartbeat of that anticipation, discovered a hollow opening, and hidden his evil grains within. So Gray continued his search half-heartedly, knowing the tendency of a pounding heartbeat to quiet once its longing has been fulfilled.

Chapter Six

The journey was Gillow's search for reality and vitality returned. It was ironic, then, he often thought, that the motion of the ship, its moving and searching, failed to carve any tangible paths through reality. Here, the crew only existed in relation to one another. Every man was bound to that floating block of wood, which, if buoyancy ever failed, would be sunk and lost with no wake, no trail through the dirt, no hardened froth to describe the moment of death to land-bound families and homes, unless it was all only a dream, as Gill had long imagined, in which case its finality would make the long desired moment of waking.

But for now, Gill relaxed into a dreamy lull, the mystical existence of life beyond land. One morning, he rose early, though he had gone to sleep late, as usual. He climbed to the top deck to watch the morning round rise into the waking blue. Symmes was there, looking across the still water.

"You know, prior to this expedition, I'd spent very little time at sea. And now I'm thinking a lot about the religion of the sailor, and sometimes it feels a bit odd to be captain of a body at sea without sharing the water men's religion. You know, I tried to begin the expedition on a Friday? Had no idea it was such back luck. Nearly didn't have us bring a ship's cat either, until Deverix insisted Missy be allowed on board. But at least we haven't got any Jonah causing trouble. But what happens, anyways, if a boy named Jonah desires to become a sailor? Is the name itself already too much a bad omen or could somebody named Jonah be other than a Jonah aboard?"

Gillow shrugged slightly, stretched his gaze all the way to the distant haze of the horizon.

"And just think of all the historically significant moments precipitated by singular or collective superstitions. Imagine all the places where the differing superstitions about the land and the sea have historically met."

He began a long series of calculations and elucidations, at the end of which he was certain he knew how it was that Columbus had mis-stepped and landed in the Americas back in 1492.

The rest of the early hours passed as usual. Repps lost a game of cards over his breakfast porridge, and his exaggerated stomping could be heard periodically throughout the remainder of the morning. Lunch was a white fish. Due to the overgrowth of Sworded Vine fruits, whose citrus Gray had tasted and deemed more than satisfactory – the grapefruit's bitter sweetness collided with the lemon's sour punch -- the fish was coated with a creamy Sworded Vine sauce and the men, captivated by the new flavor after so much repetitiously seasoned grub, consumed their lunches with an eager edacity.

Around one, it was Drury, mousy Drury, out with Spillsby for a smoke on the middle-deck, who announced, "I feel a tingling in my cheeks. It's strange, and oh, there it is now in my legs. Feels like there's a troop of fairies dancing around on my insides, and their pinhead feet are leaving me all fuzzy."

"Yes," came Spillsby, "I think I'm feeling that, too. But hang on, doesn't the world just look a bit brighter than normal? Look at the water. The blue looks so saturated. I can't see any of the usual traces of mossy green or gray, floated up from the deep to tarnish the purity of the surface, whisper of the mysteries lurking below. No, instead it's as if the clear sky and the sea were giving themselves to one another today, trading brilliances. It's really quite mesmerizing, isn't it? It's –"

"Hang on, Spillsby," Drury interrupted, "Look at that cloud up there. Look at the way it's moving. Sort of pulsing. It's traded its whispy bits in for tentacles, and look at that, it's stretching them all the way across the sky and then retracting them back."

"And the ship, too!" Spillsby jumped up, startled by what was happening beneath his feet and nearly choking on his own exclamatory, "Look at that! It's as though the panes of wood were breathing! They're like gills, filling up with water and warping their swirling patterns, only to compress the warped panes, dehydrate them so that they swirl differently once more."

Both were speaking quickly, nodding energetically, and gesticulating madly.

"Everything seems to be waking up, coming alive. Drury, everything is breathing! Even my ankles and toes and the hairs on my knuckles are breathing. What strange gods can be acting upon us here, causing these beautiful, but also –" he gripped his stomach, "slightly nauseating disturbances, or rather, these awakenings? We must go and tell the others!"

Drury and Spillsby stumbled in on shaky legs, yelling obscenities that grew more and more incomprehensible.

"There are ghosts making love in my belly! Get them out, get them out, before they give birth to me and I become their only son!"

"Share your breath with the wood! Touch her many bodily manifestations – your bed, the walls around you, the table at which you dine. Touch her gently, and give her your breath or she will eat you alive, close in upon you -- tight and dry and dehydrated -- and finally swallow you whole for sustenance and spit your bones into the sea!"

"Ah, the sea! Look away from the sea, for it is no longer a sea of water but a sea of eyeballs. Millions upon millions of eyeballs belonging to all of those who have ever died upon

this earth. Do not look at her, for she is the sea which sees! In the reflection of your gaze, you will meet the vision of your very own death!"

The two ran stupidly up and down the ship's halls, eventually stripping their clothes off after Drury declared, "The threads of your clothing are nothing more than a thousand tiny snakes woven together. Their only desire is to wriggle themselves loose enough that they might realign to constrict your body, as the boa does. Remove your garments at once or you will be squeezed until all of your gases are released and an army of snakes slithers down your throat to drink up your blood from inside of you."

"Yes," decreed Spillsby, "That is sometimes true! But at other times, the woven threads are the breathing cocoon, and you, inside, are the butterfly in waiting. They desire only to comfort and warm you, allow you time to grow, and especially, to sleep. But now is no time for sleep! Look around at the living world, and emerge from your cocoons. Fly forth, butterfly men!"

Some of the crew, primarily those who tended to the ship at night, when all the others were asleep, emerged from their bunkers. But in truth, Drury and Spillsby were far from the only ones who had, apparently, gone suddenly quite insane. In the refectory, one man ran screaming from his own shadow while another chased after that very same shadow, calling out to it as a lost lover. Anther had laughed himself into a fit of hiccups and was now walking about and pressing his hands, with each jerking 'cup,' firmly against some hard surface, certain that he could pass the hiccups out through his fingertips and into the ship itself, whose hiccups he was sure would make him laugh even harder than before, but he did not care, for he was too intrigued by the hilarious notion of a hiccupping ship.

For Gillow, who was downstairs amending his morning log between two birdcages, the sensation was something quite different. It was perhaps more familiar, but also more alienating, less experiential, for it was so deeply grounded in his own churning history. It was writing coming alive again – his pen eagerly arabesquing across the page and producing dancerly formations of words – no longer mechanized or cold, but all abreath in their own poesis, in the beauty of themselves in relation to one another. Gill tried, at first, to hold it back, but there was nothing to be done. He closed the door and opened all of the bird cages, then crawled inside of an empty cage himself. And from there, gleeful songs propelled his pen forward, though his eyes clouded with tears. He wrote fitfully of Lydia. And when he had written only of her for three hours and the cramps had begun to pulse outward and sashay through his whole arm, he wrote of Gray, and then Symmes and Repps and the ship and the journey, and finally, himself and his ceaseless confusion, his desire to awaken, for he knew he had been away too long. Gillow filled one salty page after another. So drenched in tears was his every rumination released that the notebook came to resemble those brine and stew-dipped pages he had long ago slurped down. And all the while the birds stretched their wings and composed their pulsating songs. Melody and pitch fluctuations were matched to sudden dives of the cerulean beaked sparrow, the downward glide of the alamass, and the jubilant spinnings of all variety of other birds, whose twirls produced a blasphemy of colorific images, the imprints of which seemed to float in the air a few seconds before fading and disappearing back into the stream of time.

The crewmen all were entrapped in the magical wanderings of their many minds, in the gallopings of swirling perceptions, the kaleidoscoping sensations destabilizing their bodies, such that a group of five lay on the floor, each, in turn, projecting a word into the ether between them -- “table, water, laughter, gemstone, harpsichord, Symmes, light, marble, fork, gold, shoestring,

baby, woman, fire," which they later recounted as an exercise in which the saying of the word allowed one to experience, bodily, all of the essential qualities of that thing.

"Take gold, for example," Sam later explained. "You might expect the sensation to be quite simple. Of course, you'd feel heavy and dense, expensive and beautiful and rare. But this sells the experience short, because humans have attributed so many metaphorical qualities to gold that frequently diverge from the base-line actuality of the element. For example, gold is a symbol of nobility and thereby of a rare form of power and strength which is derived from ancient bloodlines and systems of governance. Elemental gold, however, is a soft and malleable metal. And by virtue of its elemental status, in its smallest parts, it is indivisible; it is inherently pure and simple. Frequently senecdochized, though, the golden crown stands in for the nobility in matters of speech --'the crown forces move in,' or 'it was the decision of the crown to take this or that action.' However, as we in young America are all aware, nobility is habitually impure – it is often corrupt and malign and noxious. But it is through metaphor that humans produce meaning. And so, when the word gold was uttered, you can imagine all of the conflicting sensations we experienced. And that to say nothing of true gold's essential quality of inanimacy. So you can then only try to imagine what it was like when somebody spoke a word like laughter or music or death."

Outside, sea and sky, too, were transforming. There was a sudden recognition, not *of* one another, but of the part of themselves living in one another. And it was a resentful recognition. The two began to claw at each other, trying to take themselves back, and in the process, they became so indistinguishably entangled that they might have been fused into a singular violent body.

The few men who had not tasted the juice of the Sworded Vine fell into a panic. They ran about yelling to a crew lost in revelations, "All hands on deck! All hands on deck! There's a mad storm a'brewing!" But most were too caught up in their jumbled thoughts to even hear what was being yelled. They had forgotten the faculties of their own bodies, their collective ability, through the utilization of tensed muscles and swift action, to wage war against the mingling forces of sky and sea, to alert them to the presence of the ship and try to halt their bickering by proclaiming, "there is another body trying to rest here!"

Only fourteen capable men could be found. Symmes emerged and began delegating orders.

"Deverix, Eaton, run onto the outer decks and search for anybody deranged enough to still be lingering out there. Bring them inside. Then, move all of the others, as many as will be moved, into their rooms. Get them out of our way and safe. Lachlan and West, go and replenish the coal supply. Oswald, you will act as my co-pilot at the helm. The rest of you, raise up the emergency sails, and do whatever you see needs doing. We can survive this if only none of us rests for even a moment."

All began running to their posts.

"Tomfy, stay back. I have an important mission for you," shouted Symmes over the turbulence.

Tomfy whipped back around, eyes wide, long messy hair in his face. As one of the youngest aboard, he'd early befriended Gray, and now he wondered where his friend might be.

"You must go downstairs and into the menagerie," instructed Symmes. "Find the cage which contains the fiery-breasted jay. You will know her when you see her. Once you've found her, sing her these words in this melody. Now listen carefully."

And Symmes began to sing –

Lead me to the hiding place
You alone, so full of grace
Are subject to the whispering trace

If you believe my intentions malign
Take me instead-
To the room of Lucifer's design
And I shall remain, forever, confined

But if you see good
When you look in my face
I implore you, great spinner of songs –

Lead me to the hiding place
You alone, so full of grace
Are subject to the whispering trace

Tomfy only stared in confounded response.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure it's a bit confusing, but really, there's no time for questions now, Tomfy," Symmes said firmly. "Sing her the song, and then follow her to wherever she leads you. She'll be able to tell I've sent you, so she won't suspect you of anything. Once you've arrived, extract the object and bring it to me at the wheel. Now, do you remember the song?" Tomfy began humming it back to himself. "Yes, I think so…take me instead…room of Lucifer's design…forever confined…"

"Yes, yes, you've got it, you've got it," Symmes assured him. "Now go!"

The ship heaved while Tomfy stumbled down two flights of stairs and a long, thin hallway, all the while lunging from wall to wall to keep from falling. He pulled open the door to the menagerie, and two gray doves flew out. "Christ!" he exclaimed. "What's going on in here?" He jumped inside and slammed the door shut behind him. Birds flew in all directions, though every few seconds, those directions simultaneously changed, and if one observed for long

enough, as Gillow had been doing – looking entirely away from the page as he wrote – the patterns they described formed fractals in the air.

Turtles with black skin and black shells and little wooly creatures with six arms were positioned around the perimeter of the room, watching. Most had squeezed between cages bolted to the floor and piled supple bodies to become immobilized, each other's bellies and breasts acting to cushion the blows brought on by shifting loose objects and surges in the ship's movement. Though they perhaps offered the most stability, none had reentered their cages. Gillow alone lay contained.

"Gillow!" cried Tomfy, "What have you done? I must find the fiery breasted jay at once!"

Gillow looked, cloudy-eyed, at his son's friend. He finally grinned widely, and shrugged, as if to say, "Can you really blame a creature for wanting to fly?" He shifted his gaze back behind Tomfy, so that he might continue watching, continue writing.

"Damn it all to hell. Symmes'll have my head for this," muttered Tomfy. And then, hollering again, "Where is that stupid jay?"

At length, Gillow pointed to a far corner. Tomfy followed the invisible line stretching out from the base of Gillow's index finger. He stood for a bit, fixated upon that back corner. And then she appeared, flapping vigorously. Tomfy bellowed and dove after her, but her body moved from one place to another like matches are struck in a dark and drafty room. Just as soon as her fiery chest appeared, she was gone once more. Again and again, Tomfy dove after her, and she eluded him. Exacerbated, he cried out to Gillow, "Isn't there a damned net somewhere?" Again, Gillow pointed, this time quite automatically. Tomfy grabbed the net and swatted at the bird and fell down, the ship's turbulence and his own lunging a corrupt marriage

that left him bruised and bloodied. Once, he nearly had her, but then the ground angled itself a bit differently, and he dropped his net, and the little flame disappeared again. The boy started to weep. He lay down on the floor, wove his body between the bars of a large cage, so as to not slide about, and began to whimper and snivel very loudly. Gillow, whose concentration was reliant upon those mingling bird songs and the chaotic composition of their intricately performed dances, was becoming very impatient with Tomfy, who was causing him to forget all of the consonants or vowels in a given word, or sometimes to write a sentence absent of any punctuation whatsoever, even missing its spaces -- those most essential silences that make the noise of language, but also of life – comprehensible and bearable. He stretched to grasp a metal shovel that was proximal to his cage, and he banged it loudly against the bars, trying to grab Tomfy's attention. The boy looked over. Gillow beckoned.

"Oh, Mr. Glove, it's just awful, it's such a shame and a waste. Somehow it's happened that this great storm that will be the death of us all has coincided with the sudden madness of you, and your son, and most of the rest of the crew…like you all received some premonition of the coming end and decided you'd rather die somewhere far away, inside your minds."

Gillow put down his pen and looked at Tomfy.

"And the worst of it is, if you hadn't all received this premonition, or, what have you, if you'd all stayed sane, we might've been able to save ourselves. The knowing, the possibility of the peaceful adieu, has forsaken you. And now I'm left here alone, entrusted with Symmes's final mission, and I'm going to fail him. Oh –"

Gillow poked at the boy through the bars of his cage. Through all his pitiful blathering, he'd failed to notice a great change come over the room. It seemed that the lyrical beauty and the cosmic figurations the birds were carving into the dank ship-bellied air were both linked

inextricably to the sweeping, slight movements of Gillow's pen. They were the voices that spoke his lost language, moving in patterns like night-blooming flowers – mysterious, exhibiting a delicate strength, blooming in shadow by the light of distant stars, trying to infect some beauty into the world and then die quickly on a frosty evening, perhaps leaving some fading impression -- hot fingers against a cold body. Each of Gillow's words was a night-bloomed flower, a single note, dive, or twirl in a cosmographic avian performance. And so when Gillow had put his pen down, the birds had stopped singing, stopped moving. Instead, they only floated in place, fluttering. One could not be free without the other, and never was Gillow truly free unless he was writing.

Tomfy looked out at the menagerie, dumbstruck. He spotted the fiery-breasted jay fluttering in a corner just below the ceiling. Reaching up, he plucked her out of the air, tears still hanging off his eyes. He whispered her singingly Symmes's song, humbled in the presence of these lords of melody and lyricism.

Right away, she flew to the back door of the menagerie and started to peck at it, imploring Tomfy to push. Gillow picked up his pen and so the birds flew, or perhaps the birds picked up their dance and so Gillow wrote, pen and bird moving just a bit differently in the absence of the fiery-breasted jay.

She led Tomfy down a long hallway and then pecked at the floor, indicating the handle of a trap door. He raised it up. The ship lurched and she swooped down, Tomfy falling in behind her. They landed amongst thousands of oblong vials of mauve and magenta liquids. Some contained floating jellies and shimmered as one moved around them. Though all were mounted, a few had gotten loose and crashed to the floor, emitting a tangy, sulphurous odor. But Tomfy didn't have

time to notice much else, for the little flame was already far ahead, and the boy had to lunge along, his banged and bewildered body barely capable of keeping her in his line of sight.

They moved through a labyrinth of surreal landscapes, all contained beneath that hidden trapdoor. There was a room of taxidermed beasts wilder than any they'd encountered, and one filled, waist-deep, only with very fine black sand. Finally, the two reached a huge room full to the ceiling with books. Many were unbound fragments rendered in mysterious languages, some perhaps a thousand years old, handwritten by noble scribes of near-forgotten histories. On the fourth shelf down from the ceiling, on the westward facing wall, stood a book forty-six books in, which the little flame took to pecking at with a vigor. Tomfy pulled the book down. He could not read its title, for it and the text within were written in a language indecipherable to him. The characters did not resemble those of the Greek or Latin scriptures or any from those languages he knew of from the Far East or the desert lands in the Middle East. Confounded as he was by the myriad events that had transpired on that particular day, whose morning had passed in a monotony indecipherable from every other since they had first boarded Symmes's ship, Tomfy had only one object in mind now, and that was to deliver the book to Symmes before the ship went under. In this way, he would be granted some eternal glory, like the great messengers of history, often martyrs who died to deliver messages whose mystical meanings they might never have known. And yet, had those messages never been delivered, all of history may have been altered entirely, for it is common knowledge that all historical events are the precipitators of all other historical events, so that, had an army waiting to sack Jerusalem not perished by plague-carrying rats, Jesus Christ would never have been born, and then perhaps Charlemagne, that first Holy Roman Emperor, would never have brought together the many

nations of Western Europe during the early Middle Ages – instead he might have been born a peasant.

So Tomfy ran heartily -- his nose streaming blood and his left leg donning a deep gouge and the rest of him tattered and torn and busted -- all through that labyrinthine lower level until he found the trap door and leaped up, his legs thrashing wildly until he was back above, at which point the little flame departed to return to those cosmic dances still alive in the menagerie, and Tomfy stumbled through the refectory, where two men lay dead, hanging pots and pans having landed on their unsuspecting heads, still caught in daydreams as they were, and down the long hallways with many doors on either side, from which he could hear all manner of strange noises – screams and howls and barks and growls, pounding and smashing and cursing and crying, and then he ascended that final set of stairs that led up to the helm, and there was Symmes, his hair and eyes wild, Oswald lying dead on the floor beside him, screaming as he spun the wheel.

"Ah," he yelled, "Tomfy, you've come back! Tell me, did you see Gillow anywhere?"

"Yes, he's in the menagerie, and he's let all the animals out. He's, well, I'm not quite sure what he –"

"It doesn't matter, my boy, as long as he is alive. And did you get the book?"

"Yes, here it is, I've got it."

"Oh, thank you, my dear boy. This book is of the utmost significance, so you must now put it in that jar over there and seal it off. I've already placed the note inside, so if we are all to die, at least that most pertinent knowledge will not be forever forsaken."

"But what is –"

"No time to explain now, Tomfy. I've been having the most maddening time up here," he yelled as they hit another wave and Tomfy was thrown a few feet to the left, book still in hand.

"Get it in the jar, Tomfy, quickly! It's gone dark, and I haven't been able to see anything outside for nearly an hour." He paused a moment. "You know, I'm not sure I ever gave enough credence to bodily sensation up until now. I mean, of course it's purposeful for identifying when something is painful or when one is hungry. But it dilutes—" they slammed against another wave, "-- the ability for men to see clearly. They become blinded by sexual desire or the sensations produced by the drink, or they become gluttonous. But this is really something! I'm just moving the ship along as though she were my own body. Thought without my vision we'd be lost," -- they were jerked once more, "but I think I'm doing quite well, all things considered."

Tomfy didn't respond. He'd gotten the book into the jar and sealed it off, and now he curled himself around the doorframe, gripping hard. After a few minutes came a final roaring crash that meant certainly that the ship had at last been undone, some seam had been ripped out, and now it was only a matter of moments before the whole thing fell apart. Symmes dropped to the ground, rendered unconscious, and Tomfy cried out. Then, all became still. The wind and rain could still be heard, a calamitous shrieking. But the ship rocked no more, and the ground on which the crew lay scattered was as stiff as the earth they'd been absent of for so very long.

Chapter Seven

There was little movement aboard until morning. The last great surge was perceived to be the violent thrust into death, and all lay waiting in the windy stillness to be carried off. In the early morning light, some thought of ascension, but unsuspecting limbs soon began to wriggle and a continued vitality was at last recognized. The many worlds traversed that previous day and night started reducing themselves into dreamscapes rather than a cosmos of reality until Drury, who had woken splayed on the lower deck with a deep gash through his brow, came limping the course of the ship. "Land ho! Land ho! We've washed up on an island!"

And so that final surge was truly death's antithesis, a great thrust back into life. The island, they discovered shortly, was that very island which is commonly referred to as Iceland. Here, a few weeks were spent healing damaged bodies – their own and that of the ship. Supplies were replenished, Symmes handing over a bit of extra money for the indulgence in a few luxury goods – salted meats and lavish spices – so that he might give hearty thanks to his men, try to restore injured moral, for many had gone to places more foreign and distant than even the interior of the earth, and the return had been such a jolting experience, with no moment for adjustment, just the expectation of death which, by the voice of another – land, ho – is realized to be life, for land is nowhere in Heaven or Hell, even if it has also, for some time, been nowhere in life. A general quietude and jitteriness thus prevailed. For some, though, the tempest was a catalyst, the precipitator of some profound alteration. Gillow, though still eluded by his masterpiece, could move his pen again without shaking fingers, could write the words, 'bucolic, petrichor, pereidolia,' – words he had forgotten because he was terrified of the beauty they so carelessly boasted. Repps became less quick to anger and less inclined to gamble. He seemed sometimes deep in thought, a place he had rarely gone to before. And he finally went to speak to

Gillow in the refectory late one evening, thereby forging an unspoken connection with the others, Gillow as the vessel of linkage.

Gray, however, remained wary of Repps. He created a plan only to be enacted in the event that Repps's menacing disdain toward some relatively undeserving member of the crew became too great for Gray to observe with any conscience, knowing the actions Repps was capable of taking. He extracted the scales from the wings of a death's head moth -- a most vile creature, which resembles a moth bodily but wears on its nape a likeness of death itself and is known to squeak when irritated, and to give birth to larvae that bite. When the moth is seen in the room of a dying person, it is thought to be the incarnation of the soul as it leaves the body. But perhaps most noteworthy is that the scales from the moth's wings are believed to cause instant blindness when they come into contact with a human eye.

Gray learned a great deal about the creatures from Maxamillion -- an herbalist, entomologist, and zoologist hired to tend to the plants and animals aboard – including the location of a tightly sealed container with four death's head moths inside. Once he had obtained the container, he covered its oxygen holes and waited for the moths to asphyxiate. He removed them with metal tongs and plucked off their wings, which he then ground into a fine powder with a mortar and pestle. He was sure that by crippling Repps's sight, not only would Repps be distracted from his intent to damnate, but his disorientation would be such that he could no longer place those evil little grains precisely enough to ensure that the right man would ingest them, and so, reasoned Gray, he wouldn't think to try it before the trip's end.

At first, Gray thought he might just walk up to the unsuspecting man and blow the scaly dust into his face. But if Repps knew the cause of his blindness, he would certainly find a way to make Gray's end. So he considered sneaking into his bunk in the night, but then he'd have to

open the man's eyes to get the powder into them and risk Repps recognizing him or strong-arming him. So he went, on a matted-sky night, and picked the apothecary lock to obtain a potent sleeping tincture.

The ship traveled north, now getting close, Symmes claimed, to the Great Rim. Gray completed his preparations, so that he would be ready if and when he felt that the noxious remedy was called for.

They sailed past an island dotted by ten thousand fat seals, so numerous that it was impossible to decipher whether their perch was a sand bank or a huge block of lily-white ice. If it were indeed a sandbank, the grains of sand were surely crystallized, frosted over, hard to the touch, suckable for moisture, as solid, in fact, as if they were crystals of ice blanketing an unbreakable tundra. More and more, the ship was surrounded only by drifting ice, that mysterious form of water which differentiates itself from the rest of the ceaseless flow, water which floats upon water, drifting over itself as though bearing the superiority of land, assisting the lives of living things – seals and puffins and penguins and other beasts of the surface about which itself underneath doesn't give a damn -- the ocean, murderer of creatures born incapable of breathing her water. And yet, ice has a tendency to give preference to some forms of life over others. Towards humans, it is generally indifferent, sometimes finding amusement in treachery – the iceberg reaching down and sprawling out beneath the surface like a sickly old woman with the teeth and strength of a wolf, so that unsuspecting sea farers might sail ships into her toothy wide grin below and come quickly to their freezing deaths.

All became wary of the elements. Neither form of water to be trusted, the sky scoffed at for its previous thrashing brawl with the sea. Only when the sky differentiated itself with blood, the blood of early mornings and evenings, which reminded all that her body was elementally

different, purer, more likened to that of humanity, did they rest easy for a bit. Clear weather – translucency, no clouds suggesting distorted intentions -- always allows blood to be seen.

Following their departure from Iceland, they passed a series of small islands. They stopped at each to gather specimens and rest a bit, and each precipitated some fluctuation in their faculties. The first rendered all sustenance so tasteless that plainest water seemed to possess a variegated array of textures and consistencies. They felt they would all soon die of starvation, or perhaps, over-hydration, for they kept eating and eating the 'skyfood' – which is what they called it, for it could have been blandest clouds – but never did they become sated.

On the second island, strange filters seemed to gather out of the air and hang over the men's eyes, though nothing was hard to see but each other, for each perceived every other as an exact replica of himself, such that Drury and Tomfy and Gray and Repps and Symmes and Sam and all the others cried, respectively, "Drury, Tomfy, Gray, Repps, Symmes, Sam? Is that you, I mean me…or…who is that?" and only Lachlan, who had a twin brother, was calling out, "Simon, what are you doing here?"

On the third, everything they lay their hands on had an integrity quite the opposite of what life had taught them to expect. A puddle of water was sticky and thick as batter, and a tree might have been a sculpture cut from foam, for with one finger, they could press six or eight inches into it without any difficulty, and when they pulled away, it would set itself back into its starting position.

The fourth was an island of smells. Every flower, gust of breeze, even the purple spotted toads Gray captured, exuded smells which were exact facsimiles of smells the men had been familiar with in their previous lives. Such that a bloomed flower, picked by Drury, smelled to him like smoked meats at the Kingston market, and to Repps like his brother's chicory pipe

tobacco, and to Gillow like his mother's gnarled hands. There were so many smells, in every direction, that harkened to so many other smells, that all got caught up in great bouts of nostalgia and spent hours and hours lazily reminiscing about this memory or that.

On the last island, everything that was said echoed eternally, and words which had been said hours ago bounced off of those spoken only a moment ago. Eventually, all had mingled in the repetitious ether so much that entire conversations had been had between people who'd never spoken, and one could even venture that, many years and then decades and then centuries or eons later, the echoes had found ways to discuss all that is discussable.

Afterwards, they named the archipelago of altering perceptions 'SSUNE' which they pronounced, 'sun,' standing for 'Island of Skyfood,' 'Island of Selves,' 'Island of Unpredictable Surfaces,' 'Island of Nostalgic Smells,' and 'Island of Echoes,' and as they grew closer to the Rim, they often contemplated the many secrets of 'SSUNE,' a method for keeping the cold out of their toes and noses.

They had been sailing throughout in a northeasterly direction, so that the Rim could be mounted slowly. Symmes explained, "the North polar opening is approximately four-hundred miles in diameter, but the Verge is so vast that one might, by traversing in a northeasterly progression for an extended time, enter the Interior without realizing it, except that soon would come a variation in the times at which light can be perceived, and, once inside, the direction of the compass needle would reverse. This is true because the needle regards the center of the polar opening rather than the axis of the Earth. So, right near the, shall we call it, 'summit' of the Verge, just before the Interior, the variation of the needle becomes extreme. And this is how we will know we are nearly moving inwards."

"But Johnny," hollered some contrarian, "If this here earth is hollow, then how come none of them other planets up there in the sky are too?"

A snicker went round.

"Well, lad," Symmes began, steadfast as ever, "think only of the vast caverns observable on the surface of the moon – many were clearly once polar openings, the only difference being that the moon likes to change her axis quite frequently while our little blue and green planet has no such inclination. Additionally, the rings around Saturn are a clear indication of the theory of concentric spheres. They are the evident fragments -- the remaining ruins -- of his former Exterior shell, the rest of which is fallen down upon the body of the planet."

At night, the Aurora Borealis turned elegant pirouettes. "It is caused by the meeting of the cold exterior air with the warm interior air." And any time he spotted some warm-blooded form of life, he reminded them, "there are many animals – seals, reindeer, mackerel and herring, musk-oxen, white bears and white foxes -- that migrate north for the winter, seeking the Interior regions for warmth and sustenance. Then, in the spring, they return, fat and lazy, to the Exterior. Thus, some of the early birds are just beginning to arrive."

In his beard, which Symmes had started to grow at expedition's beginning, salt and pepper strands started to appear. There was a constant chorus of chattering teeth, and for the first time, coal-hauling duty, which was arduous, sweat-producing work, became lucrative. Repps's temper was acting up again, and Gray was floating through mental clouds poisoned with the gaseous stuff of suspicion, which brewed anxious ticks – nail-biting, pacing, insomnia, frequent checking and rechecking of Repps's whereabouts, making sure he was stationed in his expected position.

Then, one early evening, as Gillow and Gray sat together, the elder drinking tea with hot whiskey, the younger staring into nowhere, Gillow's spine became very erect. He stood quickly, looked at his son wide-eyed. Every hair on his body stood straight, and his blood flowed faster, and he forgot what he'd been writing to Gray, his memory jumping back to the tempest, to the pen, which had felt weightless in his tight fingers, and the cramps he had neglected to notice until the following day, cramps that travelled the length of his arm. He saw gilded feathers swooping with pristine clarity and grew short of breath. He grabbed hold of his son, who only looked at him vaguely, couldn't seem to understand the gravity of sensation that was taking hold of his father.

And then came the shrill voice of the night watchmen and the vague shuffling that can only be heard aboard a vast ship when one hundred bodies all begin to move frantically at once.

"The needle is spinning! On the compass! The compass needle is spinning! The needle is spinning!"

Chapter Eight

The air hung hazy, a rare evening mist. With the exception of a fleshy pair -- the elder at the wheel, boasting such swollen bags beneath his eyes that one was tempted to try popping them, the other, nearly toothless, perched in the crow's nest on lookout duty, with varicose veins and head swollen and pounding from last night's drink – with the exception of these two, all the rest gathered on two decks just below the ship's helm. Eyes were so wide with anticipation that in the dark nothing could be detected but the shine of two hundred swollen orbs gliding syncopated. The world was silent, with the exception of the spinning compass, which clicked and shuttered anxiously. All seemed to be waiting for something. But at the equator -- great divider of Earth, renderer of halves, where everything that lies north can be called 'Northern' and all that lies south can be called 'Southern,' there is no change in the frequency of sounds or the pitch of crashing waves or the thickness of the air. The only qualitative change which occurs at the equator is a relative lack of wind, making it impossible for the albatross to fly. But the windlessness extends both five degrees above and below the equator, the doldrums thereby not synonymous with the aequare – the circle equalizing day and night – because not limited or enclosed by it. No, earth's perfect dividers exist in the relative drift of conditions from one end of the earth to another, the notion of their perfection being only a human imposition, and so it was absurd to think that, as they rounded the summit of the Verge, lightening would strike or the water would run orange instead of blue, but still the men held their collective breath.

Finally, his words riding a hushed outward breath, Gray said, "My father knew when it happened." Floating eyes shifted to angle in Gray's direction. He stood up, looking terrified.

"It was all very sudden. He dropped his pen and grabbed hold of me. And just a few moments later came Finn's voice, announcing the spinning needle. He knew just as we were crossing over."

The orbs shifted away from the boy, now angling themselves at his father, silent as always.

"Codswollop," came some voice, "so he got a bit sea-sick. Happens to us all. Don't make 'em some sort of prophet. And besides, whose to say the damn compass ain't jus broken er somethin? Eh? Everything looks jus' the same to me as before, excep' we's all standing out here in the middle of the night for wha' seems no reason at all."

Symmes's voice came booming from the lower deck.

"This is not the way that a broken compass acts, young lad. Have you ever seen one move like this? Why, she's jumping around as though she'd just come alive! I am a man of science, as you well know, not one of superstition. And it was my scientific prediction that when the Summit was mounted, the needle would begin to spin. And so it has. I do not need any further indication now of where we have come to be – I do not stand here waiting for some symbolic gesture to fall out of the sky, but rather, because I have dreamed of this moment for many years, and because it is exceedingly necessary now that we all stay alert. There are fundamental truths that pertain to the outside world, which we all known to be true, even in those parts entirely unknown to us. There are the Exterior laws of physics, for example. And, everywhere on the Exterior, more than any other creature, it is man who governs the earth. Now that we have reached the Interior, these fundamental truths may come undone. We can no longer rely on them with any surety. Thus, our movements must be calculated with exceptional diligence and care if we are ever to retrace our steps and return home. We wait now until the

Summit has been passed and the needle rests, and then we will reorient ourselves to her new dimensions, for north and south and east and west will all be reversed.

And as for the feeling that came over Gillow -- you have heard of Saint Teresa's Ecstacy, of mothers who feel the death of their children at war, thousands of miles away, of lost dogs returning to their nomadic masters after months of separation. In every scenario here, it is clear that the former entity holds a connection to the latter which is more profound than anything else concerning their lives. For Saint Teresa, this was God, for any mother, it is her child, and for a dog, it is always his master. Could there not exist those for whom nature's divisions are an ecstasy? Perhaps, for some reason unknown to us all, Gillow possesses some incredible connection to the Interior, which caused, for him, a moment of rapture. Or maybe," he chuckled, "there is some magnetism that aligns him with the compass and the Summit, and all the organs in his body suddenly flipped about when the Verge was crossed. And then—" he was drifting off now – "perhaps the man was only sea-sick after all."

By the following morning, the compass had righted itself, and now they travelled South, rather than North. The sun cascaded down and nuzzled into Symmes's beard, and flecks of salt and pepper seemed to shimmer and jump when he turned to face Maximillion, who had been brought to his question by this very phenomena. "But how can the sun continue to shine so brightly? Aren't we moving down the side of the curved Interior? I mean, at the very least, shouldn't the light be dimmer and our shadows longer?"

Symmes shook his head back and forth in quick, sharp increments. "If you recall, Max, one of the most noteworthy points to my overarching theory is that, not only is the earth hollow, but it is also *habitable* within. Now, although humankind does not receive energy directly from the sun, as all green things do through the process of photosynthesis, still sunlight remains

essential for the survival of humans. Not only do we need it for the most obvious of reasons – the ability to navigate stealthily and recognize our enemies as they approach, but without it, we quickly become sallow and frail. Now, based on all of my charts, of which there are a great many, the particular shape and size of our earth, in combination with such factors as the size of the two polar openings, our distance from the sun, the speed at which we rotate -- both on our own axis and around the sun -- and the laws of refraction, I have no doubt that the direct rays of the sun will fall on every part of the Interior, the ultimate amount of sunlight, though perhaps divided in a different fashion than the regions of the Exterior, being enough for humans not only to live, but to thrive."

The following morning, Finn, who'd been at the helm with Darden, reported a problem at the wheel.

"We can't get the ship to keep straight. The wheel is nearly rigid, and as soon as we're aimed south and let go, we start to drift east. Shall we put up the sails for aid, find some way to clamp her into position?" he asked.

"No, no, we can't force her, or I'm afraid she may break. Keep her going in this direction, and make sure to record the exact dimensions that we travel. My guess is that something has drifted into the rudder and cogged her, so that she only wants to move one way."

Symmes paced about for an hour, and then he called a meeting of the ship's mechanics.

"Let's toss out our bigges' anchors, wait til they catch an' then send out the bes' swimmers, see wha' they cado," suggested Ory.

"But the object will likely be too large, especially with the decreased force that muscles exhibit when submerged. And even if they do remove it, then the blades will start to turn again, and they'll be cut apart. It's much too dangerous."

"Haps if we don' do nothing,' jus' let 'er drif awhile, it'll come loose. We don' know where we goin anyway, whas the difference if we drift southeas' a while?"

"But we can't jus' ignore it. Wha appens when we spot trouble and can't steer clear of it?"

"Well arigh, why don we anchor and send down a few just to scope it out, don' need to take it ou', jus see wha' it rightly is. Offer 'em a bit of extra commission money or sumpn?"

But just as Gray -- whose length of limb and sprightliness had always made him a strong swimmer -- along with Tomfy, Findel and Wynn, were preparing themselves to swim, only waiting for the lowered anchor to catch, Yancy, who was sitting crow's nest, spotted something floating in the distance, and yelled down to Misell who told West to go find Symmes. And sure enough, when Symmes pulled out his telescope, he recognized a spot of land at a straight shot southeast, which meant that they were already approaching it fast."

At Symmes's command, all donned their best clothing – which for most meant only the garments least stained by sweat and fish oils – for, "it is essential that we greet the New New World with grace and respectability. We are here to learn all that we can from it, and so we must present as upright vessels, ready to be informed by the Interior's unique majesty in whatever from it may take. With nowhere else to begin, one always begins with appearances. So dress well – it shall be humankind's first meeting with Interior Land!"

This announcement was met with rolling eyes, and a few knowing glances were exchanged between those who had often discussed the possibility of Symmes's madness. Gray wondered if Symmes might only desire to cement this moment in his memory with as much beauty and wonder as possible – if that could be what drove his concern with their dress. And

perhaps he liked to present as too scientifically minded to experience such aesthetically-concerned sentiments.

Symmes compiled telescope, magnifying glass, rope, various knives, bags, and bottles for gathering objects, writing utensils -- for he intended to dictate to Gillow at length -- a scale, and various other tools which would allow him to measure length, breadth, width, and density of a vast array of objects, as well as wind speed and temperature. Tomfy, Lachlan, Spillsby, Yancy and Darden were to stay on board until the others had returned or one full day and night had passed, at which point, they were to assume something had transpired and search for the dispatched crew.

And so they set to the land, Symmes delaying a bit, as usual, for every time they were just about to depart, he would remember another item he required and go running the length of the ship, a few times to some drawer-in-wall or slot-beneath-floorboard, so that by the time they did finally depart, there were six men loaded up and strapped over this way and that and up and down as well, all only carrying Symmes's great quantity of stuff.

But within moments of landing, ninety or so men were surrounded by three times that amount, emerged swiftly from the trees. They were Interior-residing humans, and their faces hung bleak. All of the women wore cropped hair, wrapped tightly about their skulls, though some had a fringe, generally used to cover smaller foreheads or else puffed out or curled up like a 'C' against the nape of the neck, and some wore braided side burns as long as two feet in length. In contrast, the men's hair hung long down their backs.

Gillow placed a firm hand on Gray's shoulder. Gray watched a solemn-looking man's cheek twitch. They were surrounded entirely. A cluster formed, with Gray and Gillow at the center, and all looking outward, silent and fearful, their perspiration turned dry and sour from the

healthy stench of excitability it had exuded only a few moments prior. Now the two groups – Exteriorites and Interiorites – were arranged like concentric circles, except that in this formation, Exterior had become Interior, and Interior, Exterior, and the new Exterior group looked to have no desire to become acquainted with the new Interior, instead looking as though they would rather remain ignorant to this business of outsides and insides, and to that end, might just bare down from the outside and crush the newly interior-ed Exteriorites.

Symmes seemed none too aware of the malign intentions of the exterior-ed Interiorites. He whispered to himself, "Interior residing humans, Interior residing humans, Interior residing—," his certainty of the moment's unreality so great that he began to believe that he was dreaming. He repeated himself until his words became mundane, and the perceived dream, too -- for dreams are naturally quite unbelievable – disintegrated into mundanity. An Interiorite woman at the exterior soon stepped forward, one long sideburn braided and wrapped all the way around her bald head until it attached to itself just in front of the right ear, at beginning's end. She spoke with a liquid voice, unquivering.

"Here, Interior residing metaphor makers, made inward by the outward, meaning a conquerable, curatable dream, nullify the dis-easing influences of out going in, stop the haughty breath -- the condescending movement of blood. Though violent action does pierce painfully dream-livers, your death – the releasing of your semblance -- is only a metaphor, too, and our abstraction withers if we permit your chaos, if we do not render you first a separate abstract, bodily inanimate, unbreathing, supinely spent."

"Lord," shouted Wynne, "I think she means that she means to kill us!"

And so the men bared what weapons they had, but with three Interiorites to each Exteriorite, Symmes, who was finally pulled back up into the air from his dreamy submersion, at

last gave a sensible order. "Put your weapons away! Recall your dignity, we have come here to learn, not to fight."

And so weapons were replaced and hands were bound, and the Exteriorites were lead into the Interiorite village to await their execution.

Food was brought to them in prison cells made of hand-woven vines that were daily arranged to the slightest degree, such that the threads met at ninety degree angles to crisscross over one another and eventually formed a uniform network of twenty prison cells by two. They'd been disarmed, though a few men retained hidden weapons with which they hacked at the vines. But the plant was stronger than steel, and not a scratch was rendered. The food was hearty and sumptuous – cakes with citric glazes, a thick green juice with jellied pulp, a dark stringy meat which fell apart at the touch, served in a salty hot broth. The delectability of it stank of remorse, for pity is always prepared with compensatory delicacy. When it was served, Symmes said, "You must send somebody to speak with me. I implore you to do so. I am the explorer John Cleeves Symmes, Jr., the captain of this ship, and I promise, we have never intended you any harm. In fact, we've come here with no intent other than to learn, to expand ourselves and shrink our egos through the teachings of the Interior. Please, you must let me speak to your leader on the behalf of my crew."

To which the server responded, with eyes cast to the floor, "The word-changing metaphor maker will exchange utterances with the vessel that carries you-ness."

Wynn, who was in the cell next to Symmes's, called out, "They're all nuts, Symmes! It's a whole breed of brain-funnied people living in here! They'll never let us go cause they're all insane. We should have fought them when we had the chance, but now we're all going to die because you were too oggly-eyed to realize how wither-brained that nonsense lady was. If she's

their leader, we've no hope at all! Absolutely nada, Mr. Symmes. We may as well say our final prayers and lay down to die!"

"Well now, hang on!" came a voice from somewhere else. "Is no' like we'da had any chance fighten' 'em off! They was tree times us. An' we been gone near a day now, others're bound to be a'comin' lookin' soon nough!"

"And what in the hell do you think the five of 'em'll be able to do for our sorry arses? They'd be better off jus settin sail now, goin on back home, recognizin the utter tomfoolery that it was for any of us to ever set foot on board with the likes of a lunatic like Symmes!"

The whole place became a cacophony of gruffery, harsh angry voices and muffled snivels and sobs. Through it all, Gillow and Gray sat huddled, Gray leaning long-bodied across his father's chest, Gillow dripping silent tears and scribbling over parchment pressed against his raised knees.

I should never have brought you here with me, my boy. But I promise you, truly, it's all only been a dream. I'm sure of it. Soon enough, we'll wake up at home, and your lovely mother will be frying eggs and oysters, and we'll sit at the table with her and laugh, and you'll have no recollection of any of this, for you'll have been asleep, dreaming something and somewhere much happier than here.

Gray only nodded, allowed his father his own dying comforts.

The word-changing metaphor maker arrived at Symmes's cell after much of the yelling had died away and many of the men had fallen into disturbing dreamscapes that shifted violently and jerked them awake and then pulled them angrily back under, proximal to some nights atop the ceaseless flow. She was beautiful, a solid figure with wide hips and broad shoulders and a curved belly, her eggshell-white sideburns hanging wispy and braided loosely behind her head to

the base of her sturdy spine. In contrast to the fleshy softness of her body, the features of her face were sharp and angular, though they remained broad and strong. High cheekbones, long rectangular white brows which tapered to a fine point, almond eyes and a wide circular mouth with dark lips. She spoke to Symmes with a nearly Germanic accent, though less throaty, more reliant on the forward stretches of the tongue. "Hello, Mr. Symmes," she said calmly. "I am Ava, word-changing metaphor maker of the southern Verge region. In your language, I am called a translator." She looked down for a moment. "I have been assigned the difficult task of explaining to you why venturing into these parts must necessarily result in the termination of you and all you have come with. I seek also to appease any requests you might have before the termination is to be completed. I am sorry, Mr. Symmes."

"Ah, but this is where you are perfectly wrong," replied Symmes, prepared now to discuss and negotiate until he was able to bring the other party around to his side, as he had done so many times previous – with all those who had frequently doubted his theories, with Gillow, and with the United States Congress, which was full of skeptics and had originally refused to fund his expedition. "You see, we have come here with no malign intentions. We have no desire to conquer your land or steal your resources. We yearn only for stimulating conversation, the opportunity to show and tell you of the many great wonders of our lands, and for you to boast freely of your world as well. We seek only to develop through such conversation -- to learn from your ideologies, your scientific understanding of the world, your politics, your philosophical notions about life and death and everything else. For example, I would love nothing more than to study the form of your language, which appears to be rather adjective heavy and lacking in proper nouns and pronouns."

"It is a good place to begin, Mr. Symmes, with our language. It speaks volumes about the fundamental differences driving the lives of our people and those of yours. Let me try to explain."

"Please do."

"In most inhabited regions of the Exterior, a vast quantity of sunlight is received each day. Humanity has learned to align sleeping habits with the presence of the sun and the moon. Thus, Exterior residing humanity has developed the habit of sleeping approximately eight hours within the twenty-four hour cycle and, for the other sixteen, remaining wakeful. Because two-thirds of one's lifespan is thus spent awake, the Exterior residing psyche has adjusted to section its energies such that the waking mind and body moves quite slowly in comparison to the dreaming mind. This is why it is common for the Exterior residing human to wake from six or eight hours of sleep feeling that many episodes across much time has been traversed. In direct contrast, those of us who reside interiorly receive an average of only about eight hours of sunlight per day, and so our bodies have adjusted such that we sleep for sixteen hours of the twenty-four hour cycle and are awake only eight. Thus, our wakeful time moves quite quickly, while our sleeping time moves like syrup in comparison to the motion which projects your dreams. Ultimately, we have come to believe, through a thorough examination of your peoples and of our own, that we of the Interior have drawn the card better for the well-being of humanity, in terms of the effects of our cyclical functioning upon our very mode of being."

"Is that so?" interjected Symmes. "Because one might argue that a life spent two-thirds asleep can't possibly make for a very productive life at all. And your advances must then come at a much slower rate than –"

"Mr. Symmes," said the word-exchanging metaphor maker, "I believe you may be missing my point."

"Well carry on then, and I'll respond in due time."

"Thank you, Mr. Symmes. You see, it has been our observation that when humanity spends so much time in the chronological reality, as the Exterior residing being does, the significance of the non-chronological reality is ultimately misrepresented. To dream, Mr. Symmes, is to be abstracted from chronological necessity, the world of history and of future. You have heard that we refer to members of the human species as 'metaphor makers.' This is because we believe it is abstraction -- our ability to understand and create through metaphor -- which sets us apart from all other creatures. On the Interior, enough time is spent away from chronology each day to remember that the dream-life, the life in which one exists entirely in abstraction, is just as important as the chronological waking reality. This is why we speak as we do: our words tend to float around the subject at hand rather than name it outright. For example, when I spoke earlier, you will recall that I said, 'Stop the haughty breath, condescending movement of blood,' rather than, 'We will stop you,' for what is you? It is not you that we want to stop, but only the small part of you that threatens us. We do not much understand metonymy here, the part which stands for the whole, because, through frequent abstraction, one learns that there is no precise whole, no exact point where 'I' end and 'you' begin, and so we do not refer to ourselves with proper names or titles. You of the Exterior, however, ignore the dream-world so well that you often forget that man deals always in metaphor. You forget, for example, that money --"

"And how is it that you presume to know so much of us anyway?" Symmes suddenly interjected.

"Mr. Symmes, it is the arrogance of the Exterior man to assume that when he has an idea, he is always that idea's original owner."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Have you ever considered, Mr. Symmes, that you are not the first Exteriorite to consider the earth's hollowness?"

"But so others have come here before? When was it, and…and from where? And--"

"These questions are not relevant, Mr. Symmes. Yes, there have been others. Would you allow me to go on?

"Well, alright," he said, exacerbated by Ava's condescension.

"I was giving the example of money being only a metaphor man created for wealth. It is not wealth itself, and in fact it is both meaningless and powerless when humanity remembers that wealth is a theoretical notion that cannot be rendered true by a substance. Power, too, is an idea that has become so conflated by man un-abstracted that he tries to render power visually -- by owning vast quantities of land or people. We do not blame you for the emergence of these skewed ideologies. They are a natural product of the flow of time upon the sunlit Exterior. But we know, too, that the more distanced Exteriorites have become from the abstract, the more these ugly conflations have gone unexamined. And thus we know that if we were to free your men, no matter how altruistic your intentions are, your return to the Exterior will precipitate the coming of fleets and armies seeking to steal our lands and ravish our resources, and, ultimately, taint an Interior world much more peaceable and happy than your own. This, we cannot have, and so we are forced to destroy you bodily, though we believe that in doing so, we only destroy one part of you, the you which threatens the us, and not the you entire. We regret that it is our duty, but we hope always, and indeed believe, that the death of the body is only a permanency metaphoric of a

happening which brings a much greater fullness. And we hope that that fullness will be of comfort to you."

"Well then," came Symmes's sturdy voice, ready to do battle, "All that you intone makes clear sense until you come to your final point, which betrays an obvious logical fallacy. If you claim that the loss of bodily life is metaphorical of some greater happening -- the loss of the individuated self to the whole, the great conjoining -- then perhaps your ideologies are not so very different from our own, after all. Though my language, which feels to me grounded and precise, may sound to you vague, for it identifies visually, by naming things which appear as wholes, rather than the ideas which animate those apparent wholes, and though our ideologies may diverge along certain lines, at the strongest point – our shared belief in God – we remain inextricably linked."

Ava nodded to all of this, prompted him to continue.

"Well, if it is true that we are both followers of God, then it is also true that we are both aware of his strictest law -- the breaking of which leads not to a blissful conjoining in death, but rather to an un-glorious, unbreakable matrimony with fieriest hell – thou shalt not kill."

"Yes, but –" interjected Ava.

"Now, you claim that it is your duty to kill us because not to do so would mean your own destruction. But this is all speculative. You likely do not know this, but it is written in the Constitution of our great county, the United States of America, that all men are created equal, which is a principle I stand vigorously behind. And, with that in mind, it seems that your conviction to kill us is predicated on vanity, the assumption that your great world will be corrupted through contact with our lesser world. We do not threaten you bodily, but ideologically. And to be so threatened by ideological difference only betrays to me that your

society is built on fear and thought control, for you refuse your citizens the chance even to entertain the thoughts of a people different from your own. To kill out of fear of losing ideological control is nothing more than criminal, and I am certain it will result in the damnation of all involved. And so it is my proposition that, instead of murdering my fellow explorers and I, you draw up a contract whose condition is our release in return for a pledge of secrecy. We will return home, and I will declare that my theories were wrong after all, that the earth is in fact a solid sphere or, otherwise, that it is indeed hollow but that the lands within are so barren and hostile and altogether dreary that it would be a waste of energy for any person to even entertain the notion of trying to return ever again. The terms will be up to you. Ultimately, I can promise you that I am a man of honor and that –"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Symmes, I tell you all of this truly with a heavy heart, but ultimately, it is the conviction of our guiding council that, because the individual body does not encapsulate the individual, but instead the individual can be divided into a series of parts, a categorical set of ideologies, to destroy the body is something different than killing. In our language, we call it 'releasing the semblance.'"

"But this is just fascism. The individual is so much more complex than a set of principles or convictions!"

Ava shuddered. "For us, murder is truly only the complete destruction of an idea or a principle. It would mean, for example, releasing the semblance of all of those who practice hedonism or subjectivism or objectivism or asceticism or dream-interpretation or Satanism. An idea or a principle or an ideology is an abstraction which takes a guiding form, and so we believe it is murderous to fully eliminate any idea or its doctrines. A human body, though, is only a

series of parts, and to destroy a part which is tainted is to keep alive the health of the whole. I am sorry, Mr. Symmes, truly."

"But we are believers in the Hollow Earth! If we do not return, that school of thought disappears. It will be murder nonetheless!"

"But we are residents of the Hollow Earth, Mr. Symmes, and we know of it even without you. And besides which, the existence of the Hollow Earth is a substantive truth, not a philosophy. It just is, much as a table or a glass of water or a flower just is. Again, I wish this weren't all so."

"But, but…there must be something-"

"I must go now, Mr. Symmes. Try to dream well and forget the chronological mess of the waking life."

"No! I won't. I'll—"

Chapter Nine

On the platform of the gallows, ten ropes hung in a clean line. Perhaps it was a pathetic attempt at philanthropy, Symmes thought – a public execution. Ten at a time would travel together to their deaths, and those Interiorites who had blindly accepted this mandate, done nothing to stop it, would be forced to watch, to etch into their skulls the kicking and thrashing, blood draining, gasping for air, and then, the stillness, a final twitch passing through an arm or a leg. The five who had stayed aboard the ship had been found. They stood in the last row, where they would wait until all the others were gone to finally meet their own deaths. An Interiorite stood by each rope, ready to assist in the maneuvering of the head and the tightening of the noose. In the first row stood Gillow and his young son. The elder's eyes were glassed over, though the younger's didn't shine at all, seemed already silent and dead, all the youth gone out of him. They were ordered to step forward, and Gill reached his hand to the right, gripped his son's shoulder. At the other end of the row stood Repps, weeping. Each was allowed a few words. They began with Ignatious.

"Ne'er wanted much but enough ter live by and a bit extra fer a strong drought.' Eases the spirit. Sorry May – thas me wife – for not staying wit ya when ye told me not ter go. And ter little Sarah, fer missen the day ye was born, not putting ye firs' an all. Love yous, and I'll be a'watching from da uder place."

The man began to sob convulsively, and Gillow stepped forward with pen and paper, his hand wobbling and shaking, scrawling his final pronouncement. He held it up to the crowd, and a woman at the front spoke it loudly, such that his words echoed to the back of the crowd, punctuated by Ignatious's heaving.

"*It has all only been a strangest, most illuminating, and most horrific dream. Lydia, Gray, I will see your bright faces bathed soon in the morning light*."

He stepped back, reached for his son again, both their palms clammy and rigid. Gray kept ahold of his father, opened his mouth to speak ragged words, but before he could, there came a cry from the crowd.

"This bodily semblance is, in outwardly parts, at the very least, that ink-art renderer, word spinner, weaver of cerulean worded marriages where abstract encounters concrete, scenarios rendered permanent on tree-sourced unblemished sheets. Here is the brain-crafter and ink-renderer of 'The Shadows Reflection Did Waywardly Swim!'"

The sea of eyes widened, and all stared deeply into Gillow's haggard face, trying to penetrate the crevices lining his cheeks and framing his eyes, to find something that might betray the fallacy of words just pronounced. "Render something vocally!" cried one of the crowd, which now held the loose conviction, Gillow realized, that he was some well-known figure from the Interior. And now they wanted him to speak, he who hadn't blankly uttered a word in nearly two years. "Render something vocally, render something vocally," grew into a chant, and Gillow's face became even more flushed and panicked than it had been a few moments preceding his own death, for he felt the weight of all of their destinies combined. Whatever move he made now would determine the bodily fate of them all. He grew redder and redder, and his cheeks puffed out, and he began to emit a whiney half-croak, prolonged and ragged, until, the crowd quieting down, excited expressions morphing into slanted mouths and braided brows, Gray stuttered loudly, "He, he, he…can't speak. L-l-l-leave him be!"

At last, Gillow collected himself enough to motion for his parchment to be passed back to him. With it returned, he wrote the only thing he could think might influence a crowd so caught in their conviction that he was some famous man of the Interior.

If you are to kill them, then you are to kill me first.

Chapter Ten

Gillow, Gray, and Tomfy were loaded into a long, rectangular vehicle. It was perhaps twenty feet in width and only five in length and tall enough that all, with the exception of lofty Gray, could comfortably walk about. It was furnished with an excessive number of pillows and blankets, some so hard and heavy one might assume they were filled with stones, if not for their smooth complexion, the exterior fabric seeming to be firmly woven to the material of the interior, such that it could not be pulled about like a pup in his skin. Other cushions were liquid soft, though instead of sloshing when shaken, they hummed. Likely all to be utilized for the creation of different dreamscape permutations to satisfy the Interiorite's excessive concern for sleep, reasoned Symmes. Four furry creatures with girthy spiraling horns and three-humped chests pulled the vehicle in pairs steered by one of two Interiorites who sat outside the enclosed wagon, at the helm. Tomfy, Gray, and Gillow were visited twice each day by Ava, who otherwise stayed with Symmes in a second, similarly furnished, wagon.

The Interiorites had tried, at first, to take only Gillow and Symmes, but the former had written a note stating that he would refuse to cooperate in any form unless Gray and Tomfy – who had become something of a second son to the silent man -- stayed with him. They had agreed, though they insisted firmly upon Symmes's segregation. The rest of the crew were returned to their prison cells to await whatever may come, which would be determined by the journey of the four wagon-enclosed men through the Interior lands.

"So, they believe he is some prominent figure, somebody respectable, and that executing him would've made a real mess," suggested Tomfy.

"And you were in the line-up as a form of protest," said Gray, looking to his father. "Against the laws sanctioning the execution of foreigners. So that, to uphold the law, they'd

have to kill you as well, which would demonstrate such a state of complacency, perhaps show how afraid people truly are of the government, how far from idyllic --"

Gillow held up the parchment he'd been scrawling across. He was nodding fervently. *Prove through my own bodily execution the significance of the body, especially the body replete with ideas a society has often feasted upon.*

"And now you've taken a vow of silence!" exclaimed Tomfy. "'The famous word-spinner refuses to spin words until all are released or death does him part.'"

"And you're refusing to write as well. Remember—" looking to Tomfy, "he's supposed to be an ink-artist, a word-spinning ink-artist or something of the like."

"Well perhaps he's written a manifesto of sorts, a call to action, to make illegal the execution of foreigners. And if he is executed still, it will become his alma mater, the final words he ever rendered. The exposure of the failures of an Interior government that persecutes blindly and incoherently."

Okay, but why would I be writing in the language of the Exterior?

"It's all part of the statement of solidarity," said Tomfy. "You'd rather die as one of us than go on living as one of them. It's simply another gesture to show how entirely you've removed yourself from a society capable of performing such gruesome acts."

"But why the need to keep the two of us with you?" asked Gray.

"Perhaps," answered Tomfy, looking to Gillow, "you needed a few Exteriorites to travel with you, ensure that your cause is kept alive, that you aren't manipulated into believing we were all set free while in actuality they only continued the execution in your absence. With us here, the Interior government remains accountable for our return to the rest of the crew and our further

return to the Exterior. Gillow can write in the manifesto of his determination to return with us, to make certain of all of our safety."

"And then, if it all works, he'll make his own escape by sailing out to meet us in the night!" exclaimed Gray.

So Gillow set to work writing, his manifesto sprawling quickly across many pages in a desperate fit to finish before their arrival.

For two weeks, they traveled in this manner, Gillow scribbling, sprawled bodily over the wagon's strange pillows and cushions, the other two devising silent games in silent languages, as it was silence that Gillow needed most of all to project the false manifesto onto the page. Alternately, Tomfy and Gray sat each to one side of the widthy wagon and watched foreign landscapes speed past, the steady bouncing over rocks and uneven soil become so familiar that it often seemed it was the outside moving while the wagon stood still, the rattling and shaking only a slow-pulsed grumble of annoyance at the world, for looking so different from one second always to the next. They passed swamps, on the surface of which drifted phosphorescent tessellations of lily-pads, which glowed brightest at the light-shifting moments of the twenty-four hour cycle – the rise and set of the sun, which was more a fading, for the rippling curve of the sun at its bloodiest moments could never be seen. During the night, huge insects boasting eight rows of ten legs that spiraled down from a spheroid body suctioned themselves to every square inch of the wagon, never gnawing at it or burrowing into it, but still gleaning some apparent energy from its substance. In the morning, it was the flurry of releasing 'pops' that woke the prisoners and drivers alike and set them to riding again. The nights were incredibly long. Ava and the drivers slept twelve or thirteen hours at least, and so Gillow, Gray, and Tomfy spent long expanses of time in the wakeful darkness, their minds stretching to cosmigraphic locations. They

were always relieved to park in the vicinity of a phosphorescently décored pond, for sight has the ability to keep the wandering mind grounded and in the dim light, Gillow was able to continue writing. One night at dusk they passed distantly what appeared to be an Interiorite city entirely bathed in an auroral light like that of the glowing lily-pads but with a greater myriad of hues – pinks, blues, greens, yellows. It was as if, using some sort of adhesive, the humans of the concavity had covered every building with networks of luminous vines which climbed the heights of the tallest building, marvelous in itself to Gillow, Gray, and Tomfy, who had always resided in small towns in which the tallest structures were a mere fifth in height of what they now observed. The distant glow was warm and seemed to hang in the air between buildings, so that the city entire became enveloped by a clear shimmering sphere, preternatural and alluring in character.

The three, though often mystified by their surroundings, grew increasingly stir-crazy. They had become accustomed to confinement of a particular kind during the months aboard the ship, but in that confinement was always present a sense of agency, an excited anticipation, but now there was only the dread in light of eighteen hours of darkness approaching, and agency only existed when deciding which pillows to lie across. They started to become less certain of Gill's manifesto the longer the journey endured, for they supposed that, if it was necessary to travel hundreds of miles, they must be in pursuit of some place of great esteem, perhaps the capital city and the governmental headquarters therein, where the people would be intelligent and manipulative and very perceptive. So Gray took to cracking his long fingers and toes and back and wrists, knees, ankles, neck, elbows and jaw, Tomfy bit his nails until they were bloodied stumps, and the veins in Gillow's eyes could be felt to pulse, spots of color floating over the air whenever he broke his iron-fixed gaze from white pages run black.

Then, after two weeks, the wagon came to a mid-morning stop, and it did not move again. Gillow, Gray, and Tomfy sat in prolonged expectation until Ava collected them, and they exited the wagon at long last, Gray, who had only been able to fully elongate by laying across the wagon's floor, elated to stand and stretch wonderfully upward. They had stopped at the base of a truly elephantine tree. In fact, it seemed they were in a forest in which the trees grew in width rather than height, most about twenty feet tall, but three, four, even five times that in diameter. They grew sparsely, but still the largest boasted trunks so wide that they began to press into one another, branches dancing and twirling in polite courtship until they could not resist contact any longer and became so fused that one could only discern their duplicity by crooked lines that darted about the wooded spines, faint delineations of one as two.

"Follow me," came Ava's liquid voice. They stepped in line behind her, Symmes joining at the rear, the manifesto tucked into Gillow's jacket, all clammy with anticipation. They moved around the base of the elephantine tree until Ava stepped leftward and seemed to disappear into it. All turned to follow, finding Ava had stepped through a small door into a huge hollow, containing only, at its center, a great spiraling staircase, which sprouted from the floor and grew up to the ceiling, a tree within a tree, the prodigious banister endowed with intricate renderings of three-eyed boars, foot-long wooly caterpillars, and some bird which resembled the lonely night-breeding cacupo with his foghorn call, crying and crying eight hours each night for his lost love, who only comes to answer him one night in every five years.

At the top of the staircase, Ava stepped out, apparently onto the air, and Gray lunged after her and out onto the air as well, the others yelling in alarm. But neither fell, instead they only dangled in space, and when the others stood at a different angle to the opening, they spotted a bridge that seemed spun of spider-wool, for it was so nearly transparent, only given away by

spots of light that got caught in its lace. All followed quickly, not trusting the deceptive thread. They entered the top floor of a second hollowed tree, about which stacks of paper were strewn self-reflexively about. Tessellating across the network of spider-web bridges, they continued to trek, though from each, they could never spot any other, and indeed they became more and more confused always about the path heretofore traversed. Finally, a vast echoing sitting room was reached, reminiscent of the old wagon for its quantity of variegated pillows and cushions, though these were now adhered to a number of chair and couches and ottomans of different lengths, widths, backrest heights, leg heights, and recline angles.

Ava told them to sit, and so they did, remaining in a small cluster, silent and still, with the exception of Gray, who picked audibly at a seam in his jelly-textured armchair. And then, through a door on the far side of the room, appeared a man who rendered Gillow's manifesto instantly null, kaput, purposeless, actively nonexistent, un-applicable, utterly un-usable. He was average height, with broad shoulders, and thick, pliable legs, like youthful saplings. Beard and hair seemed to grow, unkempt, into one another, a cloudy charcoal hue, with small braids sometimes emerging from the mess. Brows were heavy enough that one expected them to merge into the tangle of hair as well, but they kept their marginal distance. Nose was shapely and attractive, and his eyes were a deep swimmable blue that betrayed a depth of emotion uncharacterizable. It was only evident from the eyes that he was not an unfeeling man.

Gillow stood and walked slowly towards the man. All looked on, incapable of comprehension. Gillow and the man stood beside one another, and the creases in their vascular hands, the tapering lines of their mouths, the expressions of the eyes, even the nervous mannerisms – the twittering of pointer and middle fingers on left hand, the biting of cheek

insides – were exactly the same in every way. They were perfect replicas of one another, each now identifiable to the group only by the clothing that adorned them.

Finally, it was the man, the Gillow replicate, who whispered, "Gillow, may I embrace you?"

Gillow hesitated, taken aback by the question. He took out a piece of parchment and surged through a variety of different possible reactions, pen twitching in hand, before settling on rage.

Embrace me! Who in the hell are you? What in the hell is going on here?!

Symmes could be heard muttering, "…just as I had thought. All these years…oh God above…"

Gillow swung around, scribbling feverishly.

What in the hell are you muttering, Symmes? What are you getting at! This is just as you had thought! That I had some identical twin living on the Interior? Just what --

"Gillow, we are—" began his Interior double.

"Perhaps you should sit down first," Symmes cut in, leading him back to his seat.

"Tomfy," he said, "do you recall the room the fiery-breasted jay led you to during the tempest?"

The boy nodded. "The library."

"The Room of Unknown Literature, yes. It is a library I inherited from my father and which I spent great chunks of my childhood traversing."

Gray stared intensely on, daring Symmes to continue, though Symmes didn't seem to take notice.

"Once, it was filled with mysteries. It contained un-authored books, books in unidentifiable languages, books never seen before by any scholar, books purported to have magical properties, like a book whose words could only be sung, or one book which always told the story of the reader's life from start to finish, up until the moment of reading, books untitled, banned books, unfinished books, books claimed to have been written by children who died before they ever knew how to read."

Gillow was nodding vigorously, motioning for him to get on with it.

"The library is what made me become a scientist, Gillow," he said calmly, "for I could never rest until I solved the mystery of how each one of those books came to be, how they functioned, what their place was in the history of this world. So I spent many years solving literary mysteries, trying to understand my own library with the aid of scholars and musicians and shamans and circus freaks and, most importantly, other libraries. I traveled extensively, and eventually I was able to find answers for every book. Every book except for one. I'm sure you can guess which that was, Tomfy."

"The book the jay showed me, the one you had me seal in the jar in case all else was lost during the tempest."

"Yes, the very one. Now, that book's mystery first sprung from its language. It was written in a language unrecognizable to every scholar from every field, every tribesman in every village, everybody, it seemed, on earth. I had at one point a team of some fifty people working to try to discover its origin, but all were unsuccessful. We were able to accomplish one significant thing, though. We discovered that the book was a translation. The symbols were codified, and it was recognized as the ancient Platonian text, 'Cratylus,' but still, the particular relationship between subject, verb, and adjective did not match that of any language group,

ancient or modern, that we were familiar with. People grew annoyed with me. They said, 'come on, we've solved it. It's probably from some obscure early writing society. All the other texts were lost, or they were conquered, and their writings were all burned. There wouldn't have been too many anyway. Not totally unfathomable,' they said. But it *was* unfathomable. These symbols resembled no other language ever seen. They were utterly unrelated -- detached, in a way, from the rest of humanity. Still, I could find nothing more about it until a few years ago."

Gillow's expression was softening as he prepared for the relief of clear answers which would surely emerge through an explication as thorough and long-winded as this one.

"At that time, I was reading Pythagorus, one of the earliest advocates for the spherical earth. I'd already begun working on Hollow Earth Theory. And suddenly, it struck me. What if the translation was unrecognizable not because any record of the language or its speakers had been lost in some ancient sacking, but because the writer was not a citizen of the Exterior world? I had already concluded that, if indeed the earth were hollow, it was also habitable within, and with that in mind, I wondered if it was possible that it might *already* be inhabited by humankind or that it was, thousands of years ago. But there were of course no records of the Greeks ever being visited by Interiorite people. In fact, most of them still believed the earth to be flat. Certainly, there couldn't have been Greeks, either, who traveled to the Interior. An exchange just seemed so unlikely. If it had happened, it would be history's greatest secret. But it just seemed incomprehensible – sailing and navigation methods were not good enough to allow for such an exchange, and it truly would have to have been an *exchange*, if one was capable of learning the other's language – of making a translation. And so I began to theorize about the possibility of the parallel."

"The parallel?" asked Gray.

"Yes," came replicate Gillow, "the parallel. The alignment of the Exterior and the Interior. The two were once perfect mirror images, every blade of grass moving at the same time, every human being possessing an identical twin who looks, moves, speaks, loves, laughs, dreams, and thinks as you do. There were some minute differences. The written languages. Sometimes, due to the lesser amount of sunlight on the Interior, the tone of the skin, the colors of fauna and flora. The flow of time. But otherwise, all was exactly the same. The book that was such a mystery to you, Mr. Symmes, was no translation. It was written thousands of years ago by the Plato of the Interior."

"And so, all of us? Tomfy and I as well?" asked Gray.

"No, not you. You are too young. The parallel was broken thirty-nine years ago. November the fifth, seventeen eighty."

"My birthday," mumbled Gillow.

"So it's true! Something did change," exclaimed Symmes. "I couldn't figure it out at all."

"But how could you possibly have known?" asked Gray.

"Three years ago, I started to prepare for the expedition. I was recruiting crewman, staying in a hotel in New York, when I heard rumors of a book-eating man. Gill. At first, I was only fascinated. I tried to learn all I could about you. At some point, I heard that you had been pursuing writing, had had some incredible dream of a full literary masterpiece, but lost it at the waking and gone a bit mad. I was deeply saddened, until I learned that, in your state of 'madness,' you'd started claiming to have found a few pages of your unwritten manuscript in the belly of a herring, a fish I believed migrated each year between the concavity and the convexity. I thought, my God, his Interior self has written the book that he forgot! But I couldn't

understand why or how. If he had done what you could not, it would mean that the parallel was incomplete. So I decided that I had to meet you, that you had to come on the expedition. But I couldn't tell anyone what I thought. Half the world already thinks I'm batty. Hollow Earth Theory and all. I would surely have lost my funding. Still, I was certain you would be the key to understanding the parallel. But what happened? How could the parallel have broken?"

Gillow tore a bit of parchment from his left breast pocket and began scribbling quietly. His doppelgänger began again.

"It was the date of our birth. A few Exteriorites, long departed from their intended course, drifted despairingly into the Arctic Circle and landed on the tiny singular island which sits directly on the Verge. It is a place where time reputedly stands still, the whole island a philosopher's stone, an elixir of life. If one lived there, one would never die. There had always been rumors of its existence, but nobody that we know of has ever been able to find it before or since. The lost Exteriorites spent some stretch of time on the island – perhaps a few days, perhaps one-hundred years."

Gillow threw the note he'd scribbled at Gillow, who paused, bent sharply to pick it up.

"The book? Of course, you want to see the book. *Our* book."

"Later Gillow," said Symmes, anxious for his own answers, robust and complete.

"Yes, I suspected you would want to see it. There is a copy just over there, on the divan with the hard black cushions. They're filled with black pearls you know. It's the place where I sat most frequently while I wrote it."

Gillow scrambled away from the conversation, gripped the book firmly, caressed its weight, moved his own weight onto the cushions, thousands of pearls cleaved apart and truncated, weight spreading evenly over them. He read the title with the same motion in his

mind's breath that there had been the first time he'd ever pronounced his wife's name, Lydia, and his son's after that. *The Shadow's Reflection Did Waywardly Swim.* He opened it delicately, as though peeling a flower in the night.

"When the crew finally decided to leave, they'd lost track of where they'd come from, and their compass was spinning wildly. So they sailed out a bit until it seemed to right itself, then they moved south, not knowing, of course, that south had become north, and north, south. When they came truly inside, the parallel broke, and our world began to diverge."

"But there must have remained some connection between those born previous to the break and perhaps some lesser connection between those born on the day of the break. Like you and Gillow?"

"Quite the opposite actually. For everybody alive up until that day, November the fifth, 1780, the existence of the other just was. They were one and the same -- the duality could not be ascertained. But to be born on the Day of Divergence precluded a dichotomous existence. One was 'of the divergence.' In a sense, Gillow and I were grown together in utero, when Exterior and Interior were fused, but at the moment of birth, perhaps the most traumatic of all life events, we were lost to each other. Before this day, one was always birthed, in a sense, with themself as company. Beyond birth, one learns to turn away from the self, look to the world instead, and so that self so desperately needed in those first moments is forgotten. But for Gillow and me, the separation came at the abrupt moment when we were most necessary to one another, and that can never be forgotten.

Symmes, so typically insensible to any expression of emotion, asked, "But how did you know? How did you discover that the worlds were paralleled?"

"Simple discourse with the crew of the Francesca. They eventually washed upon the shores of North Americus, and we were led to understand that they'd come from our equivalent Spain. They were sent home, all of us still believing, of course, that we were of the same world, except that they finally arrived home, not to husbands and wives and parents and children, but to husbands and wives and parents and children already accompanied by themselves."

"And what happened to them?"

"Mostly they stayed inside, abandoned their Exterior families, for now they could have everything they once had, but they could have themselves as well. And the possibility of knowing the self, but also the potential to turn away from both that self and all those whom they loved, whenever they chose to -- for if they were gone, the Interior self would still remain – became a more lucrative end for most than attempting the long journey home. They came and went in faithfulness and loyalty to their Interiorite friends and families, and they forgot their Exterior lives. It was through a thorough anthropological study of these processes that our government began to consider the Breaking of the Parallel other than a glorious moment of opportunity for humankind. Of course, many were anxious to meet their Exterior selves, and so at first, the prohibition of integration and even contact was quite controversial. But as our society began naturally to diverge, based on the flow of Interior time, into one concerned mainly with abstraction and metaphor – this is when the spoken language, too, diverged to become ideologically, rather than visually, focused – when this all happened, the self became far less significant to the individual, and the controversy lost much of its steam. Still, executionary laws are widely debated. As well as the methodology of capturing outsiders -- border towns whose sole industry is finding Exterior ships, hooking them into a system of ropes and pulleys all

hidden beneath the tides, and then executing the catch publically -- it's deplorable, it's absolute—"

"So there was nothing stuck in the rudder?" asked Symmes. "We were just fish on a line, being unknowingly reeled in to our deaths? Well, there's no fairness to that at all, it's absolutest, totalitarian, downright evil, undemocratic—"

"I agree with you. The methodology is greatly flawed. It is the reason Ava has brought you, in secrecy, to see me."

"In secrecy?" asked Tomfy.

"Yes," came Ava's silvery voice, "It was the ruling of our town council to send you directly to the Parliament for Grounded Realities. But your drivers – Elise and Dew – and myself – we reject the executionary laws, though we've never had any means of resisting them until now. We had to at least give Gillow and the Author" – this is what she called his double – "a chance to meet."

"But why?" asked Gray. "My father may have been mistaken for you at the border," nodding to his father's double, "but surely the Reality Government, or what have you, will figure it out quickly enough. Why take such a risk only to prolong some eventuality?"

"Because--"

But here was a new voice, new to all with the exception of Gray, for whom it rose like the sliver of a dream.

"The death of the one is the death of the other."

And he continued, very scratchy, with a lot of hiccups and jumps in tone and pitch, the man's voice box all rusted over. But when he spoke further his language was unrelated to the discussion. He had plucked the line from his own book in paraedolia -- for it was, uncannily, the

answer to Gray's question, which was posed not to him, but it's end had coincided with the start of a sentence rendered that seemed to Gill the obvious answer. *The death of the one is the death of the other.* He continued to read, ejecting his own words without ever having orally consumed them. He read until his voice grew strong and hearty, and he was positively *pronouncing*, impregnating the words with luster and emotion. And at the end of the chapter, Gray said, "Dad?" and Gillow, raising bleary eyes in a quarter-orbit up from the page, chin still tilted down, all a nerve with expectation, replied softly, "Gray."

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"-- But they don't know that I know anything," said Gill, much later. "It's why they kept Symmes in a carriage separate from ours, is it not? Unaware of the parallel, I would also have no idea of my connection to you." He nodded to his double. "I wouldn't understand my power, even at a distance, over your life."

"Right, so they might let you go, but they won't take any risk greater than that. Even if you reveal all that you know, threaten suicide to free the others, they will likely let us both die rather than allow so many to return to the Exterior."

"Logically then," came Symmes, "we cannot go keep going."

"No," said Gillow.

"But they will come for us very soon. As soon as they realize that Ava defected from the intended course of travel."

"So what do we do?" asked Tomfy.

"We leave – together -- right away," answered Gillow's double. "Stay the narrow trail through the woods. We'll go to the home of an old friend of mine."

And so they descended all, crisscrossing back through tree-house rooms and spiraling down the staircase, Gillow back behind his book all the while, the reading gradually filling him up, as though quenching thirst after a delirium-inducing dehydration. There was nothing egotistical about the exercise. It was not that Gillow found his language too beautiful to turn away from. Rather, the return of his own dreamed language was the echo returned, reverberated off of every wall and finally coming back to strike him, to swell him up with noise after a silence so long he'd assumed the vast emptiness had swallowed his language entirely, used it to nourish its own bleak and vacuous solitude.

In the carriage, he read until it was too dark to continue, at which point he merged into the conversation, the Author speaking at present.

"—the Baron came to me very excited. 'I found a hole near the base of a willow tree,' he explained, 'and the willow's whiling leaves grow down into the hole, which is perhaps ten feet deep. And so I can climb down the rope-ish leaves until I am hanging under the ground! But still, I am up in a tree!' See, the Baron has spent perhaps forty years in the branches of trees, all of which, up until now, have been above the ground. He has never once come down, for he has developed a sort of new philosophy of elevated living. But now that he's discovered this hole, he's taken to digging with a stick, his body wrapped and tied in willow leaves such that he dangles just above the bottom of the hole. And the more he digs, the longer the willow branches grow, so that now, he often hangs hundreds of feet below the Interior surface, perhaps farther from ground level than he ever was in the tallest treetops."

"So you're saying you think it could be a way out? That we can just lower ourselves down into this hole and come back out at the Exterior?"

"Well, not quite. The hole is not nearly deep enough yet for us to consider it as an escape route."

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And in the hours when it is so late that it suddenly feels quite early, night abandoning age for the youthly vigor of a not yet dewy morning, the carriage stopped. The Author emerged first, urging the others to stay close behind, for a gaping hole hidden by the darkness was not far off. A lapping could be heard, water brushing sensuously against the river banks. The Author stepped carefully in the direction of the water, first striking a long match and lighting what appeared to be an oil lamp, except that the flame was pure white, and it emitted a scent which Symmes likened to scorched dandelions. Just as the silvery reflections of the moon began to dance across the eye, betrayal of even the slowest flowing river, the Author stopped and held up his hand. He bent forward, dangling his lamp into the cavernous hole, and the others gathered round to peer inside as well, but the light tapered off into darkness after only a few feet, below which nothing could be seen.

"Call down to him," suggested Gill.

"No, we need to stay quiet. The forest is dangerous at night."

Instead, the Author plucked at the willow's taut, dangling chords, which hung deep into the hole. The plucking produced a hollow sort of riff – insubstantial, like the sound of muted guitar strings. He thrummed and twanged for perhaps thirty seconds. Then, for a gathering of minutes, there was silence. And finally, a cumulative ruffling, which lasted near twenty minutes, until the Baron had hoisted himself all the way back up and tied himself off to dangle just a foot above the ground.

"Word-wanderer, these spider spun reverberations, the flesh maneuvering of the green goddess who grows steadily in both directions -- had me suspecting your bodily presence."

"Yes Baron, here I am. It is wonderful to see you again. Were you asleep down there?"

"Well yes, but why the old English, Author? Who have you brought along?"

"Take a look for yourself."

At which point, the dangling man, dark bushy hair stuck with leaves and twigs, body lithe, arms boasting an elegant strength from so many years spent climbing, turned to the boys, who were fanned out behind the Author, and he looked them up and down, stopping sharply when he came to Gillow.

"Can it really be? But how? You couldn't have dug your way through?"

"No, no, Baron, indeed they could not have. They came from the North, a sailing expedition. The rest of their crew has been imprisoned in Winnefax."

"Oh?"

"They are in need of a particular type of assistance that I believe you might be capable of offering. And, in turn, I suspect they may be able to give you something that you have been desiring for quite some time," said the Author.

"It'll be dangerous, I'm sure."

"Certainly, but you're the best climber there is. Nobody can catch you unless they're determined to set a forest on fire."

"Enough flattery, come out with it, you old pen rattler," intoned the Baron.

"My suggestion is this. You must go with a team of your finest climberly friends, to the prison in Winnefax where the crew are being held. Drug the guards or what have you, and unlock the cages in the night. Bring all of the men up into the trees. Nobody will suspect them

of being climbers. Teach them to move amongst the branches, and lead them here, where they will not be found, for all will suspect them of fleeing by their own ship. Once here, they will help you to dig. With that many men, in a few months time, I am certain we will be able to reach the Exterior. You will dangle so deep that you come out and begin to rise into the air again, and the men will be able to return home at long last."

The Baron leaned back against the air, his left arm and body forming a right triangle with the rope-ish branch, and he relaxed his neck back to look up into the constellating branches.

"A secret tunnel to the Exterior…I could see the Italian forests, the Ombrosa of the Convexity. I could find Viola again, or perhaps we are already together, swinging through the high branches of the outside world." He let out a sigh, sat back up with a start. "But do you think it is our right, Author? To risk the secret of the Interior? And if things turn sour, that then becomes our weight to bear."

"And yet," came the Author, "if we do not try, these men go to their graves without so much as an explanation. If we dig, it will be in utter secrecy, and when the men emerge on the other side, perhaps you and I will dig alternate openings which branch from the main tunnel, and close up the exiting-entrance and the entering-exist, so that only we remain capable of moving between worlds. If we dig, Baron, we will do it to uphold so many forgotten values. For, to regard Abstraction and Metaphor and Pure Ideology is one thing, but the application of those values which loses the individual the right to his or her own body when it is perceived to threaten the peace – truly the stasis – of the abstract -- such a 'well-intentioned' system threatens totalitarian-ly. It threatens mindlessness disguised as peaceful dreaming, it threatens a reverberating silence when discourse is most direly needed. It threatens -- "

"Alright, Author!" the Baron suddenly exclaimed. "I've been looking for a momentary repose from digging anyhow. I will go to Winnefax."

And with that, the Baron pulled at the willow strings before him until he entered a staggering swing, and on the third great swing, he gripped the high thick branch of a nearby tree, shook himself loose of his harness and was off into the tree-topped night. A faint rustling could be heard in his wake as Symmes and Tomfy and Gillow stood all below, dumbstruck and silent, and the night was, after just half a minute, as quiet as ever it had been, so that for a moment, Gillow thought that perhaps the Baron had only been an illusion, that the cavernous hole had been empty after all, never having been the hole of any man at all, just some animal's hole he'd narrated with a dream.

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The outlaws continued their trek. The nameless Author told Gillow how, in his youth, he had often dreamed long narratives, and when he woke and relayed the stories to his father, his father would say, "sounds like an old Shakespearean play – Hamlet – or, sounds like something out of Don Quixote," and later, when he read these books, he knew that they had been the stuff of his dreams, and so he often thought of Gillow, imagined him this great scholar already by the age of twelve. Gillow, in turn, told the Author about Lydia, how she'd hated the smell of oysters while pregnant with Gray, how she was round and soft in unexpected places.

They were going, the Author explained, to the house of an old friend, a woman with a name –Elizabeth – for she, too, had once been a citizen of the Exterior.

"She is," he explained, "one of the founders of the Broken Parallel. She was on that first ship – the Francesca – which washed upon that island where time neither passes nor regresses, but stands like a soldier at attention, never moving at all. There, while gathering wood for a fire,

a splinter lodged into her left pointer finger and refused to come out. She bathed it in brine, squeezed it and prodded it, rubbed it with herbs and extracts, but there was nothing that could make that little sliver reemerge. Now, forty years after her arrival at the Interior, Elizabeth has not aged a day. While others from the voyage long ago began to sprout crows-feet and grow round bellies and feel the joints in their hands and fingers start to swell arthritically, Elizabeth, who was thirty-one at the time of her arrival, has remained slim-figured, with cheeks still full of color, not a wrinkle to be found upon her olive complexion, her small widow's peak still sprouting hairs of complex shades of brown and gold, the vision in her near-black eyes as sharp as ever. Ultimately, it has been deduced that that unbudging splinter, whose wood was grown on the Island Outside of Time, has made time fall away from the woman herself. The absence of time was inserted into her, and now, she carries it with her always. One must thus be very careful in her presence, for time slows down as you draw near to her, such that one may spend a week in her home and emerge to find that six months have passed in the world of the uniform, linear-flow."

"So, going to Elizabeth is a sort of method of expediting, for us, the work to be done by the Baron and the crew?"

"Yes, we go into hiding in Feitlertown and we wait, staying close enough to Elizabeth that, in a week or two, we can emerge, potentially ready to make for the Exterior," answered the Author.

"So those in pursuit of us will be given less opportunity to find us – they might search for us a whole month, but we will be gone already within a week!" exclaimed Tomfy.

"And by that time, people will realize that the Author has gone missing," remarked Ava. "They will get wind of what happened in Winnefax and assume he's been executed. Many will

be outraged. There will be a flood of protestors, and thus, the Parliament will be less focused on trying to recapture the crewman and altogether slower to action if, after all, they do catch us."

Chapter Eleven

Elizabeth was very quiet. When she did speak, it was with a long drawl, as though awareness of her life as an infinite expanse had penetrated her speech, allowed it to become slow and careful and eloquent. She was beautiful, as the Author had proclaimed, and had a fitting ethereality about her. She seemed to glide between the rooms of her sparse home, which was decorated by a great tree that grew up through the middle of it, the branches of which, when they touched the walls, knowingly transformed themselves into sprawling vines décored with huge white-flecked charcoal flowers, each cluster of eight thick petals laying down flat, sharp at the edges, so that, fully bloomed, they looked like pieces cut out of the twilit evening sky.

"Author," she had pronounced upon their exhausted arrival, late in the night, "you have come seeking refuge."

He nodded, stepped close to her, but there was no embrace.

"I heard rumors that your doppelgänger had washed up at one of the border towns. I was prepared to go looking for you. But then I heard you'd gone missing as well. Thought you were either dead or in pursuit of your double. But I never expected the both of you to show up here, together."

"Ava, a translator from Winnefax, defected from her course, brought Gillow – that is his name -- to meet me."

Ava, standing across from Elizabeth, nodded silently. Elizabeth looked at her with a deep weariness.

"I believe you have done a great thing, Ava. Thank you."

Ava nodded shyly again. She was reserved in Elizabeth's presence. Symmes had wondered if perhaps the Woman Outside of Time might be something of a deity to some Interiorites – and he seemed to find his answer in Ava's reverence for the olive-skinned woman.

The Author began an extended explanation of their circumstances, but Gray and Gillow, Tomfy and Symmes all seemed to recede into themselves, trying to perceive the slowing of time, which was surely running like molasses now as they all sat so proximal to Elizabeth, the molecules of air that moved in and around her body alternately flowing between Tomfy's toes and catching against the hairs on Gray's forearms, and floating into the strong crevasse at Gillow's collarbone. They all moved their bodies discreetly about, and Tomfy even tried whispering quickly to himself, under his breath, but there was no perceptible change in time's motion.

They were to remain enclosed in Elizabeth's house, so that the other townspeople might not recognize the Author or his double. The two carriage drivers had gone on that first night, only dropping Gillow, Tomfy, Gray and Ava on Elizabeth's stoop before continuing into the quiet night, onward and onward until they might find a resting place in a new and distant life.

All moved anxiously about the house. The Author tried to explain to Gillow the methodology through which metaphors are consistently articulated colloquially, though the subject at hand remains understood. Gillow commented, "And it's such a miraculous mode of speaking, for it forgets the mundanities of the world. Every moment of life, of existence, is worthy of poetry, and so one always sees how the everyday is truly miraculous – how mundanity is only an Exterior mythology."

"Yes, and especially when one becomes capable of speaking of dreams – metaphors in and of themselves – in metaphorical language – does one begin to recognize echoing patterns

which reverberate through the mundane and the fantastic alike. Sometimes, for example, the only way to word-ly render the most startling, magnificent dreamscape is to liken it to the simplest of events – it was like the fastening of a shoe, for example, or the early evening dimming, or the drinking of a warm tea."

Symmes noticed one afternoon that there was, perched on the dining room table, a basket of Sworded Vine fruits.

"None of us had ever seen them until we landed on a tiny Exterior island," he told Ava. "We collected many hundreds, and then, unfortunately, a vast quantity were consumed just before a great tempest reared its ugly head. Are they quite common here?"

"Oh yes, they grow wild all over the place – they are known to grow on at least four continents."

"And do people eat them much," he asked, his brow quite elevated.

"People consume them in many different forms in order to live ecstatically in the particular waking dream-state in which one's abstract or hallucinatory thought movements can be manipulated by other psyche's present – through discourse, or even physical contact -- as opposed to a full dream-state, in which no person but the self is capable of much influence upon the mental movements. In Winnefax and the surrounding lands, most like to juice the plants and then boil the juice and drink it hot, though some will eat them raw or eat only the skin or the sinews which separate one internal section from another."

Time passed slowly in Elizabeth's home, and the anxiety of the waiting made cloistered couples of them all. Gillow and the Author, in the quiet library, remarked upon the easy containment of thousands of words and sentences, all silently shelved around them, pressed up against one another – 'sparrow' kissing the space between 'hollow' and 'crescent' on an opposite

page, the rareness with which ‘morning’ might press against ‘night’ – all of this sequestered language starkly opposed to the language which flowed so easily between them, language which had, for such an expanse, been condemned to sit at the back of Gillow’s throat. It came spewing out, as though it had been accumulating force, waiting to be set loose, and now that his mouth was capable of opening freely, he let it rush out and drench the spaces and people around him, let it encounter all of the architecture which might enclose him, especially that of his very own double.

Ava and Elizabeth came to occupy the intimate space of Elizabeth’s bedroom, where they began to find comfort in one another, for both had a sense of having been displaced from the world, and thus, they were capable of seeing each other with a clarity which was not there when they turned back to look at themselves.

Tomfy and Gray spent much time in the kitchen, trying in spurts to perform their lost boyishness, horsing about and throwing smart witticisms. Both felt that they had become burdens in the end. Tomfy had not been the force that kept his father from madness, as his mother had instructed him to be, and now, if he were to die or remain forever trapped on the Interior – sculptural likenesses all lost – he would have abandoned her for nothing. To the others, they knew, they were only children, and having to constantly regard their safety and whereabouts was just an additional taxation.

And then there was Symmes, coupled with his notebook and wandering about, deep in thought, always scribbling observations, sometimes flipping back a few pages and audibly rejecting some theory he had developed of the Interiorites’ architectural ideologies as they related to their sleeping habits or of the sense of fulfillment produced by domesticity on the Interior versus the Exterior, etc.

It was only during the disjointed morning hours, when the Exteriorites would wake, their Interior counterparts sleeping on and on, that Gillow and Gray, and Tomfy and Symmes, came together for a few hours to read or cook or chat lightly. It was pleasant, the coming together, though the proximity tended also to magnify the anxiety-produced distances, the quiet, the lack of laughter which had begun at their taking, when the Interior had first made prisoners of them all, and they had stood inches from their very own deaths, only turning away at the last moment, saved by the silent man, who existed then only as a ghostly reference to the double – to himself and to the Author.

Chapter Twelve

At the end of a fogged week, the circular navigation of Elizabeth's rooms -- the couples moving together and breaking apart, only changing the topics of conversation and the content of dreams and moods – had become a terrible loop, a festering restlessness. Then, by the late morning cawing of a huge black and red avian creature, whose wingspan was perhaps twice Gray's height – a friend of the Author and the Baron – the graying cycle enclosed by slow-dripping time was finally broken. They stepped outside. Raw air was breathed again. Seven twelve-horned horses were borrowed and mounted. The Author led them back to the place of the hole, and as they neared the river where the willow bowed into the hollow, they were repeatedly showered with acorn-sized metallic cubes which grew out of slots and crevices in the ground and could be plucked from many varieties of trees as well. It wasn't until Tomfy, frustrated, chucked a few back up, the release being met shortly with a whelp, that they realized the fiends were not squirrelly approximations, but rather members of their old crew. Wide grins were cracked, and a flurry of coy insults were tossed down.

"So you've come for the drunken after party, eh?"

"Good luck making yer exit with those pretty little arms."

When they were nearly to the willow-dipped chasm, the trees were positively brimming with Exteriorites. Gray spotted Repps sleeping drunk in the crook of a spiral-branched oak, and nearby Eaton and Deverix dangled upside down at an impressive height.

They were beckoned up into the branches, the men in trees desirous to show off their profound litheness of body, turn clever tree tricks that they'd learned from the Baron. But for Gillow and the Author, Gray and Tomfy, the novelty of the reunion quickly wore away. Ava was jumpy and dejected, the snap of a twig nearly bringing her to tears. Menacing faces

overflowed the architecture of the forest. Rocks snarled and leaves threatened to fall heavy and cut through her, or, if they did drift smoothly down, she felt certain that they carried toxins that would set her skin to oozing and pusing and rotting at last. Perhaps, she thought, she was simply no longer a woman of the world, for both Inside and Outside seemed available only as places to wither and keel.

The Author asked after the whereabouts of the Baron.

"Aven't seen 'im a few hours," remarked a drunken tree-dangler. "Been a wonderin' meself."

"But the signal was sent, was it not? Where could he have run off to?"

Finn climbed down onto Gray's horned horse, more morose than the others.

"A few never got the knack for climbing," he said. "West fell from a tree in the night three weeks back, and we all sat in silence, listened to the haughty breath of those nameless beasts, heard his muscles continue to rip and tear long after he'd stopped screaming."

He told Gray that Ignatious and Oliver, too, a bit older than most of the rest, hadn't been able to mount the trees at all, had tried to alight onto branch after branch for fruitless hours until the slow brightening began, and they'd started along on foot. They were found by a search party and killed, which Finn knew, for it had set their pursuers onto their trail, and they'd been close enough a few times that rumors began to circulate amongst the escapees about the methods of torture and execution they'd heard Interiorites speak of far below.

"It made it impossible for us to come down at all," he said sharply. "So we've learned to piss from the branches and eat raw bloody meat."

They'd all grown thin indeed, Gray noted melancholically.

"We had to learn everything at once or die – let our bodies finally touch ground again with a sharp hollow thud. That's a noise I've heard three times. And when we made it here at last, there was not a moment to rest. We set to digging straight away, and used up our final reserves of energy, which couldn't be called energy at all — just anger, anger and a desperate longing to be back on the other side."

Gray looked at him, as wordless as his father had once been.

"The attitude is all a hoax," Finn concluded, "They're all just happy to finally be escaping this hell."

By the time they met the small clearing where the gaping absence should have been, Finn had nodded off. He came to only as Symmes pronounced, "My, that is strange. I could have sworn this was the place." He was trotting about the base of the willow, and Finn jumped down swiftly, lunged widely and fell in front of Symmes's horned horse, so that the horse whinnied and jerked ninety degrees leftward, pivoting on its taloned rear hooves.

"We cover the hole during the daytime so it can't be spotted," he lectured through clenched teeth. He began moving large branches and other debris out of the way, revealing a rounded vertical perhaps five feet across, which Symmes had very nearly cascaded into. The others dismounted their horned horses and gathered round to peer downward. Tomfy dropped a stone and waited, but nothing was heard. Thick sticks had been hammered at vertical increments into the horizontal dirt and clay to serve as free-floating ladder steps. The willow's leaves flooded the hole, and Gray wondered at their terminus, imagined the Baron shimmying down them, enthralled by their silken quality, their ability to guide him simultaneously up and down.

Gray sat at the edge of the precipice, his legs dangling into the hole, feet lost in the tapering blackness. Half a minute passed, its gesture – so proximal to Elizabeth – a slow

dripping, a coagulation. Gray imagined the distant patter of half-minutes, wondered if the Baron was only caught up in a form of time that falls like fresh rain. He thought of the way time is even capable of bounding forward, positively gushing along, especially on the Exterior, where dreaming and dreams are not the most bountiful of things, and instead there are houses and garments and foodstuffs — an abundance of concrete objects making for time that flows quicker and sterner, for its only intention is uniformity, to pass rigidly, without too much notice.

But then, suddenly, the Baron's voice was heard in the distance.

"— by bureaucracy! You're all so set on your own comfortable dreams that you've forgotten the significance of the individual will to live. Are we not all brothers, after all? Does the beauty and majesty of our dreams not derive from lives in which we weave ourselves together, make tapestries of our thoughts and experiences? The flow of your dreams exists because of your individuality and mine too and the places where you and I and all others intersect. Release me, you bastards!"

The Baron and his captors were nearly upon the clearing by this time. Most of the Exteriorites were in the trees yet, and the Baron, they could see, was being carried by four men who held opposite ends of a branch to which he steadfastly clung. Perhaps he had mounted a wonky tree, and he and the branch had fallen together. The eight on the ground hastily kicked a few branches and leaves over the great hollow, Gillow grabbed his son by the nape of the neck, and all scurried behind the trees.

"Besides which," screeched the Baron, "I am guilty of nothing at all! You stupid bureaucrats have had the misfortune of letting some Author and his double escape you, and now you want to pin it off on me!"

But the forest floor was covered over in roughage, which became animated with noise at the slightest movement. And the Interiorites, so accustomed to studying minute alterations in sound and atmosphere as a methodology for producing varied dreamscape permutations, and accustomed, too, to these woods in the night, knew the difference in sound between a cluster of three-footed stags shifting about and the panicked movements of human feet. A twig snapped. Gillow and Gray were easily found.

"Don't you dare lay a hand on him!" shouted Gillow, kicking into a meaty bicep as it reached for his son's tooth-pick leg. Gray fell and tried to propel himself backwards, but he only rolled clumsily over a small precipice and into the underbrush of a fallen tree. Gillow drew a knife, but his own pursuer jumped over him and landed beside Gray, whose exceedingly long body afforded him an extensive quantity of surface area to latch onto. He grabbed Gray around the torso, but Gill jumped over the precipice and onto his shoulders, so that they all fell. But then two more Interiorites were atop of them, and Gray was scooped up by a stout, hugely muscular man, who folded Gray's squirming body in on itself so that his knees pressed up against his thrashing chest. When Gray was clearly taken, Gillow's body slackened, and he allowed himself to be dragged to where the Baron clung to his branch. He and his son were released in a pile and sat upon by their four pursuers. Their hands were bound and fastened to a long rope, so that they were held like dogs on a leash. All the others had watched intently, heads spinning, but they did not budge, for a vast troop could be heard coming up from behind, and they knew that fighting, now, would only get them all killed.

Of course, Symmes reasoned despairingly, crouched behind an ashy approximation of a maple, as soon as they caught the Baron, hundreds of reinforcements would have been called for, for with the Author and Gillow and Symmes and Tomfy and the whole rest of the crew escaped,

it would be obvious to the Parliament for Grounded Realities that they would all seek to find each other once more. They should have expected it right away when the Baron was absent, though for a moment, the sheer quantity of approaching bodies seemed almost a stroke of luck, for the collective heartbeats of Tomfy and Ava, Elizabeth and the Author and Symmes and all of those hidden above was enough that the trees could be felt to vibrate and pulse if one leaned carefully against them.

"In smallest measure, our own bodily semblances now hold contained the word-weaving dream-spinner, or perhaps the reflection of that ink-art renderer," spat one of the Interiorites holding Gillow and Gray's leash.

"But no reflected shadow shall waywardly swim!"

They laughed.

"For the single semblance is, too, the duplicitous semblance. And both semblances shall shortly be released."

The approaching fleet stopped and huddled in close rows behind the prisoners. They seemed to be regrouping a moment, for they stood quite still, only peering about for signs of more tree-hidden bodies. The Baron continued to yell, hoping his language would cover over any scuttling of leaves or heaving of breath -- the collective pulsations of terror-ridden bodies. Gillow, incapable at the moment of forming a coherent string of insults, instead began to loudly recite an old poem – "This Indian weed, now withered quite, Though green at noon, cut down at night –", and to add to the cacophony, Gray began to sing a sea-shanty he had learned from Lachlan during the voyage. Their captors were readying to tie their mouths, but then a man three rows back from where the Baron was held, who was ignoring the ruckus, instead gazing lissome

up into the trees, spotted dreamy-eyed the moonlit reflection of the scene as it was projected back downward off of a tiny floating orb. It was Repps's cataract-cloudy eye.

"The wayward blowing bodies!" he suddenly shouted. "The waterly-approached, the individually possessed, residents of the unbalanced waking reality, they're hidden in the bodies which move to and fro but remain always in place! They're hidden above like avian semblances in the sky-dwelling whitenesses!"

Arrows were promptly raised and pointed into the branches. But before the Interiorite had released his full conglomerate of adjectives, reaching at the thing without touching it, proclaiming that the men were hidden in the trees without ever truly saying it – the illusion, had it been finished, denoting the deaths of so many above, beginning a battle which could not be won — Elizabeth darted out from behind her tree, a jewel encrusted knife drawn long, and slashed the rope which connected Gillow and Gray to their captors, so that they fell leftward, away from the crowd, which she then leapt upon, the Baron consequently falling backwards onto a mass of bodies, the whole fleet tripping and landing one atop the other. Ava screamed, and Symmes clapped a hand over his mouth. Elizabeth had landed impaled on a night-black arrowhead.

Time seemed to slow cruelly, spectacularly, so that the moment was etched and replayed in microscopic detail, in every gesture that precipitated every other, the tiniest atmospheric interactions – a foot with a branch, an arm swung back at a strange angle – all traceable as they precluded the moment of Elizabeth's death. But then it became clear that the slowing was not only an altercation in perception. No, Elizabeth and the Baron and all of their pursuers lay truly unmoving, absolutely at rest. Soon, Ava began to run toward the pile of bodies.

"Do not touch them!" screamed the Author, who ran out and tackled her to the ground. Still, not a body moved. All were frozen, faces askew, Elizabeth's brow furrowed, the reaching of her splayed limbs so full of intent. Gray and Gillow crawled slowly away and then stood, glassy-eyed, marveling at the frozen heap. The air around those paused bodies seemed intensely pressurized. The others could feel its weight, though they only looked strangely on. And then it was clear. There was a point of contact between them all. Elizabeth's left pinky against the bridge of the Baron's nose, his foot in the gut of one of the men who had carried his branch, which he still managed to cling to, and that man fallen against a man behind him, and his hip touching the shoulder of another and the eyelid of another and then the sternum of another, and on and on, until it was clear that all formed a great web, for all were of the same substance, and there were only pockets of air between them and some kicked up leaves. Elizabeth was dead in a sea of connective tissue. But is it possible for a creature who does not exist within time to die? They were a frozen cosmos, perhaps a black hole, for to touch them would be to make oneself disappear into the void, into a place neither of abstraction nor of linearity. They just were, eternally.

Ava and the Author fell into one another. They trembled and gasped for light air, but everything was swollen and weighted.

"There are no casualties, only absences," whispered Ava. "But is that any better?"

Everything was still. There was no more fear, for no outside force could move fast enough through such a thickening of time to reach them on this night. Nobody could touch the solid mass of bodies, the solidity of time itself – solid time equaling absence of time, for time is nothing but flow – and in the dark branches above, with Ava and Symmes, Tomfy and Gillow and the Author all weeping below, Repps lit a candle in thanks and commemoration of Elizabeth

and the Baron. Then, every man held a candle which swayed instead of flickering, and the glow hung in the air long after they began, at long last, to depart.

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A willow's leaves drew the perpendicular. They hung strong and motherly as near one-hundred bodies climbed at once up and down, at once toward and away from. There were a very few – Repps among them – who stayed, having found more affable versions of themselves at the Interior. They fell to unreprimanded dreaming in trees which sometimes glowed phosphorescent, for dreaming is the glory of the Interior. The Author followed Gillow, who followed his son, who followed Tomfy, who followed Ava, through the elongated darkness and to the Exterior.

Ava moved ghostly, aimlessly along. One day, in early spring, she hitched a ride to New York harbor, and snuck aboard a ship to Spain. She arrived in Setinil, quiet and dreamy, with no sense of self-possession, nearly having forgotten the trajectory of her last months -- how it was that she'd finally ended up so far from Winnefax. Still, the name of the town had hung clear in her mind, though she was not certain of where she had heard it. Setinil was built under a huge rocky overhang, the whitewashed buildings only filling up a small absence in the great stone permanency. When, one mid-afternoon, she walked past a deep blue shuttered house which sat proximal to the narrow river gorge, the overhang swooping low across the street onto the house opposite, she felt certain this was a place once described to her in great detail, a place she had later dreamt of with so much more clarity than the chronology of her life now. She knocked on the door impulsively. At length, she was greeted by a middle-aged man and woman, both olive

complexioned, with widow's peaks and rounded eyes, though the man had a handsome bump in the bridge of his nose, and drew a slightly slimmer figure than his soft-bodied sister. They could not, Ava knew at once, have been other than Elizabeth's twin children.

The Author went to live in Wellfleet with Gillow, Gray and Lydia, and the oyster stand, and the icy shoreline. He took to frequently introducing himself as Gillow's twin brother – Mikey — who was anemic and therefore required much sleep. But for Lydia and Gillow's mother, he was the double, for the whole truth was revealed to them by Gillow, who did, after all, orate Symmes's story-- and eventually write it all down, too—it being his story as well. Gray and Tomfy filled in here and there, before Tomfy continued the trek back to his New Hampshire home, from which he wrote frequently to Gray, the two having months ago established a knowing correspondence that would endure their whole lives through. And at the end of the telling, Gillow said to Lydia, finally, without a croak or the swallowing of even a shred of paper, "I love you, my dear. Please -- shall we go to sleep and dream anew?"

After six months, Symmes -- perhaps owing to his overwhelming need to discuss and juxtapose and analyze the two worlds of the single sphere, or perhaps due to his unrest at positively needing the scientific community of the Exterior to know the truth about the Hollow Earth, but knowing, too, that it would be impossible to release such knowledge without also becoming responsible for the unavoidable eventuality of warfare – the destruction of Exterior and Interior by one another -- sold off all of his belongings and gave all of his money to the men of the crew and then disappeared, never to be heard from again, leaving behind only a very peculiar book, written in a language heretofore unknown to the Exterior world.

Notes

On page 25, the line, "nature has wisely assigned to every thing just matter enough for strength and usefulness, and has in no case overburdened it with unnecessary and cumbrous weight," is taken from Symmes's Theory of Concentric Spheres, which was written 'By a Citizen of the United States,' and published in 1826 in Cincinnati. The quote appears on page 54.

And here is the citation for the image on page 2:
Audubon, John J. *John Cleeves Symmes, Jr and His Hollow Earth*. Digital image. *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia, 1 Feb. 2016. Web. 2 May 2016.