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West West West

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Bard College

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West West West

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

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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1. Dance

Later, on nights when Alara was feeling nostalgic, he always thought back to his dance with Shellycan—to the one time when things changed. That day they first met, was it a casual, magnificent spread of her wings? Or was it him, lowering a shoulder, trying to initiate a game of tag? He could never remember what had started the dance. Nor could he recall how their goofy, unsynchronized movements hadn't bothered his injured wrist. On these later nights the boy could only recall the smell of wet bird, wet mud, and wet stone. Those, and a moment during the dance when his arm accidentally brushed against the underside of her wing. It was the only time he ever got to feel those soft, pale feathers.

Alara always marvelled at how inexplicably easy it had been for them to trust one another. Especially him; especially after he'd felt so low. How had he taken a look at that huge, dark creature and been so sure that he was safe? How, before the dance had even begun, had the bird already somehow slipped underneath and perhaps even up the side of his heart?

2. Stalkwoods

It all began with the wounds. Alara was on his morning walk through the Stalkwoods—the forest that separated his home from the world—and none of the usual birdsongs were pinging overhead. When he looked up at the branched-off sky things felt humorless, streamlerless stripped of the sound. There was also the problem of the sun. That day light bloodied the browns of the trunks, casting the woods in a sickly red that clung to the crags in the bark like drool.

Normally, at that time of day, light was turning leaves into gold. Now, instead of rasping metallic on the forest floor leaves were simply rasping like the dead. Alara hoped there was such a thing as a residual sunrise.

Then the sound of heavy paws digging dopily into pine straw punctured the silence. Little Dog, Alara's walking companion, had burst from his side and was now scooting up the big hill to his right, then was out of sight. It was alarming; he had never seen her so blurry and bothered. He followed, and when her whines finally leaked their way through the distance his walk up the hill turned into a run. Something like a deer, he hoped, felled and full of grubs.

When he reached the crest in the land, his lungs felt like juice boxes that had been squeezed dry. He scanned and found Little Dog running below. She was darting between strange black gashes that hung motionless in the morning air, swinging her head threateningly towards one and then yanking herself away. Alara waited, hands on knees, but the scene remained. The dark wounds were still hovering halfway between every two trees, making an imperfect grid that began at the bottom of his hill. So it wasn't just one of those fuzzes of the eye that happened to him when he was out of breath.

He felt conflicted, much like Little Dog. He didn't know whether or not he should go down and investigate these wounds on his own. They were slouching, waiting for him, decorating the Stalkwoods like doomful Christmas ornaments. "It's okay girl!" he shouted down. And maybe it was. He could not think of verses that corresponded to the sight, even in *Isaiah* or *Revelations*, so he wondered something secretly that he knew he shouldn't: had the glossy paperbacks that sat for him at the back of the library actually contained something real? Those sinful tales of witches or knights or ships in space, *real*? Was all the guilt he felt over reading

them totally misplaced? With these questions, Alara looked out at the gashes again. The shadows now seemed to be winking at him like sly, sideways eyes. In one of the rooms of his mind that was exiled from the rest, he imagined himself a hero at the beginning of their thousand-page quest. Now Little Dog was back at the base of the hill, looking up at the boy with eyebrow marks raised and whines louder than before. *There*. She was his heroic reason. He knew that whatever awaited him might actually be a gift from Hell, sent to touch him as it had touched his father. But he could not help but save his dog from the devil. Surely there was no sin in that.

He wound his way through the wounds and observed. They hovered three feet off of the ground and were slightly larger than Alara's big-for-his-age, 12-year-old frame. They were shaped like pea pods that had been emptied and then pressed flat. The edges of the black were sharp, cutting through the morning as though it were nothing but a sheet of cling wrap, giving the surrounding air a wrinkly, sallow complexion. He wondered if it was not the sun that was sick, but his forest.

Then he stopped; he noticed there were something like rolls of color, just color, forming and then unforming on the outskirts of the black. Black bunching into something that reminded him of his own rolls of fat. His older sisters were always pinching his in disgust, but he found these simple, impossible ripples beautiful. They formed, preened, and then flattened back to the smooth surface of the rest. "Hi," he said to the waves, dragging his fingers up the soft rungs of his belly. "Hi. ... hi. ... hi. ...". Then the ripples stopped rippling, and he realized it was because he was now looking right into the center of the thing. He moved his eyes back to the edge of the gash, and sure enough his vision was soon rolled back to the middle. The gashes like a vinyl record, his eyes like the needle.

He took a step closer and noticed that there was a faint noise coming out of the wound. Little Dog whimpered but he ignored her now that he was here. He brought one of his ears to the gash. The sound might have been mechanical, coming from some kind of machine. He closed his eyes. *Weird*. It was an artificial kind of rumble—perhaps, he thought, of a giant golf ball rolling over rocks. The small, enamel-like ridges of it knocking against yet giving slightly in to hard stones, somewhere far, far within.

Little Dog's frightened barks suddenly seized Alara by the ears, shaking his poor brain to bits. The boy stumbled backwards and fell onto his butt. Her wet nose was there to greet him, smudged his cheek. He wrapped his arms around her abundant, soft mane and wiped his face on her fur. He wanted to be patient, to respect her fears, but it was hard. He looked out again at the rest of the world. *Oh*. His lungs once again felt squeezed. All of the gashes were gone.

Now, as always, the sun shone brilliant and stern over the earth and small birds crackled air into energy. Cruel, the brightness, disappearing his adventure. He couldn't believe the brevity of the event. But he was used to holding onto the things that would drag his limp body forward; he didn't want to linger on the disappointment. They were gone because they had been there. "They're real," he said too close to Little Dog's face. She gently broke his hug and started walking at her normal, leisurely pace, back in the direction of the house.

Alara knew he would have to do the same. Instead of walking straight home, however, he decided to take the winding river route. He wanted time to pull himself back together. He couldn't hear his mother's voice right then, nor see his sisters cleaning under artificial light. He didn't want Lysol stretching up his nose.

3. Home

Alara's family lived in a wide white house by the river. It was full of hallways and stairs of three steps or less. The carpeting was thick and the couches were high. The air in the house was stuffy despite the woods and waters around it. Sometimes John—his father—built the rest of them fires, though it was never cold.

The house had been built by an older couple who died ten years after moving in. The woman had been a history professor at the community college, interested in the relationship between the Creek Nation and early settlers. She wanted to retire to a place where she could look for artifacts on her walks and imagine what things had been like before, during, and immediately after the conquest. The surviving family left a shoebox full of her drawings and notes for the next owners of the place to peruse.

John was particular about the quality of driveways. He had a smooth, grey one poured over the slightly busted original, all the way from their garage to the nearest road—about a mile. He was also particular about the education of his children. Shelly, his wife, had homeschooled all three until a year ago, when she had convinced her husband to let Alara go to public school, or “school school” as the boy smugly called it. Perhaps she did this because she was tired, or perhaps it was because Alara was a boy, and the ‘smart one,’ and the baby. John had removed some of the writings before he handed his children the box. The sketches of buildings and layouts were educational, but he found the notes overly simplistic and uninformed.

Shelly liked to say that the river gave the house a soul. Looking at the place house first, river second, it seemed like the building might fall right into the water with one good push. It kissed the house and ran south, winding, occasionally falling in small waterfalls with the sloping land.

Alara hopped up it from rock to rock, water shrinking down noisily at his feet, going the opposite direction of the current to get home. They were dense little scars, he thought. With a special gravity, a special set of threats. He thought of the Big Bang, which had also been all packed in and volatile. He thought of his science teacher, Mr. Garn. Now, too, plenty of Bible verses floated up to the fore, all corresponding to the gashes in their way.

4. Big Bang

He sat on his rock as if it were a modern chair: on the edge of it, looking up, with his right hand in feigned support of his chin.

“There are two things about the Big Bang,” he said to someone imaginary who was fascinated by his mind. “One is the explosion. Everything shooting out from the center in utter chaos. Matter streaming open space like a heavy rain—but not just down, mind you dear ... guy, rain sideways, diagonal, up! Everything exploding and at speeds faster than you or anyone has ever even been able to imagine. Millions of times faster than the speed of our eyes. And the second thing is gravity. As in, everything combining. The sucking up of quarks, into atoms, into molecules, into this cave where we now sit. All the tiny beads sinking towards one another at the

same time as they are running away from the center. Things pinging off of other things. Breaking other things. Smunching up into big wads, which get packed into bigger wads, which get sucked into huge rocks, which all fall into the sun. Until the universe is trillions of masses that are all unique. They're still flying, still banging around, still running away like their heads are on fire, but as specks on the spokes of galaxies!"

"I suppose," Alara leaned back, as though he hadn't been rehearsing this speech for weeks, as though this last part was occurring to him in the moment, "I suppose that even the tiny particles were moving that way, from the beginning. I suppose they were swirling and spinning just the same as stars spin now, only on a scale so small we could never ever see."

A new question arose though, from an imagined member of the audience: *But wait, wouldn't that mean that every atom was like, its own little galaxy? That everything, including me, was made of tiny little wheels, and that my thumb was spinning as we speak? Don't we know that atoms move differently, with their own rules?*

"Ah, well, yes, in fact, beloved beloved, what is your name?"

5. Spell

John came home early that day. Alara and his sisters—Candy, Reegan—heard his truck roll in and scrambled, as usual, to their places at the table. They felt lucky to have set it early. Alara noticed that everyone was in a good mood. His mother was making taco soup and cornbread in the kitchen, which was separated from the eating area by a white island countertop and

accompanying barstools. It was light out, and light came in. They could hear John singing over the jangle of his keys. Then the door opened and “Rocky Mountain High” washed through the house like the Holy Spirit. John added lots of extra twangs and some way too deep notes and Alara couldn’t help but laugh. He looked over at Reegan and she stared back at him, smiling. The look was hopeful, and said something like *let this be a good dinner/night*.

John had gone to his room, and was still singing loudly through splashes of water, when a thought caused Alara to stand.

“You know dinner’ll be ready not too long from now,” Shelly warned as he tried to slip away. Though nothing was made explicit, they all knew that John preferred to find them in the same place he had left them when he came back from changing and washing up.

“I just remembered a lesson I have for Monday. I want to make sure I brought the right folder. I’ll be right back.” He corrected her in his head that dinner was probably an hour away.

Once in his room, he pulled out a sheet of brown construction paper from the back of his closet. It was crinkled to the point of feeling feathery. He took out a marker from his bookbag and wrote “9. Coming Home Early vs. Coming Home Late” under a headline titled “POSSIBLE REASONS.”

“Daddy’s back!” John cheerily yelled.

Alara sat back in his chair. He had walked in on a conversation. “Yes’m,” John seemed to say to no one in particular, and then turned to address his children, who were all on one side of the table. The man had a voice that was indignant and boyish to complement his straw brown hair. His head was round and wide, and his skin was pale, but otherwise he was as lean and scrappy-looking as the rest of the family—save for Alara and the dog. “Now listen, I’m taking

some days and going back to Cainesville next weekend. Should be over there two or three nights. I gave your momma instructions for while I'm gone ... I'm gonna miss you babies fiercely. You know, and make sure you pray for all the people I'm going to see. God bless 'em, it's getting worse over there. I can hear their thoughts sometimes when I'm sitting alone in my office. You wouldn't believe the kind of vile things that worm around in their heads."

The children nodded and nodded.

"Oh! I'm gonna miss my babies!" He said in a voice much like their mother's. He cast his arms out wide and started to cry—pretend, but Alara and his sisters still formed the group hug.

"Oh! My children. Who's trying to take you away? Who's gonna try to take you away from me?" His voice operatic as he rocked them side-to-side. When he let go, they all smiled pleasantly with heads tilted down and returned to their seats.

Alara sat there until he finally blinked up the courage. "Dad, I wanted to tell you something." He could sense Candy's worried look. "This morning, I think I saw these, strange things in the woods. They were black and they were floating in the air, hanging from something, only I couldn't see what. They were everywhere, I mean, and they looked like cuts or something, but they were black, all black. Little Dog was barking at them, too, and running faster than I've ever seen her run." His father's eyes were now wrinkled into warm pools. Alara pushed away Candy's looks and the cracks that were beginning to break up his speech. "And I was wondering if there's something in the Bible about that happening, or if there's something in Cainesville, something that you're trying to stop, that you've seen before?"

It was silent then as the birdless Stalkwoods from morning. Shelly, Candy and Reegan were all turned towards Alara but looking expectantly at John. Finally, the man smiled. He put his worn elbows on the table. A red hue flowered to the surface of his skin.

“Are you sure they weren’t you?” He asked jovially.

Those were the words. Alara knew they were all he was going to get, but he didn’t know how to work with them. He took a deep breath. He heard the sounds of the river splashing just outside the window. He resisted the urge to say “what?” and instead went with a feeble “no.”

“The reason I ask is, I sit here ...” His father held his forearms out to indicate where he sat. “Or” he jumped out of his seat and then took bouncing steps to the kitchen, so that he was addressing the family from behind the island. “Or I’m standing here. And it’s so funny, what you said, because it’s familiar to me.”

Alara perked up. “Oh! Good, did—”

“A little black wedge just hanging there, sitting there. And I think, ‘okay, kind of strange, not exactly what I expected, but okay.’ Right? But then, at the worst, possible moment, it asks me—who’s really quite generous, right? who, I’m really quite reasonable—but you, boy, you ask me these questions like ...” He was still smiling, but had brought all of the fingers on his left hand together and was screwing them alternatively tight and loose in the air, trying to find the words. “Like you’re taking a blade ...” he took his pocket knife out of his pants with one hand and lifted up his shirt with the other.

“Wait!” Shelly screamed.

“It’s okay,” he hissed. “I’m not gonna do anything. I’m just demonstrating.” He tried to force her back into her chair with his eyes, but she stayed on her feet. He continued: “And like a

coward, you take your little blade and slip it right in between my ribs ...” he pointed to the groove in question with the folded knife. “... at the moment I think that everything God ever gave me is perfect and that everyone of us is safe.”

He stared hard at Alara, his expression challenging the boy to react. But Alara *was* reacting. His forearms were tossed over the top of his head for protection and his eyes opened and closed. He squirmed to see Reegan’s face but she refused to look his way. He tried to think of something to say, something to satisfy his father’s crazed, expectant look. He let out a few high-pitched whines, trying to find his voice, and at that, his father quickly flipped open his blade and made a shallow cut down the trough of skin between his ribs. A thin line of blood soon surfaced on his chest.

“Hey, good, Shelly is ushering my babies away from their daddy. It’s too bad they don’t let women be ushers at the church, right? you could sit up there as soon as tomorrow, the kind of raw talent you possess.”

As usual, Reegan went to her room, while Candy and Alara remained close by. For his part, he didn’t want to leave his mother alone, and he felt a responsibility to gather more data about his father’s spells. There was no real danger, either, especially if John didn’t see them watching. The man was bad at knowing what was going on or who was where during a spell. Candy shoved Alara back from the corner of the wall that they were peering out from behind. “You don’t get to care about it, you started this dumbass!” she said. He decided he hated her and ran around the house, stopping at the opening on the other side of the kitchen area. He saw that John had now grabbed some melon juice from the fridge. It was unusual for liquids to come into play during the first phase. He was speaking in tongues, exactly the same as in church. But

obviously they had to mean something different right now. Shelly was in there with him, keeping her distance. But John sank down into a sitting position in the center of the open room. *Okay.* Alara watched his mother slowly crouch down and approach the man. Watched John starting to quiet. All three of them knew it probably wouldn't be that easy. And sure enough, as she went in to hold him he took a rapid swig of the juice and then drooled it onto the top of her head, stickying her hair. A few more mouthfuls then dropped to the floor from his wet, shaking lips.

After that sight, both Candy and Alara left. She joined Reegan in their room without a word to her brother, and so he went to his.

Shelly brought Alara some dinner at midnight. He was still up, and he enjoyed being allowed to eat at such a late time. His mother was apparently done for the night, and rubbed Alara's back while humming a nursery rhyme until he was done.

6. Afterspell

Day one was a Sunday. Alara knew everything would be grueling for a while, if predictable. Everything would be predictable except *what has he done?* The question threaded their minds together, never a different question. The voice of fear made bland, but still. But still *what has he done?*

Alara got up. He pulled out the feathery paper and crossed out reason 9. He went to where it happened.

Bloody rags were plopped onto the otherwise spotless counter—dull wondering. Shelly’s head emerged from behind it and she screamed. He had scared her. She hadn’t slept. She gathered bits of broken glass into a dustpan, a few small nicks on her hands. Alara scanned the cabinets and saw one open, saw that a row of the formal glasses was gone. He wondered which part of his father’s body the rags had covered. He knew they were too bloody to have been for his chest. Watery red dripped onto the white. His mother groaned in frustration and swiped them off of the counter.

The day stretched hot. They went to church. John sang loudly and gripped the pew in front of him, fresh bandages on his hands. A squinting drive home and then everyone searching the house for other messes. None more found, but still. John followed them, pestering, baiting them into mentioning what happened at dinner, asking them what they were searching for. Nobody budged. Shelly was especially silent. Another trip to bedrooms, another soft-hummed song. Shelly bracing herself for night. The children unable to ignore their father’s flat, pained wails coming through their walls. Sometimes it sounded like a monster crying, sometimes like a baby.

Day two. John a little softer, Shelly growing loud. Alara went to school. Nobody knowing anything. Sly jokes made at his expense. Then home.

Candy seemed to have forgiven him. Everyone reminded themselves of the scripts that got them through this. At night Alara burrowed down further into his covers and shook with rage to tire himself, to sleep through the crying.

Then day three. More school. His mother packing a note in his lunch box that promised “homemade mac’n’cheese for dinner tonight!”

To dinner. Alara stared down at his favorite meal, and was frustrated. Next weekend felt too far away. His sisters looked perfectly recalibrated, and he was not. John was eating sloppily and smiling at Shelly after every bite.

Tomorrow, Alara knew, his father would remember it all. He would remember and drop into a big well of regret until all of them had forgiven him a few dozen times, lifting him back up. All of his apologies would be addressed to the four of them as one. Then the exhausting, collective search for reasons why it had happened would commence—reasons in Cainesville, in politics, in things all of the family members had done to once again invite the demon into John’s heart. And in the end, after they all resolved to do their part, his family would have to appreciate the realness of it all—the way John’s spells affirmed that in fact there was a powerful God, and thus a powerful Devil.

The sound of smacked food clapped Alara’s ears as sweaty hands. It was unbearable, and nobody else knew anything about it. Silently, hating them all, he decided he didn’t care what was best for his family—he would remember how bad this spell had been. He would remember his father’s pathetic lips. And the malicious look his father had given him before whipping out his blade. He would remember the black gashes, too, and how his father had tried to take everybody’s attention away from them. He resolved to make himself unreachable, like dead weight, impossible for anyone to lift out of the past. He imagined sneaking down to his father’s old desktop when everyone was asleep and typing what he remembered into Google. This made him laugh. Out loud. But when he looked around for reactions, it seemed as if no one had heard him. The house had grown dark over his family’s faces and he realized then he was sinking, being swallowed by the floor. Their heads became modest streaks of light as he dropped. His

stomach lurched. He heard a faint cry from Reegan, but then it was gone. He fell until he could see nothing at all.

7. Darkness

Alara opened his eyes, though he could not recall having shut them. It was just as dark either way, wherever he was.

The air was humid and cool. It was unlike the steam that rose from the hot lowlands back home. There, air felt sticky, almost exhaled. But here it seemed like air wasn't bothered by the creatures or microcreatures of life. He was left alone in the pure, empty space, and he felt calmer and cleaner than he had in a long time. Something about this felt familiar to him; he wondered if he had been to this place before. When he was a baby, perhaps, or even before he was born.

He also wondered if this was where he would have ended up if Little Dog hadn't stopped him from sticking his head into that gash.

Then he heard the sound. Something big was moving somewhere close. It was almost imperceptibly deep and sounded, when he focused, like honey slowly being swallowed down a throat, sounding esophageal rums not as a rake come to rasp but as liquid cotton, crawling its wet rolls ever slower, ever deep across the rib. Occasionally, mud-thick pops sputtered over this bass of the strange song.

He realized the source of the sound was hard to place because it was echoing off of what seemed to be nearby walls. So wherever he was was enclosed. This comforted him; he had always preferred closets to open fields.

Still, he was confused. The sound was starting to soothe him, in its way, but it was also so unfamiliar. And his eyes still weren't adjusting to the dark. He felt like he was at the top of his Stalkwoods hill all over again. He knew that, officially, he should be alarmed by the fact that he had just been brusquely dropped into some new place. And he knew that he should therefore be wary about wherever it was that he had landed. But it was hard for him to ignore that the means by which he had been dropped seemed to be magical—or at the very least, supernatural. And something about the cool air and the deep, crawling noise made him feel both excited and safe. Certainly they made him feel better than he had when he was balling himself up into angry locks at the dinner table. He could already feel himself giving in once again to the unofficial desire for fantasy and magic.

Perhaps the place's vacant air allowed for the more liberal movement of its few particles, for it was only after Alara was thoroughly enchanted by the deep song that he first smelled the scent. It was a sweet smell, of chocolate, or decadence, or freshly baked crust, and it came and went at random. He moved his head side-to-side, searching desperately for other pockets that might be passing by, and in another minute had found one and was able to follow it for a good three seconds before it vanished. He didn't understand why the smell was mobile; he couldn't feel any wind.

He had forgotten about his reservations completely, now. He hadn't eaten dinner, and he wanted most of all to locate the source of this sweetness in the air. He got up and stumbled

carelessly over the uneven ground, searching for more pockets of the smell. The echoes of his footsteps made it sound like a small army was in pursuit. Then, to his surprise, he saw something: a patch of brown on the ground up ahead, the only color in the place, illuminated as though it were sitting under a glowing moon.

As he neared the brightness, he finally took a step that proved too long and too sure; his foot came down past where he had expected it. Instead of a dry, flat slab, it connected with a slick surface just above the brown that also happened to slope severely down. His body followed, and he slid down the ten-foot bank, miraculously, on the same one foot. He barely had time to be startled by the slide, and now it seemed that nothing bad had even happened. It was as if the slope had cradled him while he fell, making sure he kept his balance. His yelp reverberated back to him more times than he would have liked, though as it continued the echoes seemed to harmonize and then fade into the slow, deep song.

Alara turned back to regard the brown color that he had just slid over. He noticed that the smell was much stronger down here; it greeted his nose every ten or so seconds. *A lucky fall, as far as falls go.* Then the brown started shifting back and forth and the bank suddenly broke open.

8. Sickness

Batter rushed into Alara's nose with intention and he couldn't snort it out. It felt like it was creeping past his nasal cavity and clawing at his brain. He kicked himself back above the surface of the dark river and its batter immediately evacuated his head.

His nose actually felt better now, after the darkness, than it had before his dive. So he continued his lazy float down. But then he started feeling the slightest hint of nausea. He couldn't tell if it was a reaction to what had gone up his nose or to his sudden uneasiness with how foolish the dark river was making him. Then the hint became pain that gripped him by his insides and hastily swam ashore.

Once he made it, Alara stared down desperately at the rocks for support and then vomited everything possible out. It hurt. Pain stretched up his throat. He could hear his own heaves echoing off the walls. Like God was showing him, *this is you*. A silver insect the size of a crumb landed on his knuckle and he remembered how he and his sisters used to catch lightning bugs in the summer. He stared hard at it and tears began to flow. It was a bright thing, but since it was still, he could see beyond the light to the insect's actual structure. A silver moth. Its two bundles of wing had delicate, brown markings that looked to him at first glance like splatter paint, at second and third like impossibly small calligraphy.

9. Name

As he got to know the bird, he became more and more convinced that it was something more like him than the snake, or the river, or God, or Mr. Garn. Like a being moving freely rather than a puzzle-piece part of this new world. Parts of it even reminded him of Candy, Reegan, his mother, his father. At some point, he decided he should call it something to honor this fact, and settled on "Shellycan." "Shelly" because the bird reminded him most of his mother, especially in those rare

moments when the woman allowed herself to be silly. “Can” only because he needed to make the name different, and he liked its sound. He referred to the bird as “she” to help emphasize its proximity to its namesake.

10. Bearings

Out from the pierced ground in front of him slithered a snake of many colors. Alara’s eyes needed time to adjust to the brightness of the creature, but he could not look away. It was a short snake—no more than three feet long—and had a wide middle that tapered steeply into two pointed ends. There was no orderly rainbow pattern on it, only a kind of rainbow effect. Every scale was its own, fine sun. Thousands of them covered the body, each one a different color, each one competing with its brothers and sisters to swim above the canopy of light and catch Alara’s eye. Silver, cherry, mustard presented themselves and then faded in instants as the snake slithered on. It was on the flat ground next to him now, revealing the floor to be a flat, grey stone. The severe sunlight was contained within the scales, but he could see that the moonlight which had illuminated the brown patch before extended far out from its body, about ten feet in every direction.

The moonlight has more range than all of its little suns?

But the snake was on the move, slithering brilliantly off to his left. Alara saw that the ground under it was darkening from grey to almost black. He followed, and as he did, that chocolatey smell became ever-present in the air and the deep sound swelled so loud that it

vibrated his chest. He felt absorbed within the place. The snake picked up speed. He decided that he would not forgive himself if he lost sight of the creature, all bright and in the open; he hoped it could be some kind of magical key, to help him understand where he was and what was happening to him.

But just as he upped his resolve the snake and the moonlight seemed to diminish in size. He gasped, ran to it, and tried to ignore the disrespectful ghosts of his outcry echoing back at him. As he got close, he saw that the colors at the front end were being eaten by what seemed like the point at which the almost black stones on the ground turned into a realm of blackest black. The radiating moonlight was now a semisphere, cut off by the true blackness. But despite this, the snake still pushed forward with a strong, thrashing tail, slowly continuing on as its scales disappeared into the void. Gone, colors which Alara could not describe, colors he may not have ever liked before, wherever it was he had seen them on the surface. Gone now that he was finally realizing the merits they each possessed. But he was late.

Just as the snake was propelling itself ever slower into the black, it became harder and harder for Alara to reach down and yank the creature back to grey land. Halfway down the distance to its tail, his hand was at almost a complete stop.

The snake was making better progress. It was now nothing but a nub of pinks and greying whites, wiggling pitifully until seemingly gone, *no*, a few more suns. Alara wished he could flee to his room. Just like the quaking lips or crumpled body of his father, the snake's willful disappearance made no sense. But there were no rooms, as far as he knew, and anyway his body was stuck in place. So he settled for looking away until the snake's true end.

At the place in the black where the last sun died, it seemed to him like the spirit of the snake still lingered; he thought he saw a speck of brown there in the void. He was not optimistic, and he didn't understand how he could see it now that the snake was totally gone, but he leaned in. Then, from the pin-prick in question, a thin dark ooze began to swell. He watched as a large bubble ballooned into form and then popped over the almost black with a rude crack. Alara realized that his body had gone limp right before he hit the ground.

11. Drawings

Alara drew intricate designs on the ground between his sleeping place and the red rocks. There were sections of fine dots and sections of smeared red and sections of small fish. He also thought to draw a pathway cutting through, with a simple cobblestone design, on which he could walk in and out of the circle without disturbing his art.

He also drew scenes on the walls. Without him meaning to, these drawings started to resemble the cave paintings he had learned about in school school. Most of them were of him and Shellycan—dancing, walking, eating. The largest and most detailed was a drawing of the day the two had met. The spout bisected the picturing space and the bird and the boy stood on either side.

12. Bearings

Alara woke up and felt how sore his body was from its first night sleeping on stone. He opened his eyes out of habit and saw that he was in a cave.

Darkness lingered in the jagged place, sure, but somehow now he could see most everything. It was a dramatic, bizarre-looking scene: the cave looked as though it had been carved by a slow, thick wind—a wind that could tear off great pieces of rock but then shave the next surface into something shiny and smooth. It reminded him of how aliens' homes were described in a book he had read.

He saw that he was also sitting on the shore of a dark, brown river that ran through the cave's middle. The same deep sounds and rich smells that he had sensed in the darkness were now coming out of it, only they were slightly weaker. He noticed that the dark river was in the same place that the blackest black had been before. The liquid that flowed in it looked like a batter. It gurgled and spread and moved down easy, climbing over its own mysterious lumps with soft, temporary sheets. Its banks were not as steep as the brown banks had been, but again, they were in the same place as the originals. The whole floor of the cave seemed to have been flattened in the time between when the bubble popped and when he awoke. Alara crawled to the strange river's edge and found that he could reach down to it easily, now. The batter slurped his fingers under, but released him when he pulled them back up.

He brought his fingers to his mouth and sucked the river off of them. It was room temperature, gooey, and reminded him of underdone box brownies. Only it was better. He made his palms into scoops and began lifting handfuls out of the flow.

As he glugged heaps of the soft dessert down, he felt completely at ease. It had been awhile since he had eaten, he figured. But it was more than that. More than anything else. It was not only the sweet, rich taste. When he ate it, the dark river washed away pains he didn't even know he had. It made him feel both heavy and weightless. Every mouthful had him wanting to lay on the grey shore forever. But soon, whether his stomach growled or was silent or ached, the singular desire for more of its batter-like magic made his body come alive again.

Eventually he surveyed the pretty cave again with a full belly and a mind that felt muffled by mountains of velvet. He was reminded of the diversity of its colors and shapes of stone. The grey sheet that darkened from pale to black as it approached the river ended at the mud-brown banks. The banks were short enough now for Alara to see over. Beyond them small towers of droplet-like rock stood milk-white against a backdrop of more browns and greys. *Stalagmites*, he remembered they were called. Mr. Garn had reminded his class that they were different from stalactites because you “mite” trip on them. He wondered if his teacher could help him understand what was happening. These walls were more than backdrops, though, as he looked close; there were intermittent growths of white as well as streaks of green and red. He wondered if these colorful accents were bits and pieces of the snake's skin, dispersed throughout the room like the blood and body of Christ. It was a sad thought, but also provided some comfort; the parallel might mean that God was behind his fall.

Alara also noticed that the river and the cave both had a slight bend. The cave was walled in parallel to the river, but stretched out of Alara's sight in both directions, disappearing finally behind a corner of the wall after about a quarter of a mile each way. He was on the inside of this gradual “C” shape, such that he was slightly cradled by the place.

13. Prayers

“I am starting to get confused again, Lord, though I know I shouldn’t be. I think I shouldn’t be.”

“I wonder if it feels good for Daddy in the moment when he’s going through one of his spells. Of course it doesn’t, I just wonder because it felt good for me when I was drinking the dark river, in a way.”

“I’ve lost some weight, Lord, which is something. And my calves are strong when I feel them. It’s from this, all this walking.”

“But I am confused, like I said, which I’m sorry for. I can’t figure out what I should be doing here.”

“I know a few things. Like to feel bad about how I was at the dinner table. I feel like you dropped me here because of what I decided to remember.”

“It’s hard to imagine Daddy’s office, now. Of all the things back at home, that one feels the least like it was ever real. I mean, sitting down in front of that computer and touching the mouse, the warm mouse?”

“I’m also sure that I shouldn’t have eaten so much of the dark river. Because I got sick, obviously, and afterwards, when I was better, the water turned into the river—I mean the river turned to normal water. Just like the river back home. Which must mean it was good to stop. The river’s still clear, so maybe now I’m doing something right. It is easier not to eat it all when it tastes like nothing, with just a hint of fish and weeds.”

“But I am confused because there was a snake—you’d think a devil— that actually gave this place its light. That seems more like the creation story than the Garden of Eden. And like Jesus, too, it sacrificed itself.”

“I don’t even know if what I’m saying right now is blasphemous.”

“When I first fell down here, things reminded me of those gashes in the woods, and the fantasy books I know I shouldn’t read, Lord, and of the feeling when I look out a window at nothing. If it were only feeling like that, though, I could know this place is totally bad. I mean, maybe not totally—it’s real, and that’s weird too. But ever since I got better the cave also just feels like a cave. Crazy things happen here, like miracles or magic, but when I walk around it also feels like a regular old part of the planet. And camp even feels like my home.”

“It’s like I’m walking around exploring a heaven that’s probably actually hell. But now it’s also starting to feel like neither one.”

Alara stopped walking. He had arrived at an intersection in the cave; two curving paths connected to form a huge, open space. He pulled out his map—a scratched up plate of stone—and absent-mindedly traced deeper the soft “X” that represented where he stood. He knew this was where he had come from; he would be home soon.

He kept his clothes on; he didn’t mind dripping dry. It was only up to his thighs anyway. He waded across the river at what was becoming his usual place. A few fish brushed against his knees, tickling him. When he made it to the other side they washed up after him, already dead. They were nearly translucent creatures; he could see the blurry red of their hearts sitting still within the thick of their bodies, and was annoyed. He didn’t want to carry fish this far away from camp back to the pit when he could easily acquire some once he was settled. But they had gone and died for him, and he felt obligated now. He took their smooth, scaleless bodies in his hands and kept going.

“People will flee to caves in the rocks and to holes in the ground from the fearful presence of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth. In that day people will throw away to the moles and bats their idols of silver and idols of gold, which they made to worship. They will flee to caverns in the rocks and to the overhanging crags from the fearful presence of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth.”

“‘When he rises to shake the earth,’ ‘when he rises to shake the earth.’ Why aren’t there any moles or bats here, huh Lord? Sorry. Or is that some kind of expression? I can’t remember

anything about those verses, but that's the only part of the Book that jumps out of my head as far as what could have to do with all this." Alara gestured to the cave.

"Remember how much I read from that joke book Momma bought me. I read that thing over and over again. The pages were yellow and long, and clean—"

He thought he felt the fish in his left hand twitch, but nothing more happened.

"That stupid book was horrible for me. I threw it away. You know. But it was amazing how much I read it, I think."

"God, I think you'll answer me. I know that's cocky, but I can feel it coming closer, like I'm not the only one here."

"I can't wait to hear your voice echoing off of these old walls. Like Moses heard it when you were tearing him a new one. I know, I don't really get what it means besides getting mad at someone, anyway. Tear someone a new one, tear someone a new one, tear some one, a new one."

14. Eggs

A dozen golden, orange, and red colored eggs sat proud and together, glowing from their divot of a nest. The sides of the bowl were given a particularly vibrant painting by the eggs. They were

surprisingly light for their size. He pulled up the bottom of his shirt to make a basket and stacked four of the twelve into it, pulled tightly against his belly.

“These must be the snake’s eggs.”

Later, after dropping one, he recognized the eggs as geodes. Only the glittering crystals within them also functioned as pungent spices. And that nest he had found them in was one of at least five in the area, all sitting within their own unique nests on the ground.

15. Low

Alara awoke from the weight of a particularly forceful drop of sludge onto his cheek. It was a mixture of calcium and water, dripped from a stalactite ten feet above. The drop only added to a pile of the thick liquid that had formed while he was sleeping and now covered a side of his head. He groaned, turned over, and unwittingly squashed the growth between his face and the ground, spreading it into his hair and his ear.

He got himself up and saw that the section of the cave he was in was still small. He did not feel claustrophobic; he felt everything weakly anyway. He plucked a smooth rock from the shallow stream with his left hand and scraped the crud off of his face as best he could. With a slight twitch of absent-minded movement from his right, though, he did feel one thing strongly. The nearly imperceptible throbbing in his wrist became as sharp and screaming as any pain he had ever known. He tried moving it again and had to hold back a yelp. He touched it cautiously

with fingertips. It did not feel like his wrist. It reminded him of what his newborn cousin had felt like when she was in his arms.

Alara decided he wanted to be done with the cave. Now, after the fall, he suspected that someone had just been toying with him this whole time. Made him follow a false god. *Was* the false god. Or maybe there was nothing false about it. Maybe it was the God he had always known that was fooling him. He didn't think it mattered now.

He wanted to forget that this cavity in which he sat had only recently been teeming with elephantine fish. He wanted to have his old eyes back—the ones that didn't look like waving, calci-white boulders spilling out from his blurry, eye-socket caves in the reflection of still waters. He felt like cushioning his brain with a layer of fat so that he would not have to interact so directly with the world. So that even his own thoughts would shrink into whispers. As it was, his interiority felt shipped out onto the rocks and cast in a painful, industrial light. He looked down at his swollen wrist. He wondered with amusement and bitterness if it would mean anything at all to score it with a sharp, glossy stone. To rub it with oil and cilantro and green chilies, lemon juice and great big cloves of garlic. To cook his whole arm in the hot pit until it was thoroughly browned.

He tried to find a dark bed, but there were none. He wondered if the beds only occurred in bigger regions of the cave. He decided that he wouldn't be surprised if the cave had simply gotten rid of them all. It was clear it had a cruel mind of its own. So he curled up on the regular ground. Another opaque dribble soon kissed his cheek and he welcomed it. He imagined waking up and finding that his head was completely covered by the stuff, cemented to the floor by a mass of dried calcium. He grinned at the thought and faded to sleep.

16. In the Beginning

“In the beginning,” the voice began in a warm, emphatic tone the boy had never heard him use before, had only heard his mother use as she read aloud children’s stories, “the circling sun shone hard onto the skin of the Earth. The sheets of its light streamed through cracks in the dirt to puff up the Earth into separations unseen, the sunlines coursing through the underground as a stem separates into branches. The roots of light changed with the movement of the sun across the sky, like a wedge of electricity striding across the land, ripping into the ground to print its network anew and anew. Old shafts closed and new ones began, changing the dirt’s distribution of breath so that a grain once stretching in the heat was now choked, mid-breath, into darkness. And while these grains shrivelled back into a state of waiting, their newly-heated brothers were singing trembling songs. Into the new sunlines, a few dark grains would fall, diving foolishly back into light. This repeated every fresh wall of sun, grain after grain coming loose into space. So that after every thousand sheets that were laid upon the Earth, half of the dirt would be dragged inches farther in the sun’s footsteps. Dust crawling over dust in crumbling waves. The sun always summoning them, *West, West, West.*”

“The wind curled through the mountains and skimmed off the oceans, acquiring pebbles and salt and smells as it went. The sun wove the wind up and down so its ingredients shook out. The salt and the pebbles and the smells fell into the cracks in the surface of the dirt. From here, they tumbled. Slowly, slowly, churned by the sun-spun dirt. The winds’ gifts were pinched and

thrown by the grains, twirling beneath the surface for a million trips of the sun. They shifted, broke, recombined, mixing in the hot dirt until the soil grew populated with original things. Overflowed even, so that it had to burp them out from their bustling home and up onto the barren surface.”

“Most things crumbled into dust from the sheer force of the light, but the Earth kept sending them, until one stuck. A brown type of thing with looping trunks that sewed in and out of the ground, crawling forth with small green plates to plead its case to the sun. It was a miracle that was better than a miracle: a miracle of chance, not to recur for many years. But still, it did, and did, until these green and brown loops were in a form that did not need the dirt to burp them out anymore. All that was needed now was wind, and they sewed themselves into elsewhere, anchoring deeper to the ground in the imperfect image of sunlines coursing through their womb. This carried on, with more hardened creations rising out to agree or disagree with each other in the sun, until the ground was a thick net of browns and greens, tied together in strict knots for structure.”

“The Earth was proud and the sun saw to it that its gradual tilling carried on. To be able to survive amongst the thick layer of life, only towering plants were then successful, and those after towered higher still, so that there were different levels of life living up into the sky. Once the plants got so high that they snapped in the wind, a new kind of creature emerged. These things supplemented the plants—eating them, changing them, living within them. But they could also find ways to live where the plants could not. They were able to move without being anchored in the soil. These things, the ‘animals,’ could leap and sleep and growl, adorable little terrors in the eyes of the Earth. Without the need for roots, the knots that kept a group of animals

together resided less in the open world and more in the heads of its members. And just as the shrubs had spurred the creation of a canopy, the structures that bound these animals to each other expanded in complexity. For to be able to fit into such an already entangled environment, each new being could not afford to be built as elegantly as a flower. They had to have quirks, odd shapes that could lift them free from the fray to take a breath. Each new animal added a pile onto the heap. So came the age of humans, when down onto these steadily-built, invisible folds, a vast forest of culture came crashing down.”

“Maybe if humans were more porous, they could have sustained a life in this open air. But as things were, they needed a place that could shut, that could cast their body in a darker shade and protect their mind from the open space that stretched mercilessly across the surface with the sunlight. So structures were built, craftily and quickly with anxious hands and anxious hearts, until they stood taller than the plants. This was the human’s ability, executed at the whim of some baffling kink in the mind. For random grievances, the setting down of hulking structures, the monotonous use of lands, the tearing up of most of the earth. And so the dirt became packed into something hard and sweaty as a coin from the weight of it all. It could hardly roll, hardly breathe. Its back had been broken by its own late children, and nothing more ever came bubbling out. The world was then only a matter of the surface, no longer having any promise except in matters of ‘up.’ And the dirt could move just enough to whine, ever so often, in the pitch of an Athenian street dog”

“Or at least, that’s an ending no one could blame you for accepting. But back at the start, when the animals were just beginning to come up for air, there were the first birds. They left the Earth

without a second thought, flapping into flight. They were black, cloaked, and bigger than large men. They did not squawk or cry or flutter. But their wings had a secret that they themselves could not see.”

“On the other, underside of their broad black arms were feathers that glowed with the pale color of the moon. Once the birds took off, they never landed, and they also weren’t able to look straight up. Their offspring, too, were born mid-flight, never touching the ground until their death. But the Earth could see the color whenever it wanted, on its children up above.”

“The Earth could not speak and neither could they, so nobody new learned of the undercolor. The Earth enjoyed knowing something the sun did not. It felt that maybe, if the birds saw that they had some lightness on them, they would warm to the one who had shown them. They would grip hard into the grains that had burped out their ancestors and see that the Earth knew them better than they knew themselves. So it concentrated all of its movement into the making of pools of water. The oceans were too full of waves and white already; it would have to be the water within itself that functioned as the mirror.”

“On a still day, over a fresh glass of lake that had just drowned a giant valley, it finally worked. The birds saw their reflection on the surface of the water, realized, circled back, stared again at the fast paleness below. More came to realize, and soon all of the thousands of first birds knew themselves to be multicolored things.”

“But instead of thanking the Earth, or even realizing who had done this for them, the birds recognized their second color in the nightly moon. They would spot the pale satellite when it neared a horizon and the Earth would watch as the affection on their faces grew. Soon, it became obvious that the birds were flying slightly farther away from the surface each day, trying

to reach that body in the sky for reasons unknown. They carried on like this until the Earth was left watching black pepper grounds in the sky, dots shifting and flying so fast, eventually sliding violently back and forth as a flock like a fast-leaking balloon. And then the first birds were gone.”

“But, there was one bird that had strayed far enough away from the rest that it did not notice its siblings gathering above the lake. It had strayed into the opposite: a lifeless desert caused by the natural mirror, as the Earth has sucked water from surrounding areas in service of its project. Now, stale as the dirt there was, the Earth could not even sense the lonely thing. And for the bird, the only figure was the sun.”

“The bird lost its mind as easily as it had lost its way. It started squawking and singing the first bird songs. It thought the small desert rocks were its babies or its friends. It saw itself in the desert’s barren, subtle hills. The raw bones of the earth, exposed yet folded by the death of the drain like the precarious, unseen, embarrassing, balding, manish moment at which a folded wing bone reaches its knobby peak, shielding the face and the small, waxy eyes from love and from sight.”

“However, it cannot be denied that this lone bird did find a certain kind of happiness, gliding again and again over the rocks. It would sing to them and arrange them into towers—careful not to touch the ground. It would pile them up by color, which was remarkable because it couldn’t distinguish much besides black and white. The stacks grew so high that the bird had to weave through them. It enjoyed curling around its friends and family, experiencing them from all different angles.”

“The Earth, meanwhile, was devastated. Both by the loss of the birds and the dry desert it had created to aid in its desperate attempt for recognition. It dripped water slowly away from the pool and back into the sands, until the land was restored to a point at which the Earth could get a fuzzy sense of what went on there. But when its feelers returned, they did not sense a bird. In fact, they also detected no towers of rock. All of it had vanished, so that no one ever knew. Certain physicists have become depressed upon witnessing the Sahara, feeling despite themselves that there is something unaccounted for, some hairy ether that has slipped out of the frame.”

17. Tricks

Since their first dance, Shellycan had shown Alara new sides of the cave. It started when he had allowed her to lead him out of the recently pinched section where they had met. Somehow, as he walked and she hopped, it took much less time than he was used to for the narrow rings to develop into great rooms, for the shallow stream to swell into the size of his river back home. There they set up camp, and on every day that followed, the two played and explored and did what they wanted, together. On their trips, it soon became clear that the shortening phenomenon was her conscious doing; she was able to skip tens of rings at a time as they moved, allowing them to travel great distances in an afternoon. By watching the bird, he eventually learned that if he kept up with the pace of a fish in the river as it was swimming upstream, he could sometimes jump up a ring or two.

But more disruptive to his understanding of the cave than the jumps was the discovery of the rooms beyond the walls. Somehow, with a funny-looking gait or a pecking of seemingly random points on the ground, what was once a section of cave wall would part to reveal a wide, smooth hallway. The two could then walk straight into what Alara once thought was untouchable: the round Gods that the river never reached.

What awaited them in these secret passages seemed to surprise Shellycan as much as it did Alara. He didn't understand this, as the bird acted like opening them up was a dull affair. Some hallways just ended in nothing; others ended in a room.

18. Enter Voice

Alara made it to camp. It was the same section of the cave where he had first found himself, only now clear water ran through the middle, there were less stalagmites around, and a lot of his things were scattered around the single dark bed where he slept. It was a particularly forgiving, particularly black patch of stone where the ground met the cave wall. A perfect niche to crawl into and go to sleep. He could fit himself into the bed so that it felt like a warm, quiet manger. He'd pull his legs in so that slight puffs of stone supported his knees. And another rock seemed to poke out for the sole purpose of supporting his lower back.

He felt like he had made progress with his prayer, like it was a good idea to talk about what was confusing him so he could at least know exactly what it was.

He took his map out of the back of his shorts and set the fish down in a divot with still water near the river.

Alara might have gotten smaller from all of his walking, but it was more likely the result of his lack of appetite. He only ate one meal a day ever since the river turned normal. It consisted of fish cooked in the “hot pit” and sprinkled with a varying assortment of spices, as well as a sweetened, hot water drink to sip before bed.

But that day, he decided to try something different. He took a portion of his meal and set it on a rock that leaned over the river. Next, he poured some of his sweet drink overtop. Then he reached into the river and plucked a few weeds from its side, tore them up, and sprinkled them on top of the rest to dress it up. It was an offering. In the Bible and in school school, he had read about shamans and priests giving offerings to all kinds of Gods. But he didn’t have any money, or any lambs. Food was all he had. He hoped God would take the meal and finally talk back.

Instead, he got, “You know, this just confirms that my dream of having giant squid tentacles for arms is totally justified.”

Alara was completely still. It felt like his skin had been touched by another. To have his dry ears washed over by a foreign voice. *That* voice. He wondered now if the man was responsible for everything that had happened to him, if he should have been suspicious of him all along.

“Mr. Garn? Are you there?”

“Yep. But what I mean is, I’m nowhere near the food you put out. It would take extendo arms to reach it from here. I’m on the wall.”

Alara thought so, but it didn't make sense. The sound seemed to be coming from a sideways, black, rectangular piece of stone in a wall on the far side of the cave. He didn't remember seeing this rectangle before. The lines were straighter, the contrast sharper between the shape and the rest of the stone than they were with other irregularities on the walls. But it was possible he had just glanced over it.

"If you're on the wall, where are you? All I can see is a black thing."

"Well, sorry I'm not tiger-striped."

"What? Then that thing is all you are?"

"Geez, I don't know. I see you're not a fan of sentient stones. It's alright, I'm used to it, I'm tough."

"Wait—"

"Just kidding, I'm totally fine."

Alara waded across the river quickly, then walked closer to the talking wall.

"Wait. Then if you are this ... what I see, then what were you saying about having arms earlier? And why do you want the food?"

"Well, as for the arms, you got me there. Though I stand by my statement, with a 30-foot reach I could feel that precious water and maybe even build myself a fort. Anyway, that was just a way to bring up the food situation. Because yes, I do want the food. That's the only way this thing between us is gonna work. I need you to bring it to me and, well, pour it over me if you don't mind. I know that's how I'll be able to taste it."

Alara did this. He was worried that it wasn't working because when he dumped the food on the wall, everything fell to the ground without looking any different. But Mr. Garn assured him that it was working and that it was good.

"Are you really Mr. Garn?" Alara asked when he was finished. "I mean, is there another Mr. Garn on the surface, still teaching students, with a body?" This question made Alara worry that a version of himself might still be up there, too, despite having a body of his own in this cave.

"That's tricky—which might mean there's some truth to what you wonder. I can't know whether there's another one of me still puttering around in the sunlight. Nor can anyone else I suppose. Good question, but I'd recommend you ask me things that concern you, not me."

"Why? Were you sent to answer questions about me? I don't know, did God send you?"

"Well, remember, those were more questions about me. But no, I don't know anything about anything you just said, and I couldn't really understand your meaning either. "

"Weird."

"Hey, I heard you talking about the Big Bang earlier. It was funny stuff. You should be a writer."

Alara's face went red. He didn't know Mr. Garn had been listening then. He also didn't know exactly how to take his comments, just that they made him feel insecure.

He was also thankful that he was getting sleepy. His eating habits might have changed, but he was sleeping just as much these days as he had between binges of the dark river. He spent most of his time sleeping and waking up; only about a fifth of the day was dedicated to mapping the cave. He knew he shouldn't turn away the only other thing that could talk. He could feel the

second voice healing gaps in himself he hadn't even known were there. But it was also heightening his already hopeless confusion. He was anxious to get away from the talking rock, to sleep and perhaps even not find the rectangle there when he awoke.

“Before you shut me out, big man, let me tell you a story. It will help you sleep anyway, and I'll leave you alone once you do.”

Alara was too tired now to be surprised or interested by what Mr. Garn had said. He found a dark bed close by; he couldn't wade back across the river now. There was too much to care about for him to bother caring about anything at all. He resolved to enjoy sleep, at least.

Mr. Garn began, “In the beginning, the circling sun ...” but the boy was asleep.

Alara woke up the next day feeling a little more optimistic—whether today was the day he found a way to escape and go home or it was the day he received God's blessing to fully embrace this place, he would be okay. And there was no need to be hasty, especially now that there was another being there with him. Perhaps that meant he could call his family's voices down, too. He only explored the cave for half an hour before turning back. He couldn't resist trying to resummon and learn more from Mr. Garn. He decided he would prepare a proper meal for him this time.

19. Map

Alara inspected his map. The cave was as uniformly spaced as the black gashes in his Stalkwoods. The bend in the river and the cave that he had noticed when the snake first gave him his sight continued on to form a massive, rough ring. Touching this ring were three more, each with a unique arrangement of the cave features, but each with features the same. The cave system flowered out like this; each ring connected to three other rings, with the strands of river winding and meeting and redirecting perfectly so that the flow sprawled out, and the rings were fairly even. Alara had only been able to map seven thus far, but this was enough for him to know the pattern.

20. Offering

Small black bumps pocked the semi-spherical indentation in the ground. It was a hot pit. Alara had discovered them one day by accidentally burning his sock. The pocks were so small and numerous that he often checked to make sure the whole thing wasn't covered in soot. But no, it was more like God had taken a hammer to the floor and the stone knew no other way of bristling from the strike. They were slightly painful to run your hands over, the bumps, but proved useful for cooking.

First into the pit went the river beads. These took by far the longest to cook, covered in their thick, waxy skins. He knew by now he had to throw them in from the start. Next he tasted his ingredients. They were unbearably pungent on their own. He threw them absent-mindedly at

the edges of the pit, watching them sizzle and harden as he contemplated what he could make and what needed to happen first.

He stood and looked for the right kind of bend in the river, and, once successful, waited at the shore. It only took a couple of breaths for two dead fish to come washing up to his feet. He took both in his hands and returned to his kitchen.

Next, the softer river plants were rubbed lightly with whitefat (taken from outer pockets of river water where the air and particulates churn) and tossed next to the beads in the center of the pit. Among them were bulbs, thin yellow stalks, and soggy light weeds. They soon began to soften and clear into each other, their smells opening up wonderfully into the surrounding air. Alara felt both excited and frustrated by the aroma. It was close to the smell of onions and made him feel assured that all the whispers and ghosts from his past were coming from someplace real. But they were still never the same. These shoots and leaves smelled at once simpler and stricken with a deep dampness. It was often hard to continue—he kept having to climb himself down from wistful, nostalgic stares in order to continue cooking.

Next came the water. He kept a special jar of it sitting with bones of rock (black stripes on) and some light red and yellow spices. The former resembled red pepper flakes and the latter dried oregano. The broth was getting more flavorful with each passing day. He dumped half of what remained into the pit and stirred the new mixture with another banded bone. The pot cooked this away for a long while, with Alara adding pinches of whitefat and even some sweetgrain on occasion. He liked to put big stripes of spices across the water, this time in a big “X,” and watch as they dissolved and sloshed down to the bottom like they were falling down steps of bubbling water.

Once the heat from the pit had evaporated the mix to about half its original size, it was time for the fish to be taken apart. Alara slapped them against the pit's bristling edge, breaking apart their skin until the meat came tumbling out from the delicate bones. This he let sit nearer the edge of the pit until they gained a light brown, then pushed them down into the soupy meal.

Lastly, he took the thick fingers of chuck weed and tore them into medium-sized pieces. They remained only slightly together after he plopped them into the pit to soak up the remainder of the liquid and keep it there, housed in their starchy, mealy crumble, the water tampered with until standing silent, an unknown percentage of wet river latent within.

Alara knew this would be his best offering yet. He hoped it was enough. Over the past several days, Mr. Garn had remained evasive. When he asked the voice what he was supposed to be doing there or how he could get his mother's voice to come down, Mr. Garn would say something vague, like, "you're a bright kid," or else say nothing at all. Alara was pretty convinced his company was not the person he had known from before. It didn't matter to him whether this thing heard his ramblings anymore. Mr. Garn would only respond with silence or a strange joke said the way other people deliver bad news.

Mr. Garn came to life and Alara brought him all of the food he had made. He decided he would be fine with his drink alone tonight. He said a short prayer and plunged right in.

"I don't think I'll ever be brave, you know? Not at this point. I think it would have happened by now. I've been at school almost a year now and I'm still afraid of everyone. Everything they say and do is different from me; I even feel like I would like being around some of it if I wasn't too far gone already. That's the worst part. I'm much more scared of the boys

than I am of Daddy. And he's only scary every once in a while. That's not true though, I know he's worse. But I can at least forget about him."

"What's scary about him?"

"Them?"

"No. Your father."

"Nothing, I honestly didn't even think you were listening."

"I'm always listening. Well, if you can't tell me about your Dad then I can't help you with it."

"Oh, I didn't ask for your help. Is that all, though? What should I do about school? Up there ... It was like I was stuck between two places where I didn't want to be."

"Yeah. But you can't even tell me about the second one. Relax, we're gonna be here awhile after that doozy of a meal you prepared. I mean that in a good way. For the truly excellent feast, I can do you one better. I'll tell you that same story I told on our first night. I can't say much, just that I think it will genuinely help. So this time stay awake, and listen, it's important."

Alara grew tired then, right at the moment he was told not to. But this time he was more tired of not knowing anything, of wandering around the cave every day and not even knowing what face he should make.

21. Question

Just as Mr. Garn had finished his story, a pair of men's dress pants peeled off of the black rectangle in the wall—were the black rectangle in the wall—and fell to the ground in front of the boy. Alara stood. They were flopped out of line below the knees, and smelled of an aquatic colon. He did not know what to think or to do.

So to give himself time, he grabbed the pants and stood up with them, their legs flat on top of his. The fabric did not feel as scratchy as he expected. There was a foot or so of extra material piled after each of his legs ended. He took a few steps like this. It was difficult not to trip over the bunched cloth. He was respectful with them, but it was hard to keep himself from putting them on.

He took the pants as an affirmation that the man he had been speaking to in the cave was the real Mr. Garn. It was much more meaningful to have an object from the surface appear in this place than a voice. A voice, he had secretly already considered, could be pulled out of the air, under the circumstances.

The pants had distracted him from everything he had just heard and from the question he had wanted to ask right about the story's end. Now that the rectangle was not on the wall, he somehow knew that it had ended for good. He was already losing the details now. So he set the pants aside and recounted the plot of Mr. Garn's strange tale back to himself. The dirt, the earth, the sun, the birds, choking, dogs. The different bird who wandered off and disappeared.

He remembered; the question he had most wanted to ask was not about the absence of ocean life, or the time before the Earth and the sun, or how the creation described could be something neither Biblical nor scientific, or if the desert created had really been the Sahara, or

why more lakes had popped up since, or what could be done to fix the Earth. These questions were in him, as were others, but the story fit the boy's sensibilities seamlessly. He had such an easy time going along with wherever it took him that he felt like the story, like the dark river, had to be magic. Thus, the question that burned the fiercest inside him was from an accepting place: *if no one ever knew about the bird, how does the second half of the story exist? How did Mr. Garn know?*

The answer flicked itself into Alara's mind long before he was able to think himself to it in conventional steps. A premature tongue of fire that he quickly spoke into law: "because Mr. Garn has seen evidence of the bird. Because Mr. Garn has seen the bird. Because like me the bird fell into the cave."

He wondered, was it *his* desire for this answer that made it appear in his mind before he could reason his way to it, or had something else wished it forward?

He was not tired anymore. He felt more and more like he had just heard the most important story of his life. He paced, then noticed something strange about the river. It was still flowing strong, still made of water, but carried countless white specks down as it went. They were small enough not to color the whole liquid, instead simply accentuating the rapids and dotting the clear flow with occasional opacity.

22. Light River

He was wary of drinking the new white-specked water, considering how sick the dark river had made him. But this lighter river didn't seem as severe, and he was intrigued by the fact that it had begun right after Mr. Garn's story.

So once again, he drank. As soon as the cold water touched Alara's tongue, there was a dry lurch of his mind, *forward*, such that his consciousness narrowed into one fine point. At the end of this point was the river. As he lurched, he could feel fields of his memories burning behind him, seared into lost crisps. The smell of them. But he did not care about the discomfort or the distaste. He cared only for the twists and shouts of the river. He watched as the water twirled restlessly down the space, small circles always pulling off from the flow to make momentary, playful alternatives. Down the whole of it eventually went, yes, but not without grace, not without fun. Yet it also rolled hard and maddeningly constant, like a tight succession of heads. The mist flung up from its charge found recognition in the light of his eyes, mapping the joyous encounter of water and boy.

In the days that followed, Alara drank and swam and either forgot or did not care to remember most things. The only thing he thought of often was Mr. Garn's story. He ate even less than before, was becoming all eyes and knees and belly. He didn't notice the change.

The new river left his mouth feeling like one dry pit. And there was an accompanying dryness to his mind. It made him both single-minded and perpetually thirsty. If the brain had hallways of air tunneling in between and spacing out the pink, the white-specked water shot a strong current through those corridors, exciting his neurons into an organized launch while the hallway walls suffered from windburn.

One day, while swimming in it, he considered the irony of a river that made him feel dry. Not just dry afterwards, as when his fingers shrivelled, but dry during, among the waters, when he swam. When he kept his eyes open to see the wands of weed life underneath—dry. Sometimes when he stood and walked to the shore the water felt as though it were sticking to his skin like a dust. But of course, it wasn't. Because it was also undeniably liquid. The river was an impossibility. He pinned his eyelids up and dipped his whites into the moving water slowly, curling his mouth into a dumb smile.

23. Rooms

The rooms he and Shellycan found were always large, oval shapes with floors covered in white tiles and walls and ceilings of exposed cave. Some had ceramic vases in niches on the walls. The pottery was painted an identical orange and green and had carvings, on the sides, of humans emerging from strange, curling symbols or else from the open mouths of big cats.

Other passageways led to a large flame that danced from the top of a stalagmite in the center of the room. The shadows cast by the fire made Alara dizzy. Once, when he was really disoriented, he swore he saw a slaughtered saber-tooth tiger sprawled out on the floor beside one of the flames. But Shellycan didn't understand English, and either way, he knew that if she'd seen it, she would have reacted to the sight in some way. So he decided he was mistaken, it hadn't actually been there.

Other rooms had large, opaque globes protruding from the walls. Whenever Alara touched them the fog within the globe dispersed to reveal an image of a person's face. This terrified him at first, but he soon realized they were flat photographs, not actual human heads. The people had on strange jewelry. Alara wondered if these were those "Cavers" Mr. Garn had been angry about. He wished he could get a peak at the back of their heads. Each globe presented a different person, but each room that had globes offered the same set of images. Over time, he became particularly drawn to two. One was a child that looked like the Caver version of a girl from his school that had always annoyed him. And the other was a man whose wide face reminded him of his own. Because of the similarity, Alara had avoided the man at first. But the expression was confident and witty and strong, in its way. After he realized this, Alara stared hard at the man and tried to carry the expression over onto his own face for the rest of the day.

Lastly, there were rooms in the walls that had baths. The water sat perpetually hot in steep stone basins, in rooms the same size as those with a torch. This made Alara wonder if there was a way the cave's corridors could stack, such that a fire room could heat the water of a bath room above it. But he couldn't work it out in his head. There were cuts of spongy moss affixed to various areas inside the tub. The vegetation disturbed Alara's peace at first, so he planted his feet onto them until he was used to their slightly slimy texture and thoroughly reassured that no small waterlife was lying in wait within the green sprigs. After this it was easier to give himself over to the moss' natural softness.

24. Listening

Alara had always had large, fleshy ears. Now, out from his sunken face they seemed even larger. And regarding the question of why he had ever appeared in the cave, more than his touch or his sight his ears led his mind by the hand with a childish urgency towards an answer.

After a swim in the light river and a reluctant crawl to his dark bed, Alara heard a cooing coming from the high ceiling above him. The sound split open along upside down cities of calcium growth and then came down, meeting his distracted mind in waves of something like *au*. He closed his eyes, clutched the wall at his side, tilted up his head and listened closely. Now that he was touching the wall, the soft noise spiralled right into the center of his body, combing the walls of his lungs. He realized that the *au* was only intermittently occurring among a vast array of other sounds. There were thousands of vocalizations, burning brightly and then dampening into death. Listening reminded Alara of what it was like to watch the snake. Actually, the sounds reminded him of Mr. Garn's story, too. Reminded him of the grains of dirt that basked in sunlight, then receded back into the cold. There were recurring vocalizations, but it was hard for him to keep track of which ones repeated and which ones were new. At times the song was relatively brutal and slow. But there was always some sort of relief. Roughly, there was always an *ah* or an *mmm* to soothe the pain a *kr* or *st* had inflicted.

Alara ran and grabbed a blank sheet of grey stone from the pile, as well as a random, thin rock that would serve as his pen, and returned. He clutched the wall again with his left hand and wrote with his right, capturing as best he could the sound-parts in the sequence. But really everything sounded more complex than what he could achieve with the small English alphabet.

Still, he wrote them, jotting them down as close a distance as he could from the real thing. He grabbed more sheets of stone.

Alara didn't sleep that night. Whenever he felt tired, he drank a small dose of the light river. He said a prayer before he drank that the river would not divert his attention away as it usually did. Wouldn't quash his interest in anything other than its own behavior.

As the night went on, he turned from trying to write what he had heard to deciphering what he had written. He hoped a pattern would emerge, but it was hard for him to shake the fact that his notes were imperfect. And indeed, no patterns in the sequence emerged. The prayers worked.

The process of trying to understand these mysterious sounds, however, began to feel familiar to him. The connection, built by him in the days that followed that feverish night, was this: while listening to the sounds of the ceiling his ears had revolved exactly as the half-mile bend of a given semicircle of cave.

He had opened his body up to a noise, then wrestled something similar enough but not the same down onto the page. Just as the river skirted round and round whatever was inside those rings—harder rock? God?—and wreathing it with water, translucent fish, knocking sounds, affection. Alara had thought of the river as existing for his benefit, when in fact it was living for whatever huge masses that it circled around. And now he was just like it; against the ineffable vocals from the ceiling, his ears behaved like the river and the open cave. He did not trap the sounds, but held them, and shook, and slipped forgivably forever off the sides with futile scribbles his of language.

He realized that he had been doing some version of this since first arriving in the cave. He was always confused, frustrated, missing, but still determined to find a way to make sense of his situation. The snake had dodged his sense-making, as had every feature of the cave. As had Mr. Garn's story.

"How do I become less like the river and more like the things in between?" he said to the ceiling. "How do I get to be like *that*," pointing to a gap inside one of the rings on his map. "I'm always missing."

He felt guilty, which was a habit. But because of this, he considered for the first time that all the confusion he had experienced might have been his own fault. That he might have been stubbornly thinking about things the same way in the cave as he had on the surface. This, he knew, was blasphemous. To think that everything he had been taught up there—even the Bible—hadn't been able to help him. Not because of his own shortcomings, but because it was from another world. Alara felt sick, just as he had before throwing up the dark river. But now there was nothing to throw up. With that knowledge, he pressed forward.

"Maybe this place has a different Bible, a different kind of God." He winced as soon as he had finished saying it. It was a terrible thing to think. If it was the God he knew down here, wouldn't something equally terrible happen to him soon? He waited. but there was nothing.

He thought of Mr. Garn's story, about how probably millions of years had passed since the bird vanished into the cave. Or thousands if the Bible on the surface had it right. Either way, the cave had at least been around since a very different era of the Earth. And he felt a magical caveat lock into place within his jumble of new perceptions: the God down here could be different from what he had known, while still being the same God. If he wanted to be different

from the river he knew he had to take Mr. Garn's story seriously. And if he took the story seriously, there emerged the possibility that both the cave and the surface were equally flawed and equally promising, they were parts that were around during the beginning of life on Earth and therefore could both offer insight into what God was and what God wanted.

Alara's gleeful, squeaky laugh erupted and then echoed harshly throughout the cave as he arrived, rabidly, at his truth.

"It makes sense that we only got half of the data. I really don't have to think about it. A part of the picture has always felt missing. Even how my family is different, even how we have lived. If I hadn't felt like there was more, why did I go looking for other answers, at school and in books and on the computer. Those fantasy book writers might have even sensed it, too. And there were those scientists in the Sahara."

He stopped feeling trapped in someone else's game, for once. He realized he was not doomed. It was quite the opposite, he was a prophet.

"You've dropped me down here because I could tell things were missing. You've dropped me down here so I can bring the world the other half of the story. And I'll do it, Lord, you know I will. My God. My God. Finally I get it. Finally, I'm yours."

He heard the charge, or rather, the word just after he had finished speaking: *Up*. It was coming from the place on the ceiling where the coos had come. He stood up. *Up*, it said again. "Up."

25. Wreath

As Alara suspected, he couldn't find any dark beds, so he curled up on a regular patch of ground at night to sleep. Each morning since he and Shellycan had set up camp, a handful more of wine-red rocks appeared in his vicinity. He suspected that she went somewhere while he was dreaming and brought them back. They were chalky, and the same dark color right down to their core. This made them excellent for drawing. He also realized, as the days went on, that there was a logic to their placement. She was slowly arranging the rocks into a large circle around where he slept. From then on, he took care to sleep in the same place every night so the wreath of red rocks could continue.

26. Layout

When Alara was first exploring the cave, he noticed that the river was slightly narrower around his camp than it was three rings away. As he walked in the opposite direction of the current, the river beside him always grew wider and deeper and slower. The ground, too, sloped slightly up in this direction; the river obeyed gravity. After considering "up" for some time, Alara decided that this incline was what it was referring to. He figured that the farther he travelled up, the bigger the river would become. And he decided that eventually, he would find the source of it.

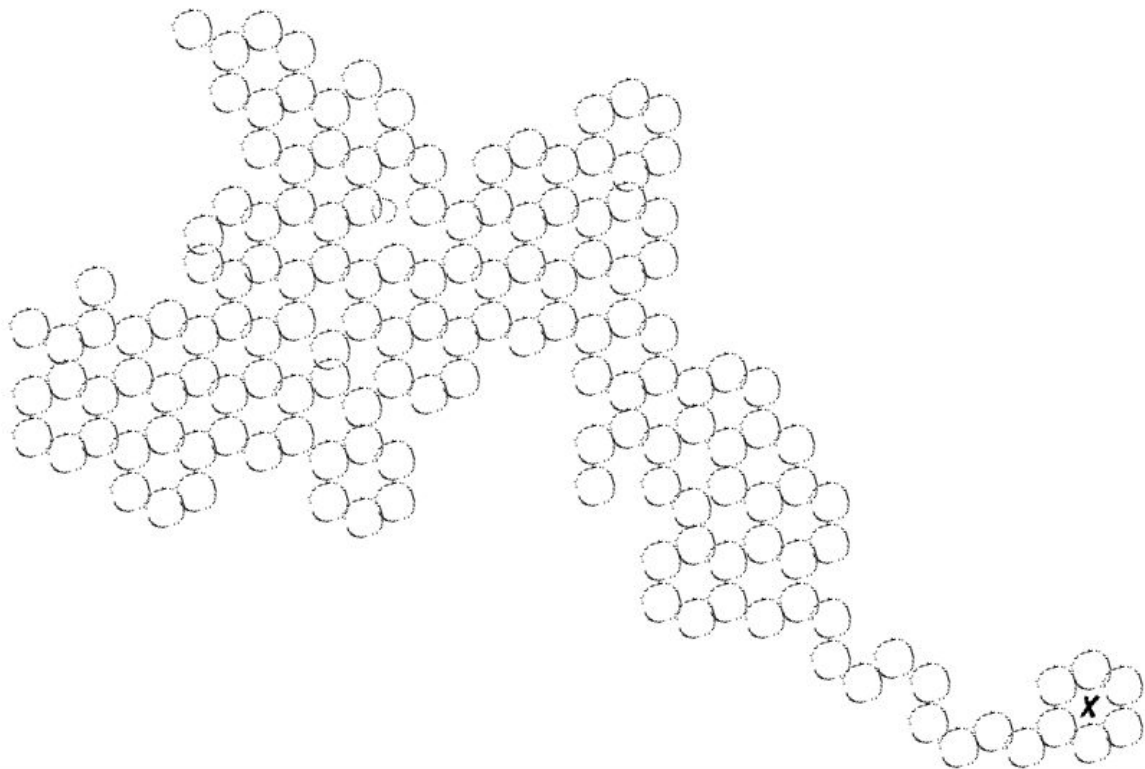
The river and the cave indeed had a beginning. Thus, they also had ends. Unnaturally, the water diminished instead of grew as it snaked down the river beds, such that at each of the hundreds of

river ends, the liquid was working to fill the cracks and the pores of dead end walls of rock. At a certain point they poured themselves through these walls, spreading the rock open into cavities, small caves, until what might be called a round god was reached. From there, the ends keep dissolving, keep opening, only now curling with the rest of the stream as a guided ring. Like this, the water printed halo after halo of cave. It was ever growing, ever altering the structural integrity of whatever space came before its freshest cuts.

Alara had to simply walk against the current to find the source. It was at the top of the chandelier of rings.

Alara's most complete sketch of the cave

("X" marks the source ring)



27. Shrine

Before he embarked on his quest, Alara wanted to thank Mr. Garn for his help and his company. He decided he would build a monument. It was very small. Only big enough to contain the pants and the three feet of air above where he had placed them. Alara could barely see the pants by the time he finished; the four walls of stacked rock rose past his waist and darkened the enclosure. The pants looked a shadowy, silken thing. He poked his head inside. The colon was still strong. Depending on the presence of those thin, worked materials, Alara imagined the monument to be Mr. Garn's surface room. Mr. Garn had probably read there under wonderful light. And leaned back in his chair and maybe even smoked.

Alara decided that it would be good to give the pants some privacy. In a closed, black space they could be just fine to go about their secret, at-home tasks as well as prepare for the next day's lesson. Besides, he wouldn't be back for a while and maybe the pants needed preserving. So he took off his shirt and draped it over the ceiling of the enclosure. He stared down mindlessly at his exposed ribs as he walked away. The cave fell quiet as he left.

28. Source Ring

So here the boy was at the end of his twisting trek, laughter let loose from his soul as he desperately hugged the rock to keep from falling into the glass of a river. The water was 30 feet deep and stood almost still, filling about half of the curving cavern up and making it so that there was almost no ground on which to stand. Alara had on the backpack and walking stick that he had found miraculously waiting for him back at the hot pit he had used for offerings. He preferred walking to swimming here because he had learned that the bigger the river: the bigger the fish. They were harmless, but much larger than him. Still, he was always happy to drink from it, as it helped guide him towards this place.

On the side of the cave opposite Alara, a purely white waterfall ran down the entirety of the wall. The falls did not seem to begin at this highest point so much as spring at once from every place on the rock. The falls flowed so thick that the stone behind them was completely obscured. At times, it seemed to Alara that the falls were frozen, or even creeping back up to disappear into the source.

20 feet in front of him, a long rod of polished stone—brown with white streaks—cut all the way across the river and connected his path to the falls. It rose just above the surface of the water and directed the flow out towards one of two sister rings. Alara had wondered what was originally forcing the river apart. Now that he had seen it, he knew that this stone was a part of his destiny. This was the bridge to the first water. After it, he would discover what it was the cave had to offer about his God. He hoped it would also provide him a means of returning to the surface, so he could share the truth with humanity.

He had no idea what, specifically, was beyond the falls. Maybe some kind of multicolored lake. Or a cavern chapel, with walls perfectly smooth and a hole in the ceiling that let in the sun. But he was sure that it would reveal itself to him once he felt the source's outer shell.

As he stood at the beginning of the bridge, the river briefly broke its placid demeanor to crash up along each side of the boy, enveloping him in a generous mist. He started to hold his arms out wide for balance, but when he had flinched from the unexpected mist, his weight shifted, inducing a delayed slip forward. Alara stopped laughing. He landed hard, belly first, on the edge of the bridge. He would have flopped off if he hooked an arm over the other edge of the stone to keep himself on. "Okay," he said to the water and to God. He started to cross.

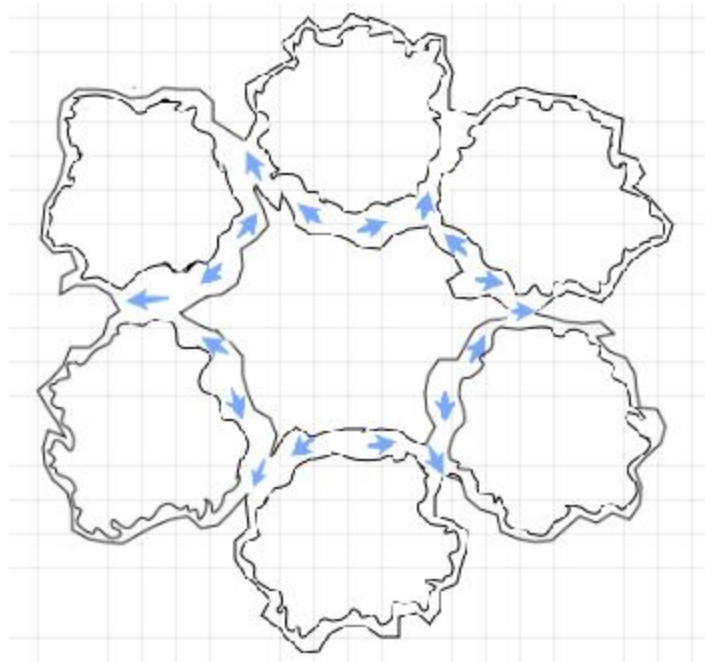
As he inched his way along, it felt like there was a line cutting right down the center of his body, separating his left from his right. And in the middle, directly over his heart, it felt like invisible waters were trying to rush in. They could not quite penetrate his chest, but still hit him, still felt like they were flying off his arms and his back as a cold cape. He worried that if the invisible force stopped dispersing and instead stayed to solely beat at his heart, he would die. It reminded him of a book he had once read in which select characters had to walk on a threatening, sentient pattern that would kill them if they were not worthy. He kept moving. As he walked forward, the pressure got stronger and stronger, just as in that book. *A test*, he thought. "Okay!" he said louder, to the water and to God.

When he was finally within range of the falls, he did not hesitate. The force of the imaginary heart-spray might have been at his strongest, but soon his clumsy hands felt the sting

of the waterfall. It was surprisingly warm. Once more he reached, this time plunging his hands hard past the water and onto the warm, old wall behind.

After contact, everything left the space in an instant. All of the fish. All of the life. All of the sounds and their echoes off of the rocks. All of the warmth. The bridge and the river and the falls. Everything drained at once into some new “source ring,” miles and miles away. The moment the boy’s hands touched that wall, it was as if someone had plucked an outlying crystal from the cave chandelier and dragged it up, declaring it the new head of the cave. Alara had just played his first note of this great instrument, and as he was falling through what was once 30 feet of water, the room shrank considerably, catching him so that he only broke a wrist.

Alara’s sketch of the source ring:



29. Geologist Speech

Alara awoke for the second time since his fall in the source ring to the unpleasant sound of Mr. Garn's voice. He swiped the dribble off of his face angrily this time. He didn't want to hear another word from whatever that thing was. After all of those meals, after he built those pants a home.

“When structures were local—”

“Shut up!” Alara screamed. He recognized that tone. It was the same tone Mr. Garn had used to speak of the dirt and the first birds.

“—when untold flowers died under untold circumstances, witnessed by creatures who might as well have died under a purple sky in their glittering cities of glass. From then until the moment in which your wrist bone buckled behind the muscle, the blood, the tissue of the palm, the skin, and the hard flat face of sedimentary stone, in that span the water as well as the—”

“Shut up!”

“—subtler erosive forces shaped the cave only inches. A strange, wriggling cut lasered onto a yellowing crystal here. There, a syrupy wind lingering on a once smoother bulge of the cave wall, bringing it dimples, bringing it back away from its harder selves, washing it with an all-delicate rag.”

Alara threw his arms over his head, then shouted from the pain of his sudden movement. And it was pointless; the voice was just as loud as when his ears were exposed.

“Nevermind the aesthetics of the cave as a whole. Nevermind the entire work of the meltwater, dissolving the rock beside an upland until it housed this beautiful chord of air. It's all science, these incomprehensible scars. For instance, what is the oolitic limestone beyond the

actants of water (and with it, carbonic acid), light, earthquakes, dust, and even the slow-moving air? Think subaerially, boy. Think about the potentiometric surface as just that—a part of something more—rather than a one-sided scroll.”

Alara felt like Mr Garn’s voice was getting smugger, more in awe of his own opinions than of the subject about which he was speaking.

“Begin with the fault-block mountains. Begin with the bedrock. Go back to the Holocene scene and hitch your chariot to *those* blind valleys, *those* sinkhole plains.”

“Then you drag this knowledge—”

“Shut up! God!”

“Into your journey through the cave. You will see that the cave’s slight incline is actually parallel to a slant in the nearby residual hills”

“Look closely and you’ll find the rocks are not simply ‘stone,’ but calcrete, feldspar, halite, breccia”

Alara blinked furiously. He hoped that this was the end of the nonsensical speech. The more he looked, the more he was sure that cave walls around him were expanding and contracting ever so slightly. It reminded him of his wrist.

Mr. Garn resumed his speech in a tone that reminded Alara of how his father sometimes ranted to his mother.

“The Caver dogs would have you think otherwise, I presume. Riding on their rafts. No, they’ll talk your ear off about ‘popcorn’ and ‘spongework,’ ‘rose ’and ‘gypsum,’ ‘swamp slots,’ and ‘dripstone.’ It’s such a crude culture. Nevermind that five of them died last week in a ‘swallow hole.’ Five more found dead in the ‘flutes.’ Gods, the other day they even claimed that

someone ascended to the surface on the back of a ‘mogote,’ which to them means some kind of giant frog.”

“I swiped a photo album off of one once. Why it is that the Cavers aren’t half-decent photographers I don’t know. Well, nor half-decent samplers, of course. But they took these too-close shots of their emperor, all pastured in that cheap frostwork. You’re young. I need you to know that that look of theirs is not natural. That long fine hair covering their cheeks ... that dumb, genderless grin where they show you all of their teeth. It’s plain unsettling. You can probably already tell, but if you can’t, just know they aren’t all there. I mean, their heads really look flat on the back. And they’re all the same, women or men—it means nothing to them. Apparently they forgot all about the sexes, and now, after staring at a couple of salamanders and rocks, there are whole new categories that they’re sorted into, categories they simply made up! Not that there’s anything wrong with staring at rocks, on its own, by the way—”

“Stop!” Alara yelled, and this time the voice obeyed. Still, he continued to shake and gnaw on his gums for a while.

He was determined not to understand anything he had just heard. He was serious; he didn’t want to play another game. Things the voice had said still swam through his head, but he used his anger to stifle them all.

30. Introductions

Alara was awakened for the third time since the source ring by a strong burst of wind that swept through the cave. For some reason, as the boy turned to look in the direction from which the wind had come, he half-expected to find that side of the cave blown out and opening onto the middle of a violent sea.

But the cave remained closed. In fact, there was no sign of anything that could have caused the gust. Except, as he looked harder, for an unusual, faint glow from far away, bobbing back and forth along the ceiling. As he kept looking, he saw that the pale glow was growing in size, that whatever the thing was was slowly approaching him. He felt like he was in a nightmare.

Then there was the wonderful noise of noisy wings. Alara watched in awe as what was now clearly a bird flew towards him, its wide frame nearly brushing against the cave walls, until it was flying straight above. From below, the wings looked like blades rounded softly as ancient towers, with feathers that flexed and dipped as spoons in the air. And just as in the story, they were the exact same bone pale underneath as the moon from the surface. The giant bird came to the ground in front of the boy with a rough landing and folded its wings back in.

Now that they were folded, the bird was incredibly dark. It looked like an overburdened coat rack—its scrawny legs the stand, its body a great black cloak, its long, obsidian, hook of a bill slanting out from the top like a hat. It stared at the boy with an eye that was somehow both waxy and wet. He wondered how long it had been there, watching him. *Could it have been around even before I heard the story?* He could not move, so the bird did.

It walked tentatively over to the stream and with a bob of its head the flowing water was redirected into the air, spraying the cave as a spout. The miraculous fountain reminded Alara of a shower he had stood under at a local water park. The bird kept walking; it plunged its round head bravely into the spray and tossed its beak from side to side, shutting its eyes and shifting back and forth on huge, taloned feet. He could see now what the bird was doing; it was playing in the stream.

Alara didn't know what to make of any of this. If Mr. Garn had been telling the truth in his story about the bird, why had Alara's quest been a total failure? Then he started the unpleasant task of tallying, for the first time, how much of that expedition had really been inspired by Mr. Garn's story, and how much of it had been because of the river, and the sounds, and the anonymous voice of "up." And then he wondered, terrified, if "up" had never been uttered, if his mind had simply been warped by a night of strain.

Alara was saved from the thought by a quiet, trilling song that ended on a higher note than it began, like a question. The bird had evidently stepped out of the spout and was now staring at him once again. Then its head gently rolled in the direction of the fountain. A gesture, he realized. *A gift, a gift.* He closed his eyes. He could not breathe. He clasped his hands behind his back and walked, head down, into the stream.

A sharp squeal ripped through the air as soon as his head was submerged. He thought it was the spout itself at first. But then he felt the forceful blows of wind on his body and realized. He took his head out and confirmed that the bird was flapping its wings, wildly, as well as making the loud squeal. It made him shudder, but as he looked on he could somehow tell that the bird was pleased with him for following its lead. More than pleased, even, elated. It started

prancing around the small section of the cave, frequently bouncing off of the jagged walls without any apparent pain. Alara laughed. It was hard for him not to be frightened, of course, but everything the bird was doing helped. He shook his soaked head of grown-out hair and flung water all around him. The bird tried to do the same, but its glossy feathers couldn't absorb or let go of the liquid so easily. Still, it didn't seem to notice the difference. It stomped its feet and bucked its head and looked to the boy with a disarming brightness in its eye. From there, Alara decided to let himself melt.

31. Ascent

Alara tried soaking in one of the mossy tubs. Shellycan left him there to explore more on her own. The bath water was by far the hottest thing he had felt since coming to the cave. As he sat in it and felt the water restore his weary body, the boy wondered whether he should accept the fact that he would not see his family again. He had never seriously considered that lives might simply go like this, from phase to phase, world to world, without a word of warning. It was painful for him to think about, but not impossible.

That night he walked the fake cobblestone path to the clear patch of stone that served as his bed. Shellycan wasn't around, which had never happened before. He wondered if he'd taken longer in the bath than he'd thought, if the bird had given up on him coming back to bed and gone off wherever the red rocks were—wherever it was that she flew to at night. He found it hard to fall asleep without her presence.

When the boy awoke, he could immediately feel that he was flying. His shoulders hurt. He opened his eyes and saw that he was shooting up a vertical tunnel at a frightening speed. On the sides of the tunnel were familiar features of a cave wall, only blurring now into a down-smear sea. He looked up; Shellycan was flapping her wings violently above him. Her feet gripped around his shoulders tightly. For some reason, she was carrying him up.

Alara was scared. He wasn't sure, but he suspected that this unknown section of the cave might lead them to the surface. Something about it felt familiar to him.

He was also scared because it seemed completely out of character for Shellycan to grab him and take him somewhere, whether he liked it or not. Maybe she was saving him from something in the cave. He realized then that she was what was making that awful sound. It was a repressed whine, but not at all like the ones that signified giddiness or pleasure. This whine was lower-pitched and longer; Shellycan seemed to keep choking on it and coughing, but kept starting up again like she couldn't help it. He could tell that for some reason his friend was both resigned and incredibly sad.

"You know you don't have to do this, Shellycan!" he yelled up. "Listen to me Shellycan," he clutched one of her talons with his hand, "you can do whatever you want! I believe you can. ... Who's making you do this, Shellycan? Is it the cave? Is it God? Who's making you do this to me? Please, it's me, I just want to go back. Let's go back together and we can keep on living. What?"

But Shellycan kept her eyes averted from the boy. All there was were those pained, sad sounds, sent down to him by her moon-cold wings. He could not even try to escape; the drop was unknowably far. All he could do was dangle like a doll.

“I don’t get what happened, Shellycan, you—” but all of a sudden he was gone; or rather, he was someplace else. He knew because he could feel the sun shining on every part of him. He could feel it brightening the roots of his hair and making his pale eyes beg for more shade than eyelids could provide. He kept them in the dark with his hands, but still, for a while it burned too much for him to be able to look around.

When he could look, he saw that he stood on a raised, flat field. Blackened grass covered the whole of it. The skinny trees that bordered it were blackened, too. The air was muggy and teaming and brutally hot.

He looked around for Shellycan, but could not find her anywhere, even in the sky. He hadn’t considered that she might not come with him. *Was that why you were crying?* He frantically searched for even a small bird somewhere, but found none. There was only an airplane flying above. Its industrial roar trembled down the blue walls of sky.

32. Toys

Alara didn’t try so hard to figure out the meaning behind everything Shellycan had shown him. Now that she was with him, he followed her lead and just enjoyed the new parts of the cave. And now that she was with him, he had less of a need to worry about anything outside of their shared little world.

But still, on those same nights that he wondered how they had become such quick friends, Alara turned over the events from before he met her in his mind. He let himself do this

because all that had happened to him before did not feel threatening anymore. In some ways, he felt closer with Shellycan than he did with anyone else, despite knowing the bird for a relatively short time. They even quarrelled on occasion. To him, this time with her felt like a foil to the rest of what had happened in the cave, and the questions that once plagued him now felt like harmless toys he could absent-mindedly spin in his head.

33. Sitting

“Shellycan?” ... he realized where he was. It was the soccer field at school school. He could see the familiar brick buildings sitting beyond and below the skinny trees. He had only been up here once before. It was a Field Day, not long before the cave. He had taken advantage of all the chaos and wandered away from his grade with a red freeze pop in hand. He remembered sitting down with it, just sitting down in the gaudy green grass and thinking about as little as he possibly could.

Now he sat down in the dead grass and noticed that the sun was starting to set. He didn't understand how the field had been destroyed. Their soccer team was good, even he knew that. Obviously there had been some kind of fire, but how recently? And why?

He sat some more and missed Shellycan and reluctantly started thinking about where he should go. He figured he would be able to reach his home if he walked all night. It was only a fifteen minute drive from the wild Stalkwoods to the middle of town.

“Shellycan, you could have at least done it with me,” he said earnestly. He knew he had to go home. He didn’t have anywhere else to go, for one, and feeling the sun, seeing the school, he knew it was time. His family might think he was dead. And he missed them, every piece of each one of them, now that he was diffusing back into his native world.

34. Cycle

Except for he and Shellycan’s dance, the only thing he remembered fondly on those later nights was the cooking. There were times when it wasn’t just about getting Mr. Garn to talk. Some of the effort he spent over the hot pit was completely sideways to any mission, completely for the sake of itself.

He realized that—before Shellycan—all of the other things he had done in the cave had been either joyless or misguided. All that time spent wandering around, alone, not knowing whether it was God or the devil that had put him there: joyless. Eating the dark, brown river until it almost drowned him: misguided. Those few days after he broke his wrist, when crud kept pooling onto his face: joyless. The pilgrimage to the source ring, and the white-specked river that sent him there: misguided.

On one of these nights, a certain straggling quote from Mr. Garn’s speech that was still in Alara’s head made him consider something new about this pattern.

“Drag what you know into your journey? or something,” he said to Shellycan. ““Drag what you know into your journey through the cave.”” Her expression remained blank.

“I know I know, why do I care what he has to say about anything? But it doesn’t matter if he’s kind of a jackass now. Because it’s funny. I can sort of say the same things about the surface as I can about what happened in the cave.”

“Look. Daddy has a spell, right? and I get confused, and start to feel mean and sad and low. Just like how I was after I broke my wrist. Then I ignore everybody completely, and daydream about living somewhere else, some other kind of way. And even though it doesn’t ever do anything, in the moment it takes me away, just like the dark river.”

“The boys at school school treat me like ... an animal, and I get confused, start feeling mean and sad and low. Kind of like when I was all confused, praying to God, wishing I had my family. Then I walk for hours, I don’t know how long, but *long*. Just like when I went on that stupid quest.”

“Daddy goes berserk again, and I get confused, and sad, and mean, and low. And it’s bad, more than anything it feels like plain badness. Then I sneak down and eat all of the leftovers while everyone’s asleep.”

“When they catch me, when they wake up in the morning and want to eat it and find out. When Daddy makes me run around the house in only my underwear: just plain badness.”

“But this is important: when I was at the dinner table, and Daddy smacked his food, I felt all locked up and hot like usual. Only that time, instead of hiding away in my room I fell here, into this dark cool place, to escape. It was really just like always.”

“I know my theory doesn’t work perfect. Like walking long. What can walking do? I don’t think walking long is bad.”

“Actually, I don’t think any of them are bad. I know I should think so, and I know I did think so, but screw it. I like them all, I even like the eating. It’s a part of me.”

He realized that people on the surface had him following an idea that truth and happiness came from rigor and talking and pain and routine. But there were also beds, silk, miracles, chocolate, the smells in a hair salon. Those things might even be closer to how people up there talked about heaven.

35. Long Walk Home

The walk took him most of the night. Alara had always been good with directions; he even cut through patches of wood on his walk instead of strictly sticking to the roads. It made him anxious, thinking of cars driving by, but none did.

The journey proved overstimulating. There was the wicked taste of a wild blackberry that he’d swiped from a bush. And then the terrible, exhilarating sight of a Brown Recluse exposed to the moonlight after he’d peeled its piece of bark off of a tree. Those and the smell of a dead

armadillo on the road, and with it, the dumb buzzing of the flies. He thought to himself that there wasn't just more to brave, or more to love, but simply more to account for on the surface.

On one of his wooded shortcuts, he heard a rustling from up above. He looked, expecting a raccoon, and saw the outline of two humans sitting on the branch of a tree, huddled close together. They looked to him like they were sleeping; he walked closer to get a better look and then with a sudden, nonchalant leap the couple fell 20 feet and landed on a tangle of exposed roots with a thud. He wondered if they had just tried to kill themselves, but then both of them sprung back to their feet. The taller one dusted off the shorter one's back. He couldn't see their faces. The figures were slightly hunched. They had few hairs, very long arms, and clothes that were dirty and brown. Alara watched as each simultaneously reached for the other's hand, held it, and then side-by-side started the walk away. He desperately wanted to know what they were doing, what they had done. And then the taller one looked back. They peered out from their bowed head with dark eyes, and were looking directly at him. His eyes met theirs for a second, and in that second adopted their warmth, their wit. In that second Alara and them shared in the bizarre moment that was unfolding, and were pleased to find the other's equal appreciation for its peculiarity, somewhere on the iris.

After that second the anonymous figure turned away, seeming to recommit themselves wholly to whatever reason they had for walking. He followed them, of course, but not at first. He wanted to stand still for a while and commit the experience of that moment, shared with that stranger, to the memory of his very bones.

They were slow people, and they didn't seem to care whether he was near them or not. Their long arms swayed in the night breeze. As he continued to follow, the air started smelling

saltier. This surprised him; his town was nowhere near a sea. Abruptly, the forest trees started unexpectedly diminishing in size and then stopped growing altogether. Beyond this was the edge of the land, onto which arms of thick fog were hurled up from the other side. Alara cautiously came up beside the two figures, who were now standing on the edge. It was a cliff that seemed to cut through the woods in a straight line for as far as he could see. What lay in wait at its bottom, he didn't know; the same fog was spread so generously into the drop that it obscured the landing—if there was a landing. Then, without any hesitation, the couple stepped off of the cliff and transformed as soon as they touched the fog into things Alara did not know—something like stingrays or maybe grey dish rags—and then drifted down easy, cutting through the dirty white blankets, and disappeared.

A tendril of fog curled halfway around Alara's ankle. He couldn't believe what he had seen. He realized he had just found another hole, another exit point, another world. And he was jealous of them for getting to fade away. He stood there, staring down at the fog, for some time. But he thought of Shellycan, and Shelly, and decided he at least had to see how things were before he came back and took the plunge.

36. Nerves

He reached his house before sunrise. He was dreading it, the sun, as he was already exhausted and sweaty. But he decided to wait until it showed. He told himself he did this so that he wouldn't wake his family. But really he just dreaded seeing them more. After seeing the house,

he felt like going back and jumping off that foggy cliff. He had no idea what to say. He figured that the only chance he had of convincing them of where he'd been was by doctoring the story, making it all about God and the Devil. But even then, it would have to be perfect, and he was too tired to work something perfect out. So they would all have to live with him telling them the whole truth.

He also didn't feel ready to touch them, or hear them, or immerse himself in all of their quirky, meaningless habits all at once. His only reference point for what was about to happen was the charged feeling in the air whenever his father came home from a particularly long mission trip. But this had been much longer. How long, he didn't know. If he had to guess, based on his shaggy hair, he would say somewhere between four and six months.

37. Return

The sun had long since risen when he heard a door slam from inside the house. He wondered if it was a weekend. Then there was shouting from inside. He could tell one of the voices was his father's. The other one belonged to a short woman who suddenly burst through the front door and then strode to his father's truck, all the while shouting back to the house. She wore a small shirt and tall, billowy pants. It was Candy. He realized the woman was Candy. Now she had climbed up into the driver's seat and apparently taken the keys, as the truck started with a roar. He had been too bewildered watching her go to listen to what she had been shouting. He reached

into his head and found one of the louder phrases stuck to the side: “This is nothing! This is nothing!” He didn’t understand. He watched Candy drive away. *17? 19? 25?*

The yelling from inside the house had stopped. He scanned the windows in his view to try and find everyone else, and saw his mother staring right at him from her bedroom. He averted his eyes. *That’s it.* He hung his head and stepped out from behind the bushes, then nervously made his way to the house.

The inside of it had been redecorated. It was also slightly messier than before. He heard his father and someone who must be Reegan talking in the kitchen. He tried in vain to smooth his shirt.

“I love you too but you actually need to show us. You need to show Mom. Talk to someone, Dad. Candice will always be Candice, but I’m giving you our answer.”

Alara had never heard her sound so stern. Reegan looked more like how he had remembered her, but was still clearly years older. She and John were sitting at the table, having coffee. His father’s head was even wider than and half of his hair was grey. John turned to look at him. He looked at his son as if the boy were a tiresome, harmless ghost that came to haunt him regularly.

“Morning, boy. You’re up early. Do you have anything you want to add to this?” The question was slightly facetious, but not completely.

Alara didn’t understand why neither of them had jumped up, why neither of them were treating him like a miracle. Reegan wasn’t even looking his way, wasn’t even curious about his answer. He didn’t understand why his mother hadn’t run down the stairs by now, either. And he didn’t understand why, if so much time had passed, he didn’t look very different.

Without a word, he walked behind the kitchen island and looked at his father. He wished the three of them were hugging right then. Without really thinking about it, but wanting to elicit some kind of stronger reaction, he pulled up his shirt and dragged a finger sideways along the top of his belly.

At that, Reagan started laughing wildly. It was loud and bitter and strange. John slapped the table hard to get her to stop.

“I’m sorry, it’s just ... *that’s* why you’ve been that way? That’s what you’ve got? While the rest of us were trying, brother, that’s where you’ve been?”

38. You and Me

“But you and me, Shellycan, it’s different. I felt bad, I mean, real bad before you came. I don’t think you know how bad. But when we play it doesn’t feel like when I run away and hide. It doesn’t feel like when I eat until my head feels all heavy. It doesn’t even feel like when I dropped into the cave. You and me, I feel like neither one of us could ever eat the other.”

“I know that sounds weird. And well, you probably could eat me with that honking bill.” With that, he threw a red rock playfully at Shellycan’s feet. She squawked, dodged, and searched for something to kick back at him.

He slept easy, that last night in the cave. He didn’t really know if he wanted to do anything about the cycle—about the badness and the escape. Let alone knowing if he *could*. But

it simply felt comforting to draw one pattern over his otherwise bewildering life and have it be half-true. And for a time, at least, Shelly can had shown him a way besides away.