



We head West.

The sky bruised and throbbing indigo. Three months from the Kingdom. A straggling Afflicted squirms **parallel** in the distance. We're headed the same way, after all.

Charlie says we're close. I believe him. The air is different this far out. Molasses-thick and **heavy**. Like standing at the bottom of the ocean. We keep the masks on to sleep now.

One of the taller Patrons glances left-right. Motions back. The Afflicted is closer, though whether it can see us is impossible to tell. I

The Afflicted waits up ahead. Crouched low. Soft bubbles ripple through its bulk. It must've slowed in the night for us. Like a mother whose youngest lags behind.

Long hours on the four. Circle down an old interstate ramp. Arms interwoven. When we started back **east** we brought a few glove-compartment maps, but we need them no longer. Whatever's out West has its own luminous pull.

Then the Afflicted roils and snaps forward.

(Burns the brain like a coal or beacon. I think of geese and calves - that magnetic sensitivity. I'm not sure we could turn back if we wanted.)

We stop with the moon, though the West still

itches behind our eyes.

Overhead, the Mansions wheel and divide. I see Bond, and Stomach, and Turtle Beak, then the deeper asterisms - Mausoleum and Celestial Boat. Crushed glass in the black of the Tiger.

We walk in his safety. We sleep in his home.

Wake by first light without speaking. Spill forward in rough, musty clumps. Sun to our backs. Something I remember, briefly: *Make it as if I were dying in my sleep, instead of in my life.* Amen.

Then the tremors settle. Equalize. The Afflicted squats and pulls itself together. Pores open in its back. Bulge and expand. Excreting the indigestibles.

His mask and spear.

We break free of an unconscious horrified hypnosis. Sprint forward. The creature whips around, too slow. Still pushing the toxins from its body. On some level that doesn't bear thinking, I know this was

As the moon makes Her way back around, we stand vigil. No body. Pulling Charlie

from that de-composition as likely as

scooping spilled tea from a river. His

weapon stays in use, double-wrapped round another Patron's waist. His rations equally

distributed round the rest.

But his mask.

how deep it has fallen into disrepair. Cracks in the wood twist like veins in the mass of a giant. The summer has leathered and wrinkled the paint into something like elephant skin. I am not afraid of this sagging, forgotten thing. Mostly I feel sorry for it. Wade through the lawn, brown and waist-high. Up the steps and to the door. Slight current on my face. It's not the wind. The house sighs and inflates, humid, asthmatic.

Hook two fingers under the mask. It falls away

onto the concrete. The other Patrons do Charlie's intent.

Clamber down the slope, pressed up against the rail. Scraps and relics flown and clustered in the ditch. Mottled empty plastics. Half-buried fire extinguisher. A

Buoyed up and outward into the heart of the city twists above us. Swirls. Dissipates like mist.

Swing low. Feint with the tassel. The Afflicted spins, snaps, but two Patrons pincer from behind. Catch it through the torso.

Full stop. Spears exit perpendicular. The entire cystic mass in perfect freeze.

The Afflicted pitches forward, liquifies, collapses a steaming mess. Its entire body transmuted into a thick gaseous fog. The smell is pungent but not unpleasant. I think of overripe peaches.

And something else. For the first time, I can make out a shape. Faint shadow against the glare, rocking gently. Spiraled over the city

We don't sleep for the next few days. Not out of mourning. The West is so near that it gleams with a psionic, impermeable light. Visible first as a faint glow behind the eyes, then a shimmering expansion as we advance. By the time we reach the outskirts, cresting over Sierra, it expunges the night completely.

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stretch away across a vast expanse. My other senses amplify. There is a sweaty, harsh rhythm in the air. Respiration. The breath of an enormously obese animal. Painful and ragged. Choking on its own bulk. I keep walking, and the heat intensifies, dilates, becomes a presence of its own. Probing and pressing my face and throat. Total immersion. I could drown. My own breath is rough and filled with fluid. I stop when I cannot walk any further. The heat is suffocating, monstrous, supersaturated. Like standing at the bottom

His mask, and the cartridge holding his last word. These we carry with us. We will keep the wake for a night, joss on the flame, then walk on West, and when we see the Divine

we will lay them at its feet.

Then the mists part, and we see the pillar for what it is.

Thick bubbling flesh. Bloated ropes of knotted **blue** membrane. Winding skyward, far past vision.

The Mansions open above us, sharp, unclouded. Change shifts by the hour. Mine near the end.

Because the Afflicted went West, too. And here they have

inflates, draws us forward and down. I reach for Charlie, my **brother**

amassed, scrabbling and writhing and slipped into each

other, fused

and molted into a tower that

stretches,

curls and smiles

fills the corners of our vision. Sighs,

and opens its **mouth**.

Testing on 07/09 indicates the possible presence of a foreign memetic agent within the Coalition. Five personnel of varying rank as far as I know, and no driveway in any case. One story. The paint job creamy and peeling. It doesn't sit. It hunkers. I pass the fence. Tap a post, right-hand, for luck. I must be six, seven years old. The house stretches far above me, yawns, fills the corners of my vision. Curls and smiles. I realize, for the first time,

the ocean. Turn and run. Back through the void, towards a tiny pinprick of light. Dissolved into the dark. I do not feel my feet meet the floor. Swimming or sprinting or tumbling towards a break in the empty,

a rectangle that rotates and expands and becomes a lawn, weed-spun and bone dry. Stumble. Collapse into the doorway, the only frame of reference by which I can gauge my position, dwindle and contracts. Seems to

be the case. "Fallon said, "I never knew what those things are capable of."

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