



HARVEST 2045

BY KRISTO L. OTSIRK

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In which we discover:

- 1) The world is good and we must find a perspective that allows this to be true*
- 2) The Universe is alive and hungry and will eat anything it pleases*
- 3) Love is a miracle*
- 4) Pain is the voice of the Universe*

The following story is fiction. What's more, it is silly fiction. It was written by a nitwit who knows less than nothing. It should be taken with a spoonful of salt and three buckets of sugar.

If you find yourself in situations that resemble the ones in the (silly) fiction that follows, it is advised that you immediately transport yourself onto a cruise-ship, or a tropical paradise, or indulge yourself otherwise, because you have probably gone bonkers and your time is running short.

A Letter of Warning from the Alien Equal Rights Organization (AERO):

Dear reader,

The depiction of aliens in the following (silly) fictional work is vastly inaccurate and offensive. You are warned against forming any conclusions or making judgements about alien life-forms based on the content in this dumb book. Aliens are just like humans. They have feelings, hopes, and dreams. They take family vacations and watch sports, and they don't appreciate the misrepresentations contained herein.

You have been warned. Heed this warning or else face annihilation!

Signed,

Panthomus K. Urrg

President and Co-founder

AERO

Ever since he was a young child, Virgil Kelly had a preoccupation with otherworldly ideas. As a little boy in elementary school, he waited eagerly for the final bell to ring and then he ran out to meet his mother, who would be waiting for him with the family van in the parking lot. Sometimes she would have a piece of fruit waiting for him, or on certain days some home-made granola, and Virgil looked forward to the possibility of a treat. But that wasn't what filled the boy with excitement, causing him to make a mad dash across the school yard.

When the last bell of the day rang, it was like prison walls falling away. As he sat through school each day, the hours became a slug, slowly squirming by. He felt cooped up and restricted sitting in the school room wearing his uniform. He occasionally glanced through the blinds that were drawn over the window and yearned for the sunlight. His teacher was a mean, humorless nun who felt that sunlight was a distraction to the learning process. So he sat and waited, shifting his eyes between the clock and the window, soaking in fluorescent light. Then, finally, the bell would ring at the end of that day. It was the sound of that final bell that gave him his first taste of freedom.

Freedom is a fundamentally strong concept, a basic human right and desire. Ideals like freedom have great power over the human mind and contribute immensely to their development. And, conversely, the withholding of ideals, as freedom often is – as punishment, or to impose power and regulation – can have an equally intense effect. This can all be especially influential to the mind of a child when the concept of the world and a self within that world are

still malleable and vulnerable to change. This is exponentially true when that mind has been raised to ecstatic states. Virgil's long days at school brought him to such a state.

He spent hours every day in captivity with shackles placed on his boyhood freedom, learning boring things like math and science while he wanted to be running through fields and watching clouds pass by. Then the school bell rang and raised his mind to a place of incredible perception. The spongey workings of the brain were exposed as the emotions of freedom swept through. He was raised into a state of hyper-awareness. And in that glow of awareness, Virgil transformed his dash across the schoolyard into a journey into Heaven.

Virgil was raised under the guidance of strict orthodox religion, as were his parents, and his grandparents, and their grandparents, and on down the family tree as far back as could be traced. The Kelly bloodline had a propensity to be drawn towards obedience and discipline. They were also very gullible. As such, they became Christians. Virgil found himself learning and accepting a vast catalog of wild and fantastical ideas as fact, ideas that came from a old book about Heaven and Hell, angels and demons and a carpenter that did funny magic tricks. And because Virgil was a boy with a wild imagination, he took to these ideas like they were his own.

When Virgil ran to the van, the wind became fire that drove him on. His smile ate his ears - he could simply not wait another moment after all the grueling day to days of reading, writing, arithmetic, history, science, and religious indoctrination. He would jump through the side door, which would be waiting open for him. They were the gates of Heaven and they swallowed him whole. He would grab the banana, or apple, or even better yet the granola right out of his

mothers hand, which would be stretched back from the drivers seat in anticipation of his arrival, and he would launch himself into the furthestmost, darkest corner of the backseat.

And he would giggle, like he was hiding smething.

As Virgil waited in the shadowy corner for his siblings to finish their slow walk to the van, he would close his eyes tight and go to another place entirely. Tingling with the acquisition his freedom, high on ideals and fantasy, Virgil would conjure up eternity, or at least the concept of such that was preached to him daily, and impose it upon the world he physically sat in. In his playful mind, he was dragging Heaven down to Earth. He would leave his body and feel himself floating high above the schoolyard. The universe would spin, and expand and contract so rapidly it was if nothing was moving at all - everything just existed in suspended oscillation. Time was liquid and he could feel it, cold like a river against his cheek.

If Virgil would have related his experience to his mother, she would have been very worried and sent him to counseling or, even worse, to the priest, possibly for exorcism. Or, Heaven forbid, she may think that the young, imaginative and impressionable Virgil was a prophet (and, as recent cults have shown, no good can come of a modern day prophet). Luckily, Virgil never told his mother. He never thought what he was doing was strange, not yet anyhow, but he was a quiet, introverted child. He kept it all to himself. It became his secret Heaven.

And so, day after day, the young child of 5 or 6 wrestled with grasping the incredible ideas of freedom and eternity. Some may find it interesting to know that freedom is innate, which is why it is often regarded as a basic human

right. The yearning and exercising of freedom can be observed even in infants. A new mother would surely agree, especially once the critters begin learning how to crawl, let alone walk. But at some point the human child will often find him or herself, whether it be known or not, learning non-freedom. The civilized world has a tendency to push the growing mind into its constructed constraints. For the sake of progress, of course.

The truly remarkable thing is that, once an innate idea is warped into its opposite by the restrictions of living, many humans will spend incredible amounts of energy longing and struggling for that which they knew already but learned to forget about. Once you experience un-freedom, freedom becomes something you strive for again. For a young, imaginative and impressionable mind, such as the one lodged inside Virgil's thick skull, achieving this mental shift can be a doorway into the surreal and unknown.

So the young lad sat, still a spring chicken, tucked in the shadows of a makeshift Heaven, but in a very real and permeable state of awareness. And he stretched his mind further and further to grasp what it is to be... forever - to be an unending thing invariably and always, floating in an infinite plane of infinity. How long is it? Is it just... now, repeated? Is it "The End" plus one, plus one plus one plus one? Is it the future unwinding like a red carpet - or maybe it's the past in a loop! Oh, I hope I don't go to the place that has the fire!

The mind of a child is very fragile and can be easily shaped. One must never forget that while interacting with the younger generation of any species, but especially those of the human variety. These games that Virgil played led to many things, but chiefly among was the keen shaping of his mind. And it left him with an intense and premature fear of death and, as a result, life. He

knew that eternity was a very, very long time, and he certainly didn't want to be dead for that long. He reasoned that if life lead to death, then one could defeat their inevitable destruction by simply avoiding life altogether.

Virgil was a very young age to try and grasp nonbeing. "If I could just stop being alive," his young, imaginative and impressionable mind thought, "Or if only I could of never have been - I wouldn't never have to die!"

And so, over time, Virgil's game where he ran into Heaven every day after school became very real, and the awareness that it brought him to began to leave its mark and linger, perpetually poking through, becoming an inseparable part of his being.

Soon after Virgil became used to having these thoughts, he experienced the death of his grandfather, Eugene, and he knew that the fight was worthless. He knew that death would knock on his parents door one day and ask to take them away, or even worse, take him away. They would all go to the place called eternity, and he feared it would be fire that waited for him. He could see his parents, opening the door for Death and making him tea, in tears but knowing that they were powerless. They would give Virgil away to the bad man in the dark robe, with powder white reptile hands peering out from underneath, and death would take him in a puff of blue, metallic smoke.

As Virgil stood by the casket of his grandfather, he felt that death was a living thing. He could feel it breathing upon his neck. He could hear it whisper. He felt the tug and pull of two forces, like a game of tug-of-war where he was the rope. And he felt that it was living inside of him. His brain strained from pressure and the inside of his eyes began to itch. He did not like this feeling, and

he ran into the bathroom and hid until his parents found him to take him home.

With the experience of death ripe in his mind, and his propulsion towards the unreal, Virgil very quickly ran the gamut of frustration over trying to grasp the after-life existence. His mind could bend no more. At such a young age, Virgil felt the philosophical emptiness of it all, the futility of even the most swarming source of life. Before even the age of 10, Virgil experienced an emptiness that some people do not stumble across until their midlife crisis. And some never stumble upon it at all.

Those are the happy ones, Virgil would say as he grew older.

These thoughts stirred dark pools in Virgil's soul. The tug and pull that he felt while standing next to his deceased grandfather lingered and wore him down. He became driven further inward with indignation and spite. Anger, frustration and a constant sense of utter failure filled him daily. These things began to turn the young, imaginative and impressionable young boy into a dark, brooding young man.

There were, however, certain things that brought Virgil some comfort, and among them were the stars. He would gaze into them at night and felt at home among them, more so than even in his own bedroom. He didn't know why, but he felt draw towards the constellations. He often wondered if there were other people out there in the stars. He thought, perhaps, the stars, like death, were alive.

Another thing that developed out of Virgil's journeys into the ethereal mind, coupled with the advent of adolescence, was an acute awareness that other people did not look at the world the way that he did. This wasn't a matter of pessimism and it had nothing to do with the way he felt drawn towards the strange and weird. Rather, it was the realization that others just simply did not see.

For one thing, Virgil began to experience visions, as if he were dreaming while he was awake. He saw spaces in the classroom wall open up, giving way to swirling portals that showed him glowing pyramids and strange, futuristic cities of industry. He once went on a field trip to museum of science and anatomy and, while walking past a replica of a human brain, saw it glowing while little tadpole-like insects break to squirm out of its veins. He looked around at the other students, expecting them to look as shocked as he did, but their nonchalant faces made it clear that they had not seen the same thing.

Virgil looked at other people and saw a heavy fog over their eyes, like a cloud that passes through a mountain town, only the sun never breaks through and the morning never comes. And Virgil's own eyes, as he noticed when he would look into the mirror, had a strange glow about them that reminded him of mosquitos fossilized in ancient tree amber. When he told his mother about this, she merely patted him on the head and told him he had a very active imagination. Nevertheless, Virgil was certain of one thing - he was different.

Virgil longed for a day when he would find somebody else like him. He hadn't made any friends and he would watch the other children play and

talk as he stood off at a distance, feeling loneliness swell up inside of him. With his fear of death constantly pricking his mind and the growing feeling that he was already lost to eternity, he dreamt of a time when somebody would understand him.

And then, one day, it happened. In Virgil's school, the chores were rotated every month. One of these chores was to walk the trash out to the dumpster. On this particular month, Virgil was assigned that chore. He was walking one afternoon towards the dumpster, trash bag in hand, and saw two old men digging through the dumpster, pulling out the recently discarded lunchroom waste. They looked like werewolves - their eyes were glowing bright and they each had a gravy-soused salisbury steak in their mouths. The shadows of the alley darkened their skin and it looked like fur. The shorter and fatter of the two looked at him once and said through the gnawing of schoolyard chum, "Hey geezer, I think this kid's got the mark!" and then turning to the child, "Hey, kid, what's longer? Math class or eternity?" The skinny man then laughed so hard that he nearly choked on the food that still somewhat resembled a meat patty.

This chance encounter led to a series of conversations, most of which were decorated with a paranormal and supernatural spirit. These conversations became a rare source of joy for Virgil. Unlike the other school children and even his family, he could talk to these men. And what's more, they could talk to him, and he would understand, and not only would they talk, but they would talk for hours and days and no time at all, because time would cease to exist. Their words would flow like a gush of whitecaps through twisting, magnificent canyon walls, pushing onward with manic force, becoming an emerald snake seeking to

quench a vicious hunger. The words would bounce into the volcanoes of the sun and out through the cavernous nostrils of the man on the moon. They would utterly transcend time and space and gravity in one, all encompassing blast of metaphysics.

Virgil looked forward to taking the trash out and would trade his assigned chore for trash duty each month, which was easy because none of the other students wanted it. He began to think of the two old men as sorcerers. They once caused the alleyway to vanish and reappear in a rainforest, and them as cougars. At the end of this experience, the two old men, as cougars, chased Virgil up a mountain, but the next thing he knew he was sitting in the dumpster that he just dumped the garbage in. The men laughed, taking great joy in tricking the child.

Over time, Virgil began to see the two old men not only as sorcerers, but as his friends. They were, after all, the only people we felt any connection to, though he knew he wouldn't approve of this friendship. These men were vagrants and one day after church his mother spotted them hanging about and called them trash. But, because of Virgil's adolescent desire to keep doing the thing you know you shouldn't be doing, that thing that you know is ok so long as you don't get caught, the teenage boy took to sneaking out into the woods at night to visit with the men.

Virgil would head deep into the hobo jungle to speak with the two cantankerous old men who had red stained teeth and weird names like Muskrat and Ragweed. Muskrat was the short and fat one. He wore a red, ribbed wool sweater and a black stocking cap. His nose was small, round and his face was covered with a permanent five-o'clock shadow. His voice was deep and hoarse,

like it was pushing through phlegm and scar tissue, and he reeked of tobacco. Ragweed was a faithful counterpart, tall and lanky, with a blue sweater and long grey trench coat. He wore a billed newsboy cap that was darkened with mud and dirt and was clean shaven, though his long, knotty hair spilled over his scarred and pocked cheeks. They both wore work battered work boots and gloves with the finger ends cut off. They were foul and perhaps even awful, but their eyes had the glow and he could speak to them of infinite things, things nobody else could understand. Things that, when he once tried to relate them to a schoolyard peer, Jack Nealy, he was called nasty names and punched in the nose.

And so, day after day, Virgil sought the company of the two homeless men who, despite how awful they may have smelt, and despite the strange tricks they would play on him, had the same glow in their eyes and saw the same world that he did.

By the time this strange friendship was developing, a dark cloud settled over Virgil's mind. The cloud molded his attitude into a permanent scowl, the result of already having spent years trying and failing to achieve knowledge of the impossible. It made him negative and fostered a critical, negative view of the world, which drew Muskrat and Ragweed to Virgil. They were embittered from a life wasted on a worthless journey and they amused themselves with Virgil's negativity.

"I don't like the other kids," Virgil would say. "They just do as their told."

"If you keep spending your time with those dummies," the old men would respond, "they'll dummy you right up."

But they had their ways about them, and there was a certain cheer that they carried alongside their despair. and resentment. This, other than the glow of their eyes, is what kept Virgil around. They laughed and joked and they didn't need much. Wine, mostly, and food. Virgil never drank the wine but he saw how it made them giggle like children. He would listen to them naysay the world and he would find himself agreeing with them, which at least strengthened his resolve to fight conforming.

For the two old bums, however, more than anything, Virgil was entertainment. He could grasp the concepts they discussed but would react to their implications with such a violence that the mischievous hobos would fall over in a ground-shaking laughter. Muskrat would ask Ragweed if the boy would be able to understand how the universe could expand and Virgil would fly off handle about how his mind felt like it was stretching and pulling back in, like a rubber band. Then the two old men would call him a rubber band boy and pull on his arms.

"Don't break, rubber band boy," they would say, "or else you'll be stuck all stretched out, and you'll have to get new pants."

And then the pressure in Virgil's mind would build and he would fly off the handle, stomping about, this way and that, lifting his knees high in the air and throwing his legs to the side, all while pulling at his hair and shouting at the trees. And the old men would be rolling on the leaves with their hands on their bellies, howling at the moon and egging Virgil on with enchanted riddles and non sequiturs while dark wine dribbled down their dirty, knotted chins.

Though Muskrat and Ragweed teased Virgil and fed his aggravation, they were essential to his development in that they kept his awareness alive.

Virgil now knew that he was not completely alone in the way he saw things. He would see a rift in space, like a small galaxy forming out of thin air, and Muskrat and Ragweed would see it, too. They wouldn't explain it in any way other than joking with him and prodding him into tantrums, but it kept him from going down the dark path of delusion.

"Do you notice that other people have fog over their eyes?" Virgil once asked.

"Yeah, kid," they would say, speaking together like they were the same person. "It's 'cause they're dingbats."

The cranky old bums gave him no answers, but at least they ratified his visions which would later lead him to profound truths of the universe.

Even still, Virgil's frustration began to plant the seeds of anxiety and a general sense of restlessness. Each night, Virgil Kelly went to bed plagued by the feeling that eternity was waiting for him, and that it did indeed last a very, very long time. He would dream of eternity and feel that he could never wake up. He would watch as his teacher turned to a reptile, her head forming into that of a lizard, and he would feel strange sensations rising from deep within. He saw the stars gesturing towards him, as if they were calling him home. He felt alien and was no longer pacified by the two old men. He wanted something more. He wanted something real.

Virgil carried on with Muskrat and Ragweed for about a year or so as junior high loomed around the corner. Because of this, Virgil got to be very adept at sneaking out and cultivated a disdain for rules and authority. Two roads began to unfold before him. One was that of the outcast, the fringe level outsider who roamed and scavenged, trading aspirations for wine and cheap thrills. This was the road that Muskrat and Ragweed walked down, and it was beginning to look open and inviting to Virgil. The other road led away from the two old men. It was unclear and, to Virgil, it consisted of hardship, continued loneliness and isolation. He may have very well followed Muskrat and Ragweed in their vagrant ways, but something incredible happened and it brought a much greater consequence.

Virgil Kelly met a girl.

It happened all of a sudden, in another one of those all encompassing moments that tingled like his entire body fell asleep and was regaining blood flow in all parts at once. Virgil was walking through a trail that ran into the woods that led to a clear stream. He found himself drawn to the stream, and, over time, developed a general liking to nature. This is perhaps another positive result of his friendship with Muskrat and Ragweed, as it led to him growing accustomed to the woods.

Virgil felt comfortable among the trees and plants and wild animals. He could almost hear their history singing to him. There was a presence that he felt from the slightest blade of grass, from the stream itself and the large cypress trees. There were a particular group of rolling hills just beyond one part of the

woods that made him feel an earthquake deep within. So it was there, en route to the hills that spoke to him so clearly, that a bright flash of amber broke through the tree line and hit him intensely in the face, just like the bully Jack Nealy's fist, only it was gentle and didn't break skin.

Virgil actually fell to the ground, crumbling under the blinding force of the amber flash. As he was pushing himself to his feet, he saw a blurry semblance of a female figure approaching. The threshold of light beyond her was strong and he was still in a daze, so he could not make the advancing figure out to be anything other than a silhouette. But the closer she got the clearer she became. Suddenly, kneeling before him and offering her hand, was the most devastatingly beautiful person Virgil had ever seen.

Virgil often wondered about the opposite sex, but he was an untouchable at school and it gave him no opportunity to explore. Puberty crept into his body and he struggled with the physical cravings that adolescence brings, which collided with his rebellious streak and left him pent up and tense. Merely setting his eyes upon this girl was a release for him, and the moment he took her hand was sacramental. She was a little taller than he, and a little older, too, because she was more developed, more adult like, with curved hips and long legs that stuck out in green tights from underneath a black skirt. She wore heavy leather black boots and light brown sweater. Her skin was fair, but not pale. Her eyes were brown and endless. Her hair matched their color and flowed downward over her shoulders. She possessed a big, kind smile that shone pearly white teeth.

The sun rose and set a hundred times. The moon rose with the sun and grew large enough that he could feel its magnetism. Every star fell towards him

and gravity reversed itself three times over. The trees floated, rooted upwards into the atmosphere and everything dissolved into nothingness, only to become itself again. And then, as form somersaulted and fell upon itself in repetition, she was still there. That beautiful girl. And her eyes had the glow.

And she was getting impatient.

"Well, you just gonna sit there and mud up your pants, or what?" she said with her hand still stretched out, holding onto his and waiting for him to rise. Virgil looked down in embarrassment.

"No, sorry," he said. "I just slipped on something, I guess."

He pushed himself up and dusted himself off.

"Thanks," he mumbled shyly while looking back up at her. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Old enough to know you aren't supposed to ask a lady that! Ain't ya gotta mom?" she said with a smile, but Virgil couldn't tell if he was being teased or not.

Virgil was embarrassed again. "Ya, I gotta mom!" he replied, a little upset. "I was just askin' cause I never..." Virgil hesitated. He looked at the girl's face with grave seriousness and recalled the bully Jack Nealy's punch to the nose. "Well, I never met nobody my age that had..." Virgil hesitated yet again, but looked at her face and saw the glow. "The eyes."

"What eyes do you mean?" the girl asked. "You mean the eyes that look like sunsets and come with all kinds a weird dreams?"

Virgil's face lightened up. "Well, yeah! That's exactly what I mean!" Then he looked around suspiciously. "Say, you haven't been put up to this by two crazy old cooks have ya?"

The girl laughed. "I ain't been put up to nothin' by nobody."

Virgil looked uneasy for a moment, but then he fell into laughter himself. Soon, they were both laughing together. The experience of sharing laughter with someone his own age was new to Virgil, and it began to compound upon itself until he was shrieking wildly. This amused the girl her laughter began to grow as well. Soon they were both rolling on the ground, just as Muskrat and Ragweed would when they picked on and prodded young Virgil.

"Say, I like you," the girl said. "What's your name?"

"Name's Virgil. Virgil Kelly."

"Well that's a dumb name," the girl said, laughing still. Virgil looked down. "I'm just funnin', I like it," she continued, and Virgil looked up and smiled. "It's not... normal."

"Well, what's your name, anyway?" asked Virgil, eager to make a friend.

"Abigail. Abigail Loppawata."

"Loppawata? Well, you said *my* name was silly," Virgil taunted.

"It is, ya dummy. Mine's unique."

Virgil couldn't argue.

"Where do you come from? I haven't seen you at school before," Virgil said.

"My parents are in the military. We move around a lot. But they said they're gonna be stationed here for a long time, so I guess you have to be my friend now."

Virgil's smile took over his face. He made made a friend.

After that moment, the two were inseparable. Virgil felt like he was flying. He never imagined that he would be able to find somebody like him, somebody who could approach abstraction alongside of him, somebody who knew the same frustrations of this acute awareness, somebody that knew the dark cloud it could bring. But it was more than this common knowledge, because, in fairness, Muskrat and Ragweed shared that with Virgil, too. Abigail was his peer, and they were in the same stages of awareness. They could journey through the unknown together.

Abigail, for her part, hadn't experienced loneliness to the same as extent as Virgil. Though she had been to many different schools and towns, she always adapted quickly because she had social grace. She was initially drawn to Virgil for the same reasons that he was to her, simply because they were alike. Over time though, she did become quite fond of him. She found his general grumpiness to be cute and endearing. She teased him about and called him a brat and was able to coax him into light-heartedness, something nobody else had been able to do. She like the way he listened to her and it made her feel welcome and important. She thought he was sweet and thoughtful and looked at his introversion as a positive thing that only needed direction.

They formed a bond over their shared journey, and it impacted Virgil profoundly. And, after all he was a budding, young man, and she a flowering, beautiful and strong-willed young lady. There was a strong physical attraction, and it was the first time Virgil ever felt this way.

Over the course of the next two years, as a direct result of Abigail's influence, Virgil's perception began to shift in remarkable ways. His scowl flatlined, and at moments you could even catch the corners of his lips turn

upwards in something like a smile. He began to become proud of his awareness and wanted to nourish it. He felt creative and joyful and no longer feared his days. The nagging of death and eternity subsided and no longer pricked at the inside of his mind.

Abigail felt at home in their friendship, but it would be inaccurate to say she changed. She was a powerful young girl and never took her frustrations out on herself or the world around her to begin with. She danced in worry like a ballerina, using its force to spin her but never knock her down. She could leap from the infinite into the real world effortlessly in a fluid, spectacular motion. She could balance upside down on anti-matter and present it to Virgil as a red velvet cupcake. She packed concepts of perverse and intangible matter in her lunch, in between two pieces of marble rye bread. She whispered strange words, like "abraxas" and "ouroboros," planting a feeling of totality deep within him, and then she would run away giggling. She was always at play in the world, completely comfortable within herself.

Virgil looked up to Abigail, and Abigail welcomed it. She nurtured him with the knowledge that her carefree disposition afforded to her. Abigail became the safe harbor for the Virgil's soul to take shelter from the restless seas of awareness.

"Virgil, I want you to promise me something," she said to him one day.

"Anything," Virgil replied.

"Stay with me forever," she said in a teasing tone will tickling his sides and smiling downward, looking at him with flirtatious, upward glances eyes.

"Ok," said Virgil. And when he said it, forever no longer seemed so bad.

Virgil and Abigail grew accustomed to long walks to and from school. Abigail was two years old than Virgil but only one grade ahead. She was now in her first year of high school, but they lived in a small town and the high school and junior high were right next to each other. The friends would often leave early in the morning and take the long way to school, off the road and along the creeks which never dried up and ran through the woods and hills to rejoin the river as it rushed home to the sea.

There was one stream in particular that Abigail and Virgil liked to walk along. It served as a tangible anchor for their own growth and development because it reminded them of the first time they met. Another time, they had an especially intense conversation that explored the cyclical patterns that permeate all organic life and weave it together. They dove deep into the life and death cycles of the forest, Abigail highlight the moss hanging off of the trees and the leaves cracking under their feet. Now, just by being near that river, they could traverse conversation that built on top of that infallible truth, the cyclical nature of existence, that was now becoming an innate understanding.

Along these walks the friends became visionaries. They would soar through the universe, rebuilding constellations and playing with gravity, which they both understood as a concept but only Abigail really understood. Virgil was not a book smart child and had little academic motivation. He did not know that $E=mc^2$ and he did not know what velocity and momentum were, but he felt these things and in that way he knew them deeply.

Abigail, by contrast, absorbed information and knowledge completely,

and fine-tuned her tastes early in life so that by now she was very smart for her age. She always led Virgil through the surreal by the hand, just as she held it as they walked through the woods.

The walks became an exploratory journey of discovery for the two friends. They became daring and courageous as they discussed the realities and non-realities surrounding them. They began to playfully shed their upbringings and were rebuilding the truths of the world from the ground up.

This affected Virgil and Abigail in different ways, each in congruence with their character. Abigail, on the one hand, was becoming the rarest of roses. She possessed a prodigal knowledge of all things and a loving heart to go along with it. She yearned to empty herself both into the world and for the world. She wanted to play in the beauty of the universe and share it with those around her.

Virgil, on the other hand, was not so quick to take these concepts and apply them to his bias and perspective of the world. Virgil lacked in educational commitment and a lot of things simply did not stick into his brain like they did with Abigail's. Her brain was a sponge that was open with a purpose, while Virgil's lay hose to a stubborn mule that sat on top and tried to kick things away. He knew things, he understood things, but he could not explain them, and when the euphoria of awareness dropped sometimes he felt like it had all been a dream.

But that's not the only reason that Virgil struggled. It is true that, because of the positive influence friendship can have on a person, Virgil was not nearly the angry, brooding boy that he once was. But even when he appeared happy, there was still a real and underlying frustration and a sense of hopelessness that throbbed in Virgil's being. It only vanished completely, he

noticed, when Abigail was leading him by the hand.

The journey of discovery did not end with their shared conversation and visions. Just as they were becoming adventurous in their quest for knowing, they became adventurous in exploring the forest itself. They began to walk down paths they had not walked down before, and sometimes, when they were feeling especially daring, they would venture off the path itself.

Abigail and Virgil were walking along the creek on their way home from school, just like any other day. Virgil's hand was held firm by Abigail, who was walking a few steps ahead pulling him forward. They were talking about Heaven and Hell, and the possibilities for the true explanation behind their stranglehold on humans thought and behavior.

The children now had serious doubts about their religious upbringing, and it could be said that Abigail had freed herself completely. Virgil, however, though full of doubt, was stubborn and could not cast it all away so easily.

"I have seen it," he said, "I have seen it over and over. Everything is the opposite of itself. There's always two of something fighting. Heaven and hell, good and evil, there's fire and water, and I don't know. I just feel it. I feel it following me, paths of right and wrong that chase me like a dog."

"Oh, Virgil, you're a Puritan. Don't be silly!" Abigail responded, now skipping along and becoming giddy. She pulled her hand away and teased him. "It's just duality, dummy."

Virgil grew frustrated and looked away.

"Oh, you're such a baby," Abigail teased. Virgil responded by turning around, putting his back to Abigail.

"Virgil, I'm joking!" Abigail said, turning him around. She held his hand again. "Listen, Heaven and Hell, these things are just ideas that people have made while trying to explain the unexplainable. They point to truths, but they aren't truths. Don't let them scare you. Don't take them so seriously. That priest that your parents think is so smart? Guess what, Virgil."

He looked back at her, "What?"

"He's an idiot," she said and then laughed. "C'mon, let's keep going."

Virgil tried to shake off the cloud that was surfacing in his mind. He looked around at took in his surroundings. He had been to this spot hundreds of times. There was a small wood bridge that arched over the small creek. They were standing on that bridge now, and Virgil looked around him at all the different paths that they had taken.

"Let's go a different way today," he suggested.

He looked over to a large, twisted tree that marked a path they often ignored. Today it looked different. Where there was once a clear path beaten into the ground was now an overgrowth of thistle and weeds, but there were some spots where the weeds had been pressed downward by footsteps. There was also an empty wine bottle with a wine-stained, white handkerchief rapped around it at the edge of the overgrowth.

"Let's go that way!" Abigail yelled, pointing in the direction of the wine bottle.

Virgil looked around suspiciously, moving his eyes from the wine bottle to the surrounding landscape. He didn't say anything, but he felt strange and thought of Muskrat and Ragweed. He could smell something foul that reminded him of a rodent, and the calling card wine bottle was there.

Vigil had only briefly told Abigail about Muskrat and Ragweed. It occurred to him that he hadn't even seen the two since he and Abigail took to each other. The friendship with the two old men became inconsequential and over time he stopped thinking about them completely. They were just some old looneys, he concluded, and after meeting Abigail he no longer wanted or felt as if he needed their company.

Before being able to protest, Abigail was pulling him towards the thicket. They came to the edge and Abigail knelt before the wine bottle. Now that they were near it, it became clear now that the handkerchief was not stained in wine, but blood. Abigail was intrigued. Virgil was frightened.

"We should just go back the way we always do," said frightened, brooding Virgil.

"Well heck no, ya wimp! C'mon, it'll be like we're detectives," replied Abigail. Even in life's most foreboding moments, life could be a joyful game to her. She pulled him forward and took him running through the weeds, following the pressed down patches.

"We need names!" she called out to him as they ran. "I'll be the master French detective Monique La Peur," she turned to look at him, "That's French for 'fear' - and you can be my loyal servant, Mopesy."

"Hey!" Virgil replied, aware she was teasing him. Abigail stopped running abruptly and turned to look at Virgil in anger. Virgil had never seen her look angry before and was startled, confused. All at once Abigail's face melted back into its former self and she started laughing. Virgil sighed. She was always at play. He wished he could be so carefree.

"Fine, you're right that won't work," She agreed, laughing still. "C'mon,

Virgil! I'm just trying to toughen you up a little bit." She giggled. "Ok ok, how about..." She put her finger to her chin, tapping it in exaggerated thought. "Aha! I got it. Buddy Flapjack, International Scribe to Justice." She made a very dramatic and theatrical display of the new name, lowering her voice and gesturing to the skies, as if making an offering.

Virgil blushed. "Whatever," he said. "Let's get on with it, huh?"

"Ok, Flapjack it is."

Abigail smiled and took his hand again. She looked at him in the eyes and smiled stronger, just for him. The glow, he thought. She glows, but not just in her eyes. She just glows.

"C'mon, Flappy!" She said and began to run again through the thicket.

Once they got through the weeds they realized they were in a much darker part of the woods, one that they did not remember having been at before. They stopped running and swiveled their heads as they waited for their eyes to adjust.

"Where'd the sunlight go?" Virgil asked.

"We've entered the lair of darkness," Abigail whispered with what would have been as a sarcastic smile if there were any light with which to see it.

Then, all of a sudden, the friends heard a rustle in the leaves and low grunting noise off to right. They turned quickly.

"Who's there?" Abigail shouted instinctively and gripped Virgil's hand a little tighter.

They heard nothing. Abigail yelled again.

"Hey, I said who's there?" she said, a little louder. Virgil felt something rising out of his gut and lodging itself in his throat. He froze.

Then whatever was there began to come towards them. They could hear one footstep hit the ground and then a long dragging followed. They began to hear a slight wheezing sound. As their eyes adjusted, a large hunched figure limped towards them. Now, even Abigail became afraid. Seconds stretched themselves as they passed by and every hair the friends arms stood in fright.

Then laughter broke the still silence, but it wasn't Abigail's as it usually was. It was Virgil who began to laugh. Abigail's fear subsided a little and she turned towards him in confusion. Their eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness and they could see each other's faces.

"Hey, what's so funny?" she asked.

"Well, it's just old Ragweed," Virgil replied, pointing towards the creature which was now about five feet away from them. An frail, dirty man stood in front of them. It was indeed old Ragweed, who aged with difficulty over the few years since Virgil saw him last. Virgil leaned close to Abigail and whispered. "Remember those crazy old men I told you about?"

Ragweed looked feeble and haggard. His right leg was bandaged and being pulled along with the help of a makeshift cane from a tree branch. His face looked hollow and the glow of his eyes was faint. Virgil felt concern. He did not necessarily care for this man, or his fatter counterpart, but he did not like to see pain. He also did feel at least some sense of nostalgia towards the two hapless old men.

"You don't look too good, Ragweed," Virgil told him. "Say, where's Muskrat?" It was odd that they weren't together. In the past they were inseparable. At times, they were the same person.

Ragweed's wheezing turned into a coughing fit and phlegm was hacked

onto the ground. He looked up at Virgil with big, sorrow-filled eyes.

"Ya gotta come with me, kid. Bring yer friend," he coughed again.
"Muskrat - he ain't doing too well."

Virgil became afraid again. Death still haunted Virgil and he tried not to think about it. Now he felt compelled to walk towards it but was fearful of what it might bring. But Abigail's fear subsided and she pulled Virgil along after the limpy, wheezy Ragweed. As they walked behind him, he would speak off into nowhere but would punctuate his sentences by turning over his shoulder and looking Virgil directly in the eye, very matter-of-factly, and his faintly glowing eyes would brighten.

"What's goin' on, Ragweed?" asked Virgil as they walked along towards a light which emerged far off in the distance. Ragweed was abstract and distant in his reply.

"Oh the ways of the world are wicked and weird," he mused, "how they toss you about - this way and that without a care for you one way or the other." He paused to cough. "One second you are drifting alone, free like a wild animal, and the next you are in a cage that shrinks and shrinks and leaves you so, utterly - " he paused now and turned at Virgil before finishing in with one cold, stark word, "alone."

This made Virgil uncomfortable but he said nothing. Abigail squeezed his hand. The old man went on, rambling.

"The sky is my mistress," he grew more distant as he spoke, "the sky, she holds me, she bathes me, she pulls me to her and nestles me in between her star-crossed thighs." He turned again to Virgil and said, "but the sky stopped calling. The sky don't want an old bum like me anymore. And it don't want Muskrat

neither."

"What happened to you two?" Virgil continued to pry for information. Something didn't feel right. Abigail observed silently. Ragweed suddenly stopped and turn halfway around, lunging up on his cane and meeting the children's eyes with his long, point, jagged and wart covered nose. He breathed on them. It was pungent and gross and smelled like sardines. His eyes looked stern and even cross, but then a ghastly sigh of hesitation floated through him and he backed away with his head down.

"Oh, I'm sorry to spook ya, kid. Life ain't what it used to be. Muskrat, see, he's sick. He got real sick. He's dyin', kid. I been havin' to provide for the both of us, cause I can't jest let him die now, can I?" He shook his head and coughed again. "No, I can't."

"I'm sorry," Abigail said.

"So it goes, so it goes, woe is me," Ragweed pined with sarcasm. "Look, kid. I think you should really just go talk to Muskrat. You know, he really liked you, he always did." Virgil noticed a sincerity in Ragweed's voice that was out of place but real. He let his guard down and loosened up.

"Ok," he replied. "Abigail's gotta come to," he said.

"Of course, of course, 'any friend of yours,' as the saying goes," Ragweed replied while waving his free hand in the air.

"Where is he?" asked Abigail.

Ragweed did not speak a reply. He sighed once more and turned around, continuing to walk toward the light at the end of the woods, which was by getting close. He motioned for them to follow with his finger.

When they reached the opening, Ragweed pulled some limbs aside and

stood aside, motioning with cane for the kids to pass through. The children could see now that the woods gave way to an old train yard. There were old, busted box cars here and there as if they had been carelessly tossed about like toys. There were piles of rocks and dirty coal that rose from the ground like mountains. Chain link fence was scattered, beginning to run a perimeter only to break off and unravel into jagged ends. Old shacks made of corrugated metal and plywood leaned against each other for support. Everything had an eerie hue, like the atmosphere was infused with an luminescent but dirty wall of flame.

"How have we not been here before?" asked Abigail, rhetorically.

As the children advanced forward it became unclear who was leading who. Abigail, for a change, was not taking the initiative to move lead the way, but neither was Virgil. They moved as if on a conveyor belt towards a spot between a shack a boxcar where the atmosphere was a little brighter, a little less polluted than the rest of the yard.

As they got closer to the shack and the boxcar, it became clear that they were approaching a lumpy figure who was laying down underneath the cover of splayed out cardboard boxes. This was Muskrat, Virgil realized, though he was only half his former, plumper self. Virgil and Abigail stopped a few feet away from him and looked at the old man. He was filthy, covered in dirt and surrounded by flies. There were also piles of snakeskin all around. The children were silent and confused.

"It's the shapeshiftin', kid." Ragweed's voice startled the children because they did not realize that they had been followed. "You remember how he used to get to scarin' ya, changin' into things? Well, it's gotten... irregular. He can't control his energy no more, it's drainin' him. He turns into this mean

snake and sometimes can't get back. And then when he does, he's like this."

Abigail looked at Virgil. "What is he talking about?" she asked him.

Virgil shook his head. "I don't know," he replied. He didn't feel it was the time to tell her stories. Muskrat grunted and the cardboard boxes began to shift as he tried to roll over. Ragweed ran over to help him.

"Come on over kid, say hi to him, it'll really make his day," Ragweed said pleadingly. "He ain't seen ya in years."

Virgil walked forward and Abigail followed closely behind, still holding his hand. As Ragweed rolled Muskrat over, Abigail noticed a spark in Muskrats eyes. This wasn't a glow though, not the amber that they were used to. This was something altogether different and, just like the atmosphere, it resembled polluted fire.

"Maybe you were right, Virgil," Abigail now herself sounded concerned. "Maybe we should have gone home the regular way."

Now Muskrat interrupted. "Is that you kid?" he sounded like a croaking toad. "Hey, is that really you? Come here, let me get a good look at you."

Virgil approached with caution and Abigail stayed transfixed on Muskrats eyes.

"Let me see you, let me get a good look, come closer," Muskrat said.

Just as Virgil got within Muskrat's reach, Abigail noticed a strange change in Muskrats eyes. There were no longer aligned horizontally, like a normal pair of human eyes. These were like oblong, upright and egg-shaped with pointed ends and sharp, spinning diamonds in the middle. They grew bigger and bigger as Virgil walked closer and closer.

It's hard to tell who snapped first, but Abigail got the jump.

"It's a trick!" she yelled, and pulled Virgil away just as Muskrat lunged forward towards him. They ran back a few feet and then spun around. Muskrat was now standing but hunched over, panting and resting his hands on his knees. But he continued to glare at Virgil. He was licking his lips and looked depraved. Ragweed walked up to his side and threw his cane away, now standing upright on both legs.

"What are you two old bags up to?" she demanded. Ragweed and Muskrat did not directly respond, but instead lurched towards them and grew in size with each step. They looked menacing now and weren't just growing in size anymore. They were growing together. They were becoming one.

"Energy," they panted together in one voice. "Give us your energy!"

"Virgil, I don't like your friends," Abigail said as they began to turn and run. They noticed then that the woods that they have run out of could no longer be seen. The train yard went on forever.

"What do we do?" Virgil asked Abigail frantically.

"I don't know, I don't know" she replied in haste but was silently calculating their next move. She looked around as they backed up. "Run towards that box car!" she suddenly yelled. They took off towards an abandoned train car that she pointed out, one that was a good distance away from Muskrat and Ragweed, who were now three times their normal size. They grew halfway into each other as they walked, like siamese twins.

"Energy!" they continued to pant, "Give us your energy!"

The children looked out from behind the box car just in time to see the bodies of the two old men forming together into a new shape entirely. Snakes spilled out from where there should have been legs and the torse grew big and

strong. The torso spewed forth two grotesque heads, one that resembled a mutated rooster and the other a single, giant eyeball. The arms were tentacles, flailing wildly into the air.

Abigail thought fast. "Stay here," she told Virgil and ran towards the pile of boxes that Muskrat and been sleeping under. She ran right up to Muskrat and Ragweed and ran in circles around the monster they had become. As the monster would dip down she would jump over the swinging tentacles, just like she was playing jump rope.

"Missed me!" she would taunt. "And you look like a butt!"

She got to the cardboard blankets and found just what she was looking for. There, nestled under the cardboard, was a full gallon of wine. She picked it up and laughed.

"How's this for energy!"

"STOP IT!" yelled the combined voices of Muskrat and Ragweed. Their combined voices produced demonic resonance. Abigail took the wine and ran in circles around the monster, jumping over its swinging tentacles with ease. She was now enjoying herself again.

"Come on, Virgil! These guys are as slow as they are dumb and ugly!"

Virgil ran out and started throwing stones and the monster. The spinning, confused, and angry monster backed against the edge of a decrepit fence as stones pelted its two heads. The children began to play catch with the wine jug, still running in circles until, eventually, the tentacles tangled themselves in with the chain-link and the monster could no longer move.

After resisting an wrestling the fence for a moment, the monster's beastly form began to shrink back into the normal, miserable shapes of Muskrat

and Ragweed, who now looked to be in worse health than ever. They coughed and choked and spit up blood and black tar. The children approached.

"Sorry, kid," said Muskrat. "Ragweed has been watchin' yous two for a while now." He coughed. "We're gettin' old, see, and we thought if we played this trick on yous we could...erm...well..."

Ragweed picked up the explanation. "We didn't wanna die, kid, that's all. We just didn't wanna die."

At that moment the ground began to shake a little and the children backed off. The rumbling grew until it felt like they were at the center of the earthquake. The coughing of the two vagrant men grew louder and louder until it sounded like the sky itself was coughing. The men became immersed in a growing beam of light that overtook the entire landscape in its glow. Just when the coughing couldn't get louder and the light couldn't be any more intense, it all converged into a single ray that shot directly up into the sky, and then disappeared.

Virgil stared at the dead shells of Muskrat and Ragweed. He began to shake. Abigail noticed this and returned to his side, taking his hand once more. The train-yard changed form, turning back into the woods they were used to. They found a familiar path and walked home.

Virgil remained shook-up by the events at the train yard for quite some time. The night after it happened, he snuck out of his bedroom to visit Abigail.. He threw a rope ladder down out of his window at nightfall and climbed down once his parents fell asleep. Abigail lived a few miles down a country road and he raced towards her on his bicycle like he was being chased. Abigail could always sense when Virgil was disturbed and so she was waiting for him on the back porch.

Abigail had nursed Virgil into complacency a number of times. She was used to his outbursts and his tendencies to brood, but this was different. Virgil's struggle to grasp what happened was natural, but Abigail was troubled in her own right and this was out of character. But she sensed the need for shelter from her friend, so she put her own fears aside and tried to lead herself and her friend towards an explanation. There were forces at play, she said, that they had not yet encountered. There was the matter of energy, which could apparently be expelled and even stolen.

Then there was the shapeshifting, which Virgil has previously assumed were a simple matter illusion or hypnotism, but which now seemed like magic. Neither of them could explain it. Abigail suggested that there was still a lot left to learn about the way the world was put together, but proposed that matter could be rearranged if a person were perceptive enough to see it in its most basic, atomic form.

What troubled Virgil the most, though, was the way the light left the bodies of Muskrat and Ragweed and shot towards the sky. Was that, he

wondered, the soul going to Heaven? Abigail warned against this train of thought. She reminded him that it was influenced by myth and that this myth was constructed out of an inability to explain reality and then exploited by wicked people for power.

Abigail told Virgil again that, often times, simple truths could be misinterpreted as magic, divinity, or even godliness. She told him that science also failed to completely grasp reality, because there were things that existed completely but could not be tested. She sounded like an adult, Virgil noticed, and he feared being left behind in his stunted growth.

Virgil hit a wall. He saw himself being controlled by fear and became furiously upset at the weakness he felt. He could not grasp these new concepts and the resulting, lingering feeling of incompetence and confusion invited the brooding clouds to return. He became prone to manic episodes of hatred and anxiety, during which his body would tense up and he would rant violently towards these ideas as if they were enemies standing before him.

During these fits, Abigail found her nurturing instincts guiding her to consolation. The first night this happened, she had the impulse to pull Virgil towards her and hold him. She took his head and held it against her, stroking his hair. Virgil shivered and held onto her shirt tightly. They sat that way in silence for a very long time. Then Abigail began to weep.

Virgil was taken by surprise at this. He'd never seen his friend cry and he pulled away, looking at her in shock. His surprise stopped the flow of his own tears and he wiped them from his face.

"What's wrong?" he asked, full of worry.

"It's nothing. Don't you worry about a thing," she replied, and pulled

him close again. Then they talked softly until the sun began to rise. Virgil took off back home on his bike so that he could climb back into bed to pretend he'd been asleep all night when his parents came to wake him up.

These visits continued for a few weeks, with the violence in Virgil's soul varying in degree. At times, Abigail could coax Virgil into playfulness and the clouds would pass. There were other times, however, where Virgil left at sunrise with even a greater sense of frustration than before. And Abigail never again wept, but she grew oddly serious at times. She was concerned for Virgil but there was something else going on in the way she looked at him.

One night, Virgil came to visit in the rain. He hopped off his bike and ran to Abigail with water dripping off his clothes, which were clinging to his body.

"You smell like a wet dog," Abigail said to him, smiling. "Come sit under the blanket."

As they sat together under the blanket, Virgil felt closer to Abigail than he ever had. Beyond holding hands, the two friends never had much physical contact. The emotional frenzy of the recent weeks drove them together. Adolescence was peaking through and their bodies began to share a warming, dizzying sensation. Abigail reached for Virgil and held his damp head with both of her hands along his jaw. She moved them to the back of his head and twisted his wet hair. As their eyes stared into each other, their faces lost their physical make-up. Their bodies dissolved into rudimentary points and segments and were spinning off into space. Only the eyes remained and they were bursting with radiance. Each fell into the other's pupils, which spread to infinity and swirled their souls around. A gold band wrapped around them and pulled them

together. They kissed. It only lasted for a brief moment, but in that moment all else collapsed into elasticity. And then Abigail began to weep again.

"Oh...Hey, I'm sorry," said Virgil thinking that he did something wrong. Abigail did not immediately answer. She pulled away and sank her head into her hands, crying harder. Unsure of himself but feeling his own impulse take over, Virgil moved towards Abigail and put his arm awkwardly around her.

"Hold me, Virgil," she said. "Hold me, please."

Virgil pulled her close, just as she had done to him. He mimicked her motherly nature, not knowing what else to do.

"What's wrong, Abigail? Why are you crying?" He asked her while stroking her head.

"Virgil..." she pulled away and looked up. She had horror in her eyes. She was afraid. She was angry. And she was lonely. Virgil did not like this.

"Virgil, I've kept a secret from you."

Virgil swallowed hard and replied, "What is it? It's ok."

"No, it's not," said Abigail. "Virgil, I'm dying. I've got a brain tumor."

Abigail told Virgil that the doctors gave her six months to live. That night, they held each other through the sunrise. Virgil did not leave and did not care what his parents would say. When Abigail's mother found them nestled with each other at dawn, she knew why and did not disturb them. They escaped into each other's minds where Abigail was leading Virgil by the hand into places that were strange and unknown, even to them.

She took them over the plains and through the mountains and they came to a road that was lined on either side by a bubbling, bright green swamp.

The swamp had a thick film that oozed onto the top. A thick and patchy fog settled around amongst their feet and only the green light of the swamp could break through. They saw a singular, whip-like barbed tail emerge from the swamp and arch its way back in. Then the ground shook and Abigail took them out of the earth's atmosphere and onto a passing asteroid, where they watched as thousands of ancient and extraterrestrial satellites where beaming millions of fragments of light and sound both to each other and down to earth. There was one satellite that was much bigger than the others, and all of the smaller satellites were feeding a beam to it. There was an inscription on the side that looked like Roman Numerals:

XX - IV - V

A blue, diamond shaped crystal sat above the inscription and emitted a strange humming sound. Out of the top of this larger satellite was a great, vibrant ray that flowed steadily into a black hole that must have been lightyears away, but was large and ominous nonetheless. Then the children found themselves at the foot of the pyramids, watching thousands of years of human history passing by in a single instant.

"Why does it have to be this way?" Virgil asked. They were now standing in a place of infinite blackness. No walls, ceiling, or floor could be detected and their voices echoed as if they were in a cavern. Wherever they stepped, a neon blue tile appeared below them.

"It just is," said Abigail. "There's nothing we can do about it. We are children. The ways of the universe are beyond us."

"How long have you known?" he asked her.

"Oh, some time," she replied matter-of-factly. The tears were gone from

her face. Out here, in the infinite blackness, no sadness could be detected from. "I found out before I knew you. Just before I moved here. The doctors, they thought it would take longer than it did. But recently it's been getting worse much faster. Something's changed."

"Is there nothing that can be done?" There were many times in Virgil's life when he felt helpless and hopeless, but never before was anything so real.

"I don't think so," Abigail replied, somehow maintaining a comforting composure. "You need to learn how to take care of yourself, Virgil. I won't be here anymore. You can't let the clouds get you."

"Abigail, I don't know what I'll do." He was afraid for his friend, but he was also afraid for himself, and his sense of self-importance was inflamed in his fear.

"You'll carry on, Virgil. There's no other choice. You either quit, or you keep going. And I don't want you to quit. You need to watch your dreams, Virgil. Don't ever forget about your dreams. They are the best doorway that we have into what is real."

At that moment a gust of wind blew around them and lifted them up. They gazed longingly into each other's amber glowing eyes until all at once they were back on the porch and it was a bright, new morning.

Over the next six months, Virgil rarely left Abigail's side. He was overwhelmed with despair and could only cast away the looming sense of doom when he was beside her. And he wanted to be with her. Even though he was young, he loved her. In some capacity, he knew this much to be true.

As for Abigail, she somehow held herself together complacently in a way that indicated a maturity beyond her years. But, at times, she become sad and feel overwhelmed by the physical and emotional pain that ran through her. She felt pity for herself and for the loss of years of adulthood that children often look forward to. But she tried her best to reserve those moments for when she was alone, traveling off into the moon or dancing in the stars. She did not know what would happen when she died. She had not, as of yet been able to figure that out. Nobody had.

The two spent a lot of those last months discussing dreams and the dream state. Abigail insisted that Virgil learn to remember all of his dreams, and to analyze them over and over again.

"You want to be able to know the different directions they can take so you can be actively involved in them," Abigail told him.

"You mean be involved in my dream? While I'm asleep?" asked Virgil, struggling yet again to grasp this new concept.

"The dream state does not have to be reserved for sleep," Abigail responded. "But even still, do not discount the power of the sleeping body. In some ways it can become more alive than when you are awake, if you can align yourself just ever so perfectly with your dream."

It was at this time that Abigail started to visit Virgil in his sleep. Virgil would remember these dreams very vividly, and at times it felt like he was living them, or perhaps unrolling a memory from another time, another place. She would lead him by the hand through the annals of mystic history. They would walk along side the early mystic sects of Christianity, the Basilideans who were obsessed with nonentity, and the Ophite's who believed in an androgynous being named Sophia, who encapsulated heaven itself. They visited Scripture itself and Abigail let Virgil feel it's breath. A snake slithered by and Abigail gently put her foot on its body. It circled around and latched onto its own tail.

"This is all beyond us, Virgil," said the dream Abigail. "Even those who practice it and preach it do not know what it means. It is truth, but not in the way that you or any of them think it is."

She took him to the bottom of the ocean, and then even further still, to the center of the earth and the wormholes that lived there. That walked inside of Pandora's Box.

"This is all your fault," she giggled, playfully indicating the chaos around them.

They stood atop a shooting star and felt no motion as the world and its surrounding galaxy move towards them. They were in ancient Rome and Greece, in Hades and on Olympus. They were thousands of years in the future, where everything was chrome and no people could be seen.

"I'll always be with you, Virgil," she would say. And then he would wake up.

After these dreams, Virgil would ask Abigail if she visited him in the night and she would deny it with a sly smile.

"I don't know what your talking about," she would say, and then she would laugh and change the subject.

One day, when they reached this point in conversation, Abigail made a morbid joke.

"Virgil, I want you to feel like I'm with you always, even after I'm gone," Abigail began in a serious tone. "So I'm going to cut off my hand and give it to you!" she giggled now as Virgil looked at her in distress. "You can keep it in your pocket and cover it in formaldehyde."

Virgil didn't know what formaldehyde was, but he knew he was being teased and he was upset by such a serious matter as death being taken so lightly.

"How can you make a joke of this?" he asked.

"It helps to laugh at your enemies, Virgil," she replied, pedagogically. "It helps to belittle them, because it makes them less important, and it makes you less important, too. Joy and play can turn a mountain into the plains. It can turn metaphysics into simple math, and it can bring the dreamworld into existence." She took his hand and kissed it. "Don't brood, little boy. Life isn't so bad. Death won't be either. In reality, there's little difference between the do."

"How long do you think eternity will last?" Virgil asked.

"Only as long as a second that never ends," she replied, and then pulled him towards her lips.

It wasn't too much longer that Abigail passed. She was getting progressively worse for a couple of weeks and her parents, alongside Virgil, were waiting at her bedside for her to die. Her parents were in immense grief themselves, having to face burying their only child. But they knew how special

the relationship between their daughter and this strange, young boy was, and they allowed him to be near her in the final moments. They didn't speak much, but she held his hand and he watch her eyes glow. Unlike Muskrat and Ragweed before they died, Abigail hadn't lost any of her amber glow. If anything, it was stronger.

All of a sudden Virgil felt the grip on his hand tighten and noticed that Abigail's body was tensing up and her limbs were growing rigid. He again felt the earth shake, but made sure not to let on because Abigail's parents didn't notice. They, like most other people, had foggy and far away eyes.

The earth kept trembling and Virgil could hear Abigail telling him goodbye, but she did not move her lips. Her amber glow grew bigger and bigger. Just as when Muskrat and Ragweed died, a luminous ball of energy began to grow from within her. Only this time, instead of shooting towards the sky, it melded with the amber light of Abigail's eyes and became a single combusting ball of flame. Virgil felt panic racing through him and he held on to Abigail's hand with both of his, and began kissing it as tears fell from his face. Before he knew it the ball of flame took the place of Abigail's body entirely. He could still hear her voice, telling him goodbye.

In one single and eclipsing moment, the ball of fire grew to the size of the room and beyond it. It traveled over the whole world and Virgil flew after it just to see how far it had gone. He saw it stretch so far that it met itself and then he was back at the beginning.

Virgil held on the Abigail's hand as tightly as it could, and in another self-consuming moment, the fire run up his arms and through his chest, deep into his heart.

"I love you, little boy," he heard her giggling from the infinite nothingness that surrounded him. "Don't be a mope."

And then she was dead.

The days after Abigail's death were a blur for Virgil. He remembered running all the way home, crying. The skies opened up and poured down with apocalyptic wrath. He remembered opening the front door and running past his parents, directly into his bedroom. Then, he plunged onto his bed and the rest slipped away in timeless abstraction.

The bed gave way into a downward spinning hall with sharp, twisting angles and what looked to be windows falling all around him. He fell into a cycle and continued to fall for what could only be described as an innumerable amount of time. He felt himself split. One of his selves hit ground while the other kept falling, and continued to fall or as long as he could tell.

The part of Virgil that hit ground stood up and climbed out of the crater that his falling body formed upon impact. He stood on the rock hard surface and felt his body steaming, like a he was an asteroid. His blood squirmed around inside of him like it was alive. His brain began to stretch itself down though his neck and around his heart. He felt it squeeze and then felt the blood die.

He saw primates walking all around him, dragging clubs behind them and mumbling in dead languages. They began to gather a rhythm and the mumbling turned into chanting. Fire rose in the form of a cylindric wall behind the circling primates and one by one they exploded in a ball of white energy and shot upwards, up the never-ending chute of fire towards a faint flicker.

Virgil then felt himself completely alone in the midst of a quickly contracting wall of flame. He looked around for an escape but could find none.

He knew that if Abigail were here, she would be able to set him free. And then he saw her hand, larger than the fire itself, reach down to grab him and lift him up. But the hand was transparent and it went through him, leaving him to be devoured by the searing fires.

These visions occurred so often that Virgil could no longer separate dreams from hallucinations. His parents noticed him thrashing in bed at night and took to sharing vigil duties. They would watch over him through the waning hours and read psalms or say the rosary, wondering all the while what their son was dreaming about.

To say that Virgil slipped into a depression would just be opening the door into reality. On one level, he was certainly depressed. He lost his best friend, and the cycles of loss can be excruciating. It doesn't seem real and you go through routine as if they are still alive. They appear in your mind as tangible outlets for things like conversation and desire for companionship. And then you find yourself facing the reality of that person's death all over again. You relive every moment of it's piercing, destroying pain. It's as if they are reborn, just to die again and rip part of you away with them. This is how Virgil felt.

But Virgil was beyond depressed. Abigail's death left him annihilated. He became consumed by anxiety, fear, hopelessness, and a very real sense of loss. He lived in an intangible world of dark and methodic imagery which was alive and organic. It pulled from his memories, using them as weapons against him. Emotions and experiences would be conjured up and thrown at the wall, like a poltergeist smashing dishes. His mind turned in a loop and the inner-dialogue never ceased. He could hear the wheels moving like they were rusted cogs. He

heard them wheezing. It reminded him of Ragweed. And Ragweed reminded him of her. Everything reminded him of her.

Of all the things that plagued Virgil's mind, there was one question that he became most preoccupied with. He wondered why it was that Abigail was swallowed in flame while Muskrat and Ragweed shot off in a glorious beam of light.

What does this say, Virgil asked himself, about where these people went after they died? If these were the beginnings of a journey to the afterlife, he reasoned, does that mean that Abigail went to Hell and those two crazy old men went to Heaven? And if that were true, what does that say about the rest of existence?

No sense could be made of anything and it all pushed him deeper into murky waters. The brooding cloud was now a hand of shadows grabbing for Virgil's throat. His parents, though used to their child's strange ways, grew concerned after he refused to leave his room for weeks and months on end. They even considered demonic possession, but their priest assured them that grief counseling was a better place to start.

So Virgil went into the irreparable world of child psychiatry, the lesser of the two evils. (While it may not be the most fine-tuned field in modern medicine, it certainly does beat a Baptist exorcism.)

The child psychiatrists - there were many, as one after the other threw their hands up in defeat - tried to make Virgil feel like he was in a safe place.

"It's ok to open up here, nobody will hurt you," they told him. "We just want to help you."

But Virgil knew they would never understand. They had the foggy, far away eyes. They could never understand the depths of the friendship he shared with Abigail, or the intangible realities that plagued him every day. They could never feel gravity the way that he felt it, even though he did have an academic understanding of what it really was. They could never tell him anything about Heaven and Hell that hadn't been read in the Bible. And, most of all, they could never bring Abigail back.

So he spent most of these sessions sitting in silence and looking the doctors directly in the eyes, trying to see into them. They would ask him questions and then grow frustrated with his silence. Once, a particularly short-tempered psychiatrist left the office to "remove herself temporarily from this explosive environment" and Virgil quickly rearranged all of the plants and books and chairs. He then sat on the desk and started to break every pencil in the pencil jar, which is how the psychiatrist found him upon her return.

Waking life became an inflamed tantrum, and sleep became a strenuous gauntlet. Virgil was torn. He felt like an exposed blister being rubbed with the coarsest sandpaper. He felt his open blister wounds being sprinkled over with thousands of tiny glass shards. And he still felt like his mind was crawling down his neck and reaching for his heart. His chest felt like it was on the verge of implosion and there was an unremitting pressure against the sides of his head. It felt like the pressure was not coming from outside or inside alone, but from both directions at the same time.

While Virgil was passed around from psychiatrist to psychiatrist, each one failing in a way just a little more miserable than the one before, his parents

pleaded with him for guidance.

"Virgil, honey," his mother began with wanting eyes. "You must talk to us and tell us what's going on. We are very worried about you."

Virgil stared ahead and said nothing.

"Come on, son," his father began, "Let us help you. How can we help you if you won't let us?"

What I want, Virgil thought, I cannot have. But he said nothing.

Over time, the dramatic episodes began to slowly peter out. It wasn't that the nightmares left, because they certainly did not. But, the physicality of Virgil's manic episodes came to an end because Virgil learned the simple rules of cause and effect in this particular situation. An episode led to a psychiatrist visit. Multiple episodes led to bedside vigils. Resistance led to oppression, and resistance was futile.

Virgil wanted to be left alone. He did not like the way these people prodded into that which they could never comprehend, and he felt insulted by their designs to "help." So Virgil focused very hard and learned how to internalize everything. He used all of his energy to feel his pain and not show it.

To control his spasms, Virgil simply trained his body go rigid, just as Abigail's did moments before she died. He was able to do this by recalling the most horrifying and plaguing memories and thoughts that he could, intentionally tensing up his muscles as the emotions barreled through. In this way, he created a trained physical reaction that, over time, replaced the thrashing that his body became accustomed to. The child psychiatrists, had Virgil told them about this, would have said to the boy that this was a very unhealthy way of dealing with emotions, and they would have had a strong case. But since Virgil was doing this chiefly to avoid those very same child psychiatrists, they never got the chance. And in that regard, if you look at things strategically, it was executed with shrewd efficiency. The end result, however, was that Virgil became a walking inner storm.

Because Virgil had always been quiet, introverted, and a little strange,

once the physical symptoms were gone, his parents concluded that everything had been a natural phase of their son's grieving processes. It was true that he became a little more distant and despondent, but their boy was becoming a teenager. They chalked it all up to adolescence and carried on as normal. They just thought they had a strange son.

And so life went on. Abigail's parents moved away and Virgil went to high school. He still walked to school, but now he walked alone and he took the road so as not to think of his lost friend. He wasn't accepted by his teenage peers but he wasn't shunned either. He was mostly just avoided or ignored. He was a shadow without a body, easing listlessly through. His time with Abigail sharpened him enough that he could pass classes with minimal effort, so teachers took no notice of him either. He was such a middle of the road, average, completely uninteresting student that if anyone could have later successfully recalled him, they would simply have said that he was "quiet, uninteresting, and a little odd."

Virgil didn't socialize because he grew weary and distrustful of the people with foggy, far away eyes, and those were the only people he saw. When Abigail was with him she used to say that anybody could lose the fog, that you could lead people out of it. But she could make anything seem possible. Now Virgil wasn't so sure. So he went through high school alone and unnoticed.

And Virgil barely noticed high school. He was beyond introverted now, and it was something altogether different than distant. He was just not there. For the first couple of years, his mind was elsewhere, lightyears away scaling canyon walls and crawling through the desert. His mind pushed him away from his momentary reality on earth and into the unknown. Looking, perhaps, for the

answer to the question of the fire versus the light, for the truth about death and the life that it led to, for a way to grasp eternity without being crushed by it's weight. And for a way to control the storm that raged within him.

Those years went by largely without incident. It is true that, at first, there was still the incessant train of vivid, ethereal imagery that constantly surrounded Virgil's perception. But he got used to looking at a teacher and perceiving him or her as a demon, or as an alien. He got used to seeing and thinking strange things like pyramids forming in the walls. He no longer attached supernatural meaning to them. For example, in the case of his teacher that would morph into an alien, he fixated on the image of the alien instead of how it used to be his teacher. How curious, he thought, and then he began to think of flying saucers and science-fiction. Virgil became amused by aliens and this interest became the closest thing he had to a hobby.

At night, when Virgil couldn't sleep, he would walk outside to watch the skies for movement. He yearned to find a saucer fly by and hoped that he would be able to mentally transport himself onto the ship. He felt a strange kinship towards the creatures he saw on the cover of gossip rags and science-fiction novels. He felt no sense of belonging amongst the human race and, sometimes, he actually imagined he was an alien. He thought, perhaps all of this mental grief that I go through, and put myself through, is only a result of adjusting to foreign atmospheres.

As high school progressed, Virgil grew more and more accustomed to his mental deficiencies - as well as his mental gifts - and he stopped thinking of them as anything other than the normal way for him to feel. His memories of

cosmic conversations with Abigail began to vanish as a result of his desire to push the pain away. He began to block everything out, all the adventures he went through, even his time Muskrat and Ragweed. He still toiled over Heaven and Hell, light and fire, but it became less and less about Abigail and more about the toil itself. His brain was beginning to learn the art of subliminally erasing an entire past in an effort to rid himself of the pain of association.

One day, it all came back to him. He was sitting in a class, in the back of the room by a window with his chin resting on his hand and his eyes glued to the world outside of school. Virgil took to mundane daydreaming, which gradually replaced his supernatural visions. He would imagine himself on a beach or he would watch clouds past. He would look outside and pretend he were somebody else.

As Virgil looked out the window, a black cat began to stroll through the school parking lot. Virgil watched it saunter back and forth, wobbling like it were drunk. He imagined he was the cat and thought that it would be very nice to have a fishbone. He imagined taking the fishbone to an alley and sharing it with two or three other cats. They would not know each other by name but smell alone. And they would know Virgil by the smell of the fishbone that he always shared with the rest of the cats in the alley.

As Virgil was enjoying this cheerful thought, something strange caught his attention. The cat stopped and turned towards Virgil and he could have sworn he saw a bright amber flash. Virgil was startled and instantly a rush of feelings and memories came surging through. He tried to shake it off.

It was only the sun, he thought to himself. Your mind is playing games

with you.

And then it flashed again, and this time he was instantly transfixed in the amber shine. He felt the world he sat in begin to fall away as another charged towards him. He felt he was at the nexus of two vortexes. He began to feel as if he were some kind of medium between one and the other.

He began to pound violently on his desk, his body growing rigid as he trained it to do, but still wanting to trash about. He tensed up and strained to focus on something to calm him down. He closed his eyes as tight as he could and saw a UFO go by. It had brilliant red lights and was gone just as quick as it came. Virgil breathed slow and relaxed, even laughing to himself for a brief second. It's all just make believe, he said to himself. It's all fiction. He was appeased by this return to reality.

When Virgil opened his eyes and looked around the classroom he realized that he created a disturbance. All of the other students were staring at him, looking more than a little confused and some stifling laughter.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Kelly?" the teacher asked.

Virgil was embarrassed. He picked up his books and began to walk slowly out of the classroom, but as soon as he began to move he fell. And as he laid on the floor for a moment he felt like he was still falling. Nobody said a word but they all watched as lay still, staring at the ceiling. Then he pushed himself up and walked out of the classroom. As soon as he left, the teacher resumed the class as if nothing happened. Virgil went straight home and his mother told the school he was sick, and it was never discussed again.

He battled with his mind in his bedroom that night, but refused to be sucked into his old habits. He did not want his memories and emotions to drive

him into places that didn't exist. He did not want to be alone in the unreal.

"Nobody else thinks this way," he thought. "nobody but Abigail. And those two crazy old men. What were their names? I can barely remember them. I must just be crazy." And then something awful clicked in his mind. "That's it! I'm out of my mind! I'm completely demented! Abigail must have been crazy too! That poor girl. And those two crazy old men, well I know already that they were crazy. There it is! That's the proof. All that business with the light in the eyes, it's just insanity, plain and simple. None of that was true. And certainly a dumb old street cat doesn't have glowing eyes, no more than any other cat! That cat wouldn't know a tuna from a codfish."

His logic was irrational but it stuck with him. He was dysfunctional and damaged, and in his mind the sooner he accepted this the less struggle he would feel on a day to day basis. His visions became hallucinations and his otherworldly sensations became mind games. All that business that he grew up with was child's play. It was a kid's way of coping with insanity. I would have been much better off with the psychiatrists, he thought.

This acceptance, as misguided as it may have been, tempered Virgil's frustration. With his frustration not so inflamed, Virgil's anger towards the world lost it's bite. His scowl became a blank stare and the storm cloud lightened. But with this temperament came something truly terrible. Virgil began to lose the glow of his eyes. He began to lose his awareness. He turned his perception into mental deficiency. He began to accept miserableness as a way of life. He began to forget the things he learned in an attempt to forget his pain. And as it turned out, Virgil got very good at forgetting.

Any time a person sacrifices their individuality in order to meet or

comply with the standards of a reality that has been imposed is a tragedy. It is the death of freedom. And it was freedom that drove Virgil forward in the beginning. Now he once again unlearned what it was to be free.

Insofar as the individual experience goes, some may say that the past can only exist as much as a memory will allow. Philosophically, a memory is not even necessarily indicative of anything correlating with reality. There are great thinkers who have gone on record to say that the human bias cannot be trusted and must be approached with caution. For all we know there may any number of demons between us and our thoughts. We are a dumb beast, after all, and we only know so much about how the brain works.

Many people who undergo a traumatic experience of any kind will often go through some sort of memory loss. They may find themselves forgetting about certain significant events, or insignificant events that trigger the memory of something greater. Virgil went through a kind of motivated forgetting process that was both repressive and suppressive, intentional and subliminal.

His memory augmentation began when he would simply attempt to stifle the thoughts and recollections that led to any kind of psychotic episode. Then, once he convinced himself that he had been insane all of his life, that all of his extrasensory perception had been child's play, things began to happen on more of an unconscious level. He did not intentionally change his memories, or suppress them, because he didn't have to. The events of the past all changed in accordance with his new worldview. What he saw didn't really happen. What he perceived was no more than psychotic misconception.

For example, whenever he could actually recall the old men he once

befriended, he now believed Muskrat to have died of a heart-attack, and Ragweed to have died of a smoking cough. He also remembered a time lapse between their deaths.

Still, there were other forces at play. The one realm that continued to bring abstraction and surreality into Virgil's life were his dreams. He no longer actively tried to remember his dreams or influence them as they were happening, but he would still have nightmares that disturbed him.

One night, Virgil dreamt of a large, metal gear that spun wildly in the center of a black plane. There was nothing else but darkness. Then forms began to manifest themselves. Two metal arms grew out of the gear and sprouted what looked like hammering pistons on the end. Out of the pistons flowed endless rubber tubes that began to flail back and forth as the elongated on into the abyss. Then a needle came forward out of the lower piston and began to come towards Virgil, as if trying to inject him the oozing green fluid that bubbled inside.

Virgil heard the howling of dogs as he ran away from the needle. Then he saw 4 headless canine, still howling, running alongside him. Their brains floated above their necks, where their heads would have been, but they were not attached to the bodies. He ran through the darkness until he came to a chrome orb that was floating suddenly before him, illuminated by a light he could not see, suspended in mid-air. It made a sharp buzzing noise and then white ink streaked out of it and covered the darkness. The tubes and the needle and the machine, whatever it was, vanished into whiteness. The orb turned into a sea horse that grew and grew until it was all he could see.

When Virgil woke up he had a vicious headache that concentrated in

the top and front part of his head. In fact, whenever Virgil had a strange dream, he woke up with a headache in the same spot. But he got used to concluding that depressed and anxious and otherwise mentally deficient people suffer from strange dreams all the time and so he did not worry about it. He forgot what Abigail told him about the importance of dreams. All of his dreams were nightmares now and he wanted to forget them.

The worst of the nightmares, however, were not abstract and riddled with symbolism. They were simple dreams involving Abigail. He would look through the haze of the dream world and see his friend, smiling at him the way she used to, teasing him playfully and watching the sun set. When these happened, the headaches were strongest and the emotion was raw. These were the dreams he wanted to end more than anything else.

These headaches began to come often, during any kind of strange thoughts or memory recall. But after the headaches were gone, Virgil could never even remember what caused them to begin with.

His mind worked hard to erase the pain of association. Virgil still remembered his friend, Abigail, but he did not think about her too often and when he did, he wouldn't let himself fixate on her. As time went on he thought about her even less.

By the time Virgil finished high school, he manifested in himself the greatest sickness of all. He denied his own existence, as a result, a thick vapor formed over his eyes. The amber glow hadn't completely left, but all that remained became more of a poisonous gas than a radiant glow. He dove through planes of self-pity, self-importance, and sorrow. When he came back up, all he could see was fog.

BREAK

Take a breath.

Believe in yourself.

You can do it.

A man lie sleeping in a road motel, just outside the city limits of a smog-filled industrial town. A landscape of factories towered over the outskirts like a distant tyrant, casting its shadow over the hills and roads. Silhouettes of smokestacks filled the skyline with looming, jagged towers. Blue flame burned from the top of the highest smokestack and sent thick black smoke bellowing into the dirty orange sky, where it melded with the other, lesser clouds of smoke before dissipating into the atmosphere. There was a low hum that was constant, punctuated only by the knifelike clank of metal on metal. Rays of dawn struggled to push through the pollution as the moon sought to bury itself in the dungeons and furnaces that lay beneath the factory foundations - the unseen source of energy that constantly pushed the machinery forward.

A trapezoidal red sign stood fifty feet in the air outside the motel and strobed through the morning, emitting a scattered buzz to join in with the factory hum. The sign had large, white block letters that read "Factory Inn." Beneath it, a smaller sign with neon letters it that would have said "Vacancy" in clean swirling pink had it not been covered in dirt with the A's burned out.

The sign stood guard over a parking lot that was mostly empty except for a few cars that each gravitated towards parking spaces in opposite corners. The perimeter of the parking lot was lined with a row of adjoining building units with white washed stone walls and a nearly flat, shingled roof. Some of the shingles where flapping up and down as an early wind swept through, making a faint clapping sound. Each unit had a single door and window, which were painted a pale yellow. The paint was faded nearly white, but enough yellow

remained to make it look like it was stained in urine. After every few rooms, a burgundy metal gutter jutted down and out from the roof above. Most of them were bent and mangled and you could see the slight sheen of steel underneath chipped paint.

Outside of room 108 sat a long grey station wagon with fins. One of the rear brake lights were broken, as was one of the smaller back windows by the hatchback door. It was covered by a small piece of cardboard that was fastened to the vehicle with road-worn duct tape that curled off at the ends. The antenna on the front the car twisted its way upward and a few dents lay like craters of the rear driver's side panel. A pale, slightly translucent figurine of the Virgin Mary was glued to the dashboard and as appeared faintly iridescent in the last of the night's dying darkness.

The curtains were drawn on room 108 and a "Do Not Disturb" sign rested on the doorknob. Inside the room, a single ray of light shot through the window, fighting its way through the curtains. It shot over to a plain wooden nightstand across the room, illuminating the dust that floated freely in the space between. On the nightstand was a dull, gold-banded watch laying next to a glass of murky water and a black alarm clock. The clock flashed the time 6:00, in bright red numbers while it's alarm sounded, crying like the sirens of a slaughterhouse, and filling the dark, dusty room.

Now a leathered, hairy hand jutted into the light, formed into a fist and coming down hard on the alarm clock. The sound persisted and the hand raised again, hesitating slightly as it changed it's course in gravity and before crashing down again. This time, the hand hit the edge of the alarm clock and was re-directed towards the nearby glass of water. The water exploded out of the glass

and disappeared into the shadows. The hand retracted quickly. For a few moments nothing happened. Then the hand returned and fumbled around the space on the wall beyond the nightstand. It found a switch and flicked up, allowing a dingy light washed the darkness of the room away.

Beyond the darkness hid something only slightly livelier. A dank and stale four-walled room with stained, light brown carpet and a single bed that looked to be the color of a coffee spill. There was the one nightstand and a small dresser in addition to that, which was directly across from the bed on the opposite wall. A small pile of clothes sat neatly folded atop of the dresser with a dark grey brimmed hat resting to the side. On the ground was a single, leather suitcase with brass plated handles that caked green long ago. And on the bed lay Hank LaFleur, traveling salesman, now dripping wet from an unexpected morning shower.

Hank hid his eyes from the light. He sat up in bed and turned to the side, draping his legs over the floor. He pushed his palms against his eyes as he shut them tight, taking account of the strangled shapes and colors that formed on the inside of his eyelids. He drifted away, further and further into what was now a kaleidoscope of hexahedrons, each giving off a mute light that passed through a central triangular prism and came out the other end in a refraction of extravagant, alien color.

He took his hands away from his eyes and shook his head, splattering water off his hair and into the room around him. He raised his arms into the air and began to slowly stretch, arching his limbs in a great motion as if wings were attached. He then erupted in a singular, slowly forming but powerful yawn. It was a whisper at first but built until it became a hyperbolic scream. Hank

opened his eyes and a fluid amber glow overtook everything within the walls.

Hank was on his way to the factory towering beyond for a single, specific purpose. He wanted to convince the owner of the factory that he should replace every single lug nut on his machinery with one that was newly designed, rust and corrosion resistant. He was reasonably confident in his ability to do so, as he was done things like this hundreds of times before. Whenever the money got low, Hank got more. And then he would vanish off the road for days, months, or years at a time, only to eventually return penniless and start all over again. Money comes and goes, Hank thought, and it is not a part of me. But it sure is easy to find.

Hank believed himself to be the last of an ancient race - a species that was something more than human. He didn't know any other way to say it except for that he saw things... differently. He didn't know exactly what he was, but he knew that he was instinctively in tune with certain things that others regarded as fiction. He didn't think himself particularly special and wasn't sure exactly why it was that he was even still here. He wasn't especially heroic or courageous. Hank could even remember a few times when he should have died, but he seemed to have an uncanny ability to slip away from danger at the last minute. Sometimes it seemed like luck, sometimes it seemed like serendipity, but he no longer questioned why things happened - they just did. He was growing old anyway, and he wouldn't have to wonder about these things for much longer.

There was a time, however, when Hank was not alone. Sometimes, when he was having trouble sleeping, Hank would drink coffee and stare off into the sky, not looking at anything in particular but with a fixed gaze nonetheless. He had friends and peers, long ago. People who rode energy like waves and talked to

the fabric that wove through the known and the unknown. They ran through the pastures that connected the mountains, jumping across millennia as they skipped from peak to peak. There was a leader, Hank could recall, that traveled from city to city and town to town, looking for people with amber eyes. He gathered together a dozen of them over time and led them through the annals of their power. The universe was vast and growing every day, and the leader showed them how to traverse the imperceptible roads that ran through each moment. There was a dream of changing the world, back then - of a day when the human race all woke up and pushed the fog from their eyes.

But everyone was gone now. Had been for a long time. Hank hadn't seen anybody with the glow in years and so he assumed there were none left. He grew old and weary of the search - the loneliness never quite lost its bite but he accepted it nonetheless. He divided his time between working whatever job he could find and disappearing into a fugue of wanderlust and inebriation of both a physical and spiritual nature.

The jobs that Hank found were usually those that required charisma and charm, as a life of acute awareness left him with a masterful command of those traits. Traveling salesman was his go-to, but had also been employed in various other fields including business consultation, negotiation, media communication, project coordination, and even bar tending, which he learned was a job you could find almost instantly in any major city with a minimal amount of energy. Hank was just going through life, waiting for his time to end, and completely unsure of why he was still here.

Recently, Hank had a dream that was particularly strange to him. It was a recurring dream that visited him many times during the past few weeks but it

never progressed in any way. It was simply two eyes that he saw in a featureless face which would appear in the scenery of whatever he was already dreaming. The only thing about these eyes that was memorable was that they had the amber glow. It would vanish as quickly as it would appear, flashing only for a second, but it was always the thing that Hank recalled first while returning to the land of the awake.

On the morning that Hank was set to go to the factory, he recalled having this dream three times while he slept. Each time he awoke feeling physically affected by the dream. There was some kind of dream-state residue that lingered in his body - a light burning sensation and the feeling of millions of needles pricking his skin. He would go back to sleep only to have the dream again. He didn't know what it meant - his meditations turned up nothing and his journeys into the metaphysical realms were equally fruitless. But it was now very early and he hadn't had any coffee yet, so he tried to put it out of his mind as he cleaned himself and dressed for the day.

Before he was clothed, Hank looked a million years old. Memories were carved deep into the wrinkles of his face and permanently chapped his lips, turning it all into a facade of tough rawhide. His eyes hid in the back of their sockets and were such a deep brown that they appeared black beyond their amber burn. The whites around the pupils were tinged with yellow age, as had his teeth. Tiny gristles of facial hair stuck out of his nostrils and his ears and a scar ran down the right side of his jaw, just underneath his cheek bone. His hair was cut short and neat but it was a rough mixture of white and smokey grey, cracked and frayed at the ends. He was in decent physical shape but he was losing muscle in his age and at times walked slowly and liked to take advantage

of stair rails. At times, his legs ached and he walked with a limp. This morning was one of those times. But if there was one thing that Hank knew to be true, it was that clothes can very well make a man. By the time he put on his suit and given himself a quick shave, he looked quite handsome and even, in the right angle, young. He made this transformation often and became adapt at hiding his age.

Hank had a secret. He took pleasure in each of his weaknesses and shortcomings, which led to a renewed sense of joy that only grew stronger in the face of failure. He thought life could often times be bleak and pointless, but he laughed at hopelessness. In fact, he laughed at as much as he possibly could. He laughed at his own misfortune and he laughed at the grief of the world. He cared little for himself, or the world around him, but that gave him the freedom to love without expectation or desire. He could see things, awareness aside, simply as they are. He would laugh at a fallen man but then he would lift that man to his feet and leave as if nothing happened. As he grew older, though, this all became more difficult. He hoped sometimes that death would come and set him free.

When he finished shaving, Hank put on his coat and his hat and picked up his briefcase. He looked in the mirror that was fixed to the wall and straightened his tie. He forced a smile as he looked at himself in the mirror.

"Time to sell some lug nuts," he said.

Then he picked up his suitcase and walked out the door.

Hank pulled into an industrial park that housed a complex of large factories and warehouses. He had an appointment with the biggest of the factories, which sat in the center and rose high about over everything else like a perched gargoyle. In his head, Hank imagined going into each of them and selling lug nuts by the bucketful. He laughed to himself and smiled as he pulled into the rough gravel parking lot. How did I end up here, he thought, selling lug nuts so that I can eat?

"How far I've come!" he said sarcastically but with cheer as he climbed out of the car and walked towards the factory.

The smell of burning plastics and rubbers and refuse and metal all mixed together in the musty air around the smokestacks and swam through Hank's nostril's, tickling his nose hair with grime and odor. It reminded him of roadkill and portable bathrooms. He let these smells seep into him and percolate. He felt memories bubbling towards the surface. He let them brew and watched as crane mechanism of his brain lifted them of the waters. To a stranger, his dazed face might have made him appear senile, but he was simply looking inward.

He recalled a time when he was young, traveling with the leader and learning the ancient ways. He recalled being brought to patch of fungus that was growing out of cattle dung. The leader instructed him to pick a mushroom and eat it. He remembered attempting to wipe the fungus clean before ingesting it, but the leader stopped him.

"Take as is," he instructed.

Hank protested but the leader insisted. "Have I been wrong before?" he

asked.

Hank ate the fungus, having to force it down his throat while using all of his available energy to stifle his gag reflex. He could physically recall the taste of the dung that went along so well with the smell of the factory. He grinned as his gag reflex triggered and his body reflexively repressed it.

After eating the fungus, reality dropped away from Hank and the leader led him through a journey into times ancient and gone, into the heart of human desire and into the fiber of emotional construction. Hank saw humans naked, but not in the sense that they were wearing no clothes. They were naked of precepts and biases, of assumptions and fears, of emotion and want. He was able to see them as they truly were, and he could tell no difference between the faces of the multitude.

He saw a snake wrapped around a cactus, coiled upon itself. He watched a singular moment become broken down into a thousand instants - a staircase leading to a point in space - a clock moving independently of linear time. He saw that every second housed infinitely smaller nanoseconds, and that in each nanosecond was another, smaller increment of time, and each moment within a moment was hardwired to the human experience. Chain reactions of thoughts and emotions and reflex and instinct branched off of every second at a thousand miles an hour. He saw that life was a succession of an innumerable amount of these moments and that the painstaking detail of the design went largely unseen.

He remembered the leader looking at him and laughing.

"Why are you laughing?" Hank asked.

"Because," replied the leader, "now you are full of shit."

Now in the parking lot of a factory, on his way to sell lug nuts, Hank felt gratitude for this memory but he did not hold on to it. It lightened him because it made him feel old and wise and young and dumb all the same time. It passed through him like the warmth of a fire and then flew away into nothingness. He let it go and walked up to the factory door.

When Hank stepped inside the factory, he could feel the climate change instantly. Outside it was brisk, even frigid, and there was still a trace of morning dew lofting about. Inside the factory walls was a dry, stagnant heat that immediately clung to his skin. He walked towards a reception desk while loosening his tie.

"Hello, I have an appointment," he said while approaching a short, stocky woman who sat behind the desk typing voraciously on an electric typewriter. He smiled widely and removed his hat as he spoke. In the distance he could hear pistons thrusting and metal banging. He could hear indiscernible shouts of direction and affirmation from the works that blended with the whiz and whir of machinery. It is a post-industrial orchestra, he thought, that plays for silent walls. The woman looked up at Hank and raised her glasses to her yes. They were, he noticed, covered in a thick fog.

"Oh? And what is your name?"

"LaFleur, from Bowman and Turner Industrial Fittings."

The woman was looking down and scanning an appointment book with her index finger.

"Oh yes, Mr. LaFleur, here we are. I will call the manager and let him know," she told him. "There is a break room with coffee at the end of the hall, if

you'd prefer to wait there."

"Thank you," Hank said. "That would be very nice." He smiled again and nodded while returning his hat to his head, and then he walked down the hall. There was now hardly a trace of age in his stride. He walked gracefully with his weight distributed evenly to both of his legs. Despite his true age, he could have easily been mistaken for a middle-aged man.

Inside the break room Hank poured himself a cup of coffee and looked at a series of news clippings that were posted onto a bulletin board next to the cupboards. There were articles about record profits and mergers. There was a notice of an employee picnic with an adjacent sign-up sheet. The sign-up sheet, he noticed, was mostly empty. He stepped back and looked out the window of the door leading back into the hallway. Across the hall was another window that framed what appeared to be one of the main production rooms. There were layers and layers of belts that moved large hunks up metal this way and that, up and down in a twisting cavalcade of industry. He saw gears upon gears and metal arms moving up and down. He heard whiney screeches and high-pitched steam whistles. The heat grew more intense as he imagined what was on the inside of the machines. Then, all of a sudden, the image from his dreams appeared before him again, as if it were inside one of the machines. The amber glow from the empty face's eyes was growing and compounding with the heat of the factory. He was floating in the sight of a radioactive glow that pulled him in, towards the conveyor belts and into the intricate workings of the machinery.

Hank stepped back and shook the thought away. The recurring image was odd and stirred his curiosity, but he had to focus. Once he made some money he could return to sinking into that world and those thoughts, but for

now he had a simple goal. Sell lug nuts, he told himself. He turned back towards the break room table and sat down, turning his attention to some papers in his briefcase.

The door opened and a young, handsome and well-built man walked in wearing a suit and a yellow hardhat.

"Mr. LaFleur, I presume?" asked the man.

Hank looked up slowly.

"I am the accused," he said with a grin. He walked towards the man and reach for his hand, which he grasped firmly. "Shall we get right to business or do you prefer to beat around the bush for a while?"

The man gave a polite laugh. He seemed amicable. Hank felt at ease about him.

"I suppose a little bush beating is always healthy, wouldn't you say?" he asked Hank.

"Ah, yes indeed, my friend, yes indeed," Hank said after being released from the handshake. "Say, what do you know about mushrooms? Edible fungus, of nature's delicacies. I was just thinking of some of the more exotic varieties that I've eaten in my... travels."

"I'm more a meat man, Mr. LaFleur," replied the man.

"You don't say!" retorted Hank, now with a little more enthusiasm. "You could say I was raised in a butcher shop. I can section off a pig in my sleep. Have you ever had belly bacon? I used to cure some myself, though it's been a few years. Let me tell you something about pork meat that I'll bet you'd never guess..."

Hank led the man back out into the hall, easing him forward with his

arm loosely hanging over the man's shoulders as if they were old chums. How easy it can be sometimes, he thought, to give people what they want.

Hank was having a good day. As it turned out, the owners and managers of the industrial complex were having a symposium of sorts because of some recent machinery malfunctions that plagued all of the nearby factories. The engineer who designed most of the factory's machines cut a few corners and after years of high pressure steam running in and out of piping, it was all falling apart.

Hank couldn't have come at a better time. He tripled the amount of lug nuts he was hoping to sell. He congratulated himself as the businessmen shook his hand and left the room one by one. With this unexpected bonus he would be able to quit working sooner than he thought. His smile was genuine and made him appear strapping and energetic. He lifted his hat as the men walked out the door.

"Nice doing business with you, gentlemen," he said as he began to stack up his papers and return them to his briefcase.

The manager who initially met Hank in the break room walked up to him now and patted him on the back.

"I would like to personally thank you once again, Mr. LaFleur. I'm very impressed with your vigor. You're a very charming man, Mr. LaFleur, do you realize that? You know, there's some positions in management opening up around here soon. I don't know what they pay you to be a traveling salesman, but I'm sure we could compete with the numbers."

Hank was amused by this, but not surprised. "That's very flattering, sir, but I've actually got plans to for a... let's just call it a private enterprise."

"Ah, of course, of course," said the manager with a tone of disappointment. "Well if you change your mind..."

"I'll come to you first," Hank said, trying to appease.

"Well if there's anything else I can do before you take off..."

"Yes, actually, just one thing. If you could just point me to the men's room."

"Ah, yes, yes, certainly."

The manager made a show of directions with his hands as he told Hank how to get to the men's room and then he was off after one more final handshake.

This has gotten to be too easy, Hank thought to himself. He felt like he was floating three inches off the ground as he walked down the hall. A kind of euphoria lingered throughout Hank's mind and body that made him slightly giddy. If you looked very closely you could see that Hank had a slight skip in his step now, a far cry from the limp that affected him and caused he his joints to ache in the morning. He was even whistling, though it could scarcely be heard above the machinery.

When Hank was just a step away from the restroom door, it was suddenly thrust open so quickly that it hit him in the face and knocked him backwards. A young man ran out and brushed by and two collided, shoulder to shoulder. Hank staggered for a second and spun around as he regained his equilibrium. The man who pushed the door open fell down and was clumsily hoisting himself back to his feet. He started to walk away and looked very embarrassed. Once he was a few steps past Hank he stopped abruptly and turned around as if on a pivot.

"Umm..." the offender shook his head and looked at Hank blankly. "I'm ... very sorry, in a hurry, um... so... yeah. Very sorry, ya know. Sorry."

He looked at Hank almost suspiciously, who was unmoving except for the rubbing he administered to the fresh bump on his temple. The young man looked at Hank as if it were his fault to have stood in the way of the door. He couldn't have been more than 25, and he had a kind of unidentifiable boyish quality to him that was all at once endearing and dreadfully plain. When he spoke he directed his word downwards, about a meter away from his feet and scratched the back of his neck. His other hand was nervously tucked into his pocket.

"So, well, must be off now," he told Hank. "Back to work." Hank said nothing, just staring at him, rubbing his head and smiling slightly. "Ok...well, bye."

He looked back up at Hank and their eyes met. The younger man was suddenly aware that their eyes were looking into each other and he became uncomfortable and staggered backward. Hank looked deeper. The eyes were very curious, for they were cloudy with the fog that he was used to seeing in others, but this wasn't the same dull fog he usually saw. Beyond layers of wispy vapor, Hank could see a raging storm. He could see the charge of the lightning that illuminated the clouds. Then, a bolt of electricity created a lingering glow that clung to the molecules of fog. The young man's eyes got brighter, and then - for a split second - Hank swore he saw a flash of pure amber.

The young man tore his gaze away now. He looked confused, like he was violated somehow, but he couldn't place the feeling. He turned around and began to walk away, shaking his head and looking downward.

Hank wasn't sure if he believed what he saw, and it took him a few moments to process it all. As his brain turned over, he watched the young man walking away, disappearing around a corner at the end of the hall.

Hank sat there for a minute without doing anything. His gaze was still fixed on the corner that the young man vanished behind. Then Hank recalled the dream, the one with the featureless face and the glowing eyes.

"No," he thought, "it couldn't be. There's no way." But the dream continued to flash in his mind. He then saw a wallet on the ground and picked it up. It must belong to the man, he thought.

"Wait!" he yelled and ran down the hallway. He turned to corner and yelled again.

"Hey, hold on a second!"

But he only saw the man long enough to see him hurry off down the hall and into the workroom. Hank stopped running and began to think.

"Were you able to find it alright, Mr. LaFleur?" a voice said from behind. Hank turned around. It was the manager.

"Oh!" replied Hank. "Yes, yes indeed."

"Very well then," said the manager. He smiled politely at Hank. "Safe travels, ok?" He turned around to walk away.

"Wait, wait a second," Hank said suddenly. He wasn't sure what he was doing. He felt things to be slightly out of his control. The manager turned around. "I've changed my mind about that job."

"You have?" the manager was joyful and surprised. "Well, that's excellent! That's fantastic news, Mr. LaFleur. Why don't you leave your phone number with the receptionist at the door and we will be in touch very soon."

"Yes, yes sir. Will do," said Hank. Then he turned his attention back the wallet as the manager patted him on the back and walked off. It was a plain, black leather wallet. He opened it up and looked at the identification card inside, hoping to find the young man's name.

"Virgil Kelly," he read.

Hank was soon put to work in higher management with the firm that owned and operated all three of the factories. His job was a simple matter of utilizing his character and manipulating his charm. When he interviewed for the position, he found the parts of himself that resonated within the executives. He spoke of conquest and drive, and when he did so he was intentionally vague at times so that the executives would fill in the blanks with their own personal experience. In this way, they would relate to him and see him as one of their own. This made them feel confident in Hank's personality and before long he won them over.

Because of his ability and ease in conversational matters, the executives fit him in as a liaison between all of the factory managers. He asked for an office in the factory where he bumped into Virgil and went right to work. Not that the work was important to Hank, or even relevant. It was easy enough for him to do, so he performed his duties with swift efficiency. But Hank knew that wasn't his real purpose.

Lately, Hank's dreams were getting stranger. He began to have visions of a young girl who wore a white cloak. She hung high in a vast web of electrical signals and impulses that traveled along invisible wires. The girl had long brown hair that fell gently on her shoulders and rippled like a sea shore. Her hands were held down and outward, as if gesturing towards Hank, and a single flame danced upon each palm. The strangest thing, though, was her face. At first it was the face of a beautiful girl, but it gave way to a swirl that brought forth a expansive system of circuitry that was covered by hanging moss. Hank could see

the minute particles of moss like they were under a microscope. They resembled pyramids. He saw himself walking into the pyramid where Virgil stood waiting in the center of an empty chamber. A clear stream ran through the chamber, running up the walls like a reverse waterfall. Virgil held his eyes in his hand, one in each, and Hank looked into the empty socket's on Virgil's face. There was nothing there, but the eyes in Virgil's hands began to glow.

The visions of the girl would appear to him sometimes during his conscious hours as well, but it was always a little different. The patterns of her face would always give way to something new. One time it was a gigantic black hole at the edge of the galaxy through which he could see binary language filtering through. Another time it was the traditional western depiction of Heaven, resting slightly above Hell, and the angels and demons were throwing long spears at each other. Hank noticed that the weapons had properties opposite to their environment. The angel's spears were burning and the demon's were covered in a brilliant glow.

Hank was puzzled with these dreams and visions and felt that they were trying to tell him something, perhaps relating to his purpose at the factory. He got the impression that he was being pushed along. An unseen hand nudged him forward in the small of his back, in between his shoulder blades. Surely this involved his business with Virgil. Perhaps, he thought, he needed to help Virgil find his awareness. But to serve what purpose, and how all these visions were involved, and what was causing them, Hank couldn't tell.

A very personal motivation to move forward in this mission grew inside of Hank. He recalled his old peers and counterparts from his youth, the old traveling gang that wanted to change the world. They were young and idealistic.

They had the strength of ignorance with no experience telling them what they couldn't do. They were dumb enough to defy and lucky enough to get away with it. For a while, anyway.

Once the leader died, things changed quickly. The glue was gone and people fell apart. He recalled each of their faces and the glow that was in their eyes. And he watched them fade away again, covered by fog one at a time.

He hadn't seen the glow since then, he realized. And he had been wandering ever since, aimless of direction but anchored in focus. Perhaps, he thought, all of the wandering has led me to here and now. Then he chuckled and broke a smile. As it always does, he concluded. And as it always will.

Hank sat back his chair and gave way to the cycles of thought. He sent for Virgil and was waiting for his arrival, unsure of how he would approach the conversation. Nothing was certain and he couldn't even be completely sure that what he saw was real. He knew to question his perceptions and he was, after all, getting old. He could very well be losing his mind.

When Virgil walked in through the door, which was open in anticipation of his arrival, the first thing he noticed was that this new guy, Mr. LaFleur, looked very comfortable at his new desk. He was leaning back and became lost in thought, glazed with a smile. His legs were extended and crossed, resting on the desktop.

"Make yourself at home" said Hank without turning to visually acknowledge him. Virgil was startled because he didn't think Mr. LaFleur was paying attention.

"Yes, sir, Mr. La..Fleuer," Virgil tried to address him officially but stumbled with the last name. Hank laughed in response.

"No formalities necessary, kid," he said while taking his feet off the desk. He resumed an upright posture and turned towards Virgil, motioning towards the two empty chairs that were on the opposite side of the desk. He stood up and pulled Virgil's wallet from the inside pocket of his suit-coat pocket and threw it on the seat closest to Virgil. "Did you lose this?" he asked, still smiling.

"Oh," responded Virgil, dumbfounded. "You're the guy I bumped into the other day. Look, man, I'm sorry - I didn't realize you worked here. I'm just a little clumsy,"

"Hey, it's quite alright. Look, sit down, get comfortable. Call me Hank, I'll call you Virgil. I hate formalities. They make me feel... senile." He stopped and made sure Virgil saw his smile. "We're old friends, you just don't realize it yet," Hank said, trying to ease Virgil's visible nervousness. He wanted to gain his trust, but he wasn't sure of how he would go about doing this. He could tell Virgil was shaky and easily off-put, and he didn't want to scare him. He improvised.

"Look, Virgil, you aren't in trouble or anything. I just called you here because... I need help."

"What could you want my help for, Mr. LaFl-" Virgil stopped short of saying the last name when he noticed Hank raising a cautionary finger towards him. "Hank," he finished.

"I need a point man," Hank replied. "I need somebody down on the ground that's working with the machines to let me know what's going on. Sometimes, these managers, ya know, they don't lie but they might change the truth a little bit here or there to serve themselves better. It's just the way of

management. I like to have... checks and balances."

"Oh. I don't know about that," Virgil replied, looking down. "That's a lot of responsibility."

"I promise you," Hank said, "this is just between you and me and all I need is honest observation. All you have to tell me is what you see. Are the machines working? Are the workers getting along? Is the work getting done? It requires little effort from your part, you just need to do your think, keep your eyes open, and meet with me once a week."

"Well, what's in it for me?" asked Virgil. Hank laughed again.

"Hey, I know how it goes." Hank said with a smile. "You will be paid for your time."

Virgil thought in silence.

"Well, ok," he said. "I don't see any harm in it."

"No, of course not! It's harm-free."

"Why me -" Virgil asked, and then paused briefly. "Hank?" he finished his question feebly.

"Intuition, Virgil," Hank responded. "There's a reason I'm on the other side of this desk. It's intuition. You just gotta know things. You've got to be sure. Fifty percent of good aim is having a steady grip, and the rest is knowing where to point the gun."

Virgil looked at him. He was disinterested and out of place. Hank knew he wouldn't crack him today.

"Back to work then, Virgil. I'll see you next week, same place and time."

"Ok. Bye, Hank," Virgil said and then stood quickly. He looked at Hank, as if waiting for something to happen, and then the promptly turned and

hurried out the door.

As Hank watched Virgil go, he couldn't help but laugh at himself. This kid's a piece of work, he thought. Wonder what got him so tightly wound like that, anyway? But he would have plenty of time to figure it out. It was, after all, his job.

Virgil sat in a long, dark corridor that ran through a wing of the factory which housed the offices of upper management. Large, fake plants were placed sporadically along a musty, maroon carpet that rolled over steel grated floors. It was silly, he thought, to try and make a factory feel comfortable. It made him feel uneasy. He shifted his wait as he sat and then settled into stillness. A week passed since he last met with Hank and he was nervously awaiting his next meeting.

Virgil took an account of the events of his life that led him to this hallway. At the end of his schooling, when Virgil became convinced that he was on the fast road to insanity, he traded in sobriety for a cocktail of experimental psychosomatic medication prescribed to him by doctors and psychiatrists alike. He became a blur - a mute and meek member of an unspoken livestock. The drugs dulled the blades that ran through him, but the nervous tension remained within, like an unending wave of energy pulsing through his body. The inner dialogue still ran constantly as well, but he disassociated himself from it. When he did give specific notice to his thoughts, they frightened him and took him to dark places that followed him into his sleep and took the form of nightmares. He grew to hate his dreams and put no effort towards remembering them.

Virgil spent a couple of years working part-time jobs that came and went quickly. The jobs he worked were always simple since he had no obvious talents and no motivation or passion to push him forward. Cashier, grocery stocker, warehouse labor, lawn mowing. He rarely stayed at a job for more than a few months in those days. His bosses noticed his lack of motivation and the

distance he kept from his co-workers, and they always let him go. Each time, Virgil was told that he just didn't fit in. Before too long, he ran out of places to work.

His parents voiced their concern. Virgil was still living at home and his siblings were, by now, all moved out and well on with their adult lives. So, with no job and no prospects, Virgil headed into the city and very immediately found the job he now held. It all happened almost too easily, now that he thought about it. He was walking through town looking for help wanted signs but hadn't come across any luck. He stood at an intersection and sunlight reflected into his eyes. He held up his hand to try and block it, but he couldn't find the spot between his eyes and the offending glare. Then all at once, the glare went away and revealed a small diner sitting on the opposite side of the road, though Virgil could have sworn that there was a parking lot in that spot when he passed by it earlier. Regardless, it was there now and the sun was reflecting off of the glass door at the front of the diner. Strange though, he now had a sudden craving for coffee, even though it was late in the afternoon. So he walked across the street and into the diner.

Sitting at the diner counter, sipping on cheap drip-coffee, Virgil couldn't help but eavesdrop on the lively conversation that was taking place behind him. Three rough looking men were talking about a night of gambling gone sour. They carried on boisterously and filled the diner with laughter. Virgil was amused by the revelry and perked his ears.

Suddenly, they began to talk of work. They all had jobs at a factory at the edge of town which recently expanded its production. Virgil learned that the factory was hiring all able bodied men and women to work the assembly line

full-time. By that time the next day, Virgil was working that assembly line.

Unlike his other jobs, Virgil kept this one. He wasn't sure what the difference was between this job and any other one that he had, but months came and went and he was still there. He thought that maybe he was meant to work with machines, where interaction isn't necessary.

There was one point, very early on, when Virgil began to feel especially nervous about his job and decided he'd better leave, maybe try his luck in a different town. He was staying in a hotel, paying by the week, and so he now went around his hotel room gathering his things together. He was rounding up his toiletries and reached for the light switch on the wall when he was finished. The light switch then shocked him, sending an electric jolt up his arm and hitting his head like a pipe. He came to a little while later, laying on the floor. His vision was shaky and, as he pushed himself up, he realized that it was light outside before he got shocked. It was nighttime now, so some time must have passed. He felt very weak and went to the bed to lie down, where he soon fell asleep. That night he dreamt that, as he was leaving town, his car ran off the road and over a cliff, plunging into the depths below. He watched his body submerging into water, unable to find a way out the car. He watched his eyes grow big and horrified, and he could feel them pop just as he was waking up. The space around his eyes ached with a sharp pain. He decided then that he would move out of the hotel immediately and into an apartment somewhere next to the factory. He didn't want to leave anymore.

And so Virgil went to factory, day in and day out, working in a roomful of machines and feeling very much like a machine himself. Just as in school, Virgil kept to himself and had no social activity or even hobbies for his own

personal amusement. He spent most of his time feeling lost, and he could never shake the deep feeling that he was falling. He still watched the sky occasionally, feeling like he belonged far away.

Years went by and Virgil's life became a lily pad in the center of stark and stagnant pond. It floated without effort, without any direction and only as much movement as its tough, gangly stem would allow.

"Ah, Virgil. There you are," a voice came from behind Virgil and brought him out of his thoughts. He stood up quickly and turned towards the voice. It was Hank, who was smiling with his arm stretched out towards his office door, inviting Virgil in. "Come, tell me all about what you've seen. Spare no details."

Virgil walked in and sat in one of the chairs across from the big desk. Hank, however, did not go to his seat behind the desk. Instead, he sat on the edge of the desk and leaned casually.

Hank continued to speak, now addressing Virgil in a very friendly tone. "You know, these guys up at the main office, man they are some characters. I'll tell you what. You gotta minute? Can I tell you something? Those fellas, they're all nice fellas, don't get me wrong, but I'll tell you - Sometimes I get the impression that they don't know a lug nut from the nuts between their legs. Christ! Can you believe it?"

Virgil laughed but then stopped himself, surprised at his reaction. He shut his mouth tightly.

"Well, forget 'em," Hank went on. "It's all inconsequential. Say, Virgil, what do you do around this town for fun? I can't find a damn thing. It looks like a ghost town - what's goin' on around here?"

Virgil shifted in his seat, his nervousness taking hold.

"Well," he began, "lots of the workers, they go drinking down at the tavern by the lake, back out on that alley way behind the supermarket - "

"Say," Hank cut him off, "is there - maybe a planetarium around here?"

"A planetarium?"

"Ya, you know, like an observatory or something. I like telescopes, I like the stars, ya know? You ever look at the stars, Virgil?"

"Oh," Virgil fumbled for a response. Hank noticed this and stepped closer, looking deeper into the storm beyond Virgil's eyes. "No, not too much. Lots of pollution, you know." Virgil lied. He didn't want to share his thoughts about the stars with this stranger.

"Hmph," emoted Hank. He stepped back, relaxing again. "Yes, I suppose that's true isn't it." He jumped off the desk and began to pace back and forth slowly, his mind churning. He looked over at Virgil while he was pacing. Virgil followed him with his eyes, unsure of what was happening. Hank caught Virgil's eyes in his sight and tried to look deep into them, all the while still pacing. He saw the storm behind the fog again. He tried to call to the storm. He tried to become the current of water that was replenished by the storm. He tried to beckon to Virgil to jump into the waters, to let the storm rage and thereby create him anew.

Hank stopped cold and sighed. Nothing - no response from Virgil whatsoever. Maybe I'm wasting my time, Hank thought.

"Well, Virgil, why don't you go ahead and tell me what's going on with the factory workers. Hows life down on the floor?"

Next time, Hank thought, as Virgil spoke of working conditions. I'll get him next time.

A few months went by and nothing changed. Virgil continued to meet Hank in his office once a week but he never got past his surface assignment and spoke only of the factory. What he said never amounted to anything more than, "Yes, Hank, things are running smoothly." Things were, in fact, running smoothly, but Hank knew this. After the machinery began to fall apart, the owners of the factory went to great lengths to get the best safety inspectors, engineers, foremen and managers that money could buy, so everything was air tight and as efficient as could be. The workers were all paid relatively well and had full benefits, so there were no complaints.

To Hank, the meetings became about trying to find a way into Virgil's past. He knew he couldn't approach the subject directly. That would scare Virgil off. He also knew that Virgil forgot awareness completely and wouldn't be able to grasp it as a concept. He had to skip all of that and think of a way to get Virgil to recall awareness by actually experiencing it again. The best way to do this, Hank knew, would be to find something - a word, or a story, or a memory, anything - that would trigger a subconscious reaction and allow the hidden knowledge to seep forward. Only at that point would he be able to tell Virgil directly what was going on.

Hank knew this would be difficult. Often times, when people lose their awareness, the residual perceptions often become diagnosed as mental illnesses and people begin to believe they are damaged or insane. They eventually begin to lose all belief that any extra-sensory perception ever existed. He saw this happen to many of friends a long, long time ago. He observed how anxious and on edge

Virgil was and feared that the young man did the same thing.

Whenever Virgil came to Hank's office, he was greeted with the same casual friendliness that he received during their first meeting. Virgil was resistant at first to conversation, mostly because he was not used to it. He did not have friends and he did not even partake in workplace chatter. He was quiet and aloof, and conversation was awkward for him. As a result, things progressed slowly.

But Hank had a very keen eye for observation. At times during his youth, when he was first roaming around the world on his own, he used to make a good amount of side money gambling. He could spot tells very easily, and what was more, he could sense them. When he talked to Virgil, he employed the same strategies and as he would in a game of five-card draw. He was looking for a single word, something that would trigger some kind of physical reaction, a flinch or a subconscious tick of some kind. But Virgil's anxiety created such an immense barrier between himself and the world that it made Hank wonder whether or not any of his words even resonated within the young man's brain. He would have to figure out a way to get him to loosen up.

"Virgil, I take great interest in my employees," Hank began one day, resuming his leaning position on the edge of the desk, exuding comfort and ease. "I like to know that they are well, and that they are satisfied, because that's how you get good workers. Do you understand what I'm saying, Virgil?"

"Yes, Hank, I think I do."

"I'm worried about you, Virgil. You don't have much joy in your life, do you? The problem with that, Virgil, is that good work requires joy. It should be cathartic to produce. Work and play go together, in a way, if you can put your

mind to it." Hank knew how this must have sounded. He thought it ironic to take on such an authoritative role, and as he heard the words come out he had a hard time keeping a straight face. Playing roles made it difficult at times to not let the true self burst through. But he only said these things to set up his next move. He looked at Virgil, who gave no reaction.

"I want you to come with me to that tavern you mentioned, Virgil."

Now Virgil looked up with fear, like he was a child being thrown into the deep end of a pool to learn how to swim. "You want me to go with you to the bar?" he asked.

"Yes, you need to relax. If you get stressed out, it could affect everybody. That's how it goes with a work environment."

"I don't know, I'd really much prefer to be alone."

"Virgil, I am your superior, and I demand you come with me to that bar after work."

Virgil laughed now, somewhat defiantly. "Can you do that?"

"Of course, I can, Virgil. I am a very powerful man. I can do anything I want. And right now, all I want is to go have a drink in this godforsaken town. And I want you to come with me because, well, honestly Virgil, I don't really like that many people, but you're alright."

It seemed harmless when Virgil mulled it over, and he didn't want to upset the new boss, so he gave in.

"Ok, Hank, I will go to the bar with you," he said.

They met at Hank's station wagon after work. As they drove into town, Virgil surveyed the interior of the car. He traced the grains on the wood

paneling that ran along the dash to the statue of Mary that was glued to the top, directly underneath the rearview mirror.

"Are you religious?" he asked Hank.

"In a way," he responded without really thinking about it. Then his eyes widened a bit as he realized that Virgil's innocent question was opening up a clue.

"What about you, Virgil?" he asked. "Are you a religious man?"

"Not since I was a kid," Virgil replied. Then he snickered to himself and turned his gaze out the window, into the city that was advancing ahead and to his right.

"I find it interesting," Hank began, "that religion falls away with people. The way people think that they can know something like that, and they think they know it so absolutely, and then all of a sudden... something happens - everything just changes." He was being sincere, but he was also hinting at something.

"I find it interesting that anybody believes in it anything at all," replied Virgil gloomily.

"Well, it helps people to believe in something, I think. It's a comfort for some. I, for example, believe I need directions to this bar. I haven't been out this way before. I would be comforted to know that we won't get lost. Do you know where we're going?" Hank asked.

Virgil gave Hank the directions as they headed along the perimeter of the city's downtown. They rode along a street that swung them outward, like a arch with the tallest high-rise as its center point, and they soon ended up at the part of the city that lie just beyond downtown. This was on the other side of the

city and it was a proper juxtaposition to the dominion of the industrial factories on the opposite end.

Behind the coagulation of sky-scraping atrocities that bulged together like a hemorrhoid to form the downtown was an old, nearly abandoned strip mall. It was, in fact, completely abandoned save for one store, which had the generic name "Grocery" on a cheaply made vinyl sign attached to a shingled awning. The lights outside the store buzzed and flickered above a gathering of hunched over, heavily clothed people with long, scraggly hair and oversized coats that watched accusingly as the station wagon rolled by. There were a series of window panels which allowed a stained view of the inside. From where Hank and Virgil sat in the vehicle, they could only see boxes of beer stacked atop of each other.

They drove through the deserted parking long to the end of the complex. Then they turned right out of the parking lot and into the alley, which doubled as a road with both commercial and residential addresses. As they drove, Hank noticed how odd it was to have alleyway dumpsters on his right and mailboxes on his left.

The road came to a dead end, or rather ran into a gravel parking lot which was overflowing with cars. Beyond the gravel lot was the tavern. It was a long and narrow wooden building with a flat, tar roof. The wood was planked upward and painted a dark, dull red. There were no windows and only one door, which was painted black and hard to see even though a marquee hung lit above it. The marquee had black block letters that spelled the bars' name, "Gatherer's."

"See, kid?" said Hank. "I believed that I needed direction, and now I have been led to the promised land." He grinned, ribbing Virgil.

As they found a parking spot hidden away in the corner, they could hear loud barroom chatter and the faint sound of a jukebox playing loud, strange music. Hank led the way as they walked inside. When he threw open the door, a cloud and stench of cigarette smoke flew by them and the bar chatter doubled in volume. He turned around and looked at Virgil, who was appearing very rigid and was looking into the door with dread. To Virgil, these situations were the same as being led into a torture chamber.

"Come on," Hank said, "Water's not too cold."

They walked inside and stood by the door for a moment as they took in the layout of the bar. The bar itself was a big piece of long, darkly stained oak that ran nearly the entire length of the wall, which was about 30 feet. Behind the bar was a massive collection of small to medium sized wood carved figurines of trolls, devils, gargoyles, and other mythical animals, some painted and some left plain. There were also at least a dozen of faded but framed photographs, a myriad of comic depictions of wizardry and sorcery. Filling in the rest of the space was a healthy amount of all of the brown, clear, and yellow spirits you could hope for, each resting on their own single shelf, of which at least 50 were sporadically fitted into a spot on the wall. All the bar stools were full and mostly held heavier men who had full facial hair and slumped over their elbows on the bar. In between a few of those at the stools were other patrons, leaning in and trying to make their drink orders. The bartender was hustling back and forth along the length of the bar, filling the orders as quickly as possible.

"Have a beer?" Hank asked Virgil. Virgil didn't respond, or even give the impression that he heard anything. He stared fixedly ahead with his jaws clenched and his hands deep in his pockets. "Ok," said Hank. "Beer it is." He

looked around to find a spare place to sit and spotted a red vinyl booth in the corner. It sat under a light with a cheap stained-glass chandelier, decorated in brown and tan floral arrangements. "Head over to that booth," he said to Virgil. "I'll see you there."

Hank shoved his way up to the bar and Virgil headed towards the booth (after Hank gave him a push in that direction). He nestled in between two of the heavy-set, bearded men, mumbling apologies to them. "Just getting a couple drinks, boys," he said. "I'll be out of here in one second."

The bartender walked up to him. She was tall and sturdy, with wide shoulders and a tough face that had a very simple, weathered kind of beauty to it. Her dark hair was pulled back on her head but a few strands knocked themselves loose and hung in front of her foggy eyes.

"Well, we don't get too many of the suits in here," she told Hank, referring, he assumed, to the fact that he was in upper management at the factory and the bar was largely home mostly to the laborers.

"Ah, yes, well, you know, I like to stay close to the ground," replied Hank, playing the part.

"Uh-huh," replied the bartender. "What'll it be then?"

"Two beers oughta do it, and two shots of rail whiskey, too, if you don't mind. Thank you very much."

As the bartender slid down to bar, gathering more orders on her way to the beer taps, Hank ran his fingers along the bar top and looked over at the corner where Virgil slouched down in the booth. He was sitting nervously, looking blankly at the table in front of him.

There's gotta be a better way to do this, Hank thought to himself. When

he was younger, under the instruction of the leader, he and his peers used to discuss how they longed to do this for everybody - to help them return to their pre-conditioned sense of awareness. The leader was just beginning to elaborate on his theories for how this could be done when he died. Hank was improvising, based on the limited knowledge he had of memory and psychology, and what little he could remember about the leader's theories. The only of these that Hank could really recall at the moment was that you needed to dive deep into the mind and a general attitude of extreme patience was absolutely necessary.

The bartender returned with the beers and whiskey and Hank handed over a folded bill.

"Keep the change," he said and smiled as he turned to walk away. Just before he turned, however, the bartender's face changed. For a moment he saw the girl from his dreams, who suspended in air and light with outward reaching arms. My mind is playing tricks on me, Hank thought. I'm getting older by the second.

He walked with a beer and whiskey glass in each hand to the booth where Virgil, shaking off the odd sensation he got from recalling his recent dreams. He put the drinks on the table and fell heavily into the opposite side of the booth. He drifted off for a moment into the bubbles rising along the walls of his pint glass.

"You ok, Hank?" asked Virgil.

Hank raised his eyes up at Virgil without moving his head. For a minute he forgot who he was, who Virgil was, where he was at and why he was there. He was just an aging loner looking at a young, dumb, scared kid in a place that could have been any bar in any town. How did I get here? he wondered.

"You ever have dreams, Virgil?" Virgil didn't respond, but he continued to look at Hank as if waiting for a prompt. "Come on, dreams!" Hank went on. "Everybody has dreams, nightmares, fantasies, that kind of thing."

Hank waited for Virgil to respond - nothing.

"Drink up, kid," Hank said while pushing the whiskey glass forward. To Hank's surprise, Virgil drank the whiskey immediately. As Hank watched, intrigued by Virgil's sudden vigor, the young man reached over the table and grabbed Hank's whiskey glass, throwing it down his throat in one gulp.

"Well, aren't we suddenly alive?" Hank teased.

"Why did you ask about dreams?" Virgil said, ignoring the ribbing.

"Well, I've been having dreams lately," Hank explained. "Weird ones, too."

"Like what?" asked Virgil. Virgil sounded slightly eager but also unsure, like he was walking along the edge of a cliff trying to decide whether or not he should jump. Hank smiled and looked deep into Virgil's eyes, as he had during their meetings, and continued to speak as he journeyed through the fog that spread around the pupils.

"Well, I'm glad you asked me that, Virgil. I've been wanting to tell someone about it." Hank shifted forward and was now leaning forward over the table. He could start to see the storm forming in Virgil's eyes.

"I'm standing there, all alone, right? It's not in a room, it's not outside, but it's a place, somehow. It's a place that has no walls or limits or definition. It's like it's empty, except that it's the opposite of that. But not full - there's no objects in the place or anything like that. It's... It looks empty, but it's not, ok?" Hank paused. He could sense it starting to rain. "So I'm standing there, and this

dream is from a first person view, too, so I don't see my body at this point. I just see... white. And then a woman appears, more a girl really. She's kind of like an angel except there's no wings, none of that crap, but she does illuminate. And her arms are stretched out and they're holding fire, and her face is like a portal to another dimension."

Virgil's brooding eyes were now turning violent. Hank saw this and knew he close. He stumbled onto something that stirred Virgil's soul. Hank's dream pulled a memory from the depths of Virgil's mind, but it was hard to say what exactly that might be or how he could find it.

"Anyway, it's a weird dream, and it's been happening a lot." They sat in silence for a couple of seconds. "The human mind is a strange machine, Virgil. Capable of many, many things, and we don't know the half of 'em. You remember that. Everything we think we know..."

"I have dreams sometimes," Virgil interrupted, almost sprung into the conversation. Hank stopped talking.

"Oh, really?" He said, pleasantly surprised. He kept his eyes fixed onto Virgil's, envisioning himself wading through the storm clouds as lightning began to fill the pupils.

"I don't remember them all. They bother me. I let them be forgotten. But there's one that I remember all the time. I have it sometimes when I'm awake."

"What is it, Virgil? What's the dream?" Eyes fixed.

"It's... It's nothing really, I'm just falling. That's it. I just fall forever and then when I wake up I still feel like I'm falling."

The storm raged. Hank could see Virgil falling from the clouds of his

own eyes. He ran forward through the vapor and dove after him. Now they were both falling, but they went nowhere. The environment gave way to infinite darkness and bolts of electricity were running all around. The two men were floating in the middle of it all, not going anywhere but being pulled towards something unseen by raw gravity.

In the vision, Hank looked at Virgil and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"You've got to remember. You know why your falling. Where are you falling from?"

Virgil looked at him in horror. The color ran from his face and he gasped for air, like a fish on the shore.

"Look past all of this, Virgil. Look up. Where are you falling from?"

Virgil looked up. He saw a tiny speck of light off in the distance.

"Go to the light," said a voice, but it no longer came from Hank. It was the voice of a woman and it came from within him.

Suddenly Virgil was swimming through the nothingness towards the light, which was growing bigger and bigger and made welcoming gestures to him. He could now make out a ring of fire that danced around the growing light. All at once he burst through the opening and stood in a burning room.

I've been here before, he thought. As he looked around he saw a plain bedroom that was black and white behind the fire, like an old movie. Then he looked at a bed and saw that it was the source of the fire. It was gathered in a huge ball in the center and spitting flame in a spiral pattern around the room. Virgil felt pulled towards the fire and walked into it.

"Virgil," he heard the fire say, in the same disembodied female voice as before. "You've come back."

Virgil was bewildered and did not trust the fire.

"Do not worry, Virgil. Fire is life. Fire is passion and instinct. Let it have you."

The fire crept towards Virgil like a snake and began to slither up his arm. It wrapped around his torso and licked his neck. Virgil felt his muscles loosening. He felt his heart lightening and he felt the fog begin to lift. Then he turned his attention back towards the fire and moved closer. He felt strong, somehow. He was now kneeling on the bed, right next to the source of the fire, looking deep into.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"You know me already." the fire responded. The voice became clearer. It sounded familiar.

The tube of fire that encircled Virgil now sprang back into it's source and the ball grew twice in size. A female form began to take shape within the flame.

"Know me again," she said.

The female within the fire reached out to him and Virgil let her take his hand. At that moment the walls fell off of the room. The floor pulled away and the roof flew upwards and gave way to the cosmos, which swept in and danced around them. A comet tail wrapped around their hands and made three loops before shooting off into the distance. A black hole opened up and swallowed them whole, but when they came out the other end they were in the same place. Electricity jumped from star to the star, yelling in glee. Time vanished and gravity no longer affected Virgil's body.

The female form inside the flame began to take shape but no detail

could be made out. She was a shadow, but with depth.

"Hold my hand, little boy," she said, giggling.

"I've missed you, Virgil." Her voice encompassed all. It now came from without and within and it shook him to the core. Memories sprang out of the depths and tried to force their way through to Virgil's conscious thought. They were cannonballs trying to break through steel. Each faint memory brought an emotion. They hit him together and separately at the same time. He felt like there was something trying to crawl out of his chest.

The girl leaned forward, still shrouded in flame, and gave Virgil a gentle kiss on the lips. She ran her hand along his cheek. Virgil felt his physical form give way as warmth spread throughout.

And then, in the flash of a moment, she was gone. Everything was gone. Virgil was back at the bar looking at Hank, who sat with his arms crossed wearing a mischievous smile.

Virgil was shaking. He panted like he ran a mile.

"Hank," he asked. "What's with your eyes? They're kind of glowing."

"Yes, they are," said Hank. "And so are yours."

It was a clear, brisk night with low winds and a bright moon. Hank drove Virgil out to a spot on the outskirts of town that was just far enough away to see the stars spread out across the sky. He opened the doorway for Virgil, but he still needed to push him through.

Having grown accustomed to long drives in the night, Hank knew of a lookout spot that was about a 30 mile drive out to a cliffside which overlooked a rock quarry. He took Virgil there to let everything sink in, knowing that the stillness of the atmosphere would provide padding for the liquid intensity of his thoughts.

Virgil rode in silence with his eyes closed and his head leaning back in the passenger seat of the station wagon. He wasn't yet at the point where he was trying to comprehend what he experienced. He was still coping with the physical sensations that accompanied this slight mental transformation. His head felt like his head was being pushed inward by a trash compactor, and a tremendous pressure pressed against his chest. He felt as if the blood running towards his heart was being thwarted by some kind of barrier. He wished his blood were acid so it could burn through.

"Breath slow and deep," said Hank knowingly. "Don't think of anything but your breath. Count to ten. When you get to ten, count backwards. When you get to zero, go back up. Back and forth, back and forth. If you can count to ten you can do anything."

Hank turned on the radio and dialed in the analog tuner. He found a classical music station that was soothing enough and he let it rest there for a

minute, but he left his hand on the dial and eventually found a spot just to the left that was mostly static. The string section barely bled through the white noise. He smiled and turned the radio down until it was a barely audible hum. The residuum of the string section screeched like a tomcat singing through the static.

They drove mostly without speaking. When they were about five miles out from their destination, Hank turned off the main road onto one that was made of gravel and wound through the woods. Virgil turned to Hank with his eyebrows arched upward in worry.

"Where are we going Hank?" asked Virgil. He didn't think to ask before. After what happened at the bar, Virgil grew instantly pale and ran to the bathroom where he violently lost his stomach. Vomit pumped upwards through his esophagus and burned holes along the way. Bile poured outward and he clung to the toilet bowl gasping for breath while dry heaving with his head resting on his right arm. When he returned to the booth, Hank was standing with his car keys in his hand.

"Let's go," he said, and Virgil followed without saying a word, resigned in the moment to Hank's direction. But now the basic human instincts were returning to him and he was growing suddenly curious as to what the hell was going on.

"Virgil," Hank replied in the musty station wagon, "we are going someplace where you can think in peace."

"Are we going somewhere specific, or are we just driving?" Virgil replied. Hank laughed and turned up the static. There was now an oboe bleeding through that sounded like a rodent screeching. He pulled a pair of aviator

sunglasses from the inside of his pocket and put them on, laughing louder, demonically.

"Hank, what the hell?" said Virgil, excited and afraid. It was very dark.

"The places we go from now on," began Hank, "don't necessarily require the senses you've gotten used to."

Virgil wanted to scream. He wanted to open the door and jump out of the car. He felt sure that he was in the hands of a maniac. But he couldn't move. There was an invisible force pushing him downward against the seat of the car. Hank laughed again as he took a sharp turn. He accelerated into the turn but he was in complete control. Virgil was not appeased and ripped through the gravity with his right hand to pull the sunglasses off Hank's face. Then he pulled back in shock, sunglasses in hand, when he noticed that Hank's eyes were clenched tightly shut as they wound back and forth through the absolute black of the night.

"Relax. Save your energy," said Hank calmly while swerving sharply to the left. "Count to ten."

Virgil gulped deeply and turned away from Hank. He felt powerless. He felt like a rock being thrown into a ravine, like a pinball being battered around by flippers and bumpers. He breathed deep. He counted to ten. He closed his eyes. 10...9...8... what the hell is going on, he thought ... 7... 6... 5... I've got to get out here... 4... 3... 2... "Relax, little boy" said a voice from nowhere... 1... 0...

Then they stopped. Virgil heard the engine cut off and the driver side door open and close. He let his eyelids spread apart and he looked around. They were on a cliffside. Hank walked ten feet in front of the car and was staring off

into the sky. Stars were everywhere, like glitter. He got out of the car and joined Hank at the edge of the cliff.

"Where you stand now," began Hank, who was waiting for Virgil to join him, "is the precipice of something great. You are between two worlds. You are in the midst of a great and eternal transformation, a movement that exists beyond you, but also within you and because of you."

"Hank," replied Virgil, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't usually drink. I think I'm having a bad reaction."

"Wrong again, kid. You are leaving your bad reactions behind. Where you go from here is not a world of reaction, it is a world of being. Reactions are for the unaware. You will simply be."

"What's going on?" demanded Virgil, growing agitated. "Tell me right now what the hell is going on or... I swear, I will push you right off the edge of this place."

"Greater men have tried much worse," said Hank. "You can't harm me. And you don't want to. But you are scared and confused, like a baby who has just left the womb. You shouldn't fight this. It is who you are."

"What is who I am? Why are you talking like this? Why won't you tell me what's happening?"

"I will tell you, Virgil, relax. Here, have a cigarette." Hank pulled a tin cigarette holder out of his coat pocket and pushed it towards Virgil while pressing in the switch that opened it up, revealing ten thin hand rolled cigarettes. Virgil didn't smoke but he took one and lit it.

"Now breathe deep, kid. I can tell this is going to be hard for you. Look at the sky, up there - see that bright star? The one that's brighter than all the

rest. Look at it, fixate on it, but don't let yourself become tense. You want a relaxed focus. Don't look away. Breath deep, smoke, look."

Virgil sighed. He looked at the star because he didn't know what else to do.

"Now don't look away," continued Hank. "Just keep looking at that star. What you saw, Virgil, that wasn't a hallucination, that wasn't a vision. You aren't crazy. If anything, you are saner now than you ever were before. What you saw was real. What you saw was a reality that moves through this one, that exists inside of it, molds it from within. What you saw was the world of pure, living energy. The energy is inside of you, Virgil. And it always has been, but you forgot. You knew once, but you learned to look at the world in a different way. Now keep looking at that star." Virgil was transfixed. "What do you see?" asked Hank.

Virgil was locked in on the star. He saw it growing in size. It pulled the other stars towards it, joining with them in a growing ball of illumination.

"I see all the stars falling into the bright one," replied Virgil.

"That's right," said Hank. "This is always happening. It has already happened, since long ago. It is already done and yet it continues to happen. What you are looking at is where the past, present, and future all come together and become one. What you are seeing is the conception of momentary existence." Hank flicked his cigarette ashes onto his boot. "Now keep looking. Look deeper. Follow your mind, don't direct it."

Virgil continued to look as the light grew larger and larger until it covered the whole sky. They were still surrounded by the darkness of the night, but they were also blanketed by strange iridescence.

"Everything you think you know," continued Hank, "is only a reflection of the truth. The truth is, Virgil, this existence that you think you know is not life. It is death. It is the death of human awareness and it is more than that, too. Humanity is a prison that has hidden the true spirit that burns inside of each of us, that connects us with our ancestors and our children. It is a spirit that joins us together, that makes us as one. Yes, we are individuals, but we are individuals only within the framework of a certain kind of togetherness that unites the entire universe in an elastic flash of momentary eternity." Hank rubbed out the cherry on the end of his cigarette and placed the butt in his pocket. "Virgil, this is what the world looks like. This is the living universe. There is no god, there is no religion, there is no magic, these things are all just misinterpretations of the truth. This, what you see here before you, and what you saw earlier, this is the doorway to reality - the multi-dimensional reality that humanity has learned to forget. And it is only the beginning. But now you can learn to remember. I couldn't tell you before, while we were working at the factory, because you had to see it. You had to relearn it for yourself. All I could do was prod the pools of your memory and hope to stir up the right one. It worked. Now, your life begins again."

Virgil remained transfixed on the growing light and the older man's words grew further into the distance. Virgil felt the heat of the Universe on his face. He felt it drawing tears from his eyes. He felt his heart loosen and he felt his weight disintegrating. He felt the army of memories trying to rush back at the him. He felt pain and pleasure, sadness and joy, life and death all clashing together and existing at the same time. He cried because he was growing.

And then the female voice came back. "Hello, Virgil," it said.

Virgil looked around but saw no body.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Out of the center of the burning light stepped the shadowy human form again. It walked closer and began to take color. Smooth skin that was fair but not white, dark brown hair that rippled over her shoulders, and then brown eyes that matched the hair and drew him in. The face was familiar, but different.

"Virgil," the body said, the beautiful curved female in the white robe, "Virgil, I've missed you. Don't you remember me?"

And then he knew.

"Abigail," he said, and froze in awe.

She aged somehow. She was ten years older, as if she never died. The ripples in her hair began then to take on a movement of their own. They swirled upon themselves and ran ten shades darker, then back again, rocking steadily in the light of illumination. The curls went on forever into hypnotic shades of auburn fractals.

"That's right, little boy," she said, giggling like she did when they were young. "I'm still here. I've been waiting for you."

Her eyes were a gateway into himself. He looked through himself when he saw her. The strength of her poise made his weakness bearable. They burned with an intensity that shifted gravity and made the Universe miss a breath.

And then, like it was all stretched rubber, the world snapped back into place and Virgil stood on the cliffside, crying and looking at the sky.

"Hank," he said through the tears, "what do I do? Where do I go from here?"

"Well, Virgil, I'll tell you one thing. I'll tell you where we aren't going,

and that's back to the factory. The good news is that first thing tomorrow we are going to quit our jobs. And then I'm going to help you see."

Hank and Virgil slept at Virgil's modest one bedroom apartment in the city that night. Hank had been renting out the same motel room over and over, waiting for the time when Virgil's awareness returned. That was on the far side of town, and Virgil's place was closer. Virgil, in the throes of mental and physical exhaustion, wanted the comfort of his own bed.

When they got to the apartment nearly dawn. The rays of the sun began to peak out from behind the horizon and pushed musty shades of blue and orange into the black sky. The apartment was in a dilapidated brick building that housed about twenty or so identical living quarters. Each had only a kitchen and a bedroom with a single bathroom that was placed through a doorway by the stove. Virgil put a small couch and coffee table in his kitchen in lieu of the standard dining furniture. The cupboards were all empty. Virgil only had basic kitchenware, which he kept on the drying rack next to the sink. One plate and one bowl lay next to each other, with only a few forks and spoons lying below. There was one clear pint glass and one brown coffee mug. A single pan sat on the stovetop next to a small metal pot. He kept things relatively clean but the apartment itself was dirty from years of the landlord's neglect. The drywall had mold spots near the joints. The drywall tape, which was poorly applied, was peeling itself away from the mud and paint that strove to keep it held down. There were no decorations, there were no furnishings. In Virgil's bedroom was only a mattress on the floor. His clothes were stacked in hastily folded piles atop milk crates that lined the wall under a window, which was covered by a green wool blanket that served as the curtain and blocked out the sunlight.

"Make yourself at home," Virgil told Hank when they got to his room, which was on the fifth and uppermost floor.

"Very accommodating," said Hank with a slight smile. Virgil turned in response and looked around, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

"Sorry, Hank," he said, "I don't get much company."

"There's nothing to worry about, Virgil, I can sleep anywhere. Anyway, it will be all the easier for you to leave. It doesn't look like you've gotten too settled in here."

This was true. Virgil rented the first place he could find. It didn't matter where he lived, he thought, because he resigned his life to being mute and meaningless. This pervasive attitude was attached to the walls that surrounded him. It still seemed true but its weight was drifting away.

"Hank," said Virgil, "do you mind if I ask you a question? Why did I forget? Why did I give up? Why do people give up?"

"Well, kid," responded Hank, "it's hard for me to say because I don't know your situation. But almost every time it's very simple. There is one common thing that unites everybody, those who glow and those who drift in the fog. It's a thing that attaches itself to humans from birth and, in most cases, consumes them immediately. It gets to be too much and people give up."

"What is it? What's that one thing?" asked Virgil. Hank was lying on the couch with his coat rolled up into a pillow and placed behind his head. His hands braced his neck and his legs stretched out. They were crossed and just barely too long for the length of the couch.

"It's pain, Virgil."

Virgil looked down, lost in thought.

"I will help you remember," continued Hank. "You will relearn everything. There's a lot to be done. Life begins now."

Virgil looked at Hank, who was now lying with his eyes closed. He began to leave but stopped at the doorway to his bedroom and turned around.

"There's one more thing, Hank."

Hank said nothing, but opened his eyes and looked at Virgil.

"Back at the cliff, when I had that... vision... I saw a girl. I knew her. And she was real. She was... I think I loved her, Hank. Long ago. She's dead though. She died when we were kids. But it seemed so real. Like she was there. And I haven't thought about her in such a long time."

"People who are in touch with the universe do not die," Hank said. "They become part of the universe. She seemed real because she was real. You're friend is not gone."

That night Virgil had strange, lurid dreams. It didn't feel like he was asleep. There are certain parts of the brain which communicate with their host during normal sleep cycles, and all of those parts of Virgil's brain were throbbing with activity.

The dream began with Virgil looking at the same night sky that he was looking at on the cliffside with Hank. There was a great white blanket that joined the stars together and stretched wildly over the dark, night sky. Virgil could see the stars twinkling individually within their communal sheen. He saw them both separate and together.

Then Virgil was flying towards the brightest, most centric star. As he got closer to it, it opened up like a doorway, and then it actually did form a door

frame that was burning with a white flame. He reached the doorway and stood in it for a moment. He turned and looked downward upon Earth, which was covered in a green, oozing sludge. He could hear the commotion of the world's minds, clamored together in cacophony. They bellowed together in orchestrated pain. He saw arms reaching out of the ooze and towards the sky, their hands grasping at air.

He turned around and looked through the doorway and saw a magnificent swirl of blue and purple with a cyclonic eye in the center. He leapt towards it and fell into the eye. He began to spin, or rather, the world around him began to rotate. The speed of rotation grew furious and then slowed to a crawl. At this point, Virgil could make out a shape that was growing in size. It was very bright, almost fluorescent. As it grew, Virgil could see that it was a pyramid stacked on top of its inverse self. The world around him was no longer spinning but the double pyramid was, and he saw that it only appeared to be growing. It was actually moving towards him. He could make out Roman numerals that were inscribed on the side. "XX-IV-V"

All of a sudden Virgil was standing on a beach. He noticed there were no footsteps anywhere in the sand. The double pyramid was now ten stories tall and was hovering directly in front of him, above the shore where the pulsing tide massaged the bank. All of a sudden the double pyramid stopped spinning and a ramp began to lower out of it towards Virgil. Soon the ramp came to rest at Virgil's feet and was leading directly into an opening in the double pyramid.

Virgil stepped onto the ramp and began to walk towards the opening. Once both of his feet were on the ramp, however, the opening began to emit sparks and what looked like bolts of electricity through its frame. The electric

bolts began to join together and redirected themselves outward, to a point that was just in front of and above where Virgil stood. A small, red ball formed with a faint orange hue around its edges. The ball grew and became oval shaped, like an egg. Then it began to shift again, and before long it formed the shape of a human. He watched slowly as the head formed eyes, nose, and a mouth. He watched as the torso formed with breasts and arms, and legs underneath.

It was Abigail, wrapped in flowing red silk from her neck to her ankles. She was lowered by the electric bolts onto the ramp and advanced towards Virgil. She was not Abigail the girl that Virgil knew as a young boy and watched die. She was a woman, mature and strong. She fully blossomed and was more beautiful than he remembered.

Virgil fell to his knees and began to cry.

"Why are you crying, Virgil?" Abigail asked.

"I... I forgotten about you. I'm... I'm sorry, I'm so ashamed."

"Stand up, Virgil."

Virgil stood.

"Do not punish yourself for the ignorance of your childhood. What matters is now," she said.

Virgil looked up at her. Tears fell from his eyes. Abigail leaned forward and kissed him gently on the cheek where a tear lay.

"Are you real?" Virgil asked.

"I am," replied Abigail.

"But... you're dead. You died, I was there."

"Virgil, there is much for you to remember, and much for you to learn. Your friend Hank will help you with that. But you must listen to me. There are

things Hank does not know. There are things that I must show you. You must dream, Virgil. You must continue to dream, no matter how difficult it gets. You must fight through the pain."

Virgil felt all the heartbreak and loneliness that Abigail's death brought to him as a child. His body clenched and he began to tremble.

"You are not alone, Virgil. In your pain and loneliness you are human and you become one with all the others."

"Why, Abigail? Why did you have to die?"

"Organic matter must die, Virgil, that is what the laws of the universe dictate. But the energy that drives the organic matter into the fluid organization that we call life, that does not have to die. It is that organization that makes you human, and it is the pain that makes you alive."

Virgil looked at her silently, now holding back his tears.

"But this is not why I am here right now, Virgil. Come with me, I've something to show you. There isn't much time, I'm afraid."

She reached for Virgil's hand. At this moment a comfort swept over him that he hadn't felt so completely in years. He felt his fears wash away, like the driftwood on the shore being picked up and carried out to sea by the ebb and flow of the rising tide. They walked up the ramp and into the doorway of the glowing double pyramid.

Once they went through the doorway, they were surrounded by rows upon rows of large glass vials that ran from the ground to the ceiling. The ground was made of smoothed granite and the ceiling was raftered and looked to be two hundred feet high. Enormous ribbed tubes ran from one vial to the other and pumped voraciously like the veins of a heart. Steam emanated from

the ceiling and hung there. Inside the vials was pure light.

When Virgil saw the light inside the tubes, he was instantly transported back to the train yard where he stood beside Abigail and watched his old Muskrat and Ragweed dying with rays of light shooting upwards towards space.

And then they were back among the vials, walking alongside them. It became clear to Virgil that the ribbed tubes were pumping the light upward out of the vials. They walked and walked and the tubes kept going on. Virgil thought at one point that they were walking in circles.

"What is this?" asked Virgil, but Abigail gave no answer. Instead, she stopped walking and held Virgil close as they floated upward towards the rafters. They were soon engulfed in steam and when they came out the other side they were on the roof of what looked like the factory that he worked at with Hank. But the city they overlooked was not the city he lived in.

Virgil looked at Abigail and noticed that a single tear formed and was falling down her face. Virgil remembered when they were children and Abigail began to cry just before she told him that she was dying. He remembered how he held her then. He repeated that action now as a sense of doom swept through him.

The city they were looking at was one of steel and rust, of monstrous towers that defied gravity not only in height but in the way they grew away from their base and foundations. They climbed the skyline diagonally or in a zig-zag pattern, only to disappear in clouds of red and green. Surrounding all of the buildings, in fact the whole city in general, was orange smoke that broke only when an eerie pink light shot through it towards the sky. The sky itself was not the sky he looked at from earth. There were three burning suns, varying in

intensity, and the moon which shone simultaneously was not the moon he knew. This moon was bright green and much larger and had a loud, violent pulse. In the center of a city was a dome bigger than two football fields that looked like a snow globe, but underneath the glass top was more green, bubbling ooze. Tubes, not unlike the ones that ran in between the vials, but at least five times their size, ran from certain spots in the glass dome and into the concrete streets that surrounded it.

"What is this place?" asked Virgil.

"This," responded Abigail while tightening their embrace, "is hell."

Then Abigail lifted her red silk cloak and wrapped it around the both of them, pulling Virgil closer. He was completely covered by the cloak and could no longer see the strange, industrial world that brought him only feelings of fear. She pulled Virgil towards her naked breasts, which made Virgil suddenly extremely tense and nervous. He never felt a naked woman before. And she felt so real.

"It's ok, Virgil," said Abigail. "There is no time for fear anymore." And she pulled him closer still.

Again, the feelings of loss and heartache gripped Virgil from head to toe and made him feel as if he were collapsing upon himself. He began to relapse into the violent fits he had when he was a child. Abigail caressed his hair. He suddenly felt again that he had been falling for a very long time, the one sensation that never really left him, even in the time of his forgetting.

"I... I can't help it, Abigail. I am afraid. I feel death." Virgil was crying again.

Abigail hushed him and massaged the back of the neck, kissing him on

the forehead. He felt the warmth of her naked breasts push away the fear and replace it with a tingling comfort. And then he no longer felt like he was falling. The entirety of existence vanished and became replaced by Abigail's red cloak and her naked, perfect body. He felt every negative emotion push itself to the surface, but they disintegrated each time Abigail kissed him.

"You've got to become strong, Virgil. I will help you. So will your friend. Do not forget to dream."

There was an infinite pause in which all the joy and pain Virgil ever felt joined together in an orgasmic explosion within his mind and body. And then found himself back in his apartment, covered in sweat and breathing heavy. His blanket was gone and he was wrapped under a red cloak, but Abigail was nowhere to be seen.

Virgil and Hank went to a diner the next night and talked over egg sandwiches on white bread and endless cups of coffee. Virgil called his foreman at the factory from a pay phone at the diner to quit his job. Hank decided he was just going to stop showing up, as he had done countless times before. As a result of the commission he received from the inflated sale of lug nuts, along with the months he held his management job, Hank saved up plenty of money to support the both of them for quite a while.

Virgil hardly said a word that day when he got out of bed. Hank didn't press him, content to be silent as long as necessary. When Virgil walked backed to the booth after the phone call, he began to speak.

"Hank, I had a dream last night."

"I kind of figured on that," replied Hank, and he lit a cigarette.

He told Hank as much as he could remember - about the double pyramid, about Abigail and how she aged even though she was dead, and about the room they saw inside the double pyramid, which he described as something between a laboratory and a factory. He told Hank how they floated to the top and saw a strange city from another world. He started to tell him about the way Abigail held him, but he found himself growing nervous when he approached the topic and left it out. He did however, tell him what Abigail said about pain and energy and how he strained to make sense of it all.

"Heavy stuff, kid," said Hank. "I can't say I understand it all myself. That double-pyramid and everything that you saw inside of it, that's nothing I've ever seen. I don't know what to make of it. We'll come back to that though. Let's

focus on the energy first, because that is the basis of everything."

"How so?"

"When Abigail died, what did you see happening to her?"

"She was burned up, engulfed in flames, but not really. I mean, I saw the flames, but when it was all over her body was fine and there was no evidence of any fire."

"That's the release of human energy back into the Universe. It takes the form of fire, of passion, in those that are particularly strong and whole. Then they become one."

"I thought she went to hell."

"That is a common misconception and one of the reasons why people traditionally associate fire with death and hell."

"Well, I knew these two old men, they were some winos that used to let me hang around when I was a kid. Before Abigail came along, they were the only others I'd met whose eyes had the amber glow in them. When they died, they shot up to the sky like light, and it was like the light I saw in the vials inside the pyramids."

"I have noticed this too when people die, and I believe that to be what happens to people who are weaker. When people have a strong energy, it burns as it leaves the body. And the energy is so strong that even we can't see it."

"What happens when you rejoin the Universe?"

"Your energy becomes immortal, because the Universe is a breathing entity. This is going to be hard for you to understand, but think of it this way. You have told me that you grew up religious. Remember when you were a kid and people talked about god - most of the mythology and legend that surrounds

the notion of god is another misinterpretation. This idea of god is actually just the Living Universe. The Universe is actually an organism in and of itself that feeds off of us and gives back to us. It's all cyclical, the energy does not leave. That's physics - that energy cannot be displaced. There must be a balance, it only transforms. Your friend must have been so strong in spirit that she still is very much alive within the Universe. Not in physical form, and not like a ghost or anything, but as a part of the universe. And her being can still manipulate other forms of energy, especially in the dream world. Which is why she seems so real to you. She is. She is real and it's very important that you keep in communication with her. Because she is part of the Living Universe, she knows more than you or I could ever imagine. She knows Truth because now she is Truth.

In many religions people talk about death unifying a person with their god. What actually happens is that person's energy combines with the energy of existence itself, and thereafter exists both separately and together with it. She has retained her individuality within the sea of energy that the universe has both fed off of and given back to us."

Virgil sipped his coffee and took a bite of his sandwich.

"She told me that the city we were looking at was hell," he said to Hank with a look of worry."

"As far as I know, hell, in the way that religions have expressed it, does not exist," replied Hank. "I don't know what she meant by that, but keep talking to her - it will be revealed. You just need to watch your dreams, and I will teach you how. I will teach you how to live in the dreamworld and to impose the dreamworld into reality, at which point you might find yourself seeing little

difference. Virgil, I can see the annals of human history surrounding us right now. I can look at the grill cook and see the Spanish Inquisition. We live in a momentary existence but in that moment all of time exists. The past, the present, and the future. All parallel universes that converge here and now, always."

"So what is hell?"

"I believe hell to be lost energy, energy that hasn't found it's way back to the universe. It bounces around the cosmos looking for its home and cannot find it. Or the energy fights its natural return to that which gave it breath. Then it destroys itself when it is expelled from the host."

Virgil sat back in thought.

"But," Hank went on, "that's all conjecture."

"Hank, can I ask you a personal question?" Virgil said.

"Shoot," replied Hank with a smile.

"Why are you doing this?" Virgil asked as he pushed his coffee aside and leaned forward on the table. "What do you have to gain from this?"

Hank laughed.

"I go where the Universe tells me. And it told me to come to you. See, I hadn't met anybody with the glow in a long, long time. When I was young, I was part of a traveling cavalcade of sorts. A pack of people that were my age. We followed an older fellow who taught us, like I am teaching you. He was stronger than I was though, he was a sorcerer. He could manipulate energy even in his living form. After he died, the group fell apart, one by one. The fog took them. And I hadn't seen anybody with the glow since then. I've been living a... solitary existence. I had all but given up hope of finding anybody else and then you came along. That day when you bumped into me, running out of the bathroom, I saw a

shine behind the fog that covered your eyes. I had to know. And now that I do, I have to teach you, because I'm old Virgil, and I won't be around too long. Somebody must keep Truth alive."

At that moment the grill cook turned up the television that was mounted to the top of the wall in one of the corners of the exposed kitchen. Hank and Virgil turned to look. There was a news reporter holding a finger to his ear and talking into a microphone. A headline scrolled in front over a blue banner that read, "UFO Sightings Seen By Hundreds." They stopped talking and listened.

There have been hundreds of people who have been reporting the same thing, a spinning double-pyramid shape floating above large cities. They have been reported to have a bright glow and have been seen all across the country. People who have seen this unidentified object have stated that it will hover a few miles above and then vanish, as if out of thin air. We have called the Air Force but haven't heard back from them. Government officials are declining to comment. We do however have some footage that was sent to us by one of the people who claimed to have seen the object.

The screen cut to homemade footage of an object floating in the sky that looked exactly like the one that Abigail led Virgil into. Virgil stopped drinking his coffee. Hank looked confused.

"Hank, that's it! That's what I saw in my dream! That's what Abigail took me into!" Virgil yelled.

Hank realized that people in the diner were turning to look at them and motioned for Virgil to lower his voice.

"What's going on Hank?"

Hank turned back towards the television and looked grim.

"I don't know, Virgil. I have no idea."

They continued to look at the screen in silence for a few moments.

"I think I'd better start teaching you how to dream, because I think you and Abigail need to have a talk."

Back at Virgil's apartment, Hank paced back and forth rapidly while telling Virgil everything he knew about dreams and how to use them to recall the information that was hidden in Virgil's mind. There was a strange sense of urgency now. Hank was never one to believe in science fiction but the connection between the news report and Virgil's dream was too strong to be ignored. He didn't know what it meant but he knew the only way they could find out was through Abigail.

"The problem right now," Hank began, "is that you are at the mercy of your dreams. If you learned how to control them, in the sense that you could go to that place whenever you wanted - out of your own volition - then you could talk to Abigail any time. When I was young, shortly after my old leader died, I used to stay in close contact with him. The rest of the group was unable to do so, which was a big reason why they gave in."

"What happened when they gave in?" asked Virgil.

"People often lose faith in what they are doing when they try to deal with the gravity of pain and perception. It often becomes misconstrued as mental illness and they end up thinking they are crazy. This, mixed with the pain of being, it just breaks them down. The fog takes over."

Virgil looked down and sat silently as he related this to his own experience. I've thrown away years of my life by giving in, he thought. Hank looked at him and sensed this.

"There's no time for regret, Virgil. Youth is wasted on the young, as they say. The important thing, as always, is now. So listen."

Hank instructed Virgil on lucid dreaming, on how to willingly call people and landscapes in his dreams, on how to project himself into other places, other galaxies, into protons and neutrons and matter itself. He told him the difference between watching a dream and being part of it, and he told him how to recall these things in his waking life.

"The trick," Hank said, "is to turn off the inner dialogue that runs through. You need to watch it and remove yourself from it. You need to learn how to separate your conscious thought from your unconscious thought. You need to learn to meditate and mediate - become a medium for the universe. Once that inner dialogue is gone, you can lift the weight of being and float. You need to become a walking mantra."

Hank made Virgil sit on the coffee table with his legs crossed.

"Sit silently, don't say a word. Breath. Watch your breath. Your breath is everything, it is the only thing that exists."

Hank watched Virgil. Virgil started to shift his weight and Hank slapped him in the head.

"Hey, what was that for?" snapped Virgil.

"Do not think about how you are uncomfortable. If your body tells you that you are uncomfortable let it pass. Detach yourself from it."

They tried again. After a few minutes, Virgil looked at Hank and started to ask him a question, but Hank slapped him in the head again.

"Don't talk and don't look at me. Look through me. Look into your mind so that you can look through it. Breath deep. Don't do anything else."

This went on for a while until Virgil started to feel the room slip away. He felt himself surrounded by clouds. He felt the vapor of them on his face. He

snapped his eyes back open and smiled.

"I did it!" he exclaimed. Hank slapped him again, laughing this time.

"And then you blew it. Do it again!"

Virgil repeated the process and the room fell away again. This time he saw himself as a child in his mother's van thinking of heaven. He now noticed that the world he imagined himself to be pulling down had been there all along. Then he saw himself following Muskrat and Ragweed through the woods. He saw them laughing at him but he no longer felt affected by it. He saw Abigail reaching out to hold his hand. He took it. And then they flew away to the great pyramids far away, flying through them and into the tombs below. He heard Hank's voice calling him back.

"Why did you call me back?" asked Virgil.

"Because the next step is to be able to hold this state while interacting in the physical world. That will require more practice."

"How does this relate to dreams?" asked Virgil.

"The things that the mind does in the dream world can also be done in the waking world. What you need to do is learn how to be both awake and asleep at the same time. You need to learn how to superimpose the dream world onto reality."

He explained to Virgil how part of the brain works to interact with the world comprised of organic matter while the other part works to communicate with the world of dreams, which is Hank said was the spiritual world. He said that once the inner dialogue was gone, and once he learned how to navigate the other dimensions, dreaming would become habitual and he could do this any time that he wanted. He could travel to any place in the known and unknown

Universe.

"All I can do," said Hank, "Is lead you into your own mind. The Universe is relative to your perception, so when it comes down to it, you need to teach yourself. Now try and speak with your friend. I won't interfere."

Abigail was waiting for Virgil down the end of a long linoleum highway that had the eerie feeling of a hospital made of plastic. Everything looked new but it was completely empty except for Abigail. She was standing at the end, looking out a wall of glass with her back turned. Virgil was moving towards her as if the floor was not a glossy white tile, but a conveyer belt like the ones he remembered from the assembly line at the factory. He heard pops and hisses like the burning of dry firewood and the pungent smell of ethanol burned the edges of his nostrils. He came to a rest at Abigail's side. Her eyes were lost in the world beyond the window. She looked somber and disturbed.

"Abigail..." Virgil said.

She turned towards him and forced a half-smile. She was where a white spider-silk dress with a dark black shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her skin was milk white in the reflection of the hospital like surroundings. She smelled like coconut cutting the ethanol.

"Hello, Virgil. I see that Hank has been teaching you."

"Yes, he has. He's a good teacher."

"You are learning quickly. Do you remember?"

"Remember what, Abigail?"

"Do you remember the journeys we took? Do you remember the way we soared?"

Virgil's mind rushed down a tunnel and he saw the two of them walking along the stream in the woods that they followed as children on their way to school.

"Yes, I remember."

"The creek spoke to us then, Virgil. Do you know what it was saying?"

Virgil remained silent and locked himself into Abigail's burning eyes.

"Virgil, the natural world has been upset. The balance has been lost, long ago."

Virgil now met Abigail's concern. His eyebrows furled and he felt a sudden pressure in his chest.

"How do you mean?"

"Look outside, Virgil."

They turned towards the glass wall and looked out. Virgil saw a large city of familiar skyscrapers and high rises and a connecting web of streets, but it was covered in the bubbling green ooze that he was growing accustomed to seeing in his dreams. The ooze was smoking and he suddenly heard the collective moaning of thousands. He then saw the glowing double-pyramid rise out of the ooze and into the air. The ooze clung to the pyramid ship for only a brief second and then dropped below to its home in the hungry sea. Thousands of small beams of light ran from the ooze and into the bottom of the double-pyramid ship. The ship acted as a reverse prism and one beam of white light shot out for the point on the top, straight up into the sky. There, again, he saw the same Roman numerals he saw before: XX-IV-V.

"What is this?" he asked her.

"This is what has been happening to the world you live in, the world I

died in, since the beginning of human existence."

"I've never seen this before," he responded.

"It's not organic, you can't see it when you are in your body."

"What is it, Abigail?"

Abigail turned again towards Virgil and put her hands around his neck. Her eyes began to water and she breathed deep.

"It's the sea of alien parasites... They've come to harvest the human race."

The pressure returned to his chest.

"I don't understand."

Abigail looked away and there was a great series of flashes, like a strobe light, that overtook Virgil's sight and devoured the cityscape. After it was finished they were in a dark chamber with a pool of water in the middle. It was like a cave but it was made of steel. The pool was still and clear, so you could see to the bottom, which was made of the same kind of steel.

"Look inside," Abigail instructed.

Virgil walked up to the pool and looked into it. He saw a reflection of himself and Abigail. Abigail reached her hand in and stirred the waters, which gradually gave way to a hazy vision of Hank. He was wearing his suit and running through an alleyway. Large, red brick walls lined either side of him. They had no top - they went onward forever. Hank looked desperate and tired. There were thick beads of sweat pouring down his face. Then a large creature suddenly came into view, pushing the image of Hank away. The creature was nearly humanoid, but not quite. It had a torso, arms, legs, and a head, but its features were misplaced and alien. The arms gave way to large, slimy tentacles and the

feet were pointed and clawed at the end with thick folds of sewage-colored leather. The legs, and torso were hairy with knotted, crustaceous armor that was the same burgundy color of the creature's skin. There were large bat-like wings that rose from the shoulder blades and it had three tails with barbed, arrowed ends shooting out from the creatures backside. The head was beaked and reptilian and there was a single, glowing yellowed eye in the center. The creature opened its mouth and stuck out its tongue, which to Virgil looked like a tangled mess of snakes.

"This is a joke," Virgil said.

Abigail turned away and pulled Virgil with him. The cave vanished and they were back in the gleaming, sterile hallway.

"It's no joke, Virgil." She was very stern, serious, almost admonishing.

"And time is running short."

"What should I do?" Virgil asked.

Abigail looked down.

"I have to go Virgil. Leave the city. Hank will take you. You have more to learn."

She leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips. A shock passed through. Another moment slipped by where Virgil left himself completely, which he could only do with only knew in contact with her. Through the subatomic friction that kept them minutely but forever apart, he felt a glimpse of her soul and mind. It was the only time he felt at home.

And then Virgil was back in his apartment, sitting on the coffee table and looking at Hank, who was on the couch with his eyes closed, smiling.

Virgil told Hank about the vision. Hank was disturbed when he heard what Virgil saw in the pool.

"I'm not afraid to say," Hank said, "that I haven't the slightest clue as to what the hell is going on."

"She told me to leave the city," Virgil said.

Hank stood up and began to pace back in forth while stroking his chin.

"We may be able to make quicker progress somewhere with more isolation. And there is no power greater than that of Earth itself," Hank said.

"Where should we go?" Virgil asked.

"Far away. Deep into the desert. And we will leave first thing in the morning."

The next day, the old station wagon rolled off the highway and towards the horizon, far off of the dirt roads, towards canyons and dried ravines. Before they left the city, they pulled off at a station for gas, where they found a newspaper. The UFO's were, according to the military, an experimental communications satellite. Hank and Virgil both read the headline, but neither believed a word.

Hank had been to the desert spot dozens of times, but Virgil was in uncharted territory. He saw nothing but death and emptiness here and it reminded him of the fear that gripped him as a child. He thought of his grandfather's casket and how big it looked. There was vast nothingness all around them and it threatened to swallow him whole. The air was dry and smacked him on the side of the face like sandpaper as they cruised forward with the windows down. There was only dust in this world, dust and little animals that lived off of dust. It was the exoskeleton of the earth. It was hard and unforgiving and not used to human life.

Virgil wondered if this was the fate of the rest of the world, once the green ooze swept through. He wondered if they were driving through the graveyard of a lost civilization.

Hank talked to Virgil about the power of the earth and the sky, about how man could harness the power of nature by welcoming it's incomprehensible silence.

"From this we came," he said, "and to this we will return."

Hank told Virgil that these barren fields were the portal to his

ancestors, to the beginnings of humankind. All of humanity lie in the dust, he said. And all of history is happening now, has never stopped. Eternity exists in a moment, and once you learn to crawl inside the moment, you learn the ways the eternal.

They reached a point in the desert that was indiscernible from the rest except for a single cactus that was cascaded by distant, raised cliffs. The sky faded from purple to pink to blue to white, like a geodesic prism that engulfed the earth. Hank told Virgil to go to the back of the station wagon and fetch a shovel wrapped inside of a tarp.

"What do you want me to do with that Virgil asked.

"Dig a hole," Hank said and smiled.

"Dig a hole?" asked Virgil. "Hank, this isn't a good time to mess around."

"Dig a hole," Hank said again. He was still smiling but he was deadly serious.

Virgil looked at Hank and sighed. Then he dug. Hours passed by while Hank sat on the hood of the station wagon and watched, occasionally smoking a cigarette. Virgil took off his shirt and pants and dug feverishly in his underwear. The sun baked his skin and soaked him in sweat as his muscles strained in labor. When he finished, Hank brought him some water.

"Now what?" asked Virgil. Now Hank smiled.

"Get in."

"Go to hell, Hank," said Virgil, exasperated.

"Get in," he repeated. "Or shall I make you?" He smiled again and took the shovel. Virgil though Hank's smile was becoming unsettling. But he

remembered Abigail telling him to listen to Hank. He sighed again and lowered himself into the hole. Hank began to fill it in.

"What is this supposed to do?" asked Virgil.

"It surrounds you completely by the element from which you came. You will meditate here in the desert, completely in the desert, and you will learn to harness the power of humanity through the only thing that gives us any meaning - the world in which we exist. This dust is meaningless and yet it is more powerful than you or I could ever hope to be. The consciousness of the dust is stronger than ours, for it thinks nothing. It wants nothing. It has to hopes, no desires, no expectations, no ideas about being anything other than what it is. It is, and so you will be."

Before long, all that could be seen of Virgil was his head sticking out of the hard, barren ground. His face and hair were covered in dirt, and he spat dust out of his mouth.

Hank flipped the shovel upside down and drew a circle in the dirt. Then he pulled a small leather back out of his jacket pocket and sprinkled a black dust all around.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"You don't want to be eaten by scorpions do you?" asked Hank, his suspicious smile growing larger.

"Hank, get me out of here! Get me the hell out of here! This is insane!" protested Virgil.

"You don't need to trust me, kid, but you trust your friend Abigail, don't you? What did she say?"

Virgil was silent. Hank dropped the shovel and began to walk away.

"Where are you going?" Virgil yelled.

"I am going to be alone. Your visions have frightened me. You need to get a hold on them. And I feel an end to the line that passes through me. I need to do as you, I need to connect with the earth. Be patient. Be strong. Fight your fears. I will be back to get you at nightfall."

"Nightfall? Hank, that's hours from now! I could die! I could be dead by then!"

"Yes," said Hank. "You could. But if that happens, what will you have to worry about?" And then he walked away.

Virgil stood in the hole, unable to move anything but his neck. The sun beat down him profusely and made him itch. The unbearableness of not being able to scratch himself or shield himself from the sun made Virgil feel psychotic. It made him recall the times after Abigail died when he succumbed to what he called mental illness. He suddenly found himself wondering if it were true.

Was I crazy then? Virgil thought. Am I still crazy now?

He fought to accept the situation he was in. It was ludicrous. He wanted out but the dirt was packed tight and he couldn't move his limbs.

Hours passed by. Virgil was growing furious and delirious. He was in the hands of a senile old man and he trusted him. Now he was going to die.

No, get a hold of yourself, he thought. There must be a method to all of this.

Virgil had no reason not to trust Hank, and he trusted Abigail with his life. Unless it was all make believe. Unless he was crazy, always had been, and he had fallen prey to somebody else just as crazy as he.

No. That can't be. Fight it.

Virgil breathed. He counted backwards from ten. He began to panic and started over. 10... This is insane 9... I can't believe this is happening ... 8 What have I gotten myself into? 7 6 5... just take it easy... 4... close your eyes... 3... think of the dust... 2... think of the bones that have passed through ... 1... Come to me, Virgil...

He opened his eyes and the desert began to fade. Green bean sprouts pushed through the hard ground, which was cracking wide open. Trees sprang forth from the bean pods. Thousands of years of growth occurred in seconds. He was in a rainforest and it was cool and breezy. There was a stream that ran around him. He yearned for the water. He saw monkeys and birds and rodents and insects all around him. He saw apes walking on their hind legs using their bulky arms and knuckles for support. Then he saw the double-pyramid ship appear in the sky, just above the tree line.

The pyramid ship slowly descended onto the ground level of the forest. The door opened and the ramp lowered while the ship glowed and hummed. Louder, more intense. A dozen tentacled, reptilian cyclopods walked out onto the moist earth. The ground shook when the clawed feet touched soil. The soil recoiled in disgust under their weight.

The alien pack gathered at the base of the ramp and stood still. The biggest one stood forward and howled. It was a deep, hissing noise. It sang with its throat and nose while it released a blood-curdling scream. The rest of the creatures squirmed and emitted green ooze.

The biggest one advanced towards and a female ape and wrapped a tentacle around its throat. The ape protested and tried to beat her way free but she was too weak. Her pack began to advance but was held off by something

invisible. The rest of the aliens pack focused their cyclops eyes on them with their tentacles raised towards them.

The big creature pushed the ape to the ground.

Virgil felt instinct take over and made a motion to run at the alien. The dirt held him still.

The ape struggled and began to cry out as the creature mounted. Virgil screamed. The ape's pack could not penetrate the force field that held them back.

Virgil threw up. The vomit stuck to his chin and the smell made him gag. He closed his eyes but he could see through his eyelids. He tried to turn his head but it followed him. The earth shook violently. The sky split open and bled. The Universe was in pain.

Virgil screamed again. It went unnoticed. Suddenly Virgil was flying, flying towards the creatures, but not at them. He went inside of them and felt himself being injected into the ape. He was one in a pool of a million little double headed snakes that squirmed in a river of green ooze. He saw himself traveling with them through the anatomy of the ape. He recognized the internal organs, the stomach, the intestines, the liver and the heart. The puddle of ooze ran to the spine and the snakes attached themselves to it. They crawled upwards towards the neck, through the throat now and into the brain. And then they attacked.

Virgil watched as the million little demon tadpoles attacked the brain, biting it and crawling inside. The brain secreted the green ooze. It smelled like a cadaver. And then the brain grew and mutated. It formed a green film around itself and began to pulse and throb, as it it were a second heart.

Then it all dissolved and Virgil was back in darkness. He was crying. He

felt helpless. He wanted to kill the creatures. He wanted to destroy the pyramid-ships.

The apes returned, now walking through the darkness. They began to change. At first, they walked by using their knuckles for support. Then they pushed themselves up, one by one, and began to walk, becoming more upright with each step. They began to lose their fur. They were becoming human. They were evolving.

Then it was over.

Virgil was standing in the room with the light filled vials. Abigail was with him. Virgil was angry and spoke in a loud voice.

"Abigail, what's going on? Why is this happening? I don't want any part of this. Why did I have to watch that? Have I gone crazy?"

"They would like for you to think that, baby," she said while grasping his neck. Virgil was gracious for the comfort. "I'm afraid this is the truth. This is what happened. This is why we are here."

"What are you saying, Abigail?"

"Alien genetics, Virgil," said Abigail. "They forced evolution upon us. We are them. At least, in part. They interfered with the life force and we are their prisoners."

"I have gone insane. None of this is real I'm going to commit myself. I've obviously lost whatever was left of my mind."

"I'm afraid you are more in your right mind than you ever have been before in your life, Virgil. Asexual parasitic reproduction. These creatures have a fully developed, parasitic sperm. The creatures attacked the primates with purpose. The parasite attached itself to early primate minds and has reproduced

by overriding human DNA ever since."

"This is sick."

"They clone themselves and the clone attaches onto human sperm. It rides the sperm into the egg. Then it waits until the brain is formed and begin to feed. And it keeps feeding, for an entire lifetime."

"Then you are alien, and I am alien, if this is all alien why are you telling me this? What's the point?"

"We are not alien, so-to-speak. We are the host of alien parasites that seek to destroy our awareness so that our energy can be withdrawn. They have forced evolution upon us so as to make our energy stronger, more fit for their machinery back home. Our brain is part of us, but it also hosts a part of them that seeks to take us over.

Virgil, those with fog in their eyes are losing the battle. Those who get harvested have lost the fight. They have given in to the powers of the parasite."

Abigail paused and breathed deeply.

"Virgil, the aliens came here for a reason. Do you see these vials? They are filled with the energy of humanity. All of human civilization has been harvested by these creatures. That's what the light is, it's human energy. That's why Muskrat and Ragweed left in rays of light. They were going to the mothership."

"Then why did you burn up? Why didn't you go back to the mothership?"

"What the aliens hadn't counted on was the power of the Universe, Virgil. The life force, the Living Universe Itself, it has been fighting against it. Inside of each of us is part universe and part alien. They have been at constant

war. That is why you thought you were going crazy when I died, Virgil. That was the alien taking over. That is their weapon, the deficiencies of the mind. They use it to gain control. They use our emotions and our memories to wear us down. They use them to get humans to give up, to stop living. Then the life force dies and they can take the human energy.

But I wouldn't let it, I overcame. That is why I burned up. That is what happens when the energy within us rejoins the universe." Then she added, "You can do this, too. Anybody can."

"Abigail..." Virgil was beside himself. He felt nauseous. "Abigail, this is crazy. There's no way. There's just no way this is possible."

Abigail reached for Virgil and kissed him once again. He felt Truth seep in.

"It's all true," she said and turned him towards the vials. "All of this light, Virgil, this is the history of humanity."

"But... Why?"

"They use it to power their own civilization. They live off of our energy. They themselves are a mutation, a horrible, disgusting mutation that feasts off of life itself."

"And they're coming back? Why do they need to be here at all? It seems like they have it all figured out. Where do I fit in? What about Hank? What about you?"

"They seek those with the amber glow. They want to harvest us because we are the most powerful. Those of us who have been able to fend off their attacks, who have been able to maintain communication with the universe. They want total control. They've come for you, and for Hank. And for the few

hundred others who are scattered across the world. They've already gotten to most of them. Once the aware are gone, they have nothing more to oppose them. They're going to come for you, to hide the truth, to harvest humanity. And then they will come for me. Then, they will come for the Universe."

"What am I supposed to do? What can I do?"

"I don't know, Virgil... I don't know. All I can do right now is show you Truth. I cannot do anything with it. You need to be strong. You need to keep the Truth alive. And you need to fight. You can't give in."

And then everything gave way to static, like a broken television set, and Virgil found himself back in the desert looking at Hank, who was digging him out of the ground.

The desert sky was lit by countless stars, constellations, galaxies and planets. The moon was full and orange with the embers of the passing night. A meteor shower raged onward and so it looked like raining stardust. Mentor and protege both sat on the hood of the car watching the celestial blanket unfold as Virgil told Hank of his vision. Hank listened with a pale face.

"I've got something that I've been saving for emergencies, and I think now is that emergency," said Hank, and he retrieved a flask from the glove compartment in his car.

"What is it?" asked Virgil, leaning up on his right elbow as Hank retrieved it.

"One of man's finest elixirs. It's a good medicine and it's never failed me."

Virgil gave Hank a confused look.

"It's whiskey, kid," Hank said. "And right now, I need it."

Hank returned to the hood of the station wagon with the flask and took a big drink before handing it to Virgil, who felt compelled to oblige. The cold air of the desert night soothed Virgil's heat worn, aching body and the whiskey warmed his throat and chest. He coughed, unused to the burn of liquor.

"What's wrong, Hank?"

Hank took another pull.

"What you're telling me is that my brain, your brain, in fact the brain of every living person on this planet is being control by little...reptile sperm from another galaxy? That we have only been given the power for thought so that we

can lose control of it to some tentacled monster light years away?"

"It may not be so simple a distance as that, actually. It may be inter-dimensional, not necessarily a distance on the x-y axis."

Hank gave Virgil an angry look. He sat up and put the flask in his pocket.

"You sure have picked things up quick, haven't you? Inter-dimensional? Abigail teach you that word?" Virgil flinched. "Sorry, kid," Hank saw the burn her name had but he didn't pull back. "Really though, you expect me to believe this?" Hank pushed himself off the car hood and walked back to the driver's seat. "I think maybe you are a little off your rocker, kid. And you know what? I think I might be too. I think that everything I believed up to this point has been..." Hank laughed. "Science-fiction. Get in the car, we're leaving."

"Hank -" Virgil protested but Hank was resolute.

"In the car, kid!" Hank stopped and turned sharply at Virgil. "Unless you feel like walkin'."

Virgil jumped off the hood and sat in the passenger seat as Hank turned on the car and immediately pushed the pedal hard against the floor. The wheels spun out and the wagon fishtailed before speeding off into the direction from whence they came.

"Do you know how to get out of here in the dark, Hank?" asked Virgil over the sound of the revving motor. Hank turned and looked at Virgil with a wicked grin and put his sunglasses on, just as he did nights before on the way to the cliffside where Virgil first began to dive deep into the recall of his awareness.

"I know everything, kid," he said. "I know all the secrets. I'm a goddamned alien sonofabitch." The station wagon was charging forward at

interstate speeds, tossing itself wildly on the roadless path.

"Hank, settle down! For chrissakes, you're gonna blow out a tire, we're gonna get stuck out here!"

"Then the mothership will pick us up, right?"

Hank laughed with spite and pulled from the whiskey again. He began to ramble.

"You know, kid, for all my life - all my goddamn life, I think I'm a freak, a real freak, ya know? And every now and then, no really - just a couple times, I meet somebody that makes me think - there's no question. No question about it. I'm a freakin' loon. And this is one of those times."

Hank lit a cigarette.

"Take those glasses off, Hank, you're acting insane," yelled Virgil as he clung to the door through the open window. Hank turned and looked at Virgil with a wicked grin, the fresh cherry burning directly beneath his nose as his teeth bit down on the end of a cigarette.

He slammed on the break and turned hard to the right. They spun quickly out of control - 180 degrees, 360, 540, 900, onward until dizziness replaced the equilibrium. Then they came to a quick stop and Virgil, who was not wearing his seatbelt, was thrown against the windshield which cracked against the weight. Virgil felt blood running over his eyes.

Hank braced himself against the steering wheel. They came to a complete stop the unsettled dust surrounded them in a cloud. Hank thrust open the door and, leaving the keys in the ignition, stepped out of the car and jumped wildly onto the hood. He looked hard at Virgil, clenching his fists and shaking from head to toe. The veins in his forehead were screaming through his skin,

which turned plum-red, verging on purple in anger. Virgil shook himself but was paralyzed in his seat, wide-eyed in terror.

And then - in a magnificent downward arc - a hot glow pushed forward, separating the stars and calming the dust. Though a brisk wind broke through it was still, as if the wind blew in a vacuum and could be felt apart from the stillness. Every hair on both of the men's bodies raised in stark alertness. Skin was rough with blood wanting to break through. A double-pyramid appeared in the distance behind Hank, who began to curse and spit at Virgil through the cracked windshield.

"You don't get into the lug nut business and expect to walk out with your head attached," he yelled. "You goddamn punk! I shoulda stayed back in Arizona, back in that goddamn peyote field. There were women there, man, jesus there were women, and now I'm stuck with a goddamn kid who thinks he's an inter-deminsional freakin' alien, and christ I'm thinkin' I can help this kid, because I want to feel like this all meant something -"

"Hank!" Virgil was yelling, pointing frantically behind his teacher. "Hank, I think you should turn around!"

"Now you're telling me what to do!" Hank snapped.

"Hank I'm not messin' around, man, look the hell behind you!"

Hank spit again, snarled, and raised his boot.

"I hope there is a hell kid, I hope that place you saw was real. Go there and take me with you." He brought his boot down through the window, shattering the glass on the passenger side so that it exploded inward. Virgil shielded himself with his hands and his raised legs while the shards rained over him. He felt himself get cut. He felt blood drip.

Virgil was hot with adrenaline. He was fueled with a mixture of delusion and fear and still running off of the euphoric afterglow of his earlier vision. He reacted quickly and kicked open the passenger door. He jumped immediately onto the hood of the van and - to the surprise of both Hank and himself - thrust a bloody fist into his teacher's jaw. Hank dropped immediately and Virgil dragged him off the hood, throwing him across the back seat. He slammed the passenger door and looked back at the pyramid ship, which was growing larger and advancing towards them. He ran to the driver side and got in, turning the keys and slamming his foot on the gas.

He sped forward, hoping it was the right direction, and noticed in his rearview mirror the pyramid ship following them. It continued grow larger and brighter each second. The blood dripped into his eyes. He was growing faint but pushed harder on the gas. Abigail appeared in his blurring sight, just above his eye line, as if she were dancing on the horizon.

"Keep your foot down," he heard her voice say, "and keep your eyes on me."

He clenched his teeth and strained to focus on Abigail, who was swaying back and forth. He gripped the wheel tightly and matched the movements of Abigail's hips with the direction of the wheel. When she dashed left, he turned with her, and when she leapt right, so did he. He looked back in the rearview mirror again. The pyramid began to fade. Then it grew brighter than ever, three times, four times its original intensity, and sprung back towards the stars, which were still spread open, as if waiting for its return. It was gone from sight, for now.

Virgil continued to drive straight as the adrenaline and euphoria gradually faded away. Hank was unconscious, sprawled and limp across the back seat. Virgil knew that Hank brought two full tanks of gas that sat in utility canisters in a steel tool-trunk in the rear of the station wagon, so he wasn't worried about gas. He grew too tired to care any longer if they were heading in a direction that led back to a road. Anything that led them away from that ship.

Virgil wondered if Hank was right. He wondered if his perspective were skewed, and if he and Hank shared a matched delusion. But he recalled the voice of Abigail, almost hearing it again, and felt the joy of knowing her push through his body, warming his blood and calming his nerves. He favored this reality, even if it were skewed and biased and now seeping with monstrosity. He felt more alive.

And so he drove, refilling the gas tank once in the night as Hank remained in a lost state of unconscious agitation, tossing and turning every hour or so and mumbling incomprehensible words. And then the sun came up. As it burst through the sky, bringing with it the unforgiving desert heat, Virgil saw a road.

He was too tired to show it but Virgil was thrilled. He felt a renewed desire to be survive whereas he previously only tolerated living, motivated to stay alive purely by a harrowing fear of death.

Fifty miles down the paved desert road, Virgil saw a road motel with carports and a cafe. Next to which was a gas station, general store, and post office. The motel was called "Desert Stop Motel," which was painted with black

sloppy block letters on a whitewashed sandwich board. He pulled into a parking spot and fell back into the driver seat, relieving his exhaustion with a long exhale of breath.

Hank stirred. He sat up, shaking his head and rubbing his hair, confused and straining to remember what it was to be awake as the remnants of bourbon and madness struggled to pry themselves off his inflamed mind.

"Oh boy," Hank muttered, to himself mostly since he was not yet aware of his environment. He looked around and double took when he saw Virgil. Vague recollections of the night before came back to him in fragmented shotgun bursts, ten at a time but each only for an second.

"Virgil," Hank spurted, "Hey kid, I think I owe you an apology..." He paused. "But I'm not quite sure." He looked at the shattered windshield and felt a throbbing pain in his jaw. He rubbed it while stretching his mouth, checking to see if it still retained mobility. He saw the motel beyond the windshield. "We made it out of the desert." He said.

"I drove though the night," Virgil said. "I'm going to rest, if I can. Give me some money."

Hank looked at Virgil and received his words in lag time, each one seconds after it was said. When he fully comprehended what Virgil told him, he nodded.

"Okay," he said, and reached for the wallet in his back pocket. He pulled out a large bill and handed it to Virgil.

"Get the suite," Hank said sarcastically.

Virgil rented a room and walked immediately inside, dropping himself onto the bed and leaving the lights off. Hank followed in minutes later, closing

the door behind him and staggering to a wooden folding chair that sat next to a small table to the right of the room's entrance. It smelled stale. There was rough carpet below his feet that pushed through the soles his shoes, which he was now kicking off. He sat in silence as Virgil slept, his mind slowly getting used to being awake.

Hank felt attacked. Not by Virgil, though he remembered enough of the preceding nights' events to know that Virgil punched him in the jaw. This explained the sharp pain and slight disconnection he felt in that spot. He felt attacked by something else, though, something invisible.

He reached for his whiskey but it wasn't there, so he got up and made coffee with the complimentary package of grounds that sat in a wicker basket next to the sink. Most road motels wouldn't have this, he thought. This was followed by the thought that it was nice to be thinking of something so trivial at a time like this.

A time like what? He wondered. A time when something starts to exist that negates everything the human race has been lead to believe? But the Truths, he thought, the Truths are still there - nothing changes.

"But they may not be Truths. They may be Lies."

He heard the words as if it were another voice, or another version of his voice, a low, mean, raspy growl.

"You were led astray," the voice said. "Just like your friends when the leader died, just like the Christians, just like Virgil. There is no Truth. The truth is that, either, you are no better than a pile of coal to a vicious breed of overlords, or you have simply gone off the deep end."

The coffee finished brewing and Hank took the whole pot back over to

the table. It was light outside and that light filtered through the moth eaten curtains and sprinkled through the room. The coffee gave off a slight smell of charred root. Hank sat and drank a cup, lighting a cigarette while playfully tossing aside the no smoking sign that was on the table. He tried to relax. He breathed. He tried to meditate, which he had done a countless amount of times before.

There was something that was building a wall between Hank and his self. The inner-being that floats through your core, that part of you that recognizes your existence, that you seek to pacify and communicate with, it was cut off. By something he couldn't put a finger on. He felt ripped apart.

There was a claw were wrapping itself around his brain. He could feel an intense pressure that stung like nails, like a bed of nails reproduced six times over, to form a cube with the long, steel points running all around the insides like amoeba. He saw the nails actually turning into amoeba now, and he saw the cube around his brain give way and become stomach lining, which Hank immediately knew to be the Living Universe. He felt his brain absorb all of his being and disintegrate into a formless apex of his own existence. It was an invisible orb, and that orb was pushed ahead, and then again slightly behind, as the amoeba intestine expanded, contracted, writhed and jostled orb-Hank along with indifference. It cared nothing for Hank. Who he was and what he was doing meant nothing. He was food for the Living Universe, just as Virgil was food to the aliens, just as maybe he was too. And so there was with a cross-roads - to be harvested by one of two monstrosities, both tinged with ambiguity, both shrouded in mystery.

But Hank did not feel like he had the liberty to choose his road. He was

being processed by ages of wormholes and nebulas. He was a product of celestial momentum.

The claw came back. It clung to the brain and pulled itself downward, to the lobes that connect it and burst with electrons. It absorbed the electricity of the brain and continued down to the throat, the throat which was burned with bourbon and nicotine, and scarred from screaming, down into the chest and towards the heart. It caressed the heart, it loved the heart and told it how it yearned to kiss its blood, to feel it pump and explode in it's proximity. The claw that loves, the claw that wants to complete you, through pain comes a new threshold and within that threshold I will love you and complete you. Let me be swallow your misery and I will transmute the darkness into light.

The claw did not stop - it crawled down into the stomach. Into the liver, now dancing on lymph nodes. And into the groin, burning now, don't you feel like an animal yet, Hank? Has it set in, have you given in to the primordial underminer that strangles your evolution?

"Consume," it told him. "Dominate and control. You are beast, you are worthless beast who must violate to become real."

Hank screamed and threw the pot of coffee against the wall and the hot liquid splashed back against him. He did not react to the burning liquid. Instead, he focused on the broken glass - more broken glass - shards of which once formed something whole. He felt a compulsion to run the broken glass down his skin, letting the jagged razor edges split open the rough leather that sheltered broken machinery, a lifetime of suppressed anger and desire. He watched the projected imagining of his suicide unfold. He felt the finality of blood flowing out, forming a river down his forearm, spilling like a waterfall

over the cress of his elbow. It turn to green ooze. He stared at the glass, but he did not touch it. He saw his reflection and watched it warp into reptilian slime.

Hank fell to his knees and wept. And Virgil kept sleeping. And he dreamt.

Virgil dreamt again of Abigail. She was his savior, the miracle of his life who came back to keep his madness at bay. You are my goddess, he said to her, and they spoke without words. Their minds were connected as they held each other and spun in a free fall through the clouded pastures of time. You are mother earth, who has given me life, strength, knowledge of who I am. To you, I owe everything. You flow through me like a river. You stir in me colossal waves that fight to crash into your shores. You are Appollina, whose golden breasts receive me and give comfort that can come from no one but you. Your curves form the Olympic mountain range. You - who house the gods and live in the gods - with your passion and love, you inspire the Universe and give It the very flow of It's blood. You are the life giver.

Sweet Virgil, Abigail smiled, you use great words in your ignorance. Do you know what they mean?

I was nothing before you and I am nothing without you. Virgil pressed his head against hers. I am a fool and you grant me the strength to be silent, the strength to know I am dirt. The strength to accept my weakness and exist strongly within it. You are the cycle of life, loving mother Universe. You are power, you are electricity. I am your servant.

They spun and became naked of their bodies, collapsing into each other in a joining ray of golden light that burned with a green flame. It grew into the

infinite plan surrounding them, filling it with atomic energy.

You must be strong, she told him. They are coming for you.

She pushed herself away from Virgil and looked deeply into him. She was not sad like she was while looking out the wall of windows in the plastic hospital of his dreams. She was powerful and steadfast. She had the strength of suffering. Knowing pain itself, knowing death, knowing loss, she looked into these things and embraced them. She fought them but she loved them and accepted them and it made her strong.

The area over her chest became translucent and gave way to her heart. Guadeloupe showed through her. Now Abigail was Lady Death. And again she was Abigail, holding Virgil once more.

Be strong, she said.

As the day changed to night, the outside of the motel room shook with a tremendous energy that ran through it as the souls inside twisted in madness and dreams. The lightbulb outside the door shattered spontaneously and a lone wind blew across the sidewalk. If someone were to have witnessed it, they'd have said it was strange.

Virgil slept all through the day and into the night, only waking when dawn forced it's way through the curtains. A single ray of light shone onto his eyes and coaxed him back into waking reality. As the fuzzy vision of the motel room formed into solid shapes, he nearly forgot where he was. One look at Hank, however, who was still sitting in his chair, slumped over the table with his head buried deep in his hands, surrounded by broken glass (where did that come from? Virgil wondered) brought everything back.

He pushed himself out of bed and walked into the bathroom, turning the shower on. Hot water streamed out and steam began to fill the room. He undressed and stepped in, letting the water hit his face and chest, massaging his muscles with its relentless pressure. He turned around and let it nurse his aching backside. It stung his sunburned skin but loosened the muscles underneath. He breathed heavily and closed his eyes, focusing on the sensation of water meeting skin.

Back in the other room, the sounds of the shower faucet met with the breaking daylight and brought Hank out of his own weary sleep. Hank had been dreaming of the double-pyramid ship. It chased him and filled his head with dark thoughts of self-mutilation and suicide.

Hank tried to push these thoughts away. He stepped outside, squinting in the sun. He saw the general store across the parking lot and walked towards it to retrieve some coffee, since he broke the pot in the motel room the night before. As he payed for two of the largest size that was offered, and some anti-inflammatory pills that were out at the counter, the clerk intriguingly looked at

Hank.

"Rough night?" He asked, motioning to Hank's swollen jaw.

"Something like that," Hank responded while counting the money. He paid and walked back to the motel room where Virgil was just finishing dressing himself. Virgil saw Hank come in and turned his attention towards him.

"Hank -"

Hank looked at Virgil, embarrassed, and sat down at the chair he slept in, placing the coffee on the table. "Brought some joe," he said.

"Hank, what happened here last night? What's with the glass?" Virgil asked, pointing to the broken coffee pot. Hank rubbed his head, feeling again the throbbing pain of his jaw.

"Long night," he said, and left it at that because it hurt him to speak.

Virgil grabbed a wash cloth from the bathroom and walked outside. Moments later he returned with the cloth wrapped around several pieces of ice. He knotted the end and tossed it to Hank.

"Put that on your jaw," he said. "How much do you remember?" he asked him.

"Bit's and pieces," was all Hank said in reply.

"Hank, you lost it. Are you ok?"

Hank stared ahead and said nothing.

"I need to know where you're at, Hank. They're coming for us. Do you realize that? This is real." Hank stared in silence. "Can you still teach me?" Abigail said I have more to learn."

Hank pushed the ice on his jaw. The coldness that leaked through the cloth felt wonderful against his burning jaw. He popped the anti-inflammatories

into his mouth and swallowed hard, chasing them with coffee. Virgil walked over and took a cup for himself. He sat in the chair across the table from Hank.

"Are you ok, Hank?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

"I'm fine, kid," Hank said. "Sometimes things just get a little out of control, alright? But I'm fine. We'll get you taught, don't worry. Let's drink coffee."

The two sat in silence and drank the coffee. Virgil felt uncomfortable watching Hank act in such an injured way and stepped outside.

Virgil walked to the curb outside the room. He sat in the shade and watched the motion of the sun. In about an hours time, Hank appeared behind him.

"There's one very important thing you still need to learn, kid," said Hank with the compress still held against his jaw. "And thats the superimposing of dreams onto the world. You need to learn to let the lines between reality and non-reality give way until they are no longer different. It's a different kind of meditation. You coax yourself into sleep and force meditation in on the process, and you project your body into different realms while at the same time projecting those realms onto the environment you are actually standing in. Over time, you can find that you can literally drag heaven down to earth."

He discussed this at longer length with Virgil, teaching him how to notice the stages of sleep and how to separate his consciousness from them. He reminded him the importance of turning off the internal dialogue and letting his breath speak through him to communicate with the Universe.

"You can be very sure," Hank said sternly, "that the Universe is watching."

He explained to Virgil some basic precepts of geometry and physics, relating them to the science of dreams. He explained the weightlessness of emotion in the surreal world, how they could be detached and separated from the self.

As Hank spoke, he wondered if he believed his own words or if he were merely spreading delusion. They spoke for hours and Hank grew weary yet again.

"I'm going to go lie down for a while," he said to Virgil. "Why don't you go take a walk? Think about what I've told you."

Hank drug himself back into the room and Virgil walked down the hot desert pavement. In time, Virgil came upon a single tree and sat under the shade. He leaned against the tree trunk and felt the bark pressing the fabric of his shirt against his reddened skin, causing it to simultaneously sting and itch. Over the past couple of days became used to ignoring the physical irks of his body. He focusing on his breathing and on the pervasive forces of life that bind all matter, organic and inorganic, together in one weaving thread. Water, wind, rain, fire, earth - the elements and their raw power.

He began to fall asleep and instinctively breathed slower, counting down from ten as he faded into blackness. Then, he himself standing aside from himself in simultaneous mediation and sleep. He imagined his body at the far end of the road and then he was there. He imagined his body returning to the tree and it did so instantaneously. He started to laugh, but when he did sleep began to slip away so he stopped laughing and brought his focus back to his breath. He felt now as if he were floating away, and then Abigail appeared before him.

This was not a dream, Virgil noticed, or a vision. Even though his dreams felt real, and came with physical sensation, this was different. He knew he was awake, and yet the world had a fuzzy resemblance to his dreams.

"Your friend is in trouble, Virgil," Abigail said to him.

"I know," he replied.

"You are learning with great speed," she continued. Virgil smiled. Abigail sat down next to him.

"Virgil," she began while reaching for his hand. It felt so real to Virgil, the hand that he knew as a child, the same familiar feeling that made him whole. "Virgil, I want you to tell you about something. I want to tell you about Torah."

"You want to talk about Scripture?" Virgil laughed. "I thought that was all myth."

"Torah is called the Living Word," she responded. "And in many ways that is true, but not in any way that you were taught as a child. Man has fictionalized it, man has brought the myth. For power and pride, because man is corrupt. But I am going to tell you about it's Truth. Torah is living word in that it is alive, actually breathing. The power is not in the words themselves but in the history, in the words as told by the universe. It is in the space in between the words. It is in the ink of the scrolls that were buried out at sea. Have you ever considered a book that can adapt itself to the world?"

She went on to tell him that the New Testament, the Gospels and all reproductions of the old testament as well, were interpretations of the Living Word, augmented with purpose. But the scrolls, the ancient parchment paper, contained a timeless spirit that breathed life into the world. They were written to

protect ancient secrets, to preserve a union between worlds that has sense been lost again.

"The cycle must start anew," she said. "The Word was not stories as told to man by god, that is fiction. The Word is the Universe in symbiosis with humankind, uniting everything into one body and flushing itself into a transforming, living language that resonates within each of us. It forms underlying Truths that have great, mystic powers - powers that we know before we are born."

Virgil was confused but want to understand. Abigail saw him straining and laughed.

"Don't struggle, Virgil. It will come to you." She walked around Virgil and dragged her slender index finger across his cheek.

She elaborated on what Hank told him about dreaming. She told him how dreams were the language of the fates. The three old witches who spun his life out into a yarn, waiting to cut it at the end of his life, they were weaving dreams. Dreams were the building blocks of matter - deep inside the nucleus was a dream. They were more powerful than power itself.

"You cannot kill a dream," she said. "You cannot kill the Living Word."

When sundown came, Virgil stood up and walked back to the room. He had been facing away from the motel, a couple miles down the road, so when he turned back towards it to begin his return journey he was stricken with shock. The double-pyramid ship was back. He took off in a sprint, yelling Hank's name.

The double-pyramid looked was spinning atop the roof of the motel,

glowing crystal blue. There were a few motel guests standing at a distance and watching, but nobody said a word. Their eyes were covered in a fog thicker than any Virgil had ever seen. He ran into the open door of the motel room.

Virgil froze. Hank was levitating, surrounded by a green glow with his arms out to the side. Slowly, his skin grew pale. To his left and right and were two creatures that Virgil recognized from his visions. Their tentacles wavered about and the all-too-familiar green ooze dripped off the thorny little suction cups that clung like barnacles to their undersides. The creatures turned their heads towards him. Each of them had a single, yellow, reptile-like eye, with long pointed pupils that contracted to a red bead at Virgil's sight.

"We've been waiting for you," they hissed, as if together. The voices sounded like an amalgamation of all the frequencies known to the human ear, pushed towards the high end so that it whined loud with a low rumble.

"Hank, are you ok? How did they -"

"I told them, Virgil."

"You what?!"

"I told them. They came to me in my dreams. They said they would set me free. They said they would take my pain away. I'm a fool. I want it to end. I give up, kid. I'm no good."

"No! Fight it, Hank!"

"I'm just a crazy old man, kid. Forget everything I told you. Go find a girl, get a job that pays steady. That's the secret of the Universe. Let the fog roll in, kid. It's better that way."

"Don't give in, Hank! You can't believe them! They're monsters!"

"No more than we are, kid."

The creatures moved closer towards one another and pushed their smarmy tentacles together. They uttered strange gurgling noises out of the holes that served as mouths. Their tongues of snakes flickered outward and hissed. Hank moved up higher in the green glow. His body began to tremble and he uttered a low moan.

Virgil's mind took over and pushed him towards REM sleep. He stumbled backwards and fell into a chair, which tipped over and with his weight. He fell with the chair and hit his head hard against the wall before spilling out onto the floor. The impact threw himself into a deep, meditative state. He felt consciousness slipping and forced himself to focus on the biggest shard of glass from the coffee pot, which still lay on the floor. He looked at it and magnified it in his mind, now looking at the molecules that formed it. He looked deeper into the molecules and saw himself, looking into the molecules. He saw himself break down into molecules, too, and saw that the molecules were all the same, only stacked and organized in different shapes. He looked back at the creatures and felt a renewed energy beginning to run through him.

Virgil looked at Hank, who was now shaking, on the verge of meltdown. Hank began to scream, slowly at first but building into a crescendo. The growling gurgle of the creatures grew louder and began to harmonize with Hank's scream. The green glow engulfed all three of them. In a fit of rage, Hank's body flung itself towards the ceiling and back down to the ground, smashing against the plaster roof and again against the carpeted floor. Then he was back in his original levitation position, beaten and broken, and the green glow began to turn white.

"No!" Virgil was back to his feet and imagined the broken glass on the

floor forming into a long sickle. And so it was - a glass sickle now resting in his hand.

Hank was coughing blood, gasping for air and foaming at the mouth, his eyes rolling back into his head. Virgil looked at the sickle, now gleaming in his hand, and then looked back at the beasts. He screamed, a war-cry, mustering up all the energy he could. He threw the sickle, threw it forward in space and backward in time, watching it travel through the ages, watching it fly through alien creatures who walked aside the Roman Empire, who manufactured the rebellions of slaves, who whipped those who built the pyramids. All for energy, all for what amounted to gasoline - this was why humans came to be.

The sickle sliced through the beasts' tentacles, which were now joined together. They fell away from the creature's bodies and landed on the ground where they writhed like a decapitated worm. The beasts drew back and uttered a piercing roar. Hank fell to the ground next to the writhing alien parts. The aliens turned and looked at Virgil, who watched as tentacles reformed themselves on the aliens' torsos.

"We are more powerful than you," they told him.

"The hell you are," replied Virgil, whose eyes were now intense and full of fire. A harsh wind blew through the room. The table flipped over and the fixtures shook themselves off the wall, joining with appliances and small pieces of furniture in a tornado around the creatures. The fire burned out of Virgil's eyes and onto his arms, engulfing them and becoming them.

The aliens grew quiet and looked at each other, and then back towards Virgil, with that one mean, yellowed eye.

"We'll be back for you," they said. Then, one of the snake-tongues lashed

out at Hank's chest and wrapped around the torso. The tongue squeezed like a boa constrictor and then unraveled itself, but as it did so it sliced Hank on the side of the torso. Instead of blood pouring out, the edges of the skin were singed and the blood parted, offering Virgil a full view of the muscle tissue underneath. Then the creatures slowly began to dissolve, their bodies breaking down into small vertical lines, fizzling in and out until they were gone. Virgil breathed. Everything fell to ground and the winds ceased.

The room grew still, like the desert they had recently come out of, except for Hank, who was rolling in pain on the floor next to two piles of ooze where the severed tentacles had been. The tentacles, too, dissolved, as though they still obeyed the bodies of their masters. Virgil ran to Hank and bent down at his side.

"Hank! Hank are you ok?"

Hank responded only with moans.

"Come on, Hank, you can do it! You're gonna make it, it's gonna be ok!"

All the color left Hank's skin. And, though Virgil hadn't noticed this until now, there was no more Amber glowing in his eyes.

"They took away the pain," Hank said. "I'm going to go home."

"No, Hank! Fight it! You can't give up! You can't go! I need you!"

Hank looked delirious. The old man that mentored Virgil was gone even before his body died. He was replaced by a hapless smile and two faded eyes over colorless, weathered skin.

"See ya later, kid," Hank said and then his body began to convulse. Virgil stepped back and watched as a giant ball of white light formed around Hanks body, converging into on ultra-bright spot before shooting up, through

the roof and into the sky.

And then Hanks body went limp. He was dead. Virgil watched in horror as the piles of green ooze turned to bright, red, human blood, and the glass sickle that lay on the floor turned to steel. The aliens were gone, but they made their move.

BREAK

Stretch.

Feel your muscles relax.

*Don't you think
you should bake some cookies?*

The clerk at the general store heard the screaming and called the police. When they arrived, they saw Hank lying on floor next to a pool of blood and Virgil kneeling beside it, mumbling hysterically. Next to Virgil was the sickle and in front of him was a dead man and a pile of blood.

They arrested Virgil on suspicion and put him the back of a squad car, telling him that they were going to the station to wait for a detective who would question him there. The clerk gave the police his account, saying that Hank came in earlier and looked out of sorts.

"You know what," he said in country drawl, motioning with his finger for the cops to come closer while he leaned forward on the service counter. "I wouldn't be surprised if he were on drugs. There was another feller with him too, and he didn't look normal, I can tell you that much."

None of the other hotel guests could remember anything of the events that transpired except for some strange noises that sounded like struggle and a loud scream. Nobody recalled the double-pyramid ship at all.

This all made Virgil look very suspicious as he ranted and raved about aliens all the way back to the police station.

"Tentacles," he said in a frenzy. "Snake-tongues and tentacles. I swear it! I swear to christ! Why won't you believe me?"

Virgil was thought by the police, as well as the subsequent detective that was assigned the case, to have gone completely mad. They held him at the station for a few weeks and then he went to court and was convicted of first degree murder. Virgil, being at the mercy of a simple and dumb-witted public

defender, didn't stand a chance. The defense pleaded insanity and Virgil's testimony of the aliens solidified it, so in lieu of prison Virgil was sent to the state asylum, where he now sat in a solitary confinement room.

The room was padded on all surfaces and Virgil sat in a straight-jacket. After the court case he gave up trying to convince anyone of the aliens' existence.

A few months went by and Virgil passed them in silence, except for the mandatory counseling meetings. At this meetings, which took place once a day, Virgil answered questions about his personal life directly and for the most part did not have to lie. He did, however, leave out all Truths of his awareness, and simply talked about people, places, and things, as if he were a regular, everyday person. When the therapist pressed the issue of aliens, Virgil resounded himself to silence and then the sessions would end.

Back in his room, Virgil sat and tried to meditate. The days slipped by but Virgil lost count of them. Time and isolation began to eat away at his stability. He wanted to talk to Abigail, he wanted to leave this place. He tried to impose his dreams into the room, but he could not focus. The inner-dialogue began to whirl like a motor and take over his mind. He only dreamt but on occasion, partially due to lack of sleep and partially because of the growing inability to focus. When he did dream, he saw Abigail but only at a foggy distance. She would turn to look at him and motion for him to come towards her, but as Virgil began to move her body would pull away into all directions, like sand being scattered by the wind.

And the mind claw came to him. That awful, rodent like hand with its sharp nails, its werewolf bite and it's stranglehold on his organs, had returned.

The same claw that drug Hank to his demise was now resting inside of Virgil. He felt it grappling for control. He fought it, but it was there. And it was hungry.

To any of the guards passing by and looking in the small window, which was thick, shatterproof glass only one square foot big, they would have assumed his actions were normal for the standard inmate. Virgil sat in the corner, staring at the wall in front of him or at the ceiling, shaking and trembling and muttering to himself. In Virgil's mind, however, there was a war being waged.

Aside from mandatory therapy and the two times each day that a guard would bring him a tray of white bread and slush-food, the little window was Virgil's only contact with the world outside his padded room. He could not look out the window because the floors of his cell were lowered two feet beneath the door, placing the window at a height that was just to tall for him to peer out of. He could jump and catch a glimpse of the outside for a second, and even then all he could see was a hallway that reminded him of the plastic white hospital where he had met Abigail in a dream. It was during that dream, he recalled, that Abigail showed him the alien civilization. That seemed so long ago, now. That was before they came. That was before they killed Hank. And now he was there again, but it wasn't a dream.

Harvested, not killed, Virgil reminded himself. This was different than murder, because the aliens engineered Hank for the specific purpose of harvest. And he was in the same position, as was every other human on Earth. Somehow, Abigail escaped harvest. And so, he assumed, did Hank's teacher, if what Hank told him was true. If he were to join them, spending eternity peacefully as a part of the Living Universe, he would have to fight the

overwhelming sensation that grew proportionally each second - the maddening notion that he was going insane.

"Where are you Abigail?" Virgil said out loud.

"She is dead," said the mind claw. "She died long ago, and you are alone, with no one to care for you and no one to make you well. You are rotten, you let her die, back then - it was your fault."

Virgil shook his head. He knew this wasn't true but he couldn't stop the voice. The voice grew louder each time it spoke and it knew him deeply. It knew his past, it knew his dreams, it knew his fears and his desires and it dangled them in front of him like a hypnotists' watch, enticing him back into himself and through himself, showing him exaggerated versions of his weaknesses and breaking his strengths down into diminutive fractions of what they once were.

The voice was strong and all-knowing. It was boundless and diving and it pushed deeper into him with an insatiable hunger. It wrapped itself around his mind, fitting it like a glove and pushing out from the inside.

"You are alone," the voice told him. "You are limp and decrepit, impotent and incompetent, inept and sterile. You prostrate yourself in front of beauty, you are crippled in your fight. You don't stand a chance."

"No!" yelled, over and over. He shook his head and pulled his arms, wanting them to be free of the restricting jacket that held his limbs down around him. He tried desperately to wrangle out of the restraints and became exhausted. He fell backwards and began to weep.

And then Abigail did come to him, standing in splendor in the dazzling red cloak that she had once wrapped around him to shield him and pull him close. Virgil wept twice as hard, now for happiness.

"Abigail," he said, panting through tears, "Abigail, where have you been? I need you. I'm so lost."

She walked across the padded cell and knelt down beside him, taking his head and stroking. Now though, as comfort passed through, the claw in his mind dug deeper. He screamed through his teeth.

"Shh..." Abigail hushed him.

"Where have you been?" Virgil asked again.

"I've been waiting for you, dear boy, to break free from yourself." She kissed him on the forehead and then stood up again. "I can see now that you need my help."

"What am I going to do? I can't beat them. They're too strong."

"Perhaps, love, you do not need to beat them. Perhaps you need to beat yourself."

"What do you mean?" he asked, desperate.

"The final battle will not be against them, Virgil. I can help you keep them away, but they are not the enemy. They are the tyrant, but not the enemy. The final battle is against your self. And no one can help another in their battle against the self. It is a lone journey. There are no companions in the Sahara of the soul."

Virgil looked at her in silence, holding his tears inside.

"Do not eat their food, Virgil, and do not accept their consultation. They will punish you, they will add time to your sentence. But you will be gone by then and it will be no matter. Make your mind strong. You need to find the strength to accept yourself, not fight it. You will have to walk through hell, Virgil, but it is the only way. They have the keys and the locks and the weapons,

but you have Truth."

And then she vanished.

Virgil refused all food and therapy for two weeks. They forced food and water into him through tubes at certain points, but on most days were content to let him go hungry. When the food was forced into him, the tube went through Virgil's nose as he was strapped down to a table. The food would come out of the tubes quickly and cause him to gag. But Virgil was focused.

The hope was that, by deliberately draining his body, it would take some of the focus off the angry claw that dragged him away from his true self and built walls around his awareness. He could overcome a temporary period of physical weakness and pain, if it gave him an edge in the mental battle. It was the struggle of the mind that left Virgil handicapped. And so hungry, tired, frail Virgil sat in the corner of his cell, looking straight ahead at the the wall, trying to ignore his hunger pains and swelling stomach to focus on imposing a dream state into the reality of the asylum.

He felt his guts turning over, contracting and burning as the digestive acids began to feast on his stomach lining. And at the same time, the mind claw was fighting for attention, poking him in the back of his eyes and telling him how despicable, how utterly horrible he was for having abandoned Hank in the motel room.

"If you'd have stayed with him," it said, "he would still be alive today. He mentored you, he cared for you, and you abandoned him to his doom. But you were selfish and you wanted your pretty girl, your pretty girl who is dead too. You've got the blood of everyone on your hands, Virgil, you pathetic, child, you

are vermin, scum, reptilian fluid and filthy excrement..."

No, Virgil told himself, do not listen. It is not true.

Virgil doubled over in his excruciating stomach pain. His throat was dry and he wanted sorely for water. He formed a meager ball of saliva in his mouth and swallowed it and then forced himself up right. The internal dialogue must be shut off, he told himself. Separate yourself from it. You are not those thoughts and they do not control you. Watch them pass by but do not let them touch you. Virgil thought of Abigail and felt a sudden strength running through him.

He watched his thoughts form a wheel and pushed it off to the side. It whirled around, spitting fire at him, but he was not touched. He formed the pain of his body into a spider-web and placed it around the wheel. He watched as the mind claw fell into his stomach and burned in his digestive acids. The physical pain grew stronger but the mental battleground was momentarily pacified.

He focused on a spot on the far wall, where four of the protective pads met together. He looked at the crossroads of the negative space that these pads created and projected the double-pyramid onto it, watching it spin and glow. He breathed deep and counted to ten. He let his eyelids close halfway and watched his breath run through him. It calmed his stomach like a cool spring running over the trenches of a volcano. His body began to give off steam.

Slowly he breathed. He counted backwards. He thought of the earth and he thought of the sky, and he imagined that both were present all around him. He envisioned trees from the corners of the cell and they sprung forth. He summoned grass and ferns and horsetail to push out of the ground and they did. He was suddenly sitting in a beautiful rainforest. And then Abigail appeared to him. She was wearing a green cloth dress that blew in a wind, but which Virgil

could not feel. Her hair ran in braids over her breast and her skin was beautiful and white gold, soft like silk and blushed red at her cheeks where her smile pushed the blood.

"You need to leave this place, Virgil."

"Yes, Abigail. Yes I do."

"They will come for you, to feed you. Refuse it again. They will take you to the room with the table and the straps and they will try to feed you through the tubes, but they will not. They will take the restraints off of you so that they can spread you out on the table. When they take of the restraints, you must summon all of the energy from within yourself that you can. Make fire, Virgil. These people are weak and easily frightened. Then you will run out the door and down the hall. Turn right when the hall comes to a cross and take that hallway to a steel door. Pass through three rooms and you will find an exit. I will take care of the rest."

And then she vanished and the cell returned. Virgil collapsed in the corner, smiling and laughing hysterically. Sweat beads covered his forehead and his hair became damp, the mist of the projected rainforest ticking to him. He did it.

Virgil was still laughing when two guards opened his door with a tray of food.

"You gonna eat today, or are your aliens feeding you?" one of them snickered. Virgil was filled with gumption and struck back.

"I'd rather eat my own shit, boss," he said.

The guards were angered and pushed the door all the way open. They were both big, strong, and broad shouldered with plain faces that had no

distinguishable traits whatsoever. They walked toward him and the biggest one hit him on the head with the back of his hand.

"We'll make sure of that," he said. Virgil just laughed, louder and louder.

"Jesus, this don't pay enough," the other guard said as they each grabbed Virgil under his upper arms and dragged him out of the cell. Holding tightly to his arms, they walked him down the hallway towards the feeding room. One of them made a call on his radio, saying that they were taking him to be force-fed and needed two more guards to help with the process.

They dragged Virgil down the long, plastic hallway and into a room that was empty except for a shiny, steel table that looked like it belonged in a chemistry lab. Just like Virgil's dream hospital, it all smelled of ethanol. The room was dazzling, all white and clean as can be, reflecting back every ray that touched it with tenfold the intensity. Virgil squinted in the luminosity of the sterile room.

Two more guards came that looked just like the first two. They roughed him up. One of them punched him in the face and another kneed him in the gut, which accentuated his stomach pain like a spade had been driven through him. The limbs of the four guards grew into the same body. They morphed into a single person, as strong and dumb as a mule, swinging blindly at the prisoner who relished the pain, laughing louder with each strike against him.

They pushed him face down onto the floor so that he could taste the tile. It tasted of bleach and ammonium. It burned him but it made him stronger, more resolute in his mission. They got the jacket off of him. Even though they held tightly to his arms he felt liberated now that the restraints were gone, like his arms had been weighed down with lead balls. The guards pulled him up and

began to throw him on the table, but one of them stopped, startled.

"What the hell's wrong with your eyes?" he barked at Virgil. Virgil's eyes were burning. Flame flickered out of each of them with the intensity of hellfire. He smiled, ear to ear, just like he was a child running into his mothers van to pull heaven down to Earth.

"They're just hungry," Virgil said cryptically. The feeding instruments, which were lying on a nearby plastic tray that extended out from underneath the steel table on a mechanical arm, combusted and burned as Virgil spoke.

"What the hell?" the guard-body said, with four voices from the same head and sixteen limbs flapping wildly. And then Virgil jumped up on the table. He became possessed. He pointed to a corner and flame appeared. The door to the room slammed shut and locked itself. The guard-body looked wildly in fear but found no escape.

"Let death seize upon them," Virgil said, as if the words were passing through him. "And let them go down quick into hell."

And then the entirety of the room was engulfed in flame. The guard-body flapped wildly and screamed in agony.

Virgil jumped off the table and ran, following Abigail's directions. Out the door, which opened for him and shut behind him out of its own volition, and down the hallway, right at the end and through three rooms, out the steel exit door and out into the...

Daylight.

Virgil had not seen daylight in months. He fell down to his knees and wept for joy as the sunlight warmed his skin. But it did not remain daylight for long. The entire sky was soon swept away by a green flame. He stood up and

looked around and noticed all the yard guards hypnotized by the flame. He heard a voice, Abigail's voice, disembodied and coming from all around him.

"Run, Virgil. Be free."

So he ran. He ran right out of the yard unopposed. It was then that Virgil noticed he was surrounded by terrain that was just like the rainforest he called forth in his cell. He ran into it, through the ferns and the walls of moss, moss clinging to trees both alive and dead, dead trees giving way to young saplings, the cycle of life reproduced a thousand times over in every square foot. He ran until the night fell and then he dropped at the foot of a stream and drank. The water made his heart explode in joy, soothing his pain and silencing the wretched mind claw, still poking at the back of his eyes. He was free.

Virgil wandered through the forest, aware now that he was a fugitive on two separate paths. One to evade the aliens, and one to escape the inhumane justice system. He forged onward, occasionally finding berries and herbs to eat. To Virgil, in his state of hyper-extended awareness, the edibles of the forest glowed bright blue. And there was plenty of water, since he followed the streams, just as he and Abigail used to do when they were children.

He did not know what his course of action could be. He looked into the future and could only see, at best, a life of running. This bleak future left little for him to hold on to and he struggled with it. But the task at hand, finding his way through the forest, kept his attention. He walked in the shallow stream, hoping to leave no tracks.

Days passed by, days and nights of walking, resting only to eat when edibles presented themselves. He did occasionally sleep whenever he found a spot that offered cover. A cave, or a deep creek bed, or a hollowed tree. At one point he heard the distant barking of dogs and crawled into a tree trunk that lay in the creek. After a couple hours the barking disappeared and he continued his journey.

He was physically and mentally exhausted but knew no other course of action than to carry on. When life turns against you, when the Living Universe begins to digest without care, when you are thrown through the gauntlet and rung like a dirty rag, you have only two options - to give up or carry on. Virgil was not yet ready to give up. He thought of Abigail and it gave him vigor. There was a faint hope that he may one day be with her in totality again. The love of a

woman can make a man do incredible things. The love of a woman is all that makes a man worthwhile. If he could only beat the mind claw.

The mental battles did not vanish, but they quieted. The clawing sensation only returned every now and then for long enough to remind Virgil it was there. A prick in the back of his eye, a feeling that his heart had fallen into his stomach, an intense pressure against his brain and chest.

Virgil carried on this way for two weeks. And then, on the fourteenth day, he came upon a grand lookout, a cliff that stuck itself out over a fertile river valley where he could see elk running with their young, deer grazing on grass and salmon leaping out of the water. He sat and watched, engrossed in the simplicity and grace of their action. These animals, thought Virgil, they are the ones who are alive. In harmony with nature, in harmony with themselves. Driven by instinct, loving by instinct, unclouded by desire, free from jealousy, free the beast of evolution. They were free.

He sat and meditated and in time Abigail came to him, sitting beside and running her hands along a fern.

"It's beautiful," she said.

Virgil looked over at Abigail. He was happy to see her.

"Would that we were elk, love, to graze contently in the beauty we've been given," she said while looking Virgil deep in the eyes. Virgil smiled.

"That would be nice," he said. And then they smiled together. Virgil reached out for her hand and held it with both of his. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it, holding it to his lips and closing his eyes. Then he returned it to her and stood up.

"What now, Abigail? Where do you go after you've seen the end?"

Abigail got up as well, meeting his eyes again and pushing his overgrown hair out of his face.

"Sweet fool, you go towards it. There is life in the end, as the forest and the streams have shown you. The elk dies so that the bear can feast. The bear dies and the rodents take it home. The rodents die and fall into the earth, picked apart by insects. The insects return it to the soil and a young sapling finds roots in fertile grounds. Death is the end, Virgil, but death is the beginning. Death happens to you, dear boy, every day and every second. You only exist as the person you are in the moment that you are that person. You are a new man with every passing instant, molded by experience and environment, changed by action and recourse. Do not be afraid of death. Run into it without fear. Become death with an open heart and you thereby accept life."

"How did you get so wise, Abigail?" he asked her.

"I died."

They embraced and looked together again out at the river valley. A pack of elk now ran together, as if one, in constant fluidity, moving like the stream, together over the hills.

"The Truth is alive, Virgil," Abigail said while stroking his neck. "And it must be preserved."

Virgil pulled back and looked at her.

"How do you mean?"

"Torah has been tarnished, the Truth has been hidden behind corruption, behind power. It is time for a new Truth. It is time that people lift the fogs from their eyes so that we, too, can become like the elk. The aliens, Virgil, they are coming for you. You alone have the glow, now. They took

everyone else already. They will be hunting you. They are in you. But remember, your final battle is not with them - it is with yourself. I can help hold the aliens at bay, I can help you fend them off. But the ultimate battle will belong to you. I will not help you. I cannot help you. But Truth, living Truth, can survive, and it can live in the people after you are gone."

Virgil felt that he was an unlikely hero, undeserving of this power.

"Abigail, I'm in pain. The madness - it's coming back. I can't find it. I'm weak."

"Be strong, little boy. Do not give in. It is difficult but it is not impossible. Write down the Truth, Virgil. I will help you. Hank taught you, as his last action, to bring the dream world into reality. Go to that place. Write it down. When you go to that place I will be there. I will be your ink. Keep Truth alive. It must be preserved."

And then the mind claw came back. It was stronger now and it's hunger was immense. Virgil felt it trying to tear apart his face from the inside. The claw wanted Abigail, wanted to destroy her, was angry at her presence and incensed by her words. Virgil recoiled in pain, falling to the ground with his head in his hands.

"It hurts, it hurts so much," he said, rolling on the dew covered grass.

Abigail bent down beside him and held his hand.

"It hurts because it's real, Virgil. It hurts because it is pain. Pain is the great balancer, the equalizer that puts every living thing on the same level. Pain is the gift of the gods, to teach us how fragile the Living Universe is, how fragile we are. It brings us knowledge and wisdom, but it is pain nonetheless. It is horrible and twisted and wants to consume. It is evil but it brings good. It is

Abraxas, Virgil - it is all encompassing. Embrace your pain and fight it lovingly. Give it food but do not let it eat you."

"The elk -"

"The elk have their pain. The elk know what it is like to lose their young. They know what it is like to walk through barren valleys. We have seen their grace but they, too live in torment. All life is torment and all life is ecstasy. They bend and wind into each other, feeding each other, and we exist as the remainder. There cannot be one without the other. We, Virgil, we could not live with the great strength of the Living Universe if we had not been made captive by our alien conquerers. They gave us a gift, unknowingly. They doubted the power of the life force, they knew not of its reach. With the greater evolution came a greater awareness of its energy that flows through us. That is what evolution has brought us, Virgil, a higher state of consciousness. It is evil and it is good and we must bring the balance, our selves that exist as the sole remainder of this battlefield."

Then she stood up and walked back towards the precipice of the cliffside, looking over the valley.

"And regardless of what it is, in what state it may exist, it what it may or may not have done to us, it does indeed exist and we must deal with it. It is the human condition, the blessing and the curse of being alive and sentient. We walk on broken glass but if we can build calluses on our feet, we can become strong. We can harness the power of pain and cycle it through our creation. We can express our pain - we can make art, we can love each other, we can help each other. Pain is the guiding light, the north star, that brings us back to our equilibrium. If -" she hesitated. "If we can only learn to accept the Universe."

Virgil stood up again and walked towards Abigail. He stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He pushed her flowing hair away from the back of her neck and kissed it gently. He nestled his chin into her shoulder and leaned his head against hers.

"I will do it," he said. "I will write down the Truth."

Virgil was propelled forward through the forest by the knowledge that he could not go back into it, nor could he stay at that same spot, that picturesque lookout over the fertile river valley. He had to write down everything that he learned - he now had a mission. To turn around was to turn himself over to authorities and to stay put was to wait for them. He also knew that the tentacled, carnivorous cyclops creatures might return at any moment, but he didn't know how they tracked him or what caused them to appear. So he walked with nerve wrecking anticipation, but he walked nonetheless.

After a days journey he finally reached the end, coming upon a coastal highway that ran between the ocean and the forest. He considered trying to hitch a ride but his appearance stopped him. He was now heavily bearded and visibly dirty, still wearing the jumpsuit from the asylum. He would be turned in to the police looking like this, so he walked along the highway in the cover of the forest. He followed the direction that he saw most cars driving, hoping it would leave to a city. Then he would wait until nightfall and slip in.

As luck would have it, he came upon the outskirts of a city just at sundown. He was relieved, feeling his fatigue setting in. He laid down under the cover of the brush, deciding he would rest for a couple of hours. Soon enough it was dark and he proceeded down the road and into town.

Once in town, he walked through the back streets and alleys, checking dumpsters for clothing that he could change into. After a while he found the dumpster to a bargain used clothing store. He opened it and saw piles of cloth. He breathed a sigh of relief and jumped into it, tearing his own prison garments

off instantly and searching frantically for clothes that fit him. He emerged from the dumpster wearing lightly tattered khakis that fit him loosely around the waist, hanging low. He tore off a strip of his prison garments and wrapped them through the loops of the pants, using it as a belt and tying it off to his left side, with an extraneous length hanging down five or six inches. He also found a plain, navy blue v-necked sweater that fit him well despite the visible holes. He wore it over a tightly fitting white t-shirt. For now he kept his prison-issued slippers, since they were plain, black, and inconspicuous. He decided to keep the beard. If the police circulated photos of him, it would likely be his mugshot, which was taken when he was more cleanly cut. If he could find a hat it would also provide some cover, as would sunglasses. He found both of these things at a nearby gas station. The clerk at the gas station was young, teenaged, and not paying attention. He was able to take these things without interference. Since it was night, he slipped the sunglasses into his pocket, but put on the brown stocking cap and hurried off down the road. He also took a ball-point pen, which fit easily enough into his pocket as well, but decided he would get paper elsewhere, not wanting to take too many chances.

Virgil was indistinguishable from any other vagrant on the street. He realized that he had no money and would not be able to get any legal work and, for that matter, had no identification with which he could procure it. He had nothing but the clothes on his back and the knowledge embedded into his mind from his cosmic relationship with Abigail and the months of hard learning he endured. And he knew that he must, at any cost, get that knowledge onto paper and somewhere safe. He did not know what he would do with the writings once they were complete but he knew that Abigail would help him when it got to

that point.

In time, Virgil came upon a shelter where there was a line out the door of about twenty people, either homeless or otherwise down on luck, and he walked to end of it. These were his people now, he realized. As a fugitive from the law he was forced into the underground of transiency. He could stay here tonight and would move on tomorrow. Now that he had new clothes he felt safer hitchhiking, so he would wake up with the sun and catch the morning traffic out of town.

Most of the people that were in proximity to Virgil in the line for the shelter were haggard, reeking of liquor and waste. The man directly in front of him was short, elderly, and smelled of urine. He wore an oversized military issue winter coat and the pockets were bulging over with his possessions. The line moved forward slowly and in a half hour he was standing inside at a reception desk, which was nothing more than a fold-out table made of particle board. A kindly middle-aged woman sat on the other side, pudgy and cheerful.

She smiled at him and asked him some questions before assigning him a cot in one of the mission's five rooms designated for sleeping. One question caught Virgil slightly off guard.

"Have you been in jail in the past 48 hours?" she asked. When she saw Virgil's tense reaction to this question, she added, "It's just our policy. We have to ask these questions."

"I see. No, I haven't," Virgil lied.

"Ok then!" she said and finished the paperwork.

In the meantime, she told Virgil, they were serving a hot dinner if and he could wait in the soup line. He nodded his head and expressed his gratitude,

which at this moment was heartfelt. He waited through the soup line and nearly wept over the steaming, frothy vegetable soup which was being poured into a large styrofoam bowl over a bed of sticky white rice. He hadn't seen any real food since before he and Hank left for the desert.

He walked with his bowl to a table full of old, homeless men. Most were eating in silence. A couple of them spoke softly to each other and one particularly tall and thin man ate while looking up, quote random passages from the Bible.

"Verily I say unto you," he said while shoving rice into his mouth. He continued to speak as he chewed, slurring his words and spitting rice onto the table. The other old men ignored him. "Whoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein." He inflected his words as a preacher would, rising to a verb and holding it with silence for dramatic effect, especially emphasizing the word "not" each time it appeared.

Virgil sat and watched the steam rising off of his soup. He leaned over it and let the steam rise into his nostrils. His stomach growled and grumbled in anticipation of the food. For now, his mind was silent as we watched little bits of green bean and carrot swirl in the broth with peas and kernels of corn. He stirred the soup with his spoon and began to eat. The food quenched him completely.

At least, he thought, if I die now, it will be away from that prison. He ate, focused completely on the soup, the healing power of the broth washing over him. When he finished he felt like a new man.

As Virgil walked towards the waste basket to discard of the styrofoam bowl and plastic utensils, he noticed one of the cooks walking away to take a

break. He was a young man, about Virgil's age. Virgil walked towards him.

"Excuse me," he said to the cook, "I have a favor to ask."

The young man, used to entertaining old, drunk and senile men, smiled and nodded, interested in seeing somebody at the mission that was different than the normal stock.

"You look a little young to be so hard up," he said to Virgil.

"Yes... I suppose hard times are all around," he responded. "Anyway, I don't mean to startle you - I don't want to ask for much, but I was wondering if perhaps there were some paper I could I have? I would like to write a book."

The young cook was taken aback by this question, but reacted pleasantly.

"Well it certainly is nice to see somebody trying to do something productive around here," he said. He told Virgil to wait and vanished into the kitchen. A few minutes later he came back with a stack of legal pads.

"We have a supply closet in the back and we just restocked," he said to Virgil. "Have as much as you'd like."

Virgil took a few of the legal pads and thanked the man, then watched him walk away. He began to head to the cots in the room assigned to him, which was down a hallway that led out from the cafeteria. On the way there he past a box of donated clothing and picked through it. He found a school bag that was made for a young girl. It was pink with white stars along the sides and a rainbow across the back. A unicorn was perched in mid-gallop underneath the rainbow, gleaming its horse-teeth upward. Virgil smiled at this and took it, putting the paper, his pen and his sunglasses inside. And then he walked back to his assigned room, found a cot and laid down, eager to have a full night's sleep.

Virgil's exhaustion carried him into a deep sleep that lasted all the way through the night. He went to bed early and by the time the dredges and drunken home-bums gathered around their cots, causing a fair amount of commotion, Virgil was out cold. His body worked to fortify its walls, but had little protein with which to work, so when he awoke at dawn he was still sore and fatigued. Even still, he knew he had to move, fully aware that people were after him and it was harder to catch a person that could not be found.

He flung his legs over the cot, grabbed his pink backpack and headed out the door. On his way out he saw noticed the morning's newspaper sitting on the folding table that served as the reception desk and stopped to look. He was not normally interested in the news but he wanted to see if there was any mention of his escape. He flipped through the pages looking for a headline but didn't see anything and breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, just as he was about to fold the newspaper back together and return it to the table, an article caught his eye. The headline read "Time Capsule to Orbit Earth; Return in 50 Years." He scanned the article, which told him that a special safe had been developed that would house artifacts of modern culture and was programmed to shoot off into space, circle the planet and return to the same spot of its take off decades later. It was nice to welcome a distraction but Virgil shrugged it off and threw the paper back on the table, walking out into the burgeoning daylight.

He walked through the city with his sunglasses on and found an entrance to the freeway ramp. He turned around and walked backwards down

the ramp, watching as traffic gathered at a stoplight just before the turn-off. He stood at a safe distance from the road on the edge of the shoulder, which was widened for pull-offs. He stuck out his thumb and waited.

As Virgil waited he felt his mind slowly kicking into gear. He wished for coffee, which he had not had since the day Hank died. And then he thought of Hank and felt a sudden sickness, a genuine sadness for the loss of his mentor. The way that Hank died, having turned on his life's direction at the last moment, sacrificing his soul for madness, caused a powerful rush of emotion to pass through him. He shuddered in the brisk morning air and closed his eyes behind the sunglasses.

By the time the sunlight overcame the last remaining bits of darkness, a small white delivery van pulled off to the shoulder. Virgil ran up to it and peered in through the window.

"Where ya headin'?" the driver asked. He was strong and stocky, with a pleasant face with a kind smile. He wore a blue ball cap and a light matching windbreaker. Each had an emblem of a tornado on them. Both of the windows were rolled down but there was a still fragrance of condensed and pungent herbs.

"As far as you take me," replied Virgil.

"Hop in, brother," the man said. "People call me Twister." He reached out his hand and Virgil shook it while he situated himself in the passenger seat.

"Thanks," Virgil replied, "my names Vir-" Virgil paused before finishing his name, thinking better of revealing any details to the stranger. "Vernon," Virgil said, "My name's Vernon."

"Nice to meet you, Vernon. I'm just headin' a few hours down the

highway, deliverin' these packages." He pointed to the back of the truck and motioned to stacks of brown cardboard boxes in the back of the van, which had no seats and exposed metal with a black rubber mat running along the floor. "I go back and forth every morning, it'll be nice to have some company."

"Well, I sure do appreciate it," Virgil replied. And then they drove away.

The highway wound back and forth amongst hills and the van ping-ponged off the curves of the road.

"Guess why they call me Twister," the man said, smiling. Virgil smiled in return and looked vacantly out the passenger window. As they drove, the man talked continuously. Virgil found that appeasing Twister was easy. He only needed to nod occasionally and say the odd phrase to convey that he was listening.

"You don't say?" he would remark, or "How interesting" and "That's very fascinating."

At one point Twister asked Virgil about himself.

"Oh, not much to me," Virgil replied. He opened his backpack and signaled to the pads of paper inside. "Out of work writer."

"Times sure are tough these days," the man replied. "Here, have the rest of my sandwich." He handed Virgil a half eaten hoagie filled with turkey, salami, onions and tomatoes, and a healthy portion of spinach greens. Virgil tasted mustard. He had not eaten mustard in a long time. It was stone ground. Delicious.

"Thanks, man," Virgil said with a chunk of spinach hanging from his mouth.

As the car wound around the roads, Virgil swayed with the constantly

changing motion, feeling like he were riding a roller coaster, but he did not feel afraid. Twister could anticipate the road perfectly and made turns while looking at Virgil and telling stories. Virgil laughed to himself, again thinking of Hank, who drove at night with his sunglasses on. Twister's eyes were dark and foggy, like the rest of the people who drug themselves through a blind existence in an unraveling mystery they new nothing about. But Twister's smile was simple and sincere. It reminded Virgil of the elk who shuffled from stream to stream, grazing and drinking water, content with their graceful and uncomplicated day to day movements. He felt jealousy and the mind claw began to flick his ear drums as each of Twister's words resonated through them.

"Doesn't that all sound so nice?" It said to him. "Think of how peaceful it could all be."

Virgil felt his mind separate. In part, he was listening to Twister's stories and nodding, agreeing and remarking, wanting to be a grateful passenger. The other part of Virgil focused on the madness that was awakening within him.

"How different, how nice," the voice went on, "if you accepted life in the fog. The vapors of the cloud can nourish you. Look at this man, driving you down the highway, look at how content he is, how willing he is to help a stranger. It's not so bad. It's a very rewarding reality. If you could only accept the way that you truly are, be done with this nonsense and end the foolishness that has put you on the run."

Virgil shook this off. No, he said silently to the voice, I can't believe you. That's not Truth. Abigail knows Truth. Leave me alone.

The van twisted down the road, on and on in its never-ending winding path, back and forth across it's two-dimensional axis day after day in a

predetermined cycle that placated the driver behind his fog. And Virgil's mind twisted likewise, back and forth between Truth and madness, fog and amber glow, raising within him a tension and weariness that would not leave him alone.

Virgil got dropped off at the end of Twister's route, which was the next city a few hours away. Virgil began to walk towards the city, but when the van disappeared down the main road he turned back around and walked back to the outskirts. He remembered seeing an abandoned shack along the side of the road about a mile back and walked towards it.

When he got to the shack he removed his sunglasses and could see that it was indeed abandoned, and probably had been for years. It was made of long wooden planks, which ran vertically and bowed in the middle. The paint had been stripped by the sun and peeled off in assorted shapes and fragments. It looked like an aerial view of roads, much like the one he had just ridden along, only hundreds of them, each winding into each other with paint pulling away in the spaces between. There was plywood nailed to the windows. The roof was shingled, or at least had been at one point. Now only half of them remained, exposing rotting wood underneath. The shack was no bigger than a small room and the door had long 2x4 planks nailed across it to keep it shut.

Virgil noticed that plywood covering one of the windows had loose nails and he pulled it off, revealing an open rectangular space where a glass window pane used to be. He hoisted himself up and pulled himself in, falling onto the floor inside. He looked around and saw scattered remnants of a workshop. A hammer here, a wrench there, a screwdriver hanging from the wall. All the exposed metal was rusting and light shone through small holes in the ceiling

and the open space of the window. There was a wooden barstool sitting before the work table and Virgil sat on it. It wobbled but was otherwise sturdy. Virgil pulled out a pad of paper and his pen, placing them on the table. He sat down and closed his eyes.

A light breeze blew through the opened window space and wrapped itself around Virgil's neck. The breath of the Universe, Virgil thought to himself. And he smiled, because he felt It touch him. It was the same breath, he thought, that has touched every living creature. And for a moment he was completely at ease, swaying gently like a blade of grass. He fell easily into a dreamy meditation.

His eyes were closed but he saw through his eyelids. He saw the walls of the shack grow tall and translucent, seeing a vast and active circuitry on the inside. Wires made of stars and a motherboard built of exploding nebulas connected to each other with an electric kiss, sparks turning into fireworks at every crossroads. He heard the voice of Abigail speaking from all directions.

"Write, my dear."

And there, in the shack along the side of the twisting highway, Virgil poured words, letters, symbols, and numbers onto the lined yellow paper, only half-aware of what he was writing, as if somebody else were moving his hand and pushing the thoughts through his head.

Virgil fugued long and hard and then came back into a normal state of consciousness. He was very tired and breathing heavily. He glistened with perspiration and saw that an entire legal pad was filled. It occurred to him then that he did not recognize the letters and words, and the lines ran vertically at

times instead of the left to right orientation he was used to. He didn't know the language in which it was written, but it was ancient, decorated with accent marks and dots, at times appearing to be pictographic in form. Every now and then he saw a mathematic equation he did not understand.

He put the pad into his pink backpack and felt suddenly that somebody was watching him. The wind picked up and blew hard through the window. And then he felt the ground shake, an odd buzz sounding all around him. He looked up at the roof and saw a double-pyramid spinning downward towards him.

The wind blew around Virgil's legs as he watched in disbelief as the ship advanced towards him. He watched as wood pulled away from the room, the shingles that remained being tossed aside by an invisible force. He looked around frantically as small, vertical lines of static began to materialize before him. The buzzing, whining sound grew louder, piercing his ears. The mind claw spoke to him again.

"They have come for you," it told him, stroking his mind with its sharp nails, digging deep into the folds of his brain. "They have come to take you home."

He saw tentacles now, purple tentacles striped in blue and emitting the green ooze out of little suckers on the ribbed undersides. He now saw that each little sucker had sharp teeth that gnawed outward at him. Virgil suddenly turned around and grabbed the rusty screwdriver that was hanging on the wall and jabbed it forward towards the static just as the reptilian cyclops eye began to materialize. Green blood gushed outwards and he heard a devilish shriek that made him to fall down, covering his ears.

"Why are you fighting your destiny?" the mind claw said to him. "Why

do you fight that which gave you life?"

Virgil pushed himself up and scrambled out the window just as the creature finished materializing completely. It pulled the screwdriver out of its eye as Virgil fell out the window onto the dirt and patches of grass on the other side. The alien fumbled for balance inside the shack, still withdrawing from the pain in its eye while, outside, Virgil began to run.

And then Virgil felt his legs leave the ground. He was still running but was not going upward, but forward. He turned his head and found himself fifteen feet about the ground, parallel with the spinning pyramid ship. The ship, in its crystal blue glow, spun faster and held him in its tractor beam. The buzz grew louder and he heard words hiss through the static.

"You cannot escape us," it said to him.

And then Virgil felt possessed. Again, his eyes burned with fire, fierce and unforgiving. Storm clouds formed overhead and rain began to fall down, but it did not touch Virgil. Raindrops ran along an arc above him like they fell upon an invisible umbrella. He began to scream, his arms stretched outwards and his back arched. The sky grew instantly dark, foreboding, and the wind howled all around him. Lightning struck the ship and transmitted a shock through the tractor beam and up Virgil's arms, rattling him like an exposed nerve in a decaying tooth.

Virgil fell to the ground and rolled. He turned around to look back up at the ship. He saw a glow inside the shack growing brighter and brighter until, at all once, it was gone, burned out. And the ship spun faster until it could not be seen at all, a beam of energy shooting off, 45 degrees into space. The aliens were gone, but now he heard police sirens in the distance.

Virgil ran as the rain poured down on him. His backpack, coated in plastic pink, repelled the water off of it, keeping the paper safe inside. He ran in a diagonal, away from and down the highway, towards the town that Twister dropped him off at earlier, and towards the woods that lined the road a short distance away. He jumped behind the brush and heavy tree trunks and continued to run. When he was about a half-mile away, he turned around and saw a handful of squad cars, sirens ringing, converging on the spot where the shack was. The police got out with their guns drawn and pointed them at the shack, surrounding it, yelling words that were lost to him over the distance.

Virgil ran deeper into the woods and climbed a tree. He hid there until nightfall. The sirens died off after a short time and the police couldn't be seen, but Virgil took no chances. He wondered if he had been seen climbing into the building, called in as a trespasser by a passing motorist. Or perhaps Twister knew who he was and turned him in. Maybe he noticed Virgil rubbernecking the shack as they passed it on their morning drive. Or maybe the pyramid ship was noticed by the foggy-eyed civilians on the highway. Maybe they remembered it.

And he wondered what caused the aliens to find him. This worried him most of all, because he felt lucky each time he evaded them, and he was sure his luck would run out. He almost felt that they weren't putting up the fight that they could. They had him hooked at the mouth but were letting him run with the line, reeling him in every so often to wear him down.

Night came and Virgil climbed down the tree, walking into town while

all of this ran through his mind. The mind claw interjected occasionally into the conversation, grasping at his heart and lungs, thrusting them into his gut and filling him with doubt. Maybe, Virgil thought, none of this is even happening. Maybe I'm still at the asylum, in prison, delirious from having starved myself, lost in a hallucination.

Regardless of what was real, he was being tossed about by the storm, both literal and figurative, a rowboat without oars being battered and thrown by raging waves. He reached town bedraggled and strained. He walked down the main street and into a tavern, seeking shelter from the rain that was growing relentless. The barroom smelled of smoke and he spent no time observing his surroundings. He walked past the faceless crowd to an open stool at the end of the bar and sat down. The bartender came right up to him and asked him what he would be having.

"I..." Virgil hesitated to respond, knowing he had no money. "I'm just trying to get out of the rain for a moment," he said.

"Listen buddy," the bartender said authoritatively, "this isn't a charity house. Either you buy a drink or you leave."

"I know, I'm sorry, just, fifteen minutes. Please?"

And then a voice from a few seats down joined in.

"Vernon? Is that you?"

Virgil and the bartender both looked over at the voice. It was Twister, who was now standing up with his beer and walking towards Virgil.

"Say barkeep, this kid's alright. Give him a beer on my tab, will ya?" he said. Virgil was relieved.

"Twister!" Virgil said enthusiastically. "You're a life-saver."

"Don't mention it, kid. Times are tough, all around. If you can't be a good neighbor, what good is this world?"

The bartender gave Virgil a beer.

"It's good luck, really," Twister said. "I was about to leave and head back earlier today but I got hired to bring a load of cargo with me. They said it wouldn't be ready until the morning so I decided to stick around. Got somebody back home to take my morning delivery, no big deal really, and these guys here are paying me twice as much. Just good luck, ya know?"

As Twister talked to Virgil, the bartender flipped through the television and stopped on the local news. There was a reporter standing with a microphone outside of the asylum that Virgil had escaped. Virgil's throat ran dry and his body froze. A banner ran across the screen that read "Breaking News." The bartender turned up the volume.

"...suspicious person sighted just outside of town, climbing into an abandoned building on the side of the interstate. Police found nobody there, but they believe there is a strong possibility that it is indeed the escaped prisoner, who has recently been convicted of murder and is believed to be potentially unstable and dangerous."

Twister perked his ears towards the news.

"Can you believe that?" he said. "This country is going to Hell, I tell you what. Madmen all around!"

And then, to Virgil's horror, they showed his mugshot with his name above it in large letters.

"Police said that he is now sporting a beard and to proceed with caution because he is easily aggravated and prone to violent reaction. If anybody has any information, please call your local police precinct headquarters."

"What? Prone to violent reaction?" Virgil said without thinking, looking at the screen. He was insulted by the generalization.

And then Twister paused, pulling his beer away from his face and placing it back down on the bar. "Wait a second," he said, squinting his eyes and studying the mugshot on the screen. "Well, I'll be!" He turned around to Virgil, his eyes growing mean. He felt betrayed and angry. "You sonofa-"

"Thanks for the beer," Virgil interrupted, "Gotta be going now." And then he slipped off the barstool and hurried for the door.

"Wait just a second!" Twister yelled, stepping off of his stool. "Hey fellas, stop that kid! He's the guy the police are after!"

A few men got up and ran towards Virgil but he ducked under their swinging arms and ran out the barroom door. Panting heavily, scared, Virgil ran down the road and didn't look back. He ducked into an alleyway and out onto a different road, following a zigzag pattern as the rain poured down on him. He went into another alley and hid behind a dumpster, police sirens again filling the air. He looked around hastily and saw a sewer lid in the center of the alley and ran towards it. He glanced around again, to make sure nobody was around him, and lowered himself inside, pulling the manhole cover back into place. He dropped down into the liquid below him, which came up to the middle of his shins. He backed himself against the wall and held his breath. The sirens grew

louder and passed over him. He didn't make a sound, holding the air in his lungs and waiting for his eyes to adjust to the complete darkness that now engulfed him.

After a while he could make out the edges of the walls, seeing the sewer channels that run beneath the city. He walked along them, keeping a hand on the stone that ran beside him, keeping the walls as a guide. He then stumbled across a valve room with dry floor and pulled himself into it, lying on the cold cement ground. He placed the backpack behind his head and lay there, listening, frightened. And the mind claw went to work, punishing him for his life and his breath, breaking his worth into fragments and tossing them into the sewage. The pressure against his brain grew intense, turning into a migraine that filled his aching body with a throbbing pain. But the taxation on his body overtook the intensity of the pain, and he fell asleep.

Despite his physical drainage and overworked mind, Virgil dreamt, perhaps because deep down, he knew he had to. He had been pushed beyond his limit and he knew no longer what he could do. At certain times, the hidden mind can take a person over and act in his place, pushing out wants and needs and replacing them with purpose. Virgil's body knew, somehow, that he needed to dream. His life, the life of humanity as a whole, depended on it.

He was walking in sand. It was a desert, but not the dry, hard desert that Hank took him too. This desert was like a beach that went on forever, giving way to dunes that rose high and sunk low. He walked onward and felt no thirst, no fatigue. The sun was shining but it did not burn his skin. The air was neither hot nor cold. He fixated on the horizon, where sand turned to sky, and walked

towards it.

Then the sand began to climb the sky as if it were an erupting geyser, arching over him until it formed a dome. He stopped and looked around him. Everything was sand. In his dream he began to meditate. He sat down and crossed his legs in the center of the sand-dome and then the sand above him cracked open. A double-pyramid ship pushed through, and then another, and another. He was surrounded now by the ships, all spinning counter-clockwise in their crystal blue glow. And then he stopped his dream meditation and the ships vanished, the dome of sand falling over him, showering him with their grit. When it had all fallen he was buried up to his neck in it, just as he had been in the desert with Hank, but he could see three large, ancient pyramids far out in front of him. They looked miniature in the distance but he felt their greatness. He looked at them and noticed that they too had a glow around them, but it was not of any color. It was an unseen energy that emitted from their edges, like heat waves. He wiggled his body, loosening the sand around him, pushed himself free. He walked towards the pyramids.

He saw Abigail waiting for him at the base of the largest pyramid and ran to her, throwing his arms around her and embracing her tightly. She held him in return and the two of them began to float, hovering at the peak the pyramid. Virgil looked down and the top of the pyramid opened up, like it were hinged, and they lowered into it.

Inside the pyramid everything was gold. There were coins, statues and even a stream of water, all gold. Virgil began to speak to Abigail but she raised two fingers and placed them on his mouth and shook her head. She led him to one of the pyramid walls, where symbols were painted in mud. It was a story

told by pictographs, he noticed, and the pictographs were moving, telling the story in animated motion.

There was a line drawing of a person, a simple stick figure, and he sat down with his legs crossed. Out of his head a line segment grew upward and a diamond appeared at the top of it. The diamond began to move downward along the line, consuming the line as it moved, until it came to rest above the figure's head. And then the figure ran, left and then right, and the diamond moved with it, attached and unshaken.

A triangle appeared. It was the same size as the diamond in height and width and sat in the same position vertically, but was a foot to the right. The stick figure ran towards the triangle and the triangle clotheslined the diamond off the figure's head. Now the triangle sat on the figures head, resting like a hat. And the diamond tumbled downward, reaching the floor and breaking into four separate parts, four notches on the wall. The triangle that rested on the figure's head grew larger and swallowed him until he existed inside the pyramid, at which point more diamonds began to rain down from the sky.

But none penetrated the triangle. Instead, they bounced off like hail, falling to the ground below where they shattered into parts. The figure stepped out of the triangle and ran downward to the line segments that lay in a pile near the joint where the wall met the floor. He brought three of the segments back to the triangle and formed a square at its base so that it looked like a little house. And then he put his arms to the line that served as his torso and removed from it a simple drawing of a flame, which he placed into the house. And then the triangle, with the box holding the flame attached below, began to lift into the air, towards the peak of the pyramid that Virgil and Abigail stood in. And then it all

disappeared. Not just the drawings but also the pyramid in which they stood and the sand beyond it. They were now walking along the stream again, as children, on their way to school. Abigail took his hand.

"Abigail," he said gravely, "I think I know what those pictures were telling me."

Abigail said nothing but looked at him with listening eyes.

"I think I know how the aliens are tracking me. When I meditate, when I try to pull the dream world into reality, I think they find me then."

Now Abigail spoke.

"That's right, Virgil. When you enter that state, you give off great energy. They have tools that monitor these kinds of energy - your energy leads you to them."

A satellite flashed in Virgil's mind. The Roman numerals were clear on the side: *XX-IV-V*.

"But that means that every time I write," Virgil went on, "they will find me. Every time I write down the Truth that can destroy them, they gain the ability to destroy me."

"Yes, Virgil, but there was more the pictures. What does the triangle mean to you?"

"It is like the pyramid we were in," he said.

"Yes it is," she replied, smiling softly at him and stopping next to the stream. She dipped her foot in and lightly kicked water into the air. "What does that mean to you?"

Virgil peered over the stream and looked at his reflection. He saw himself as a child and felt his life passing before him. He could scarcely separate

the events. He saw his birth and death overlapping, indistinguishable from one another. He looked back at Abigail.

"I don't know."

"Many ancient people believed the pyramids to have great power, Virgil. Some even believed they were of alien design. There is a certain magic in their geometry. The angles, their size, their proportions, they are alive with a special energy."

Virgil looked back into the stream and saw only his reflection. A fish jumped out the stream and caused the reflection to give way to ripples that spread through the water.

"It's a safe place, Virgil. The pyramids - that's why Egyptians buried their pharaohs in them. To keep them safe, to keep their energy safe after they died. The aliens -"

Virgil understood now. He finished Abigail's sentence.

"The aliens can't get through the pyramid walls!"

Abigail smiled with pride, her teeth like shining pearls. She embraced him and when she let go she held on to both his hands, shaking them lightly up and down in joy.

"Yes, Virgil. That's right."

"So how do I get there? I don't think I can travel that far. I mean - I don't think it's reasonably possible. I've got to stay hidden, I've got no money. I don't think -"

Abigail cut Virgil off.

"You already know, Virgil. Use what you've been taught. Pull your mind and body will follow. The dream world is real, perhaps more real than the world

you walk through every day. Go into the dream world and take your body with you. Instead of imposing the dreams upon reality, impose reality upon your dreams."

Virgil felt giddy all of sudden, the joy of childhood rushing through him. He looked at Abigail fondly. She took him back to his childhood - even just the thought of her. She changed the way he looked at the world, just by being near him. When he was with her, everything was covered in a layer of elation. He felt rhapsody singing through him as he transported to another time, another place.

"But there's more, Virgil," continued Abigail. "Think about what you saw."

"The figure, it built a box at the bottom of the triangle... and it put a flame inside of it... and then... Oh..." Virgil thought of the newspaper he saw earlier while leaving the shelter. "Abigail! The time capsule! I saw an article in the paper this morning about a time capsule that was going to get shot out into space. If I put the the writings in the time capsule then - "

"Then there may be a chance that they will survive. Yes, Virgil, you've got it." She leaned forward and pulled him close, pressing their lips together. Though they had become children in the dream, when their lips met they were grown again. They grew together, through all the years that they missed after Abigail left her body, after she died. They shared missed experiences together, they lived a thousand lifetimes in a single second, living and dying in each others arms, rolling around through the rifts of time, the aqueducts of the dreamworld pouring over them and through them.

They pulled their lips away from each other, placing their hands on each

others face, interlocking their eyes in communion. There was a cosmic magnetism that drew them towards each other. Not even death could keep them apart.

Still lost in the dream world, Virgil walked away from Abigail towards a tree by the stream. He looked at the stream and focused on its physical shape. This tree is real, he thought, and he touched it. He felt its bark, the rough texture that ran along it like the ravines that run through a canyon. This bark is brown. It is the skin of the tree, he thought. He pulled off the bark and sap ran out. He tasted it with his finger and smelled its sweetness. He looked at Abigail and she smiled reassuringly.

Virgil thought of simple truths that ruled the real world. Gravity pulls me down, holds me on the earth, he thought. He picked up a rock and dropped it, and it fell. In the real world, I feel pain, real physical pain. He picked up a stick with a pointed end and he pressed it against his forearm, drawing blood. He felt it hurt. He progressed through the elements of his reality, the physical reality that humans and animals and plants live in, and began to will it upon his dreams. He looked in the stream and pushed both of his hands into the water. It was cold, just like it would be in real life. He then saw his reflection turn to a vision of himself, sleeping in the sewers with the pink schoolbag under his head. He watched his sleeping body move its hands to its stomach as it growled in hunger, and his dream self felt that hunger. He watched his sleeping body shiver in the cold dampness of the sewer and his dream self shivered, too. He reached into the vision and grabbed his sleeping self and pulled it towards him out of the stream. He now stood over himself, feeling his own breath. And then his dream self laid down upon his sleeping self and they became one. Abigail walked over to the sleeping body and lay her own body down on top of Virgil. She too sank

into it, becoming part of it.

And then it began. He pulled the stack of legal pads out of his bag and set them nearby. He looked around him and saw the sewer tunnels and the forest blending into one. He forced himself to envision the distant pyramids and sent his mind into their tunnels. His body was pulled with it and he was now in their golden catacombs, his stack of notebooks nearby. He began to laugh, full of glee, bordering hysteria, complete euphoria. Then beyond hysteria and into lunacy.

And he wrote. The spirit of Abigail flowed through him, touched every cell and molecule of his body and mind. The madness that fought him tried to bite through but he was moving too fast. The spirit of inspiration burned in his eyes, the love of Abigail held him firm. The love and the inspiration joined together to form a boundless spirit that lifted him out of his body and with his body. He was outside of himself and he was deep in it at the same time. All of human history rushed by before him over and over and he found himself rearranging it in motion. The Bronze Age here, the Information Age there, now occurring in reverse order. He saw the barbaric conception of man when the aliens took the primates by force and he felt the anger and pain shake him. He saw the parasite of evolution clench its jaws and he felt the sting of their teeth. He saw the romantic poets and painters riding the waves of the Living Universe, loosed by their wine with stars flowing through them. He saw Jesus on the cross and he saw him in the tomb, and he saw that Jesus did not rise again. He saw Jesus' life energy shoot up in a beam of light, up into a spinning ship, and he saw worms devour his body.

And then Virgil saw those same double-pyramid ships hovering above

him, miles and miles beyond the earth's atmosphere, unable to locate his energy. He saw the death of Abigail and wept profusely and the death of Hank LaFluer, which filled him with sadness.

And he felt himself writing, but - as before - he was only partially aware of what was being written, as if there were another person inside of him, controlling the motion, bridging his mind as body. He felt the warmth of Abigail's breath and felt no difference between her breath and his own. And an ancient language flowed out of his pen, the ink dripping like blood, precious DNA placing itself onto paper. He felt the Universe all around him and within him, running through him as he ran through It.

He felt Truth exposing itself as it was, vulnerable and alive.

The notebooks were all filled. It was done. With the writings completed, only one thing remained. Virgil needed to get the manuscript safely to the time capsule, which was at a university several hundred miles away. His mission consumed him.

Virgil was spent - mind, body, and soul depleted and tired, but he couldn't risk stopping to rest. He became nocturnal, hiding in the day and traveling at night. He stole cars, driving one for an hour or two and then leaving it outside of a city, switching to another and repeating the process night after night, retreating to underground tunnels when dawn began to break. He could feel the paper burning in his bag, which never left his site. He drove with one hand, clutching the bag to his chest with the other. His beard had grown long and his hair was dirty, unkempt. His body began to eat its muscle tissue, deprived of protein and nutrition. He was a scavenger, hunting for food in dumpsters and avoiding contact with all other humans. He refused to meditate and got drunk at night with stolen liquor to keep from dreaming, afraid that the aliens might track him down. He thought only of getting to the time capsule.

Virgil came closer and closer to where the time capsule was waiting for him, but he grew weaker and weaker with each advanced mile. And the mind claw came back to him, voracious and haunting. It never let him alone, and without the aid of the supernatural world, without his communication with the Universe, Virgil found it more difficult to fend off the attacks.

His madness began to take on a menacing, physical form. It would take him over completely, send him into gut-wrenching agony and taking control of

his body. He constantly fought the urge to drive cars into a ditch or off the side of a cliff. He once found himself walking up to the door of a police station, coming back into consciousness as his hand was on the station door. He snapped out of it at the last second and retreated into an alley where he banged his head on the side of a dumpster, yelling at himself and tearing at his hair. I can't do this alone, he thought, I need Abigail. But if I go to her, the aliens will find me.

The mind claw sunk its nails deep. He could feel the parasite running through him, drinking his blood and riding the cells in his veins. He could feel it stroke his heart, playing it like a war drum. He could hear it laughing, he could feel the raunchy vapor of its breath. He became paranoid and delusional, hallucinating with hunger pains and sleep deprivation. But then he would look at the pink school bag and feel its burn, and he would remember the time capsule, so he pushed forward.

But he was wasting away nonetheless. He was a shell of a man. Writing the manuscript depleted his reservoir of energy. The madness grew quickly and began to devour his memories. At times he no longer even remembered why he was seeking the time capsule, but the pink bag spoke to him, the little unicorn under the rainbow sneering at him and reminding him of his mission.

"Find the time capsule," it told him. "Put the paper in the time capsule."

This became his mantra. "I must find the time capsule," he told the mind claw, "you can't stop me. I will find it and I will put the paper there."

Occasionally, though, through the river of alcohol that he used to cloud his mind and fend off the aliens, Abigail would seep through and nestle him close to her breast in a foggy dream. He would wake up with a vague notion of having been comforted, clutching the pink bag tightly, and he would weep over

it, his tears running off the pink, plastic lining as the rain once did.

He carried on this way for weeks, and then he reached the university. He could sense the closeness of the time capsule.

"Find the time capsule," he said to himself.

And the mind claw responded.

"Give it up. You are a waste, you have poisoned yourself and everyone you've ever even known. You are a parasite, you are a rodent. Look at you, you steal cars and sleep in sewers. You drink liquor and you forget to eat. You have become less than nothing. You despicable, wretched, filthy, awful..."

"No! No! Find the time capsule, find the time capsule, put the paper inside."

Now he was there. The newspaper article flashed into his mind, showing him the words one by one. The laboratory, he said to himself, and then another word followed. Anthropology.

It was late at night and he knew he had to break in. He pulled himself forward, each step bringing his weak frame forward in pain. He was a skeleton with thinning skin, with loosened tissue, with a battered mind. He picked up a rock and smashed it against a window on a door, reaching inside and turning the handle to open it.

"Turn around," said the mind claw, "talk to Abigail. Don't you miss her?"

He did miss her but his mantra pushed him forward.

Find the time capsule. Find the time capsule. Put the paper inside.

There was a sharp ringing in his ears, a combination of constant migraines and the alarm system ringing throughout the school, having been set

off by the smashing of the window. He walked to a reception desk and found a directory, locating the words "Anthropology Lab," which was on the third floor, east wing, room 302.

"You'll never make it," said the mind claw, walking across his brain and dragging its nails across his frontal lobe.

Find the time capsule. Find the time capsule. Put the paper inside.

The ringing was growing intense. Virgil screamed as he pushed himself onward, screaming in agony and screaming at the mind claw.

"Shut up!" he yelled. "Shut up!"

"I love you, Virgil," the mind claw said, mimicking Abigail's coaxing voice.

Find the time capsule. Find the time capsule. Put the paper inside.

He hoisted himself up each step, pulling along the hand rails. And then he was there, on the third floor. He pushed the door open and heard sirens bursting through the windows. The police were here.

"You'll never make it," said the mind claw.

Find the time capsule. Find the time capsule. Put the paper inside.

He struggled along the hallway and then reached room 302. It was locked, but there was a fire extinguisher nearby. He broke the glass door covering the fire extinguisher and, with it, bashed the window out of the door to the anthropology lab. He opened the door. The sirens were getting closer.

He stepped inside and walked towards the front of the room. There it was. A black, steel safe sitting inside of a chromed metallic rocket, about 5 feet tall. He walked up to it and fell to the floor. He kissed the time capsule. He made it. This was the end of his journey.

But the ringing was beyond intense and sirens sounded so close he could touch the sonic waves that tore his ear drums open wide.

"Don't you want to talk to Abigail?" said the mind claw. "They're going to find you and take you away. They're going to lock you up. They're going to kill you. You are a murderer. Electric chair bzzzzzz you're going to fry, you nut. Don't you want to say goodbye to your dead loverrr bzzzz fry you nut."

He did. He wanted to tell her goodbye.

"I can't make it," Virgil said, or maybe it was the mind claw - the voices were becoming inseparable. "I want to tell her goodbye."

So, with the pink bag clutched in his hands, he began to meditate. The mind claw gave him this memory, the memory of dream meditation. It wanted him to have it. It wanted him to signal. It wanted his energy.

And Abigail came. She walked into the room from the hallway, wearing the red cloak that brought Virgil so much comfort. He began to weep viciously, feeling the burning finality of death biting his heels, feeling it combat his desire for this woman, this woman who was gone but was somehow still here with him.

"Abigail," he said. "I love you. I love you so much. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened."

She walked towards him stoically, silently, until she reached his limp body lying against the rocket shaped safe. She set beside him and held him. She was crying now too, and she kissed his tears and rubbed his head.

"No, baby, no, you didn't do anything wrong." She pointed to the time capsule. "See? You made it, Virgil. You made it."

Virgil looked at the safe and smiled, even laughed a little.

"Come, Virgil. Come on, baby. Let's put the paper inside."

Abigail let go of him and moved her hand down to his, which was still wrapped tight, clasping his other hand around the pink bag. When he felt her hand on his, a sudden burst of strength ran through him. He felt whole again - for a brief moment the clouds lifted. In that moment, he opened the bag and pulled out the pads of paper. He opened the door to the safe and placed them inside. And then he wept like never before, collapsing completely into her arms.

The sirens grew louder and he could hear doors opening. The alarm bell was still ringing, joining with his migraine, joining with the piercing nails of the mind claw. And now there was a new noise. A buzz, encompassing all the frequencies of the sound spectrum, a high pitched whine with a low rumble.

And then the static of vertical lines materialized in front of Virgil. The overlords were here. Tentacles flapped wildly throw the static, the sinister reptile eye forming at the top and green ooze seeping everywhere.

"Yessss...." said the mind claw. "It's time to go home."

Virgil began to repeat his mantra, which had become his lone weapon for fighting the voice that wanted him to die.

Find the time capsule... but he already had. With Virgil's mantra completed, he had nothing more to say. Nothing more to think and nothing more to do. He had no weapons to fend the alien away. He was exposed.

The alien danced around him while the mind claw laughed, yelped through his busted eardrums. Blood began to trickle out of his ears, out of his nose. Tears filled his eyes.

"You bastards," he said quietly, hoarsely. "You goddamn bastards."

He shook his head back and forth, wanting to negate existence and deny

reality. A tentacle reached for him, caressing his face the way Abigail did.

"Abigail -" Virgil's throat was dry but the word broke through. Virgil looked for her but she was gone now. He remembered Abigail telling him that he would be alone for his final battle. It was just him and the tentacle, with its suction-cup teeth gnawing at his cheek bones.

He felt the battle being waged within him. The Truth was only a parasite eaten memory now, and he no longer saw it. He felt only the pain. He yearned for Abigail.

"I am nothing without her," he said.

The tentacle moved to his hand and held it, and a vast emptiness moved through Virgil, shaking him to the core. Virgil suddenly felt cold steel forming in his hand. When the tentacle removed itself, there was a gun in his palm that dripped with green ooze.

Foots steps echoed down the hall. The police, Virgil thought. And the mind claw spoke.

"Don't let them take you, they will kill you. Don't let them take your freedom again. You know how it will be. They will feed you with tubes. They will put you in a room. You will be dead long before your body slowly decays away."

The alien was gone now, gone in it's vertical line materialization transport - back to the mothership to wait. The ringing was still there - the sirens, the alarm, the hiss of the mind claw - it was too much. Virgil began to scream. He shot up to his feet, the madness completely taking over. He felt like electricity, like his arms were bolts of lightning. He felt the claw kissing his brain from the inside.

"Yesssss...."

It felt good. The Truth was fiction. This was reality. The fog soothed his pain.

The police kicked open the door and Virgil ran towards them, screaming, pointing the gun at them, and pulling the trigger. The loud bang of the gun pushed out the sirens and the alarm and the hiss and the buzz and migraine and all thoughts completely. It was the sound of silence, engulfing Virgil completely. He shot again, and again. And the police shot back. And bullets, the cold steel of death, with their aura of smoke and gunpowder, ripped through Virgil, five in all. One in each shoulder, causing him to throw his torso around - a step back to the left, and the to the right, and then one in each thigh, spinning him and throwing him on the ground. The dance of death, the saraband of Hades.

The claw prodded him onward, even as he fell. In the moment that death's door opens, the world stands still.

"You can still get them, don't let them take you alive."

He shot on his way down, and the police shot back, a final bullet ripping through his head.

On the ground, in a pool of his own blood, Virgil died. His arms were stretched outward, the gun at his side, and his body shook and convulsed. The ground shook. Fire and light ran against each other and grappled, turning into each other and becoming two halves of a circle. The spit and kicked and popped and hissed. Every window in the laboratory shattered inward. The police raised their arms to shield their faces. And then a beam of energy, a single ray of pure white light, shot up, out of his body and through the building, out towards the sky.

But a flame ran down his arm, spiraling around and around, and down his index finger, springing off of the tip and into the safe, consuming the manuscript, which lay on the top of a pile of artifacts, all waiting to be blasted off into space to orbit for fifty years. It consumed the manuscript but it did not burn it. Instead, it was absorbed into it, into each symbol, each letter, each word. Into the DNA of the Living Universe.

The police walked towards Virgil's body, their guns still drawn and pointed at it. One of them walked over to the safe and closed it shut.

"Probably just some vagrant," he said. "Trying to steal some of this stuff. Some poor, crazy vagrant."

It was midday, sunny and warm. A crowd gathered in polite silence outside of the great university. Parents and children and students sat in bleachers and on folding chairs as they watched a small man in a tweed jacket and wire-rimmed glasses speaking from notecards behind a podium that stood on a series of wooden risers.

"And so it is with great honor and anticipation that I knight this capsule, our picture of today for the nation's grandchildren, *Messenger 2045*. With it, we hope to provide an accurate picture of life today, our culture and our pursuits, so that humanity can continue to grow and learn, in search for a stronger tomorrow."

A crowd cheered ecclesiastically and the man who had been speaking walked away from the podium. A marching band that stood in white and red uniforms with feathered caps began to play an overture. The man in the tweed jacket walked over to the rocket-powered time capsule. A man and a woman, both wearing white lab coats and clear plastic goggles, waiting for him with a small black box in their hands. There was a red button on the top of the box.

The man in the tweed pressed the button and the time capsule shook as the rockets powered up. Steam and flame shot out from below and the time capsule began to climb upwards along the steel girders that held it in place. And then up it went, far into the sky in a long arc. It shrunk, smaller and smaller, as it moved towards the walls of Earth's atmosphere, out into orbit, where it would circle and wait before plunging back down in five decades time. The crowd was on their feet, roaring and applauding the success of the launch.

Far away, the capsule began to burn as it left the atmosphere. It was a fireball, but there was a different flame. It was a green flame, a wild flame, one that danced and teased the wind, moving in the direction opposite to that which it was being pushed. The flame changed color, from green to purple to blue to orange.

The burning capsule moved deeper into space, past a satellite with the Roman numerals *XX-IV-V*. The satellite processed the organic matter of the capsule and sent a message back its mothership.

"Space debris," the message read. And the capsule began its orbit.

END.

