In Weather Bureau custody, one of the interchangeable men had steered me down an interchangeable hallway to a room with dark walls instead of white. Properly speaking there was no lighting at all in there. A woman sat on the floor, surely uncomfortable, cross-legged in her pantsuit. She gestured for me to take a seat and the door clicked behind me. No light bled in from around it.

“YINS, right?” She wore their standard-issue iridescent visor over her eyes, but for the first time that night I caught a sliver of a smile underneath it. “I suppose you might know what these are?”

I could still see her, despite the surrounding dark, because the floor between us was cluttered with devices of illumination: triangular pieces, lights and mirrors and prisms. Fifty, maybe.

“No,” I replied, half-dazed.

“That’s all right.” Her voice was calm, like she was speaking to a child. “I’ll show you.”

I don’t remember the rules to the game, and for my purposes now they’re not important. But I spent more than an hour on the floor learning them: the names of and legal placement of the different optical elements. Then I was allowed to manipulate them, heavy and angular, to grok the possible moves. In all of this she said little about how to win.

Finally she arranged the pieces in three overlapping circles. The Weather Bureau had pumped me full of antipattern agents some hours before, and by then they were wearing off, leaving me flattened and indifferent. Under their influence it had been impossible to recognize the gestalt of human faces: she surprised me in several ways, taking off her visor so I could see her eyes.

“You go first.” She offered advantage, or maybe not.

I tried my best, which in my condition was not saying so much. I understood the moves she made, and nodded to show it; I never saw what they added up to. The balance of the light began to shine in my direction. Maybe thirty moves in, I saw some crazy gambit. My hands were probably shaking as I arranged two mirrors and a prism equilaterally, shining a bit of light back her way. “Not bad,” she offered, breaking an extended silence. And then she placed an important-looking piece, its LEDs glowing in three directions, and won the game. *This is stupid,* I should have thought. *This is meaningless.* But in the moment it was everything, and I felt exposed, surrounded bodily, floodlit from above. It was dysphoric and claustrophobic, but now I focus on that feeling beneath long and measured breaths. It’s on the way to where I’m going: part of the memory, part of the belief modulation exercise.

She kept her hand on the winning piece, and began to rotate it very slowly. Sensations, suddenly, from entirely elsewhere: a low rumble in my cramped lower back, and my nose cold as through pressed to foggy glass. She paused, hooking me with her small eyes, still turning it fractionally: *is this okay?*

I nodded.

She continued rotating the piece. There was a lot to see in that moment, in the way the light through the optics danced on her face. I understood that this was where I was to focus. Our eyes locked. And now my spine straightens involuntarily, on this velvet cushion, in this YINS meditation booth.

"My grandfather worked himself to death in an antimony mine,” she began. The words were clearly rehearsed and clearly spoken. “Coughed up one lung and then the other, gone long before I was born. My father agreed with him on exactly one thing, and they fought about all its particulars: his own life would turn out differently. At the end of the millennium he boarded a train to Shanghai with eighty yuan, the highest gaokao score the village had ever seen, and a deathbed blessing. He trained as a civil engineer, built some bridges, and had a family of his own. His hopes for my life were complicated. What I became was even harder to explain.”

She was saying the words, and I was saying the words, and now I’m saying the words, low but out loud. We were speaking together, or trading off, or I was repeating them back; it was hard to say. But as she turned that piece, those sensations from elsewhere swam into focus. I was on the floor, but I was also on a coach bus, somewhere mountainous.

"What my father did retain from my grandfather was a fascination with mines, caves, the low places." She closed her eyes for a deep breath. “Have you ever been so far below ground that you forgot the shape of the world?"

Here and now I repeat that question to myself five times, between slow breaths, as instructed.

“He and his friends were serious spelunkers, and every year they’d visit the Huanglong caves in Hunan. My mother would fret through those nights. But he would always call us the moment he emerged, and he’d come back with disorienting photos, smelling like another planet. And one year he invited me to come along.”

I repeat this, too: *one year, he invited me to come along.* I let myself shiver in the coach’s frigid aircon. I feel just how long I’ve been stuck in this seat, my face against the window, watching steep peaks emerge and retreat in the fog.

“I had lived in Shanghai my entire life. I watched them tear down the Mirror Sea, and I watched as it began to re-emerge. It took leaving the city to realize what this had done to my mind. I had felt shadows of it. A bump of panic every time I climbed out of a metro station. But now I was down in this cave, a dozen bends removed from sunlight, and the surface of the world felt distant and abstract. I was weightless between two worlds the moment we turned off our lights.”

At this the lights on the floor between us went dark, and I was down in that cave with her, and I am down in that cave with her. I count out thirty deep breaths, measured out to the calcified drip of water on stone.

“Back on the surface, something started to eat at me. I didn't know which of two worlds I had returned to. But I also couldn't say anything what made them different, so I didn't mention it at all. It was only in the evening, on the bus ride back to Changsha, that I realized a familiar pattern of lights was missing from the sky.” The uneasy edge to her voice was honest quadratic delusion, conjured from memory and expertly modulated. “I turned to my dad, pointed up past the tree-line, and asked, *Where's Seoul?*”

I inhale and feel the surface of our planet go concave. *Where’s Seoul?* I mutter. There it is, hanging just over Pudong, where I always see its streetlights winking on, duetted with ours, at nightfall. Exhale: the world goes flat, and then convex. And of course there are no cities visible in the sky...that’s where the *sky* is. Inhale the delusion, and there's Seoul again, of course it is. Exhale, and let it out. I ride this sine wave for almost an hour, mastering the inflow and outflow of quadratic belief, modulating the shape of the world. Acknowledging how readily I can make myself believe almost anything. And then the hard part — coming back down on the right side of things.

“You’re going to be just fine, Mona.” The woman from the Weather Bureau said this to me as we parted, raising lights I didn’t know were there. And I repeat that to myself, too, as I open my eyes.