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The Bitter Wake

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The Bitter Wake

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
Of Bard College

By
Nicholas Langen

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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1.) *FM and AM*

“Every branch of human knowledge, if traced up to its source and final principles, vanishes into mystery” -Arthur Machen

A pale moon sputtered through the latticework of branches overhead like film caught in a projector. Stars burned on and burned out in the deep, dark sky. Birds unseen stirred the fluid blackness. A car tore down a lonely forest road, headlights illuminating bleached, shivering shrubs dwarfed by great and bare columnar trees upholding the mantle of the night.

The inside of the vehicle had seen cleaner days. Empty bags of beef jerky lay strewn across the floor, mingling with gnawed plastic bottle caps and other snack-borne detritus. Immersed in the junk, a man with sleepy eyes and wild hair sat, with one arm lazily directing the steering wheel. In the passenger seat a woman reclined, bracelets dangling off thin wrists and a book covering her angular face. Their names were Charles and Ophelia, and it had been a long ride. She jumped when he addressed her, for he had been a very thoughtful and focused navigator, adverse to conversation on this somber occasion.

“Phi, you know that moment in the Bible when Jacob wrestles an angel?”

“Yeah, what about it,” she mumbled, the paper scraping against her lips.

“That's just, that's got to be the most human reaction there is, right? I mean, a divine messenger, an extension of the Big Man upstairs, and Jacob still tried to get him in a headlock.”

“I'm not entirely sure that's how it happened... Please tell me this isn't an excuse to talk about professional wrestling.” Her drowsy voice was swatted away by wild gesticulating in the driver's seat.

“Okay, I’ll spare you this once.” Charles laughed, though his smile did not quite extend to his eyes. “But I’m serious. I think that’s what all this is about.”

“All what?”

He pointed to the backseat, where a stray moonbeam glinted off obscure metal.

Ophelia shifted in her seat. “Oh, I thought you said we weren’t going to talk about that until we got there. Or at least until the motel.” She removed the book from her face and adjusted her hair.

“Listen Phi we still don’t really know where we’re going. Not yet at least. And yeah, I guess the pastor got in my head.”

“It was a lovely eulogy. Can you just get us to the motel? I’m tired.” Ophelia placed the book in her lap and tried to find her page.

“Yeah, yeah. Hey buddy, back there, you with us?” Charles raised his voice and leaned his head towards the rear end of the vehicle. “Stay awake alright, this is your favorite station.”

He chuckled as he spoke. Their FM radio had only been able to pick up static since entering this region of mountainous terrain. The sound crepitated from car door speakers, surmounting leather upholstery until reaching an upright funerary urn. A seatbelt had been fastened over its intricate carvings, which depicted a forest similar to their surroundings. Resonant ululations issued from the gullets of errant frogs, misled by the cold. Spiders wove their gossamer funnels in and under layers of browned leaves, their filaments beset by feeble tremulations. A fog or mist had drifted in from some far-off ocean, and a dense, bitter scent had come into the air, like wine to vinegar. The gradual introduction of the phenomenon went unnoticed by the travelers, secure in their carriage. The fog’s disorienting erasure of the horizon-line, coupled with the sinuous twilight, obscured a narrow turn-off that would have directed them

to the motel in which they had planned to spend the night. And now that night had stretched its jaws wide, the tenebrous firmament swallowing them whole.

In that esophageal passage, dark, dampened, and encircling, there came strange visions. By the roadside a large horned animal, perhaps an elk, lay disemboweled and in the process of being picked apart by a sheaf of crows along its side. As the car passed, their shapes blended together into something like a charcoal smear, or a glob of tar, eroding the organic matter. A few took off in pursuit, cawing. The static on the radio intensified, climbing levels of volume without any adjustment of volume dials.

“I hope it doesn’t make it more real to say so, Charles, but we are lost.” Phi spoke in low voice.

“How can you even be lost anymore? What’s the GPS say?”

“About that... It’s not giving me much of anything.”

“We must’ve missed the turn. Let’s see if we can find somewhere, pop down the seats in the back, and get some sleep. Try again in the morning.” They both winced at the lower back pain in their future.

“God, what are we doing?” Ophelia said, under her breath. She worked at an oceanographic institute, labeling and categorizing specimens. Nothing irritated her quite like the disorganized, cavalier direction her friend had just taken this venture.

“Ophelia, listen. This isn’t an exact science, is it,” He responded, sighing. “We don’t have much to go off of. He never talked about anything like this before... He had a map to this area, and what? The words ‘Thin Mountain?’ It’s not like anyone really knew what he meant, especially not at the end. Maybe he went there once with one of his aides. Just let me find someone around here, probably whoever works the front desk at the motel, and ask them if

anywhere matches the description. And then, yeah, we get Gabe to his final resting place.” A flustered Charles ran his fingers through his hair.

She softened. “You’re tired too. You only call me Ophelia when you’re tired. You don’t really still think we’re going to find the motel, don’t you?”

“What?”

“You just said we could pull over somewhere, let’s do that. I think there was a sign that said a rest area was coming up.”

For too long there was nothing but the road and the mist, ever-curling. A crude and sparse sign offered, in fading letters, the name of an old growth forest and game hunting refuge. Dunhearst Woods. The couple rolled into the lot, prepared for a cramped and uneven slumber. Upon entering the parking area, their high beams caught bits of painted material and glass on the asphalt, glinting like the stars above. “Um…” Said Charles, inching his foot off the gas pedal. They moved further into the lot, trepidatiously following the debris. Then it appeared, materializing through the humidity, suspended in the yellow gaze of headlights. A car lay deep in the lot, at the forest’s edge. Its frame was contorted and warped, patches of paint peeled clean off, and though it had to have been an accident of some kind, it was impossible to tell what kind of vehicle collision or circumstance could have produced such a sight. The angles seemed wrong, to the extent that the ruined chassis had become contorted in ways that railed against the conventional limitations of materials in three-dimensional space. The ground beneath the crumpled mass of aluminum glimmered with shards of windows.

But it was not the car that held the attention of the Charles and Ophelia, rather the inverted man that lay from its windshield to its grill, bisecting the vehicle with bloodied flesh along its crumpled ruin. His left ankle was bound to some mechanism beneath the windshield

wipers, the leg extending straight down the length of the hood. His right leg was bent inwards, so that the shin lay perpendicularly against the inside of his left knee. His pants were saturated with reddish mud, and where it was thin, lacerations could be seen leaking onto the metal. A loose and similarly tattered denim jacket lay unbuttoned across his grisly torso, under which his wrists were tied. His stomach was slick with rain that fell against his mauled chest and ran towards his neck.

The two cars stared into each other, headlight to broken headlight.

“Oh, Phi, I think I’m going to be sick.”

There seemed to be a halo around his pale head that mirrored the pale moon above, while his mouth almost imperceptibly twitched and a sense of serenity pervaded his expression. Long and delicate yellow hair fell over the edge of the vehicle. His eyes, or rather where they should have been, were ruined, excavated by two black radio dials. Gore trickled down his face from the jagged craters and fell to the ground in slow, fat, drops. The dials began to turn, and as they did a bolt of lightning arced down like a skeletal finger dragging across the Appalachians. His mouth opened slowly, and from his lips there slid forth the same flurry of static that rumbled from the car speakers.

“Is he alive?” Asked Charles while Ophelia practically kicked open her door trying to identify the rise and fall of the broken man’s chest. Wind, rain, and the rhythm of the windshield wipers battered her senses as she walked towards him. And there was that loud static, buzzing and popping over it all. “I don’t know.” She yelled back to Charles, paralyzed in the driver's seat, unable to perceive anything except for the movement of her lips. She approached the man, shielding herself from the weather with a bent elbow. “Can you hear me?” she called, into the tempest. Wind, rain, and the rhythm of the windshield wipers were all that answered her. But the

dials turned again and he writhed against the ruined metal, smearing the extent of his injuries along the crumpled silvery sheet. His gaped jaw elongated further, and the shape of the queer sound changed yet again. She recoiled as white noise unlike any other vibrated a previously inaccessible region of her inner ear. Ophelia reached a trembling hand through the downpour and pressed two fingers against his neck. There was a pause. Another bolt of lightning lit up an information board by the pathway into the forest. She walked back to her other car, closed the door behind her, and announced, in that hermetically sealed bubble- “He’s alive.”

“How?” Charles asked, blankly composed. He had not released the steering wheel. Despite the cold sweat, his lips and mouth and even his eyes felt dry, though distinct was the possibility that he had forgotten to blink.

“I have no idea. He’s alive. Alive, Charles.” Phi was out of breath, her words tumbling out of her mouth. “We have to get him out of there, he’s all kinds of messed up, do we have scissors or something in here? What about a knife?” She began to rummage through various compartments and pockets and darkened creases of the vehicle. Charles was still trying to shake the disbelief clinging to his face.

“Jesus. What do we do? I’d call 911, but the service... there’s no service out here. Something’s weird with it.” The static continued to scream. “Phi, let’s just get out of here. This can’t be real. This isn’t happening.” His breathing was getting shakier by the second.

“Charles, take some deep breaths.” He tried his best. “Found it!” She held up a dingy swiss army knife, used primarily for its bottle opener, that had been long lost. “Get to the tower. I’ll cut him out of there and see if I can clean any of his wounds.”

“What tower? Where am I going?”

“Right by the car there’s an information board. A map of the forest. There’s a fire watch tower not far from here, I think you could get some bars or something at the top of it. Call an ambulance, find a hospital, both, preferably.” Charles gulped. But Phi had always been like this. Her parents were doctors, and she had inherited their inclinations towards selflessness, medical curiosity, as well as rudimentary first aid training. The night they had met, she was setting his friend’s nose at a concert whose circle pit had grown into a cyclone of elbows that he had been perfectly content to watch from a safe distance.

Unfortunately, not much could have been done for Gabriel, in the end.

Charles very much would have preferred to watch from a safe distance, or exit from this scene with Ophelia and Gabe, like he had done several years ago, but instead he had thrown himself into a gnarled thicket that bit at his shins and gnawed his ankles, with only a meager phone flashlight and a short supply of nerves to keep him company. It reminded him of hikes he had always wanted to go on, but never did, for precisely the reasons that were now apparent to him. He shivered and pulled his jacket tighter, every now and then glancing at the gnarled branches and twisted trunks of sloping wood. His breath swirled languidly out of him, wispy white nebulae that vanished as quickly as they appeared. Charles followed the markers, orange dots that glowed like eyes as he stumbled his way through the uphill unknown. At least it was quieter, he thought to himself, while the static faded into the storm.

Back in the lot, Phi was making short work of the bindings. While the man lay there, twitching, she slid the knife through what she had thought to be some kind of thin, tawny rope, but up close bore a resemblance to human hair. She freed his leg first, rolled him over, and unbound his wrists. Not an inch of him was unmarred in some form, from cigarette burns to track marks to scars like white worms burrowing through the soil of his skin. His voice, if it could be

called that, had been reduced to a low gurgle. He was lighter than Ophelia expected, similar to the larger specimens hauled from the depths that she catalogued, but his was an odd weight. Even for a lanky, emaciated adult male, there was something categorically off about the way he handled on her back as she moved him. It could have been her own stomach, or the way her head swam with nausea, but it felt as though, beneath and around the hardness of his bones, there slithered his untethered innards. “I hope there’s signal up there,” She whispered this to herself as she slipped him off her shoulders and into the backseat of the car, careful to keep him away from the urn.

Charles stood at the base of the fire watch tower. It extended some fifty feet above the ground in an inelegant wireframe rectangle, a gray skeletal obelisk that jutted out above the mist and the treetops alike, deep into the thundering skies. It seemed substantially taller to Charles, as he placed his boot clad foot on the first step and steadily marched on, gripping every inch of the damp railing. Prior to his ascent there had, at one point, been a chain link fence impeding his progress, but by some luck there were sizeable tears in its perimeter that had gone unfixed. Whatever signage may have been placed along the way to discourage passage went unnoticed, as the urge to return was ever-bearing, a monomania heeded on by the dizzying height at which Charles was now perched. He had not made it fully to the box at the summit, for the tower swayed and creaked and the wind howled and it had all but bullied him into damp submission. He heard windows crack above him as he pushed himself up the final few stairs and through a small square hole. He lay there, panting.

The top of the fire watch tower was reminiscent of a treehouse, and even amid nature’s battery, there was a nostalgic quality oddly coupled with the electricity of adrenaline pumping through Charles. It was sparse, but heavily graffitied, with elongated faces weaving their way

over each other, along with names upon names and the wisdom of prophets or madmen. Dead beetles lay piled in the corners, their carapaces grim cairns, unattended. In the center of the room was a raised circular dais with a map. It too, went unattended, as Charles scrambled to pull his phone from his pocket. He held it aloft like an offering to the swirling clouds above. No service. He wiggled it. One bar. A glance at the screen showed a series of visual glitches and artifacts where the GPS should have been. A few muttered curses under his breath later, Charles saw an ancient telescoping lens for ocular augmentation, positioned at the fringe of the boxy capstone. Outside the storm roared, and through its furor he peered, deep into the abstract vista of the abyss.

Some cluster of lights to the north, or possibly west, caught his attention after squinting through the dusty lenses. It didn't look too far off, and he could swear the outlines of buildings were visible, split by a river. A spear of lightning, close by, drove into the earth and clarified the sprawling plumes and stalks of foliage in instantaneous white relief. Thunder followed after, rattling the structure. Charles did his best to ascertain the location of the lights using the topographical map on the table, and jotted down the coordinates. It had to be something, a spot of civilization that could be of assistance to the unintentional hitchhiker they had picked up. He was almost at the bottom of the tower when he heard a hissing sound and the hairs on his arms stood on end. It was then that a bluish lance skewered the cabin at the top of the tower, which erupted in a dizzying shower of sparks. Charles flung himself from the stairs, his ears ringing as he plummeted ten feet to the rain-soaked ground. There was a moment of silence. He groaned.

Back in the car, Ophelia was sweating. It wasn't so much the nerves over the fact that a man was bleeding out in the backseat (despite her best attempts to staunch the dreadful flow), or the climate (it was a brisk fall night), but rather the heat emanating from the passenger. She

carefully pried a wallet from inside his denim jacket and unfolded it. Empty, save for a coin the likes of which she had never seen before, inscribed with illegible symbols. The jacket was monogrammed with the initials A.M. before she had time to examine much more, a slightly charred Charles came stumbling out of the tree line, filthy with red mud. He motioned for Ophelia to get out and switch to the driver's side. They embraced in the rain as their paths crossed. "Phi," he said, his mouth fuzzy and tasting of metal, "There still wasn't any service, but I think I saw a town or city or something nearby. North."

"Okay" was all the verbiage she was willing to spare.

2.) *The Silence Beneath Us*

Once, I found out the secret of the universe. I have forgotten what it was, but I know that the Creator does not take Creation seriously, for I remember that He sat in Space with all His work in front of Him and laughed -Lord Dunsany

It seemed as though there were no permanent residents of Coombe's Vale, thought Regina, contemplating the fate of her downstairs neighbor, having been surely escorted to the sanitarium. She had become so accustomed to the wails of his madness permeating their divide that their absence seemed a scream in itself. Even she was just traveling through. Or she would be, if she could just figure out this situation with her car. She was a thickly bespectacled woman, but even through her bulletproof glasses she still couldn't quite see from exactly where the overwhelming urge to depart, the ubiquitously felt persuasion towards transience that pervaded the atmosphere, arose. It might've had something to do with the impression that there had been a much larger town at some point, an older town, long deceased, and that now a smaller town had been grafted on top of it like a headstone. The outskirts were still speckled with dilapidated buildings, grand carcasses of manors and mansions that had rotted and collapsed, whose splintery wooden bones were subject to oncoming -- "Regina? You there? Or are you lost in your head again?" She sighed, and took her hands off the sewing machine.

"Janice, hi, yeah, got lost in this scarf for a second, what were you saying?" Regina had known Janice since her car had broken down two years ago. Ever since she helped her to the mechanic, they had proved inseparable, if diametrically opposed. Though the auto repair company seemed completely incompetent and unreachable, dark and thickly padlocked with every attempted visitation, they made frequent calls to inform Regina that her car was in dire need for obscure parts from far flung corners of the globe, like a catastrophically ailing patient

waiting for compatible organs. This was an apt comparison, for both herself and Janice were medical staff on the night shift of the Tothen-Ostrava Community Hospital, though that was where the similarities ended. Rhythmic gum chewing squelched through the tinny phone receiver, attached to a box on the wall.

“Well, I was saying that it smells weird again. Ever since the fire, I guess, but even before that. Smells old. Like books, or a nursing home, or like one of the interns left a door open to a sewer. Definitely not good though. How’s the scarf?” Janice could hear the mechanical pulsing of the sewing machine, but it was tinged with the auditory effects of low reception.

“You’re going to love it. I’m trying to make all the seams invisible, but there’s a lot of cloth. Thanks again for teaching me.” Regina held the handset between her cheek and shoulder while she pulled on some socks, watching the storm and the moon mingle outside. She found it impossible not to smile when they talked.

“I’d love it if you weren’t late for once. Take the bus down here, you know I get antsy in this place at night.”

Janice had floated into town as an infant in a paper boat, lazily drifting down a river on the outskirts. When the sun set just right, it looked like the river fell out of that fiery portal, and some said Janice fell with it. Her blazing hair seemed to match, at least. Regina didn’t have a better theory, and it was always somewhere in the back of their mind while they spoke. She hung up, and listened to a message from the mechanic. There was a rare component that had to be replaced, and they were in touch with one of the last manufacturing plants that made them. It was a hopeful message, but Regina had long since learned to exercise restraint with her vehicular optimism. She closed the door to her apartment building and went outside.

Damp and dark was the night. That was redundant, she thought. Nights were always dark. The bus station she walked to was a little box that offered little protection from the wind and rain, and inside its enclosure aerosol vandalism spelled out ophidian nonsense. The underside of her bench was speckled with clumps of cinereal chewing gum pustules, unsightly urban barnacles. The bus ride was a sanitary enough rectangular prism of light, whose few passengers were drab, preternaturally wrinkled, and intently raking the floor with furrowed brows and beady eyes. It was a recent addition to Coombs Vale, the night bus- and no one looked particularly comfortable on it. Out the window, in flashes of lightning, the main strip of the town was frozen. Regina watched with disinterest, her eyes flicking across various storefronts, almost plastic-looking, as though miniatures or sets for some grand production. The river was bloated beside her, mammoth, incassate, with all its rushing currents embroiled in some serpentine conflict. The antique store on its bank seemed ill-positioned, mused Regina, but soon enough she arrived at the imposing facade of the Tothen-Ostrava Community Hospital.

Even before the fire, it had been a strange building. Once the home of the venerable Ferdinand Ostrava, a samaritan who took it upon himself to operate on the good people of the Vale out of the kindness of his heart, and what some have retroactively hypothesized to be ardent haematophilia. He took apprentices, who went on to have their own practice in the halls of his moderate country abode. The operation grew, received massive funding from an eccentric donor named Balthazar Tothen, and now, through innumerable extensions and expansions, the original manor lay somewhere entombed within slabs of cement and the trappings of a more conventional infirmary. After a recent fire had consumed a large portion of the lower levels, however, the rapid migration to a more modern facility had left the place largely derelict, with a few holdover

staff keeping things operating at minimum capacity, mostly redirecting the confused and often elderly to their new location.

Janice stood in the entryway, her nails long and hot-pink, aglow under an EMERGENCY neon. She motioned hurriedly at Regina, who sauntered, woefully umbrella-less, to her. They exchanged small talk, though even small talk with Janice was accompanied with big gestures that filled the clean, well-lighted corridors. Potted plants added splashes of greenery, though they were fake. When she first arrived, Regina had joked that, since they weren't necessarily beneath windows, they had to be artificial, or meant to slowly die. Janice had laughed, nervously. But now the two of them stood in the waiting room, contemplating a scent that had wafted in from somewhere unknown. "Like a wet dog, or some kind of decay?" Janice fiddled with something in her pocket.

"Everytime you think it smells like something different." Regina paced alongside Janice, trying to keep up with her longer legs.

"But you do smell it." Janice smirked, but she kept looking into the distance when she thought no one was watching.

"Admittedly, yes. Have we tried lifting up the ceiling tiles yet?" Regina and Janice spent the better part of a slow night standing on waiting room chairs, and pushing up the off-white squares that lined the upper interior of reception area and surrounding hallways with broom handles, gazing into crevices. Not once but twice did they detect movement of sorts, and an unrecognizable coin fell out of one such created alcove, bouncing twice before landing beneath one of the tight, lightly padded chairs. All while various other hospital staff, orderlies and interns, flitted about between rooms, gaunt and glassy eyed, with uncanny avian-like efficiency.

Tires screeched outside. The night shift staff turned to look through the glass doors, where they saw a small, burnt-looking man with floppy hair helping a pale and sharp-looking woman carry a dreadfully injured blond man, like two fishermen wielding an exceptionally long catch. Both were yelling long before they got to the entrance, shouting for aid, to clear the way, becoming less muffled with every step. “Janice,” Regina called, distracted by a faint memory, “Janice we need hands up front, bring a stretcher.” Janice flew down a hall, she requested platform in front of her. The man (introduced as Charles) was relaying the events of the night with bursting urgency, as though by telling them he could preserve the insane reality of the situation by spreading it to open ears. It was a babbling monologue about a car crash and static and towers and lightning that quickly became auditory wallpaper, while Regina and Janice hoisted the wounded man onto the gurney. In the chaos, a ragged shape slinked out from a vent and coiled on a waiting room chair.

“I think his name is Arnold, or Arthur, or Alex. An “A” name.” The woman, Ophelia, started, bluntly and to no one in particular. “Right there on his jacket.”

But it was already too late, he was being carted off with vigor, apparatuses already plugged into his systems by eager technicians. Temperature, pulse, respiratory rate, blood pressure; needless to say, things were dire. Speculation about his medical history ensued over a rudimentary assessment of some of the more critical components to his injury, and the surrounding language was alien, arcane. Phrases such as pneumothorax and pleural effusion were met with similarly obtuse responses-- tense and utterly impenetrable was the exchange to the untrained ear. The potential anticoagulation of a bleeding dyscrasia was brought up as a counterpoint, and a list of complications that involved perforations and leakage. The sound of Janice’s bubble gum popping in her mouth rang out at regular intervals. Someone mentioned

symptoms, cyanosis, subcutaneous emphysema, dyspnea, until ultimately a simple truth had entered the consciousness of the room. This man should not be alive, and he would not be any longer without the implementation of a thoracostomy tube, a clear bit of piping to be inserted somewhere between fourth and fifth intercostal space in the mid to anterior axillary line to drain the vile buildup of god knows what from within his contritured chest. No one mentioned the static that dribbled from his lips, or if they did, they pretended not to notice.

There was Silence in the waiting room. Proper noun silence, a tangible volume that filled the flimsy, aching intersection between life and death. Charles couldn't help but think that in that moment, A.M. was both alive and dead at the same time somewhere behind the double doors through which he had disappeared, Schrodinger's discarded roadside half-carcass. Waiting rooms became inadvertent monasteries, accidental planes of meditation strapped with vending machines and vastly out of date magazines whose wholesale defiance of the current present moment only made the clocks loom louder, sweeping seconds away. Charles looked down at his shoes, a pair he was ready to go hiking in, prepared to find his way up a mountain trail and put this grim affair to rest, and maybe, just maybe stop missing him. The floor was clean, the room well lighted, and yet there was something off. Maybe it was the smell, or the strange vibrancy of a potted plant, the way some of the ceiling tiles had been pushed up slightly, where he could almost see through the artifice of it all, but not quite.

Ophelia was thinking about numbers and breaths. How many had she taken today? How many were there ever going to be, both individually and collectively? Because, surely, there would be numerals for all of this. Data. Unknowable digits that cascade into each other, with decimal points and percentages and a specificity impossible to fathom. A number of heartbeats. A number of blinks, of sneezes, hiccups, shivers, each little biological function ticking away,

taking something with each passing cellular process. But before she was consumed by the numerical inevitabilities, she noticed what she had previously assumed to be a bundle of rags in a chair at the end of the room begin to move. She watched it shift. And groan. Charles had noticed as she did, drawn out of his own thoughts. The two of them leaned in for a closer look.

Meanwhile, Regina and Janice leaned in as well. A.M lay in one of the emergency room bays with three steely eyed nurses. Their faces were covered by blue masks, and each of them wore the same focused expression clenched between their furrowed brows. Sets of gloved hands worked on the humming husk of scar tissue that was A.M. One prepared a syringe, another the blade of a curved scalpel, their metallic instruments gleaming like the silvered banisters that once adorned an estate buried beneath and perhaps inside pale walls and faltering fluorescents. But their application, their incisions and insertions and pipings, were interrupted. As the hissing and crackling swelled, strands of skin writhed, forming at the site of the invasion, as if of a tan putty, malleable and stringy, swaying to the drone of the static. From within the chest cavity unrecognizable colors crept, like phosphorescent moss on a cave wall. As the chest tube was being inserted, the tendrils of flesh began to twist and twirl, wetly inching up the arm of the operator who looked on in fear, rivulets of perspiration trickling down his forehead. Regina began to backpedal, her hands clutched into tight little balls, her mouth too dry to form words. There was a pop. Janice took the gum out of her mouth and stuck it under the chair she was sitting in. From her pocket she produced a pendant necklace, whose bauble visibly vibrated as it fell dangling from her hand. "Turn the dials." She whispered to the nurse, pointing at the black, notched knobs in A.M.'s eyes. "Slowly. Steady does it now." Regina, nearing the edge of the room and fumbling for the door handle, suppressed a noise somewhere between a whimper and a giggle.

With his free hand, the nurse rotated one of the dials, hot to the touch, causing a high-pitched whine to distort the static, sending the strands of dermal tissue thrashing about as if wires run through with electric current. Most of the room clasped their hands to their ears, but as the nurse continued to turn the dial, the sound diminished, the tendrils retracted, and things meandered back to a semblance of normalcy apparent everywhere other than the terrified shakes of the onlookers. Regina had slipped out of that sterile chamber, the sound of her brisk footfalls echoing down the hallway towards the women's room, where a faint retching was heard. She continued walking afterward, right past the open door with Janice and the other nurses, past the potted plants that were looking more artificial by the second, under the artificial lights, through the artificial corridors topped with artificial tiles, some of which remained propped up and revealing an obscure unreality just out of reach. By the time she reached the waiting room she was out of breath and nauseous. Her shift was over, she was long gone, and as the hospital was enveloped once again by the swirling vapors and clamorous storming of the night, she felt herself unable to breathe a sigh of relief on the bus home.

The bundle of rags had unfolded into a man, and as they conversed, neither Charles nor Ophelia were able to register a fleeing Regina as anything other than a peripheral blur. This man had apparently been using his free time to search for something of great value to him, that he had lost ages ago. Despite his frequent visitations, and even occasional overnight stays no one had explicitly ordered him to leave. He looked to be anywhere from fifty to seventy, aged further from the shocking condition of his skin (burned?) and sleepless, projecting a glazed-over expression. He had a strange countenance, menacing, with a lupine skull shape, fortunately obscured by a hood as well as a thick beard. He reeked, almost primordially, a scent from beyond recorded time, of swamplands and ooze, something immemorially putrid. "What do you mean,

you're here looking for something? I thought maybe you were here for..." Charles trailed off, his fingertips grazing his cheek, before quietly getting up and moving to a vending machine. He fed change into it, little plunking sounds ringing out in the night.

"Can you hear it yet?" At first, this man's hazy, lethargic manner of speech had been assumed to be a consequence of his recent awakening, but as introductions had commenced and his inflection grew no less distant, it became apparent that he was not entirely present. A moment passed, Charles's soda fell with a clunk into the receptacle. "You will. Maybe not today. But you will."

"Yeah, I'm not quite sure I follow." Ophelia was trying to catch Charles' eye.

"It came from the sky. But we weren't ready to hear what it had to say. It took such a long time. We were so lonely in that house, but we kept digging. Needed the space to work." He paused, to draw his tongue across his chapped, thin lips. "There's something out there. Answers." He laughed, staring into the disrupted ceiling, scratching softly at the welts and ridges along his cheeks like the roofing of an amateur artificer.

Charles popped the lid on his soda. He couldn't bear to look at him, so he peered into the amber liquid winking at him from within. "I'm really sorry, but I don't think I can help you, sir. My friend and I, we're a little overwhelmed at the moment. Did we ever catch your name?"

Ophelia crossed and uncrossed her legs.

"I used to have a name. It's more complicated now. Did you two see the stars tonight, the moon? Did you see what was behind them?" The robed man spiraled his finger in the air and whistled. At this, Ophelia sighed. She stood, grabbed Charles by the arm, and very politely requested they leave.

“The signal is strong tonight. It’s strong here. Did you bring him back to us? He was always resistant. Soon enough you’ll be back too.” The robed man giggled and laughed, a dog's laughter, wheezing. Charles and Ophelia said their goodbyes, shuffling out expediently, perturbed and beyond tired. They looked back at his pestilence that shimmered like a heat haze. A handful of flies encircled him.

Janice had dismissed the nurses. For a long time, she sat by his side, A.M.’s side. From her pocket she pulled an envelope, sealed with red wax. She wore the necklace she had been preoccupied with earlier. The hum of static sounded like cicadas or locusts, like a field of gnashing insects. She played with his hair, for it really was golden like flax or the fleece from back when heroes still roamed- the kind of stuff Regina would tell her about. As she twirled the aurous strands she thought about how unprofessional it was, but this was a hollow excuse for a hospital, and she had been working here for a long time, too long. She cracked open the door, and called out with borrowed confidence. “Hey, I know you’re out there, and I know you’ve been following me for some time now. Did you think I wouldn’t notice? That was you up there, wasn’t it, in the walls? I don’t know what you want with me, or the person you think I am. But there’s someone in here, and there’s something wrong with him in a way I don’t think anyone can understand. I’m willing to bet it has something to do with this,” Janice fondled the letter she had placed on a table beside A.M. “Or this,” she cupped her hands around the amulet, which still vibrated at a low frequency. “I heard something in the static today, coming out of that guy. It was more of an impression than anything else but... but I think that whatever this is, it’s much bigger than me.” From down the hall, heavy footsteps stirred, slowly at first, but their weighted tread quickened with every syllable. Janice’s slender fingers, capped with hot pink nails, gracefully locked the door. “So now I that have your attention. I’m not the praying type. But I pray that this

begins to set things right.” Dismal, enraged scratching began on the outside of the door, accompanied by raving, animalistic snarls. Janice took a deep breath and cranked the radio dials all the way to the side, as hard and as fast as she could muster. Her screams were subsumed by the feverish whine of that damned frequency, a continuous auditory detonation that rattled the hospital to its ancient, venerable, and long-lost foundations.

In a no-name motel on the outskirts of Coombs vale, Ophelia and Charles at long last retired to beds. Ordinary beds, with no special trappings or accoutrements, and yet in their lucid regularity there was a surreal kernel still festering somewhere in both of their sleep deprived minds. Despite the sheets, soft and inviting, and the pillows, fluffed and cool, there was a pervasive paranoia sewn into every fiber. But the night was just the night, soon to be the morning, and as the two fought to forget the sights and sounds of earlier, Ophelia remembered the conversation they were having on the road. “What were you saying earlier? Something about the Bible?”

Close by, Charles stirred. “Wrestling the angel. There are a lot of interpretations for that one. Some say it’s about grappling with faith, God testing man, and there’s tons out there arguing whether it was a man, an angel, or god himself by the river, but it all seems a little arbitrary to me.”

“Why’s that?” Ophelia maneuvered herself into a crescent around Charles.

“Because Jacob... Jacob didn’t know what he was getting into. He didn’t know what was going on, and the point is that in the face of the unknown, this blind and vain attempt to conquer something far greater than oneself, while an exercise in futility, yielded something other than a literal, physical victory.”

“And you thought it had something to do with Gabe?” Ophelia stared over Charles’s shoulder, where the urn lay on the nightstand.

“Gabe, yeah. At least, I thought I figured it out. I thought maybe driving out here, trying to find ‘thin mountain’, all the grieving, that could be the struggle... I thought maybe something good would come of this. Even if we didn’t find it, even if it still hurt. I just don’t know any more though. He was the religious one.”

“Do you think he’s going to be alright?”

“He’s dead, Phi.”

“No, I meant A.M.”

“Oh. Uh, I mean, he really didn’t look so good, did he? That’s probably not the answer you want.” The two lay awake for an instant longer, but were soon swept out to a sea of unconsciousness, drifting on waves of clouded dreams.

Across town, Regina was startled awake by the wailings of the dogs that prowled the area near her apartment. Outside her window they waltzed, fur silverish and bristling in the streetlights. From her vantage point, she could see the river under the moon, on the banks of which tittering crawfish roamed. In the glass she saw herself darkly and translucently reflected, with those beasts running amok in her transparent, phantasmal outline. She pulled herself away from the superposition for a glass of water, and noticed a small red light pulsing on the receiver. She let it play on speaker. “Hey Regina, sorry for calling again, it’s the car guys, we were, well we are deeply saddened to tell you, but the factory that makes that part we needed? Yeah it burned to the ground. About a year ago. So, I know it’s been a while, but we promise we’ll have her up and running soon. Have a good one. Armstrong Motors, out.”

Armstrong Motors. A.M. The way that jacket had looked so strangely familiar, that faint memory from when he was first being brought in. The mechanic. Oh God, thought Regina. His voice was supposed to be the one from the phone calls.

3.) *The Epistle and the Apostle*

A letter always seemed to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend -Emily Dickinson

In the morning came the dawn and with it the sirens, came the flashing hues of blue and red, came hither the arrays and arrangement of police tape cordoning off a large section of the Tothen-Ostrava Community Hospital. Through the bands of yellow deterrence, stale, cool air, wafted. A commonplace looking middle aged man adorned with the raiments of detective work stood in the thick of it all, a scene unlike any other, a grisly tableau of fused sinew wherein two once-humans had seemingly been subsumed into each other with ropey bridges of curdled skin folding and stretching over each other. Rivers of epidermis flowed and converged between two leathern oceans, viscously overlapping in a ghastly collage of collagen. The worst of all, thought the Inspector, was not that the twin entities maintained a united cardiac and respiratory process- that it lived as one, but that their faces, the faces of A.M. and Janice, were still so perfectly preserved, thoughtless, and comatose in this profane embrace. On a table untouched by the calamity, the semi-liquid spill of transfigured organic matter, a letter lay outside its envelope, wax seal broken. Randolph Legrasse picked it up, the heavy sound of labored breathing behind him, and put it in his own pocket, to be inspected at a later occasion.

To whom it may concern,

My name is Janice Marwood, and I have reconciled the vestiges of an abominable truth, lodged in the history of Coombs Vale, almost quite literally, as this whole affair began with the cosmic interference of a small meteorite. It demolished a home, our old family home, the once illustrious abode of Balthazar Tothen, my biological father. The discovery of this lineage was the first rung on this ladder of nightmare.

“Jesus, this stuff’s on the walls” A younger man sauntered into the emergency room bay, ducking under a vine of biological remains bulging with varicose veins. “How is it that there’s no blood?” He reached out towards some hot pink nail extensions that were embedded within the forms.

“You’re late. Don’t touch anything” This was not what Legrasse considered a good start to his day, by any stretch of the word. And stretching was the last thing he wanted to think about.

“No hello? We haven’t met yet, I’m Francis Bagatto, they wanted a second set of eyes on this one.” He retracted his hand from the nail extensions, and held it out as a greeting.

“Yeah, they told me someone was coming. Don’t touch anything, including me.” The wheezing amalgam behind them crackled and hissed, with A. M.’s misshapen visage still conducting the bizarre signal to which reality seemed to bend.

“I’m not thrilled about walking into a charade like this either but we’re on the same team here. Let’s take some photos, send samples to the lab, and hope the new hospital is fully operational soon. In the meantime, did you talk to any of the staff?”

“They’re odd, maybe they don’t get out much, but they did mention these two that came in with the guy. Should be staying at the motel.”

“You have any idea what’s going on?”

“Not in the slightest.”

That rock, that visitor from unknown stellar space, seemed like a curse at the time. My father described it in his own writings as metallic, with a heat that lingered persistently- as if it were from some hell trillions of miles above us. But before I proceed any further it must be made clear in abundance that who I thought I was never quite aligned with the person I have been in my entirety. Until recently, I thought my appearance drifting down that river was the result of

carelessness and misfortune at best, grief and postpartum abortive desolation at worst. It was neither.

The day was brisk. In the cold light of the morning, bare shrubbery slowly dried. Damp piles of leaves lined the streets, clumps of brown almost in a paste, while passerby turned their collars up to the wind. Detectives Legrasse and Bagatto knocked on the door to the motel room in question, having darted through the reception area, it too lined with fake plants. “It’s the police, open up.”

With Charles still asleep, Ophelia opened the door. “Hi,” The two figures before her almost looked like they could be father and son. The elder of the two sported a long and flowing coat, an old-fashioned hat, and a finely groomed mustache. The younger looked like he could have been a spin class instructor. Both held up their badges.

“You two,” The older one looked inside at the snoring figure of Charles, “were the ones who brought in that guy from last night. We identified him as Percival Armstrong. He used to be a mechanic, ran the auto place down a few miles south. We have a few questions.”

“Used to be? You mean...”

“Not quite. There was some kind of... coalescent event,” The younger piped in, elbowing his way to the front of the duo.

“That’s remarkably vague.”

“Trust me, if I could describe it I would. So, where did you find this guy” Legrasse crossed his arms, and bit at a section of his cheek.

Men of science came first, from esteemed universities, procuring samples to be analyzed in laboratories far away, but soon thereafter a species of observance, parallel to tourism, flourished in the wake of the falling star, with onlookers pouring in from well beyond the local

weald to witness the spectacle of the great descender. From these migrations one can surmise the cause of rapid expansion to the town of Coombs Vale, and a great number of residences were built along the wild hills that wrinkled the landscape. There are records of the fruitless examinations that occurred, remaining preserved to this very day, records I exhumed, rummaging through a library store-room. This was, of course, where I happened across old photographs revealing a familial relationship that I had previously been unaware of.

The silhouettes of two large birds rose and fell, jaggedly, like cracks in a teacup. Their forms quivered through the porcelain afternoon under which Regina released herself from any second thoughts, wire cutters in hand. She had been ducking on a slope wreathed in the amber leaves of fall, crouched behind a tree, occasionally peering out to observe the chain link fence that secured the perimeter of the Armstrong Motors facility. It was a two-story building, with a series of garage bays, and a small labyrinth of wrecks, flattened, warped, and ruined, to varying extents- A modest junkyard. By the time she had reached the fence, it became apparent that her instrument would scarcely be needed- as the interlocking metal wires had already been subverted by a small burrow, a trench that had been dug so that the bottom of the obstruction became something to be writhed underneath while prone. Head heavy, vaguely ill with the thought of trespassing, unsettled still by the events of yesterday, and Janice's lack of communication, Regina lay herself on the pebbled earth, recoiling at its brumal touch.

The man who found and raised me, who I consider to be my father, Enoch Marwood, he is a good man, albeit wholly mysterious. I suspect he knew of my origins, and collected me as he does all things rare, such is his nature, and the nature of his storefront. I must have been the youngest thing in that shop by at least a hundred years. And that includes its owner, whose creased face and wireframe spectacles are among the first of my memories. To think he sheltered

me, while the newspapers cried for violent action over whosoever snatched the Tothen Child. And now, in his advanced age I have been taking care of him, in the sanitarium, where he has been wracked with terrible nocturnal visions. It was during one of his nightly thrashings-about that I heard him cry maniacally of a drowned tome he had retrieved and tucked away in a darkened sector of the nearby library, his hopes that I must never see it. Naturally, a fervid curiosity took hold of me. And since the day that I found my way through those archives, there has been a presence stalking me. It reeks of necrophagy, buzzes like a thousand iridescent flies, and upon my every attempt to locate its source, it vanishes into an apparent ether.

“I swear it was right here.” Charles, groggy, paced the area where at one point a singular travesty of a wreck had derailed the intentions of his erstwhile friend. “Phi, back me up.”

“Yeah, the Dunheerst forest parking. This is the spot. There’s probably still some glass shards or chipped paint or even blood still around here, traces at least.” Ophelia wasn’t looking at the ground, but rather a pair of birds in the distance, vultures, judging by their large, broad-feathered wings and zig-zagged patterns of ascent and descent. She cupped her hands into a visor to watch them while Legrasse and Bagatto scrutinized the vacant lot, stopping occasionally to place sediment in plastic bags. They both had produced expressions of acute dismay upon the realization that neither Charles nor Ophelia had any recorded evidence of their purported interaction with Percival Armstrong, or Janice Marwood.

“Well, something was here. Definitely in the vein of your described encounter.” Legrasse held up a nugget of metal in tweezers, and as the noontide light struck it, animation began to ripple across its silvered surface. These small undulations were not unlike the effect of a descendent leaf striking a mercurial puddle, but the reflected beams were of an unknown color, on an unknown spectrum. A frail fizzle of static flung itself through the smooth, eggshell white

firmament above. “Looks like my old man wasn’t joking about the meteor. You ever see anything like this?”

“I’m sorry, the what?” Ophelia lowered her gaze to the ethereal thing clutched between Legrasse’s prongs.

In that chaotic pile of antediluvian documents there was a book whose text was scrawled with unearthly looking lettering in a code or language far from any tradition, and whose tracts of indecipherable scribbling caused undue distress. But within its decayed pages the outline of a rectangular prism had been excised, inside which a sealed locket was placed. There was a note as well, whose contents were a sparse “I’m sorry, my daughter-” And as I write this, I can feel a strange cerebral respiration, expanding and contracting as though a blacksmiths bellows, forging some hephaestian perception submerged in the coals of rippled gray matter. The longer it remains draped across my collarbone, the more some influence bears down on me as though I were suspended deep under countless fathoms of murky water.

Regina no longer wanted to be here, between walls of metal and rubber, in the shadow of the facility. Slabs of rusted metal leered at her from the stacks, and the yawning pillars of erstwhile folly careered at unfamiliar angles, creating queer geometries, with various tarps and cloths above creating a sense of turbulent enclosure. After several tense minutes of claustrophobic navigation, she came to one of the garage bays, hewn from rough, gray concrete. She pressed her palm into the door, which capitulated gradually to the influx of pressure. A hum greeted her, but this was not one of static, but rather the flux of voices, murmuring, at least twenty people. Regina immediately retracted her hand, letting the door slide back into place. She was certain no one had noticed her. At least, semi-certain. She had gazed inside for only an instant, but it's afterimage was despairingly prominent. Several figures, huddled around the

wreck of a car unlike any she had seen in the surrounding area. There had been a man standing on it, in ragged dull garb that flowed like blankets over his gray, sticklike limbs. He clasped a rod in one hand which was illuminated by a yellow lantern in the other. He had disfigured skin, a woolen beard, and around him was an aura of plague- not that it deterred any of the those that swarmed near him, hearing his words. Swallowing a lump in her throat, Regina pushed the door open yet again, and furtively crouched at the back of the dim room. The crowd was maneuvering around a necklace the bearer of light had handed out, wearing it only briefly, experiencing some kind of revelry, before having it snatched from them.

“Father will be sated,” The man standing on the car said, his voice swaying, dreamily, like a frond in a slight breeze. “We have recovered one of his most precious things.” At this, some of the ensemble began to start in fear, their faces flush with consternation. Several looked past the warped car and even the ministerial speaker, to the farthest corner of the room, where an exit sign boiled the darkness with an emerald radiance. Regina turned her hood up, adjusted her thickly lensed glasses, and arrayed herself next to some of those at the periphery.

I'm not fully sure what compels me to write this letter. Perhaps it is the same force that resides in the locket, whose purpose is still singularly hidden from me. I do not wear it often, for I fear the consequences of long-term exposure, and the signal it channels seems to strengthen with each passing day. Perhaps it is because of my own paranoia, this intractable, observational persistence. Perhaps it is for Regina. Perhaps it is because of Enoch's words, which seem so pressing, but are far too often incomprehensible. Perhaps it is because there is a... thing on the horizon that I cannot articulate, and it seems pertinent to have written a record of my understanding before such a time comes that I may be unable to provide an appreciable account of the events. I had mentioned a ladder of nightmare at the start of this, and while it may have

seemed melodramatic, I cannot anymore escape a lack of orientation, to the point where I can no longer tell if I am ascending or descending. Whatever may come of this, I apologize for any inappropriate involvement on my behalf.

-Janice Marwood

Detective Legrasse put down the letter he had retrieved from the hospital, where the union of Percival and Janice no doubt still pulsed unerringly. His three companions had been listening to Detective Bagatto explain the appearance, rise to prominence, and sudden vanishing of the interstellar ore on which much of the town had been arranged. While they had been immersed in discussion, Legrasse had taken the time to unfold and peruse the scrawl of Janice's last message. "Just read this," he said gruffly, passing it around for all to see. They did so with an array of expressions ranging from sorrow-stricken to baffled. "It looks like we're headed to the sanitarium. Enoch Marwood may be insane, but it looks like he knows something that has to do with all this."

4.) *Voyeurs in Bedlam*

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” -William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act one Scene five

Time had harshened the oneiric arches and balustrades embedded within the more ornate structures of Coombs Vale, with anfractuous fissures and oxidized disrepair corrupting even the finest masonry or wrought iron. Rust and granite dominated the colorscape, ensuring a mute absorption, even smothering, of any wayward vibrant aspects. “It all looks so sick.” Charles said, almost to no one, staring out the window of the patrol car, clutching his urn protectively.

“Funny you should mention, some of it is actually a plague, the Tin Plague. It’s a real thing. If it gets cold enough there’s a reaction... how’d he put it? An autocatalytic reaction.” Detective Legrasse was biting the inside of his cheek, where a small welt had become a point of fixation while he tried to distract himself from thoughts of the Sanitarium. He was driving. “Tin used to be associated with Jupiter. The king of the sky. Zeus, infallible, invincible Zeus.”

“You can probably see it on some of the roofing as we go by,” Bagatto chimed in. “We had a major cold snap a few years back. Some of it just never got repaired.” Ophelia crossed and uncrossed her legs. Times like these, she would usually close her eyes and allow her consciousness to recede into itself, where the cerulean lull of the ocean could ease her mind, but there was no such peace to be found. “So, what’s the deal with the vase?” Bagatto, through the rearview mirror, had noticed Charles’s divaricating fingers as he stretched his digits out over the embossed surface.

“Oh, uh, it’s not a vase, it’s an urn” Charles looked down from the window, noticing the dampness of his palms, which he swiped along his pants.

“That's our friend. Gabriel. He died.” Ophelia said, blankly, the words catching on her tongue as it gave a swollen impression of several sizes too large within her jaw.

“Oh, I'm so sorry. How?” Bagatto's question threw a jab into the dance of conversation, which paused momentarily to regain its footing.

“You're not supposed to ask that.” Legrasse grumbled from underneath his bristling mustache. They were traveling outwards. Away from the prominent avenue of retail outlets, with their quaint, prop like facades, and towards a threadbare realm of anarchic disrepair.

“It's fine. It's more than fine, it's kind of funny, actually. He lost his mind too. Slowly at first, but it got worse fast.” Charles gave the urn a rub, thinking that this would hardly be the first time he'd gone to such an institution in search of answers.

“Oh god, that's horrible, was it... you know, hereditary?” Curiosity often got the best of Bagatto, but it was precisely that which made him such an effective investigatory force.

“No, family history was as clean as could be. Might've been a virus or an infection though. He had been complaining about a dull ache in one of his molars, that's as much of a warning sign as we got.” Ophelia answered for Charles.

“Jesus,” Muted Legrasse. The sibilant rushing past of outside became especially pronounced. They were on the fringes now, where wild grass had grown tall in the summer, but had since been coerced into a rubiginous prostration to autumn's reign. Charles drew a deep breath in.

“I still remember so much about him. We were... we were roommates in college, and I remember him bringing in camping supplies. Not a fridge or a freezer, or a microwave or any sort of amenity, but, like, water filters, and bedrolls. Flashlights, dried food, he gave all of us swiss army knives. He was always the one most concerned with survival, I swear he would've

outlived us all if he hadn't... you know. Used to climb mountains a whole bunch." He drew another deep breath in, deeper than the first, still not deep enough. Gabriel always came back to the mountains. Charles had never joined him.

"And the one most concerned with the afterlife, come to think of it. He had this Bible, it was this huge, black, very imposing looking thing. I don't think he would've been able to hold on for as long as he did without it" Ophelia remarked in this moment of remembrance. They were traveling up a hill of notable size, as quavering fingers of light gradually lost their grip on the sky.

"So, what happened? How'd he... end." There was a hunger in Bagatto's voice. It was somewhere close to desperation, tempered by the knowledge of necessary restraint.

"The doctors said it just dissolved. Liquified. For some reason I thought it would come out the ears but, no, all out through the nose. And down the spine." Ophelia shivered, letting the image wash over her.

"It?"

"His brain." Charles spoke again, peeling his head from the window, outside of which the nacreous fires of the stars once again twitched. Between quercine obstructions a building, castellar, came into harsh relief against the weald.

"Gentlemen, we have arrived." Legrasse pulled tight his gloves, as he manipulated the car to a halt in front of the madhouse, the asylum, the so- still sanitarium at the end of Coombs Vale, and the beginning of the night.

The harried looking receptionist had been skeptical at their approach, citing a number of incidents involving individuals who, from some impulse of restlessness or macabre inquisitiveness, attempted to glean access as spectators to the disturbed patients therein. "It's not

that I don't trust you, but Mr. Marwood, well, he's one of the oldest, not to mention more troubled ones, and I don't want you upsetting him." The receptionist was a meek looking man, with a wiry comb-over, and his reluctance was palpable.

"I'm sure he can handle it. We only need to ask him a few things about his daughter." Legrasse tapped his foot inconspicuously, arms crossed. Charles, Ophelia, and Bagatto stood behind him. Charles carried his urn, still, as if they were to unlock the secret of Gabriel's cryptic ramblings about a thin mountain in this very room. Ophelia was reading, taking in all the names of the wings, the list of patrons and supporters that allowed for the upholding of the older building. Bagatto was checking his wrist mounted pedometer.

"I hope he's in a more receptive mood today. He's on the uppermost floor, in the skylight room. Take the lift." The receptionist (Victor, according to his nametag, read only by Ophelia) sighed, but there was nothing he could do. It was a ferrous lift, a cage-like box whose designs were impressionably floral, with symmetrical flourishes of metalwork like unfurling vines and other floral. The grill clanged shut, and their wobbling rise was made complete with a garbled jingle playing in the background. Enoch's chambers were simple to locate, for despite the asylum's age, it was still a bastion of order, with neatly arranged and enumerated sections. His door was in the center, an omphalic portal with an arched doorway, and a single slat into which they could discern an interior.

In the ceiling of that room was a great skylight. And positioned under that opening upon the heavens, fixed securely in place, there stood a long table with thick straps hanging from its sides. And on the table there lay the once- collector of all old things, the custodian of history, the cartographer of a material past, now chained to a relic predating even the town itself. "Hello?

Who's there?" His creaky voice barely made it out of the rectangle before dropping off into nothingness.

"Hello Sir, my name is Detective Randolph Legrasse, from the Coombs Vale Poli-" He was hardly able to take a breath before Enoch started back up again.

"Listen... There's a great void out there, in between the pearlescent whorls of galaxies, the fizzling trceries of fine cosmic dust. Listen to the typhonic revelry in the aftermath of its passing. No one's at the wheel anymore. It's a ship without a rudder, and we're all laughing in a storm of stars-" His frail, wizened frame strained against the straps on the table, his face awash with moonlight.

"You can listen all you want in a few, but I just need to ask you some questions about Janice. There was an--" Legrasse took off his bowler hat and ran a hand over a bald skull. The patient rotated his hands to clutch at his bed clothes, a furious carphology.

"And in the empyrean slipstream of orgiastic kilonovae, some eternal entity was refracted, shattered, and flung through space in a waveform, rippling through all that have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the tongue to taste-- and we know this from the angels." At this second interruption, Bagatto stepped forward.

"Janice is dead, or dying, or something very much like either, Enoch. We don't know. My colleague didn't want to put it so bluntly but we're trying to figure out what happened to her because frankly it defies explanation and--" Once more they were cut off.

"Lucifer fell first, he was the first to fall. Fallen angels. This one was less graceful, and it burned as it atoned for a bygone sin. It could hear the waveform of the entity, and it danced to its rapturous harmonies, and it made us all dance with it." Enoch raved at the bloated, lampyridine stars above.

“Let me talk to him. I’ll remind him of Janice.” Ophelia tapped Legrasse and Bagatto on their shoulders, whispering, before either of them could respond. In the background, Enoch continued to rhapsodize obliquely about the strength of a pulse from a far-flung corner of the universe, the great unknown, and how a piece of that Macrocosm had been plucked right off, like a loose ceiling tile, and had been so carelessly and coincidentally deposited within our sphere.

“Worth a shot I guess.” Bagatto whispered back.

“Hey there...” Ophelia was more used introductions saturated in formaldehyde and glittering with scales, cold eyes staring back from glass vats and pungent preservatives. She searched for something to say while Enoch grew quieter at the sound of her voice. “It doesn’t look very comfortable on that table, I hope they have you out of there soon. Or at least loosen the straps.” Something in his face softened, the lines less pronounced, his bluish gums more visible.

“Is that you, my child? You know that I request this room. We all do. I miss you so very much.” What could have been a smile played at the papery skin around his cheeks, nearly translucent. Charles stood back, holding

“Can you tell me about the Tothen family?” Ophelia slowly phrased the question, briefly considering what morsels of information she hoped to gain from the conversation. It all seemed so nebulous to her.

“My child you must not ask me that. You must never ask me that. It is unsafe to even consider.” Something in his eyes shifted, they grew less distant, less cloudy, and his blinking eyelid squeezed a tear from its accompanying orb.

“We need to know where you found that book, we need to know about that locket, we need to know what’s going on here, please, please just snap out of it and--” Ophelia tried to

capitalize on this perceived lucidity with a stream of verbiage but was once gain cut off by Enoch's wobbling voice, invigorated, quivering like an arrow loosed from a tightly drawn bow.

“Hell is real, it's a physical space, and it's in the river. There's a hole. I was diving for relics and I followed the drachma at the riverbed and from there I found the locket, buried by some rubble, and beyond that, a monstrous sound, and I have never once been the same again. The realm of sleep is lost to me, replaced only with that cruel baetyl, and the thin mountain in its bitter wake.” Enoch made a noise like a sob. “You aren't my Janice, are you? They never are.” His eyes misted back over. “There cannot be anything more antithetical to a living impulse than knowledge. And to know too much, well, the only recourse is suicide or madness.”

Charles, standing in the back, silently, nudged Ophelia at the mention of 'thin mountain,' and she responded with an appreciatory nod. “You've been a great help, Enoch. Thank--”

“Don't thank me. There will come a day when you curse my name, curse my existence, curse the dread-tide of disinterred secrets ushered in by a terrifying new moon. There is no sense in pleading with you, but nothing good can come of this. Please leave.”

They did.

Meanwhile, Regina was scared.

Under the bitumen and cracked earth, there was another procession into a sphere of madness, where the limitations of human perception were to be wrenched into a degree of hyper-exertion, broken, and re-wired into a cruel gnosis. For Regina had become a part of that loose assembly of figures in the Armstrong Motors Facility, whose apparent denizens had begun a movement towards an exit sign of eerie viridescence. With Janice's necklace being swung like a thurible in front of him, the thin, robed man led them past the jagged heap of a centerpiece to a flight of stairs. At first they were just that, cement- gray, mottled with subtle variance in

monochromatic composition, ranging from leaden to nearly pearlescent, with degrees of lustre and polish, which Regina inventoried with meticulous attention while avoiding eye contact with those beside her. She tracked the small chime of Janice's necklace, face burning over her flight the day before. There was a banister she could steady herself with, as the walls began to swell upwards as they descended, like an ashen tidal wave, and she was thankful, for they had begun to emanate a singular aura, and she knew not to touch them.

At regular intervals the stairwell would come to small, semicircular platforms, at which point those involved with the march would rotate one hundred and eighty degrees, before continuing their tread deeper into the structure. How much further was a difficult question, for it seemed as though the staircase ate excess illumination, and digested it into darkness. To combat this, every fifth person in the single-file line was handed a torch, by an individual that waited on one of these platforms. Regina shifted to let four members of the ensemble precede her, which resulted in the ritual bestowal of a light to her. Several flights down, the configuration of the stairway began to subtly change in its formation. The stairs began to taper, the materials of its construction began to emerge as raw, less formed, and rougher. The handrails gradually disappeared into the rock. Eventually the platforms stopped, and there was nothing left but a sloping shaft, packed with a shuffling mass, their coats and boots embedding an eerie susurrus into the speluncan air. From the front of the group, a voice, his voice, lymphatically rebounded across the now-tunnel, whose anguilliform curvature magnified and distorted the sound into something inhuman. "Today we have taken, and will continue to take, a merry stroll, one step closer to the engine of creation. For those among us who have not yet been granted access to these halls, I now permit you entrance into the great work of my father, the Illuminative Barrow

of Balthazar Tothen, a wellspring of science and learning from antiquity to beyond the wildest speculation.”

Regina’s eyes opened wide, and she wished she had but none in their place. “Oh God” she breathed.

5.) *The Inadvertent Astronauts*

“That feeling in your heart: it’s called mono no aware. It is a sense of the transience of all things in life. The sun, the dandelion, the cicada, the Hammer, and all of us: we are all subject to the equations of James Clerk Maxwell, and we are all ephemeral patterns destined to eventually fade, whether in a second or an eon.” - Ken Liu

Charles and Ophelia were dropped off at their motel. Legrasse and Bagatto declared them free of suspicion, no longer under investigation, not that they had been seriously considered to be potential criminals, given the nature of what had occurred between the physical forms of Percival Armstrong, and Janice Marwood. “Wait, we were suspects?” After her assistance with Enoch, a tremor of annoyance flickered across Ophelia’s face.

“Well, preliminarily. Practically speaking, we weren’t sure if there was a crime committed, per se.” Bagatto, perpetually energetic, seemed undaunted from their excursion to the asylum.

“Someone had to have put Percival on that vehicle, as you two saw. We didn’t see the body prior to its transformation but both you and the hospital report a number of injuries-” Legrasse looked to be handling a sequence of migraines, as he processed the experience.

“I’m sorry, transformation?” Charles had been half asleep when the detectives were first hauling them back to the Dunhearst Forest parking lot, and as such had missed much in the way of context.

“Trust me, you really do not want to see this.” Bagatto was quick to dismiss the inquest, but was promptly met with Ophelia’s own petition.

“We just spent a considerable chunk of time traveling with you across this strange town, I think we’re entitled to some sort of explanation.” Her voice was level, but her crossed arms belied a stubborn indignance.

“I really don’t think it will explain much but...” Bagatto sighed, shrugged, and held out a mobile phone displaying a photo of that hospital room, strident carneous uproar defiling its pixels.

“It was worse in person... still alive when we came in.” Legrasse muttered, before informing Charles and Ophelia of their imminent departure. “In any case, we just got the warrant for us to be able to search the Armstrong Motors Facility. Understandably, there was some difficulty in processing a request, considering the circumstances. Maybe we’ll get some real answers there.” For an instant they all stood in the doorway, a temporary and impromptu alliance prodding something evidently beyond the traditional purview of a small-town police force.

“It was, um, nice to meet you, officers. It’s unfortunate our paths had to cross in this way” Charles thrust his hand out, awkwardly, for there was little protocol in the dismissal of law enforcement one had been grafted to as part of an exercise in cautious wariness.

“Yeah, same to you.” Legrasse and Charles exchanged a handshake, a gesture that was reciprocated again by Bagatto. They walked away, talking about how to properly approach the Armstrong Motors Facility, leaving the two at their perfectly normal motel room. The walls were a soothing, smooth beige. There was a portrait hanging on the wall of a man with an oblong head, whose mouth was giving the impression that some heart sized creature was to burst from his thin, pursed lips. A spherical astrolabe rested on the dresser, where silken strands denoted an absent arachnid.

“Well, you know what we have to do now.” Charles seemed possessed of a queer determination, focused on the urn he had begun to curl over, nearly ensconcing it with his chest and arms as he sat on the edge of the bed.

“What? No, no I don’t know what we have to do now.” Ophelia’s index finger carved a trail in the dust that had gathered atop the wood near the archaic device.

“The antique store, the one that Enoch used to own.” He said such words as if they were the most obvious among any string of letters, as if they were hanging in front of him, blatantly suspended in the soft, incandescent lights

“Don’t tell me you’re serious, you want to-” Ophelia looked up from her mindless tracery, her eyebrows arched.

“I need to find Thin Mountain. For Gabe. That’s why we’re here right? Well, Enoch seemed to know something about it. Charles rocked back and forth subtly, as if on a hinge.

“Yeah, and...? Both of them are,” She corrected herself, “Were, crazy.” She faced him, and saw his posture, saw his acute mannerisms, and his advocacy for this ill-advised plot, and was gripped with an exsanguinating fear. “Has it occurred to you that the words of madmen aren’t exactly the soundest pieces of advice? Charles, we can’t just stroll into an antique store and expect to what, somehow make it to the riverbed, to a hole, to a place Enoch, if you take him so seriously, calls Hell itself?” His expression didn’t change, at least not to the degree that she seemed to want it. “Charles, you saw those photos. Damn it, did you forget about what happened to A.M, Percy, whatever his name was?” Do you want to end up like that? Because I don’t...” She held her left hand between her nose and lips, covering her mouth, and used her other hand to support the left arm at the elbow. She shook, a current of sadness running through her.

“Phi...” Quizzical, comforting, monosyllabic, it was all Charles could muster.

“I just don’t think I could handle both of you in a year.” Her tremors halted as she sat next to him.

“Put your hands on the urn. He’s still here. And so am I.” In this moment, he grinned, a strange grin. It should have helped and yet there was something in his smile that made her recoil, at least internally.

“Charles cut it out, I don’t need that right now” It must have just been exhaustion, she thought. All she had eaten was beef jerky and trail mix offered to her by the inspectors.

“No, I mean it, I think I can feel his presence. I’ve been quiet because I’ve been distracted. Just holding it. It’s was eerie at first, but now... it’s kind of soothing.” Charles placed the urn directly between them, as though Gabriel was sitting right there between them.

“You’re serious? Fine.” Her hands touched the cold metal. “Are you happy?” A snowstorm ripped through her cerebrum, diadermic pinpricks riddling her with blotchy visual artifacts, and, of course, the crackling sound of a perverse static. “Oh, oh no no no. That’s not... that can’t be,” And then she smelled his soap, some kind of organic castile wash, biodegradable, highly concentrated, somewhat acrid in nature, and heard a chuckle, Gabriel’s, trickle through the acupunctural sensation, and the tingling managed to emulate the curl of his hair in some scarcely definable manner. Ophelia pulled back. She grabbed Charles by the shoulders. “Get in the car. Get in the car right now before I change my mind.”

But below, below there was only a continuation of the maze.

Chthonic fumes bellowed from the tunnel in which shuffled the cult, for it had to be some type of cult, Regina deduced. It became necessary to invigorate her strides in order to maintain a pace with the uncanny spelunkers preceding her. The torches ahead bobbed with every step of their bearers, as the elliptic tunnel begun to widen and expand, the walls streaked with their own

regular indentations. All the while, from the front, a brief history was elucidated, an underground history.

“Balthazar Tothen was a farmer, and a businessman. No one cared much until the aerolith struck his house. In the years of pilgrimage that ensued, he made his fortune. In an act of devilish ostentation, he opted to put a fragment of the comet within his cane, and it was then that he witnessed a revelation you have all come to see and fear and listen to, the static, the fizzling signal from beyond the veil. It was like an antenna, see?” A chamber unfurled before them, massive, stony, with the selfsame marks that defined the tunnel they had emerged from, only larger in scale. Dotted the walls were alcoves, connected across the depths with arched walkways, much like the one Regina’s group was now on. Altogether the area was the size of a stadium, whose enormous, sloping walls were lined with a steep, ostensibly carved, semicircular outcropping that spiraled down from their topmost platform, to serve as a means of passage lowering to bedrock, a sight that was still concerningly absent. The whole of it conjured the feeling of a great cathedral, gutted, and blown up to a monstrous size. Or of the inside of a whale, Regina thought.

“Balthazar was not a highly educated man, but there was a great boon in the nearby presence of a venerable and esteemed dabbler in all the sciences, Ferdinand Ostrava, who became his partner to help decipher both the fallen stranger, and the mantic apparitions he was wracked with. The two of them came to the same conclusion, that there was a great message rebounding out there, in the cosmos, and we just needed to find a better reception.” The robed conductor at the head of the cortege, his voice, it had taken on the qualities befitting the newly open area, deeper, booming, as though each syllable was straining to fill up the space it was given, and ultimately still failing to reach the boundaries.

In the alcoves, lit by the same beacons as that which dotted the congregation, angular chairs sprouted, one per indentation. The seats appeared aged, outmoded, and clinical. They reclined, and in them, more like confined to them, were naked and sedated figures, over which technicians bent. None were diverted from their work, a kind of surgery that Regina witnessed in various stages across the chasm.

“And the best material for channeling the signal was not simply through the metal, no, that was just the start, the kindling, in order to channel it properly, one needs flesh. This is the God-Signal, what animates us.” In one of the aforementioned recesses, a decorticated body was having strange, quivering metals embedded within it. No matter how many attempts she made to look away, there was another niche within Regina’s line of sight, another ghastly operation. A radio dial was pushed into someone’s eyeball, crushing it completely. A second was soon to follow. They continued downwards, and the peals of the robed man’s voice became mingled with the churning, gurgling sound of water.

And above, the river adjacent to the antique store (Marwood’s Curio’s and Assorted Things) was still deliriously engorged from the deluge of two nights prior.

“Somewhere in there. It’s what Gabe deserves.” Charles said, as both him and Ophelia exited the vehicle and stared at the water’s irregular motions, like an overblown length of intestine, visceral and dimly squirming.

“Enoch said he dived, I bet he still has equipment lying around.” Ophelia approached the front door of the outlet which, for all its momentousness, wasn’t much more than a cottage with a sign out front, charmingly hand painted. The inside was a cramped arrangement of bric-a-brac, trinkets and baubles upon which lambent moonlight fluttered. “Reminds me of your car,” she smirked. Charles barely heard her as he let his fingers slide over shelves, as though they were

elysian stalks of wheat, fingertips grazing a litany of archaisms among other fragmentary portions of stories untold. License plates, boots of various sizes and hide configurations, alongside puzzle boxes and dolls, whose features limply gazed out and into each other, a dumb, vacant exchange, in this house of the risen dead. Then there was a nautical scent, the dampness of the limnetic dredge, a freshwater stench that had sunken into the ligneous floorboards.

“It has to be further back,” Charles mumbled, nearly tripping over a wooden puppet, like that of an artist’s anatomical armature, though the legs were dreadfully lengthened, and the head bedeviled with a similar extensive property, for its jaw had been wrested into a wild, too-long shape. He was careful not to drop Gabe. Having been abandoned, the disrepair of the shop was obvious, and the stone underfoot was pocked like sponges, rife with mold. There rung the tintinnabulation of cracked wind chimes as Ophelia found her way to an unassuming door, from which the potamic odors wafted.

“Through here.” She found herself holding her breath slightly, hoping that the miasma was not of a toxic sort. Mephitic indeed was the sanctum of the aquatic paraphernalia, but well-equipped it was not. Diving equipment in this sense was not of the scuba variety, rather two boilers or hot water heaters, suspended from industrial chains and hooks, hung from the ceiling-retrofitted with arrays of hose and piping, with the telltale, mulciberian sores of welding that made them eerily scarred cylindrical buckets. One was equipped with a single circular window, the other dotted with many, smaller glass viewports, giving it a more insectoid appearance. Attached to the helmets with a thick layer of vulcanized rubber were their respective patchwork costumes, and on the workbench nearby, vests and ballast. Nearby a faded magazine lay open, detailing the transformative procedure for household appliances into suits capable of plumbing secluded fathoms, like the one whose coarse thrumming dominated the auditory sphere.

“So, it stands to reason,” Charles said, putting the urn down and threading the hose through his hands to a massive spool, and beyond, where it bifurcated and was affixed to an array of four bellows, two per suit, automated via a nearby gas generator, “That this is what what supplies the air.” Ophelia moved to inspect the point of connection between the hoses and the pumps, where oaken and well varnished valve boxes ensured that the airflow was unidirectional. The suits, hanging as hollow, deflated bodies from their metallic, bell-like heads, were unpleasant to witness, and the two intruders spent a moment locating a lowering mechanism.

“Found it.” Ophelia waved her hand at Charles, who set down Gabe’s urn. They operated a non-cooperative pulley, causing a convulsive descent of both rudimentary apparatuses, flapping and gyrating luridly, wet and chiropteran. To put them on was a frustrating, awkward process that involved innumerable rotations and flailings, which, after several minutes of grunting and heaving, resulted in the two of them being wrapped inside the improvised and shabby cocoons. Their breath was loud and exaggerated within the helmets, whose visor tints, distortions and peripheral nullification brought forth an obtuse, muffled state of being. With newly clubbish fingers, Charles assisted Ophelia with the zippering up of her suit in the back, and she of course in turn reciprocated.

“This is going to be very, very cold, isn’t it?” Said Ophelia, sluggishly raising a garage door to a splintery outdoor platform, held up by pillars extending into the raging water. Wincing at the burst of her voice inside his helmet as the communication system crackled back to life, Charles plodded next to her and put a gloved hand on her shoulder.

“Colder than I imagine either of us are prepared for, Phi.” He had the urn tucked underneath his arm as though it were a football, duct tape shining along its rim, pilfered from its position on the workbench inside. The moon silvered the landscape, gilding it with lustrous

chrome, emboldening the white of the seething froth, and deepening the black underneath. They sat on the edge of the diminutive pier, feeling the weight of their headgear in their collarbones and neck.

“Charles, I don’t very much like the look of the water.” Behind them, their tethers wandered back indoors, away from the selenic serenity Ophelia basked in. For all the argent, picturesque qualities inherent to the scene, neither was able to relax, perhaps it had something to do with the noise of the torrent, of what lay below, but more than likely it was the terrasonic ripple of static that came with the passive engagement of the short-range comms system.

“Neither do I, but,” Charles flicked on a shoulder mounted lamp, out of which a yellow beam shot into the snarling river. “What was it you told me the other day? Take some deep breaths?” He pushed himself off the platform, weighted shoes dragging him down viciously. His hose slithered down with him while Ophelia looked on in horror. She yelled after him, briefly unaware of their connection. Eventually, resignedly, hearing his labored breathing over the speakers, she too, slipped into the deep, lamplight fading beneath the waves.

The last vestiges of heat were ferried away on the backs of winnowing bubbles as Ophelia plummeted into a gelid absence, for there was no light, there was no warmth, and in the shock there was no cold, though a faint osteal numbness had begun to suggest such. Her own column of light ensnared floating filaments, translucent and pirouetting. They grew in shape and general blobbiness, to the tune of cnidarian life forms, or unmarked plastic bags. “Are you seeing these?” Her semi-astonished voice was tempered with some humane notion so as not to disturb the gelatinous globules.

“Yes” came the reply, peeking through the snapping and sputtering that accompanied every syllable. Behind them trailed their air hoses, umbilical. Ophelia tried to swim as best she

could but found that her trunklike, unresponsive, and weighted arms only succeeded in generating a vertiginous malaise of momentum. “Phi... It’s beautiful down here... a space-walk.” Charles dissolved, his voice lost in a glitched flurry. Stalks of underwater vegetation began to appear in her limited vision, leafed umbral minarets. Ophelia became aware that she was on her back, aimlessly grasping for something, the cold deadening her limbs. There was a subdued collision as she struck the riverbed, and the resulting displacement of sediment further darkened her field of view. Pressure swept over her as she rose, silt shuffling off her uniform and back into the fuscous banks some thirty feet underwater. A catoptric lance of light buried itself back through the portholes that trypophically lined Ophelia’s mask, originating from an aurous surface embedded in the mire.

Her sabatons pushed against the earthly treacle, and her every step was made toilsome, but Ophelia reached what was unmistakably the first of the coins Enoch had mentioned. Looking skyward, she could see that Charles had gone on ahead, his cord trailing off into the unknown, indented footsteps an indicator of his forward progress. Protuberant spouts of rock wandered into her cone of light, as did more polyps, and of course, the refuse that would have once been salvaged, had this been an operation of a different nature. A number of bones stuck up through the mud, bleached. The farther along she lunged, the more torsive the landscape became, with the foliage becoming increasingly spiraled, as though wound or wrung by invisible hands. And then, the phosphorescence emerged, subtle at first, capping rocks and small fish, their glow peeking through the atrous deep, like distant galaxies, though the pigments were awry in unearthly ways, as though these were not the galaxies, alike only in the shape and incandescence. But the space between the stars was as black as death’s eyes, his cloak, or his shadow, and the

increasing luminosity of a disquieting pallor did little to quell the fear that made each subaquatic motion ever the more chillingly alien.

Ophelia saw her tomb in that anarchic underwater wasteland, as she followed the coins she caught glimpses of it in her blurry vision, and heard its approach in the chattering of her teeth and the thumping of her heart, and she began to think about numbers. Numbers and breaths. How many she had taken, how they echoed in her unwieldy metal helmet, how many she had left, how many Gabe had received. How cold was the water, in Celsius, in degrees Fahrenheit? What was the air pressure like, in pounds per square inch? Would she know, could she tell if the gas had faltered, or if there was some other, inconceivable mechanical error? How long would it take to reach her, what would be the delay before she knew something was wrong? Was she already fated to some death, doomed from some overlooked moment long past, wholly preventable or eminently inescapable?

The river had narrowed, its sides had steepened, and Charles came into Ophelia's cone of light, heaving boulders that had been built up as a lithic impasse, through whose cracks exuded a whirling current. He turned and looked at her, while his speech blossomed like a corpse flower in her ear. "I think the transmissions are pretty short range, lost you for a minute there. Everything okay on your end?"

"Yeah," She said, "Of course. Let's get this tunnel open" And she laid her her hands on a frigid rock, heaving it away, widening a small hole, brimming with promise. Another hand, another fistful of pebbles cast behind her. The more Ophelia looked around, the more she could see remains jutting out of the earth, and as such she focused on the rocks in front of her. They dug together, in the dense, hebetudinous slog of the hyperborean nether-dimension beneath the black waves, beneath the black sky. And when that asperous portal was opened to a sufficient

degree, they shoved their weary, wavering bodies through it, morsal edges tearing their skin and bloodying their garb. Numbly releasing their ballast and kicking, Charles and Ophelia floated upward through a fuliginous chute, until at last breaching the dark water. Borderline comatose, they crawled ashore and trudged some few feet across a cavern floor before collapsing, simultaneously, on the troubled earth.

6.) *Thin Mountain*

“The only value in this world lies, at certain times, in its ability to suggest another”

-Thomas Ligotti

Regina’s feet hurt, but she could hardly register the cramped discomfort. With her companions she had been circling the great hollow, watching countless grisly procedures occur within compartments nestled in the walls, and listening to the robed man, with his staff and lantern. “When the child of Balthazar Tothen was ripped from him so heinously in the night, it was not just the girl that was lost, but also the capstone to his cane, a capstone which,” He paused, presumably to inspect the necklace plundered from Janice’s body, if it could still be considered Janice’s, “Which we have found after so long. At first, he searched for the child. Then he searched for methods of recreating her, and then he searched for life itself, life from within the stone. Even before her disappearance, our fathers’ initial experiments were done in the basement of his house, a basement whose dirt floor lent itself to renovation with the aid of a single shovel. But his vision expanded, and so did his reach, and within due time, the house of Balthazar Tothen grew to accommodate his ambition.”

While his voice remained extraordinarily riveting, other auditory forces had grown in prominence since entering the cave system. There was the rushing of water, which had ripened into a steady, dull roar. There was the unmistakable scrape of the scalpel against bone, an almost musical sound. And there was a tremor of static, in the atmosphere, as though an absent television set was left maladjusted just out of view.

“You all feel it. The slip, slip, slipping away of the veil that we stand on. Some of you arrived with the meteor, for a taste of the outer worlds. Some of you were drawn here subconsciously, in its wake. And some of you, some of you had to be given a little push, by our

more... enterprising agents.” There was a ripple of laughter in the crowd. “But one day, you will all have the honor of channeling the signal for our father. To be made so gloriously receptive, there is no higher cause. And you saw what happened to those who shirk their responsibilities, who attempt to shrug off the mantle of a blessed fate. Percy was just so... unappreciative when we made our way underneath his little shop. What was it that he sounded like?” Regina watched in horror as he cleared his throat, a throng of static contaminated the chamber, and his voice was no longer his own. “Who are you? Where did you come from? Get back! Get Back!” He cleared his throat again, like a demented animal through a dying speaker, and returned to his normal, floaty cadence, in which he produced a chuckle. “That spirit kept him going through all of our trials, such misplaced vigor.”

Charles got up first, stabilizing himself while shivering uncontrollably. Blurred afterimages wafted in front of him. Ophelia was close by, similarly dizzy, hunched over. She winced. Something in her lower back was sordidly of line, unarranged, whereas Charles was affected more viscerally, torn up as he was, sweating blood from a number of gashes. “Where are we?” He whispered, “and what do we do now?”

“Enoch said hell. This just looks like a cave, or tunnel, of some sort.” Ophelia replied, head pounding. She walked forward through the passage with unfaltering resolve, and slightly faltering knees. Her proclamations of mundanity were silenced as a familiar voice echoed from above them.

“There are those among you, I am certain, who have cast their doubts on the abilities of our father, but I do not make these claims lightly- he has succeeded in mastery over life and death itself.” The hooded man and his followers continued their descent, and it was by this time that Regina could finally make out some semblance of an end. The floor at the bottom of the

world. And it shined, curiously, pyritically. Charles and Ophelia, from their position inside a tunnel leading into that central atrium, also noticed the glimmering quality of the substratum, but were more concerned with the voice they had heard.

“Is that... is that the guy from the hospital?” Charles whispered, hugging the tunnel wall. With his severely impaired gait, his attempt at stealth could easily have been mistaken for a bracing technique.

“Quiet. The weird one? I think so.” Ophelia quietly said in response, slowly following suit in terms of wounded mobilization. The end of the passage grew near.

“But I am living testament to the miracles he has wrought, as I was brought forth and animated from the carcasses of dogs and of Ferdinand Ostrava, once his frail body gave out. I’m sure the failed attempts have all drifted downriver by now.” The robed figure lowered his hood, to reveal a distinctly lupine ear shape, an unsightly otic mutation. He bared his teeth in the lamplight, which were as pronounced and laniary as had been dreaded by Regina. They reached bedrock, which was coated with coins, heaps of them, dunes and banks, rolling hills of dull gold drachmae. “And once he could create something such as myself, well, our father found the production of these coins, the monetary backing of our cause, to be as simple as prestidigitation”

Charles and Ophelia, lumbering, wheezing, and dripping, still wearing DIY scuba gear, were not inconspicuous to those equipped with an average set of sensory capabilities, let alone those augmented by genetic meddling, and despite their best efforts to remain unseen, it was a futile hope. Tucked behind the taller rocks that poked through a sea of coinage, which reflected the blaze of the approaching torches, the two interlopers huddled.

“It appears we have some guests with us tonight, why don’t you two come on out and join us. How could I forget our meeting in the waiting room?” The dog-man giggled, much in the

way he had during their initial encounter, but his face, and his sound, both were warped into a grander malevolence, in this aurulent, sprawling, torch-lit sub-basement.

“We don’t mean any harm,” stammered Charles, frozen in place. “Really.” He peeked out from behind the boulder, and held out Gabriel’s urn in a meek gesture to communicate intent.

Then unmask! Unmask, unmask!” The first of his response was gleeful, the next were hissed and growled through bare teeth, while he clutched his staff, his lantern, and Janice's locket. The two did as they were told, removing their cumbersome helmets, and placing them, gently, on the scaled field beneath their wet, armored feet. From behind some of the initiates, Regina stifled a gasp at the sight of Charles and Ophelia. “Someone, keep an eye on these two, wouldn’t want them running off before the festivities, before they are introduced to the immortal himself.” Regina, without saying a word, made her way between the two of them, hood still drawn. The dog-man cocked his head, eyes rolling in their sockets, but ultimately decided not to push matters further, instead focusing on his bauble, that which he had fetched. He held it aloft, and let the psychosphere crackle with a depraved energy.

“It’s going to be okay, I’m on your side.” Whispered Regina, while the static swelled up beside them, like an inflamed wound. “I’m here from the hospital, that guy you brought in, they killed him, or at least were the ones who mauled him like... that...” She trailed off as people began to emerge from the various tunnels that ridged this bottom layer, vastly outnumbering the twenty or so acolytes, the robed man, and their small party.

The descending crowd was comprised of individuals disfigured in the same way Percival had been, with radio dials erupting from their eye-sockets, bound to one another with strands of hair, and their mouths, their yawning mouths, open and calling some hideous sound, the phthongal roar of ten thousand white noise broadcasts. Coins began to vibrate and slip over one

another as the infernal chorus continued, and there came a second kind of rumbling, from within the petrean enclosure. One of the larger rocks, presumably the meteorite itself, bulged and writhed, like some planetesimal heart, before levitating. Charles, Ophelia, and Regina attempted to stand their ground during the tremors, but their efforts were instantly reduced to utter, despairing prostration when the undying form of Balthazar Tothen chewed his way through the wall to their right.

No sane god could have permitted the existence of such a thing. So horrid, so ill-conceived was his massive form that any conception, any inkling, of mercy in a heavenly pantheon evaporated. From the breach he rose, attenuated, like a column of smoke from a great inferno, like a corporeal vapour eructated from the diseased bowels of the universe. First burrowed forth his enormous skull, strapped with a maw so despicably elongated that it seemed another tunnel barreling towards them with bulging, pupil-less eyes, plenilunar, like the headlights of a car tearing through a forest road on a dark night, whose chalky sclera were shot through with haematic, jagged arcings of fulgurous veins. There was nothing human about those eyes, nothing divine, nothing at all behind their glossy wet sheen and their wicked fullness.

Charles, Ophelia, and Regina struggled to their feet, struggled to comprehend the sight before them, and struggled to retain any sort of composure as the beast wrenched itself toward the floating meteorite.

Such abhorrent, cthonophagic gnawing carried on as Balthazar reared himself upward, above the multitudes, and allowed vile limbs of improbable, indeterminate length to gush from the excavation. His torso was bleached, having renounced sunlight, but with dirt begriming him, a semblance of color was achieved, though marred still by the markings of his fiendish lengthening. His terror was metameric, uniramian, and towering; and his arms, like forcipules,

how they folded from an abundance of foreign joints, how they ended in hands, knobby and obscene, how his torose fingers flexed and clenched and drew him from the hole as though he were swimming, digits taller than any of the adults present, uncinatè, phalangeal appendages of the cadaverous, colossal minotaur at the center of the labyrinth.

Of the initiates that stood separate from the radio-beings, a handful fainted, losing consciousness outright and instantly. The raw, diacoustic, immemorial sound about them seemed to feed the thing, as it began to curl around the hovering, churning rock while Balthazar's gaped, putrescent mouth dribbled ropes of saliva. The trio held each other while this bent once-human flooded the chamber with another set of limbs, fantastical and glabrous, a pair of obscene legs which mantled their way out the wound in the wall, as though the fallen star was pulling him out of a magician's hat. His creation, the resurrected dog-Ferdinand, started towards him, Janice's locket still outstretched overhead. With both disgusting, trunklike, fodian, segmented stilts firmly planted outside of his entryway, Balthazar pushed, exerting force through multiple popliteal extensions, a profusion of knee-straightenings, until at last he rose to his full, prodigious elevation.

"It's..." Charles began. "What Gabe was talking about..." They looked at each other, both curled up around their ellipsoids.

"Thin Mountain." Ophelia nodded. Balthazar shuddered and retched, spittle soaring from his tombstone teeth, continuing to vibrate as if driven by a motor, the whole of him skeletal, flexed, coriaceous, monstrous, hellish, and looming. Concentric auras radiated from the sight, he was all of these things, and he was none of them.

The corporeal manifestation of an illness no medicine can cure, an apothecary seeing the first splotches of the black plague.

A moment of fierce mortality clarified, the fragile ethereality of existence, seen in a dead bird, in the blue-black veins of an adults leg, in a cough or a snuffle.

Staring into water truly deep, or feeling an unknown entity caress one's foot from within that same deep.

Watching a close friend wither away and leak out of himself, and to have what was once his smile, his memories, his essence erased in the sanitary whirling of a washing machine, never to be felt again.

"Now would be a good time to leave" Regina whispered, while Balthazar planted his arms into the ground on either side of Ferdinand, causing an eruption of coins, more of which slid from the surface of the entangled meteorite, as though the rock could sweat. A thick, sarcoline tongue rolled out of that horrible orifice, like a pink carpet onto which Ferdinand deposited the amulet. There was a guttural swallow as the Balthazar-creature flung his bulbous head in the air and forced the locket down his throat.

"Sure." stammered Ophelia in response. Ferdinand lowered his hands, and, yelling above the static uproar, began to indulge the crowd of acolytes- speaking to them about the secrets of the precious meteor, and the signal it could carry, the unbounded knowledge that reverberated within its oscillations.

"...The greatest force in the cosmos, and it's only become stronger. Why just the other day a rudimentary procedure caused a mighty conflagration to burn down the lower levels of the hospital- a colossal expenditure of energy, from a boundless source, this thing from the furthest unknown, dowered by unknown laws."

"Wait this thing is under the hospital too?" Ophelia whispered "How big is this place?" Regina could only shrug, gaze locked at the monster, whose skin rippled in a deric anomaly like

what she had begun to witness in the emergency room. As she looked around, she could see familiar faces in the crowd, some of the interns, passengers on the bus, pedestrians. How deep was this infection, how necrotic, how hollow was the ground under which she had stood? Charles held a look of confusion or concentration while he gripped his urn, as though he were trying to force it into his ribs.

“This is it. This is every moment you’ve ever sat and wondered to yourself if there was something else out there, something extra-sensory, something extra-terrestrial, something beyond a quiet fate parceled out to you by Newtonian particle reactions you’ll never be made aware of, despite their ability to make you aware, this is the escape hatch from a reality you didn’t ask to be brought into, a reality you will so unceremoniously exit too, with or without your consent. Your wanderings have brought you here, to see beyond the veil, to usurp the intentions of biology, glimpse the backstage of the play you’ve been putting on, to rip the mask off of this world, and come to terms with what lies underneath.” Ferdinand continued alongside Balthazar and the meteorite, a triumvirate provoking intense fear, and awe beyond measure. The initiates still standing were breathless, but nodded in staggered unison.

“Yeah, I think we’ve seen enough.” Charles started backing up, his legs moving of their own accord, his battered frame gradually picking up speed as he crouched and backpedaled. “There’s nothing else that can be done.” Ophelia and Regina followed suit, and it was only when they had already begun to ascend the spiral, the great hollow, along the edges, that the cult noticed their departure. All eyes, all dials, swiveled toward their ascension, static falling on them like rain, drenching them in sound. And that was when the pursuit began, heralded by the pointing of Ferdinand, and with his flexed arm and index finger, the masses began their swarm. From limping to jogging was excruciating for Charles as the three of them picked up speed. He

trailed behind, with a clumsy but raving horde of disciples in pursuit, many of whom tripped over each other in their rabid attempt to scramble up the dark passages.

The blimplike head of Balthazar Tothen swiveled toward them with his great all-consuming, mole like features, gliriform eyes staring at them with an interminable sadness, bordering on frustration, and he dug his blunt fingers into the rocks, crawling up the wall. Regina was by far the least encumbered with damage, but Ophelia was close behind, following the dry heat of the torch while the dull nature of percussive bruising created a tightness in her back. Charles continued to lag. Multiple punctures and tears had all but bled him dry, and as he continued to hobble his way along the incline, out of breath, he could feel such a terrible presence behind him. They fled, through the concourse of walkways and arches, the hollow tower, with so many little caves and cruel sciences, with so much shivering darkness, with the devil himself at their back. Charles was alight, woozy, his lungs a pair of stars burning on in the night sky, his heart a bird, his gut a raging river. His left leg gave out, and he cried in anguish, collapsing to his knee on the stony ramp.

Regina and Ophelia turned around, however briefly, and opened their mouths to speak, to tell him to get up, to extend a hand, to lug him on their backs but he waved them aside, indifferent to their unuttered pleas. Charles turned to face the abomination which had been clawing and curling and vaulting its way nearer to them, a horde of minions at its heels. He pushed himself up, using the urn to get off the floor, gripping it in his bloodied hand by his side. Regina had to pull Ophelia away from him, but the two of them made a break for it, sprinting until their breath hurt and their pulses ricocheted in their marrow, while back on that ramp Charles stood, ready to die. Balthazar's tumescent skull hurtled towards him, wild, raw, with all

the force of a freight train. Charles hefted the urn into both of his hands, and brought it down into that miscreated cranium with all the force he could muster.

A shockwave rattled the caverns from the impact, and a peal of static burst through the collision, loosening all manner of debris that tumbled from the ceiling. Charles opened his clenched eyes in disbelief, while a dazed Balthazar stumbled backwards, recoiling, while ashes tumbled from the fractured urn. Charles lowered his hands, each holding one half of the metallic sphere, cracked like an egg. In the torchlight, one of Gabriel's teeth, a metal one, the only one that had gone uncremated, even after the secondary burners, fell through the air. It rippled, undulations matching those on the meteorite so far below. Regina and Ophelia were far ahead by then, unable to hear the interaction outside of a soft rumble, shocked still by their loss.

As Balthazar recovered, his tangle of limbs unreeling, the radio men had been advancing steadily, shambling to a position of imminent danger to Charles, who tried to resume a brisk pace once again, but found his legs so woefully uncooperative. As he gasped for air, he issued a series of silent prayers. They gained on him, hissing, crackling, a mass of the blind and aimless, lost in the signal and the delirium.

7.) *Things Unseen*

“Life is a hideous thing, and from the background behind what we know of it peer daemonic hints of truth which make it sometimes a thousandfold more hideous”

-Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

Regina and Ophelia had made their way into one of the niches, which had transformed into a proper staircase, this one blackened and scorched. “It must be the one to the hospital,” said Regina, “We did it. We made it, Ophelia, we made it.” She laughed, hands on her knees, laughing softly.

“It’s not over yet, we have to wait for Charles.” Ophelia stood with her arms crossed, obstinate, while her voice broke. Her eyes were wet, and teardrops joined river water as she dripped and shivered. Regina’s face dropped.

“I am so sorry, I am so very sorry. But he’s not coming back, and we have to keep moving, have to tell people about this. I think we just need to get clear off all this interference.” Regina, fearing her urging response would be construed as dismissive, lent a hand to the shoulder of her companion, patting it.

“He’s coming back.” Ophelia couldn’t stand to let the alternative be voiced, least of all by her own lips.

“Let’s just go a little further.” Regina felt the pull of another dread in that well of disbelief, as though there was something she had been missing.

“Okay. But he’s coming back.” Ophelia said again, and looked out at the space before them, outside the confines of the stairwell. Truly, there had been a conflagration. The peeling, monochromatic walls were monuments to saggy decrepitude. She focused on the textures, as the materials of the sub-basement had blistered and bubbled, as if it were a memory in a

deteriorating mind. Flight after flight of calcified stairs went by, soot blackening their footsteps. Medical equipment, gurneys, IV stands, wheelchairs, all had melted together into clusters of sickly, malformed shadows. “Reminds me of elephant skin.” Regina offered, as a point of inoffensive conversation. There was no reply, but it was of little concern, for they were soon able to emerge into the vacant halls of the Tothen-Ostrava Community hospital proper. As they began to maneuver towards the exit, one of the emergency room bays, cordoned off with yellow bands of police tape, drew the attention of the duo.

“No, don’t...” Ophelia started meekly

“That’s where Janice and I--” Regina tore aside some of the banners, opened the door, and never made it to the end of her sentence. From behind, Ophelia reached out, only to hear her stopped, wordless gibbering, a whimpering that encompassed all conceptions of sorrow, guilt, and confusion. For a time they sat, the two of them in the twin carcasses that encircled the room with all their shocking disambiguation, a combination once grotesque, now having begun to decay from abject horror to a profound melancholy. “Can you give me your phone?” Ophelia sniffled, realizing she had left hers in the car by Marwood’s Curio’s and assorted things. “I just need to call someone, anyone. I can let you be alone here, with her.” The thing that once was people was still, silent.

“Sure.” From inside one of her pockets, she produced a handmade little pocket square, Regina’s name delicately sewn onto it. “I loved her. Did anyone know that? Did anyone care?” Her quiet questions came slow, and were unanswerable, as Ophelia looked into the pallid glow of the screen.

She walked to the waiting room, retracing her steps, and sat in the same spot she once faced Charles, the swirling patterns in the vacant chair opposite her, mesmerizing, hypnotic. She

called the police, and calmly explained to them that her friend was trapped in a colossal underground cave and tunnel system that extended through the region, that he was possibly hurt, possibly mortally so, certainly by a cult, a dog-human zombie, and a burrowing creature the likes of which she had never seen before. The operator on the other end of the line was calm, disembodied, robotic.

“Ma’am, there are already officers in the tunnels. Their signal disappeared the deeper they went into the Motor Facility, but we are working hard to regain contact them.” Regina moved to the edge of her seat, reinvigorated.

“Wait, you mean...” From a numb, resigned despair came a spark of hope.

In that lair belowground, the nest, the inverted tower, a gunshot exploded. Charles looked behind him to see one of his pursuers, nearly headless, fly backwards into a pile of his contemporaries. Randolph Legrasse kneeled on one of the walkways that crossed the span, a revolver exhaling smoke. He was joined by Bagatto, cursing his malfunctioning phone, angrily barking requests for backup. “Charles? What’s going here? God God what is that?” Legrasse fired another shot. There was another thud behind Charles, as he continued to make his way upward through the enormous cavity. Startled and staggering, he followed their voices, which guided him along the paths necessary to reach them. They took his weight on their shoulders and went onwards, towards the exit Regina and Ophelia had vanished into. Slowly, steadily, the noise of the chase subsided, giving way to their own breath and unsteady grasp on the fundamentals of existing in this universe. Legrasse and Bagatto dragged Charles out of that hell, to borrow Enoch’s parlance, but from what little they had seen, deduced it to more than accurate. Their journey took them through the same melted expanses trodden by the preceding group, and

through subtle variations on turns and intersections, they were able to glimpse wooden paneling and the occasional family portrait creeping out of the corner of their eyes.

The waiting room awaited them, the last from the underworld, still cold, still wet, smearing filth about the clinical corridors. Legrasse gave Ophelia and Charles some clean clothes, and arranged them in the empty chairs, which tightened the empty, liminal antechamber. Bagatto returned with what looked like folded weather balloons. It had taken some coaxing to get Regina out of the carrion-room, though her pupils still wandered back. It was as if the Regina they saw now was an imitation, acolouthic, and the realer one still dwelled within that emergency enclosure. “They were wrong, Phi.” Charles spoke from within the cocoon of the mylar reflective blanket he had been given.

“Who? And about what?” Ophelia, upon seeing Charles, had held him, cradled him, and apologized for her running away, but all he had done in response was look at his ash covered hands, until this moment.

“Balthazar, Ferdinand. All of them. And about all of it. What they were talking about, ‘backstage,’ the static, the signal, they were wrong. Enoch tried to say it, that there used to be something, like a god or a deity, but not the way we usually think of one. Maybe more like a space, or something like an engine under this world, but something happened, and now we can just hear what’s left. The signal, the white noise, it’s all just bits of ash from another, grander cremation than we could ever conceive.” Charles seemed calm. Legrasse and Bagatto were in the midst of a heated discussion pertaining to further investigations into the abyss, whether or not it deserved to be probed further. Bagatto refused to believe any of what he had seen, and stormed out of the room.

“So...” Despite her growing weariness towards cosmic diatribes and arcane spiels, spurred on further by her own exhaustion, Ophelia was content just hearing him speak again.

“So what they were looking for, whatever secret they thought they were prying from the stone, it was never there to begin with. Like hearing the thunder long after the lightning’s gone. Like seeing a star’s light even though it’s long since gone out. They were just playing with shadow puppets, convinced of their tangibility.”

“And how do you know any of this?” Ophelia massaged her temples

“Enoch, at the sanitarium, but also Gabe, I think. I don’t know for certain, but I think his dentist might have been a member of the cult. I held onto that urn for a long time. And you felt it, I know you did. It wasn’t particularly explicit.” Charles would have continued, but Legrasse approached them.

“The motel you stayed in, they’re giving you another night for free.” He looked at his watch. “Or, day I suppose. Either way, I plan on making sure the two of you get some measure of rest, and then getting out of town.” Both needed sleep more than either of them realized. As they walked outside of the hospital to Legrasse’s vehicle, snow began to fall as dawn began to break. Nivean, crystalline flakes, fluttering like the droopy eyelids of the insomniacs, ensnared and refracted the burgeoning light, while grating, harsh winds briskly lapped at the travellers exposed cheeks. Legrasse made sure they knew that their residence hadn’t been compromised by the cult, as he continually reassured them, or himself.

They slept until mid-afternoon, and while the snowfall had been light, the world was fringed with hoarfrost, a bright adversary to the days that had preceded its arrival. Legrasse was nowhere to be found.

“Hey.” As Ophelia rose from a featureless repose, she found herself aching, hungry, and disquieted.

“Hey, what?” Charles didn’t fare much better, a hangover without the usual prerequisites.

“We got him to Thin Mountain.” As they gathered their things and prepared to leave, it seemed that single warm fact was embattled with all the unnatural visions hanging upon them.

“Yeah, I guess we did.” They hung on Charles heavier, having spent the most time in those caves, and even then, the full gravity of his experience had not yet descended upon him.

“Before we go home, can we go to the fire tower again? I think I’d like to see the view from up there.” Ophelia was afraid of the ground. That at any moment, the dirt, the floor, whatever beneath her would crumble, and she would be released, plummeting right back into that ceaseless barrow. Charles nodded, for he too held that fear.

It really was like a treehouse, suspended far above the tree line. After having retrieved their car from its position parked outside Marwood’s antiques, they drove forth, then marched up, wrapped in the comfort of dry clothes buffering them from the crisp air. Ophelia looked out at the mountainous landscape before her, and found themselves thinking that if the earth had a pulse, this was where it would become visible, written in the rise and fall of the granite slopes, in the curvature of the clouds they punctured, in the flight patterns of migrant, feather framed birds. Charles looked through the spyglass, which, when stripped of mystique by the midday sun, was nothing more than a crude set of lenses.

He could see Coombs Vale, the main strip, where pedestrians burrowed through their lives in inane tunnels, entering and exiting the false little spaces set up for them, the buses the cars, the doorways, the movement, all of it a series of reactions upon reactions, destinations and traveling, liminal, interstitial.

He could see the Asylum, where behind its stone walls and turrets and fortresslike ornamentation, Enoch still maundered on, in varying degrees of comprehensibility, to audiences absent or unwelcome, drowning in an ineffable melancholy.

He could see the grim river, its unchanging, unceasing progression as though it were a ribbon of time itself, uncoiled and serpentine. And on the banks stood the humble cottage of the antique store, with its cracked windows and tilted shelves of disarrayed knick knacks, with its modest garage and pier, air hoses still spilling into the deep like intestines.

He could see the hospital, layered, with what lay underneath bubbling up through its molten base, like a demented, burnt puppet, inside of which Janice still decomposed around Regina's mourning, not far from her apartment, where the dogs ran wild, where they frolicked in the wintry fields.

He could see the Armstrong motors facility, a maze that led to more mazes, a horrid redundancy whose passages were the same as everywhere else, whose contortions were of the same sort that beset the chassis of so many cars littering the automobilic charnel pit.

He could not see any lower. He could not see Balthazar, heaving chunks of the diseased earth into his mouth. He could not see those that intended to follow him, to find something deep in a static-soaked meteorite, ignorant of their own infantile reach, only capable of producing the dark reflections of life, only terror and the grotesque. He could not see the reanimated Ferdinand, howling and barking and snarling, but rotten nonetheless, a hybrid and a leper. But still he did wonder.

“Ophelia. How much more do you think there were to those tunnels? Was that all of it?”
He turned away from the telescope, gusts of wind having blown about his wild hair. He wore a

grim expression. Tingling inside his head was the monochromatic kaleidoscope of the static, turning on and on.

“I... I just can't say.” She had been looking out too, keeping herself steady by holding onto the cabin's edges. Perhaps there was nothing left to say at all. They got back in the car and started the drive.

A pale moon sputtered through the latticework of branches overhead like film caught in a projector. Stars burned on and burned out in the deep, dark sky. Birds unseen stirred the fluid blackness. A car tore down a lonely forest road, headlights illuminating bleached, shivering shrubs dwarfed by great and bare columnar trees upholding the mantle of the night.

The inside of the vehicle was spotless.