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Matthew Baker

# Evolutionary Disasters

Matthew Baker

## Author's Note

Written between 2010-2014, the stories in this book were the prototypes for the stories in *Hybrid Creatures*. Like the final stories, the prototypes experimented with artificial languages: HTML, music dynamics, math notations, and propositional logic. Yet in terms of narrative the prototypes have nothing in common with the final stories whatsoever. The plots are different. The characters are different. The settings are different. I hadn't planned on writing prototypes, but experimenting with artificial languages narratively proved to be an extraordinary challenge, and each of these first attempts was a failure.

I consider the stories in this book to be clunky and rudimentary and pitifully defective. But the process of writing the stories was what taught me how to write *Hybrid Creatures*, and so as embarrassing as these stories are, the stories are also profoundly special to me, too. Without first building these prototypes, I never could have built a working machine.

As a thank you to those who have read *Hybrid Creatures*, daring readers are now invited to peek behind the curtain in my workshop and examine these monstrous creations.

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After supper, his family had wanted to play a game, but instead, as always, he had exiled himself to the basement, in flip-flops, sweatpants, and a dirty tank top. He sat at the computer, in the basement, in the dark, his body lit by the screen. Clicking, typing, clicking. For the past hour, between dice rolls, his family had been calling his name, trying to lure him back up to the kitchen, to join the game. He wanted to, but wouldn't let himself. He was hiding.

The basement was unfinished: concrete floor, concrete walls, the ceiling all pipes and beams. He had set up the computer, an outdated desktop, on a scuffed desk between the furnace and the stationary bicycle his parents never used. That was where he hacked. The desk chair was haloed with rumpled clothing. He didn't sleep in the basement, but essentially lived there, at the computer. The keyboard was missing several keys—escape, home, control, multiple characters—whose functions could nevertheless still be triggered by pressing the exposed nubs.

Tonight, twilight, as snowflakes flurried beyond the slider, he was writing code: an eloquent, complex script, meant to hack the servers of a military airfield. The base was domestic, an installation in Pennsylvania. He lived on the outskirts of Philadelphia. He was fluent in C, C#, C++, Ruby, and Lisp. He was flunking eighth grade, again. Including English.

He was trying, failing, to debug the script, when messages began flashing onscreen—emojis, emoji, hexspeak, leet—invitations, commands, pleas, to come sneak outside. Then, gloves pounding against the slider, as boys wearing hooded jackets bolted past the glass, crossing his backyard, toward the ravine. Urging him out.

His family called his name again, and then again, popcorn popping in the kitchen. He shook on a coat, stomped into a pair of boots, as the door swished open and thocked shut.

His breath turned to mist, the invisible becoming visible. The snowstorm was torrential. From upstairs, the kitchen chandelier cast warped polygons of light through the windows onto the yard. Whether his family had heard the slider, were watching him running away from the house, he didn't know. He vaulted the split-rail fence into the ravine, stumbled down the frozen slope, and chased the others into the shadowed looming trunks of the pine trees. Here, this was his condition: he couldn't remember ever feeling anything but lonely. At thirteen years old he had already quit hoping that he would ever not be. When he was alone, he felt lonely. Around people, he felt lonelier than when he was alone. School assemblies, multiplex lobbies, supermarket check-outs, dance recitals for his sisters—crowds made him feel so lonely that he had to gnaw his cheeks to keep himself from shaking. But that wasn't why he hid in the basement. He wasn't protecting himself from people, but protecting people from himself. He hurt people. He always hurt people, had been born with some energy inside of him, some demon spirit, that he did not understand and could not control, and that's why he avoided his family, why he hid in the basement, why he ran in a pack with boys like these, boys with tipsy parents and absent parents and violent parents, boys with drawls and limps and tics—because they were used to hurting, didn't feel anything anymore, had developed psychological firewalls. They slipped across patches of ice, and cursed and laughed, and cuffed each other, and tackled each other, and battered each other with snowy branches, and cheered, and danced chanting around a rusted barrel of burning newspapers, dizzier, and dizzier, and dizzier, and a gust of wind blasted the barrel, and embers flurried wildly into the whirling snow, and he felt just as lonely as ever, and very alive.

Naked, after gym class, stepping across the frigid clammy tiled floor of the locker room, he crowded with the others around a mirror cloudy with dripping steam and swiped handprints. Their voices echoed muddily: whoops, hoots, grunts. They snorted and pointed and taunted each other, appraising virtues and mocking flaws. There was a certain thrill in becoming the subject, in

being evaluated, and a certain misery. On his turn, the others twisted his wrists and pinned his arms behind his back and shoved him toward the mirror, and critiqued him, howling, and he stared at himself, at all that HTML.

```
<body> <p> buzzcut forehead eyebrows eyelashes eyes nostrils underbite  
throat clavicles nipples ribs navel hipbones birthmark pubes penis testicles  
knees ankles toenails </p> </body>
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As boys in creased boxers flicked the birthmark, he jerked, and faked a laugh, and saw the obvious. That bodies were pages. Made of code. And that embedded in there somewhere was that demon spirit: some malware that would crash anybody he touched.

In the murky haze of the showers, beneath a drizzle of tepid water, lathering himself with a cracked bar of woodsy soap, he listened to the others crooning improv love songs: for the principal; for the president.

There were “hackers,” and hackers. He wasn’t a “hacker,” but a hacker. “Hackers” wanted money; what hackers wanted was information. His curiosity, simply, was voracious. He cached knowledge like bankers cached profits. Weather patterns riveted him; population cartograms enchanted him; he was captivated by neuroimaging. He devoured corporate accounting. His lexicon included filibuster, neocon, theocon, paleocon, muck-a-muck, and doughface, all acquired while browsing the emails of a certain senator. Before bed, wearing a headlamp, he liked to read classified printouts taken from the military. They helped him sleep.

His parents researched human genetics at a university in the city. They didn’t know he was a hacker. What did they think he was doing, in the basement, night after night? Probably blogging, updating profiles, browsing imageboards, watching videos of spinning leeks and rabbit dances. And he was doing those things—but, simultaneously, also writing code, and scanning ports, and nabbing data from a megachurch halfway across the country. And, simultaneously, emptying a

box of shortbread. And, simultaneously, downing a pot of coffee.

Mutations, that was what his parents studied. Deletions, insertions, substitutions—missing c's, superfluous g's, a's become t's—strings of codons undone by a single letter. All the resulting syndromes.

An extremely rare disorder, his mother was saying, but listen to these symptoms.

His parents had driven the family to the ocean, to walk the beach in coats and boots. The clouds were ruffled. The wind was brisk. The beach smelled of thawing—dune grass, rotting oak stumps, toadstools, birch bark, mossy boulders, all waterlogged with thawing snow. His sisters were running along the shoreline, jabbering, as waves surged onto shore, then foamed away. He was hunched in the sand, poking a clump of seaweed with a twig, pretending not to eavesdrop as his parents gathered seashells along the dunes.

These boys simply lose control, his mother said. Neurologically. X-linked, recessive, so the disorder rarely affects girls, almost always boys. And the effect is that—he's sitting there, doing nothing, maybe waiting for somebody to bring him his lunch, a bowl of soup, when suddenly he realizes certain parts of his body have just cut off all contact with his brain—his hands go totally offline—he's looking at his hands, and his hands begin moving, independently, reaching, across the table, for a spoon—and he has no control over anything that happens next. Or maybe not his hands. Maybe his neck. Maybe his jaw. These boys spend their lives in wheelchairs, beg to be confined. You leave them alone, unconfined, turn away even a moment, and they'll begin gnawing apart their fingers, or banging their head against the wall, or gouge out their eyes. Except, they aren't doing it. Their bodies are. It's incredibly sad.

Then, so, like historical descriptions of spiritual possessions, his father murmured, peering at the shell of a crab, squatting, frowning.

But the spirit is in the genes, his mother said. And like any behavior, that's only a point on a spectrum. We all do things involuntarily, instinctually. What those boys do only seems bizarre because that behavior is uncommon. But what if the behavior were widespread? What behaviors are widespread? Why are we the only extant species from our genus? Why are all the other species

like us extinct? Because we were social—survived, through cooperation, what the other species could not? Or because we were antisocial—killed off the other species?

A pair of men wearing matching jackets (#CC9966) trotted past on dappled horses, leaving a winding trail of hoofprints. His sisters squealed, chased after the horses, collapsed, breathless, onto the sand, and then, still jabbering, stumbled back to his parents. His sisters had found some frosted seaglass, and a sandy ribbon.

Beautiful, his mother crooned, stooping to examine the seaglass, beautiful.

Later, at the playground across from the marina, his sister, the youngest one, disappeared. All three were on the swing set, jabbering, kicking—and then one wasn't. She was, just, gone. The other two were in the midst of a discussion about caterpillars—cuteness, grossness, on the loneliness of the chrysalis—and had not noticed the other run away. Which direction had she gone? Toward the marina? Toward the street, the parking lot, the minivan? Back toward the beach, the woods there? They didn't know.

He hopped down from the basketball hoop he had been attempting to climb. His parents were trying not to look worried, but looked very worried. The unspoken hypothesis, the word they were saying with their faces? Kidnapping. His father took off running for the parking lot, his mother took off running for the beach and the woods, and they left his sisters, his remaining sisters, with him, and told him to search the marina.

Standing there in the sand, one gripping their seaglass, one gripping their ribbon, his sisters stared up at him. For guidance, for support, for anything. What could he say? He said something, trying to assure them that the youngest one would be found. What he said seemed actually to frighten rather than comfort them. He tried again, said something else, and they immediately began to cry. He was making things worse, much, much, much worse, hated anything that made his sisters cry, and so now hated himself. He ordered himself not to speak, not to talk, not to say even a word unless absolutely necessary, which was always the rule, so why had he spoken? Shouldn't he have known that whatever he said would backfire, would ultimately cause rather than ease suffering, like a pilot airdropping parachutes of medicine onto a war-torn village, only

to watch horrified as the parachutes transformed, midair, into bombs?

His sisters had stopped crying, were sniffling, wiping snot with mittens. He pointed at, began trudging toward the marina—the concrete slipway, the windswept docks, the yachts under canvas tarps. His sisters hurried after. Stumbling through the sand, each clinging to a sleeve of his coat, yelling their sister's name.

On the very last dock, they found the youngest one crouched in a coiled fiber rope, talking to a panting dog with matted hair, who was also lost.

There were times when he and the other boys avoided each other, pretended to be strangers, behaved like enemies. Times when, as he strolled through the neighborhood, the others would eye him from darkened doorways, from the depths of garages, from between cracked window blinds, like feral animals from their dens. Times when they would ignore each other in the hallway, would eat alone at separate tables in the cafeteria, would dress in the locker room without speaking. Times when they would hole up in their houses, licking wounds, hibernating with video games and magazines.

Then things would change—the moon would wane or wax, the temperature would climb or drop—and again the pack would form.

They smashed mailboxes. They chased squirrels. They threw stones at beehives, shot fireworks at trampolines.

They were not friends. They were rivals united by a common cause. Destruction.

Or, sometimes, terror. Blood-curdling, spine-tingling, hair-raising dares. Like the night they snuck into an abandoned factory, rumored to be haunted by a ghost with stitched eyes and stitched lips, and forced each other to scream the ghost's name. Like the night they crept into a shuttered asylum, allegedly the domain of a skeleton that prowled the hallways in a ragged strait-jacket, and goaded each other into peeking under the mildewed cots and rusted gurneys. Like tonight, as they crossed a desolate lot of cracking pavement and rampant weeds. There were ways of learning just exactly what you were. There was this way here. A woman. Through the broken

slats of a rickety fence, down a chalky slope of loose rock and broken glass, onto the deserted railway tracks. The dusk was starry. The tracks were strewn with brittle leaves. A woman lived there, beneath the highway, that looming bridge of rumbling trucks. A vagrant, maybe a witch—for money, she would read your soul. Supposedly she was as old as Philly.

Rail cars with weathered paint and blossoming rust were scattered along the tracks, unhitched, linking to nothing. Fireflies drifted twinkling. He stopped—the others blew past, hissing and cackling, running for the shadowed underside of the bridge—and stood quietly. Watching fireflies disappear and reappear. Trying to predict where the lights would flicker next.

Within reach, a firefly flashed. His gaze drifted—expecting the firefly to appear next near the rungs of a rail car—but instead the firefly appeared suddenly beneath him, was on him, clinging to his tank top. He stopped breathing, stood totally still. The firefly kept clinging. The light there must have called the others. Another came—another, another, others still—alighted on the fabric. He was blinking everywhere. He felt chosen, and embarrassed for feeling chosen, and also the lonely feeling that never left. He shook the shirt, sending fireflies scattering, then ran for the bridge.

Above, traffic rumbled. Pigeons cooed from nests in the metal beams. There was light, from some fire, firelight being cast through the doorway of a boxcar against the pillars of the bridge. A lantern—now he saw—a lantern, the hazy gleam of a gas lantern, hanging from a nail inside the boxcar. Cans, canned beans and canned pears, were stacked against the walls. There were boots crusted with mud, plastic jugs of water, a crate littered with tattered books. There were hangers with clothes. There were many boys.

As he climbed into the boxcar, the other boys shoved, jostled, fought for room. A woman sat on a crate in the shadows at the back of the boxcar. She looked much younger than they had been told. Her hoodie framed her. He stared, spellbound, studying that elegant code.

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<body> <p> bangs <b>irises</b> <u>cheekbones</u> snubnose  
<i>teeth</i> <s>chin</s> </p> </body>
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It was a scar, on the chin, a pale lump struck across the skin there, from some fall or tumble. Maybe on ice skates, maybe some pogo stick. She could have been the daughter of a carpenter, the daughter of a florist, the daughter of the mayor. A teenage runaway, a decade later. A girl grown into a witch. The woman was speaking, a raspy honeyed voice, dangerous, hypnotic. The boys got onto tiptoes, peeked between each other, clutched their hats nervously, their crumpled money. I do not do tarot, she said, I will not scry crystals. If you want those things, there are shops in town, you are welcome to visit the psychics there. Doing tarot, scrying crystals, those are about past, present, future, are about your events. I will not tell you about events. I do not care where you heard about me, I do not care what you heard about me, here are the facts. I do not do anything special. I do not have a gift, I do not do anything supernatural, I do not understand why people keep coming here. Here is what I do. I do phrenology and chiromancy. I read skulls and palms. Listen again. Phrenology, chiromancy. Are those sciences? Geology, phrenology, astronomy, chiromancy. There is science; there is witchcraft. The difference is whether you can prove your methods work. I do phrenology and chiromancy. Skull reading, palm reading, these are about essence, nature, disposition, are about your person. If you want to know who you are, put your money in that bucket, and step over here.

Outside, the sound of the traffic hushed, and then the sound rose again. He felt himself swelling with hope, that when she read him she might find something good hidden there.

As each boy knelt, she took her hands from the pouch of her hoodie—spread a hand across his scalp, lay a hand across his fingers—and she read them. The knobs and ridges in those sweaty, pimply, greasy skulls; the creases and folds in those sticky, muddy, scabby palms. And she did find something good, for every boy: for this boy, she found crudeness, but also profound humility; for that boy, she found cowardice, but also marvelous imagination; these boys sarcasm, and cynicism, and dishonesty, and arrogance, but also charm, and grit, and moxie, and zest. And, for each boy, the others realized what she said was true. They had seen, but hadn't noticed: this boy never bragged about himself, but liked to spit and curse; that boy could invent genius pranks, but was always afraid of hurting himself. She did have a gift. She was breathtaking. She made them see

what they saw.

After the other boys all had been read, he stepped toward her, and knelt at the crate. She read his body, kneading his skull, touching his palms. He began to relax. She murmured, like she had with the others. Wonder... confusion... an aptitude for language... far too much love...

She stopped. Then backed away, her crate thumping into the wall. Her features had updated, had changed appearance, suddenly displayed a new emotion. The look of a mapmaker, hired for a predictable survey of a remote mountain, discovering, at the summit, the rim of a smoking volcano.

She lied.

And that's everything, she said.

She began sorting through the wads of money in the bucket.

Goodnight, boys, goodnight, she said.

But afterward, as the others hopped out the boxcar, running back along the tracks, yipping and laughing, she stopped him. He was crouched on the rocks, where he had landed. She stood there, gripping the handle of the door, backlit by the lantern.

You have some thing, she said. Some thing in you. It wants to eat you alive.

She glanced beyond him, at the others. A frigid breeze swept through, and the pigeons cooed. She leaned out, through the doorway, and whispered.

You could learn to control it, she said. But it's hungry. And it's strong.

Then hauled the boxcar shut.

He did try to control the malware. But often just containing it, just keeping it from bursting out of him, required all his strength. And certain situations gave the malware a surge of power, left him vulnerable to being overwhelmed. He dreaded celebrations. Birthdays, like this birthday, he could feel its presence seeping through his body, taking control. Gnawing his cheeks did nothing. He tried to laugh, and couldn't. He tried to smile, and couldn't. His skin tingled with bad code.

In the kitchen, his parents hunched over a cake, murmuring excitedly, holding matches to striped candles. Beyond the dining room windows, a flock of birds plunged toward the ravine, vanishing into the treetops. Layered patches of sunlight quivered across the walls, amorphous, murky. The tabletop was stacked with presents in metallic wrapping. His sisters chattered happily, seated around the table, wearing sundresses (#99CCFF, #66FF33, #FF99FF) with grass stains and dirt streaks. As the cake was installed onto the tabletop, the youngest one swiped a dollop of rippled frosting, sucked her finger, shrieked, then collapsed into her chair in an ecstasy of cream and sugar.

Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear—

He blew the candles out, a single breath, not letting himself make a wish.

Before we cut the cake, you've got packages here to open! his father beamed. His sisters thrust presents at him, shouting over each other, each wanting her own present opened first.

He tore paper from boxes, snapped off ribbons, lifted lids. He expressed no surprise, or pleasure—simply examined the contents, then set each box aside.

His sisters had stopped bouncing, chattering, smiling. His parents watched intently. He could feel the malware spreading, their moods crashing, them wondering what was wrong. And something did seem wrong: peering into each gift, his face got gloomier, and gloomier, and gloomier, as if what the boxes contained weren't presents, but punishments—this box a puff of smoke, that box a cloud of sulfur, these boxes dead animals. This wasn't just birthdays. He ruined everything.

Wearing a new windbreaker, new headphones, he tried to say thank you, and couldn't.

Afterward, his mother hugged him, which made him feel worse, because the hug was only another thing he didn't deserve.

He did have a blog—he never wrote about hacking, just wrote about life, his various experiences, anonymously. At the outset, he had envisioned a masterpiece, imagined somehow charting through the blog the intricate bewildering shape of his life, eventually discovering some underlying significance there. But, in reality, the blog was a random assortment of random experiences.

As if he were only an aggregator, an aggregator of memories, of memories that truly were impossible to comprehend.

What was the meaning of a rash appearing, then disappearing, on your body, where nobody but you saw? What was the meaning of losing your key to your house? What was the meaning of seeing, from the backseat of the minivan, driving with your family to the aquarium, the form of a woman leaning over the railing of a distant bridge, and realizing the woman is about to leap, and being seized by a gut-wrenching panic, and watching the woman instead suddenly release a bouquet of balloons into the sky? Why did he love pancakes? Why did he love erasing things that other people had written? Why did he love molehills collapsing underfoot, the flaking striped paper shell of wasp nests, the crumbling rooty mud of swallow nests, spiderwebs when wet with dew? Why did he tear down those spiderwebs? How could he hope to explain the feeling, stopping on the walkway between the bus and the school, in a downpour, rain as heavy as hail, as others rushed past him, in hooded raincoats, with quivering umbrellas, toward the doors, explain the feeling, stopping there, in his tank top, and jeans, and flip-flops, staring up at the clouds, being battered by glacial rain, squinting, and drenched, and smiling? That, if awake was the level above asleep, the rain had shocked his system into the level above awake?

He dripped rainwater, a puddle forming around his chair. Today in chem lab each student had to present on a different element from the periodic table: chemical symbol, atomic number, period and family and state of matter. He found himself at the blackboard, clutching a trembling sheet of paper, wishing he were back out in the rain, where now there was thunder. Anytime, the teacher was saying, go ahead and start. He stood, terrified, staring at her staring at him over the back row of students.

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<body> <p> updo wrinkles <object>eyeglasses</object>
<object>mascara</object> lips <object>pencil</object> </p> </body>
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She had a habit of chewing pencils, left jagged toothprints in the wood. A few of the other boys

were in the same class, were variously smirking, pouting, blowing kisses at him. The other students were glaring at him like something unsightly that had just washed onto the beach. He began speaking.

For him, trying to talk to people, just what was that like? He chose the wrong words; he used words wrongly; he rushed sentence to sentence, or paused mid-sentence, or put words in the wrong order. Helium, that was the name of the element he had drawn from the beaker, the subject of his presentation. He knew, had so much to say, about helium. And he could not get any of that out of him—as if his mouth could only form a simple shape, and his thoughts were complex shapes, all bowing curves and jagged angles, that could not be shoved through.

That's why he only spoke when he had to—why, afterward, in the cafeteria, sitting around a table of boys chugging milk and swapping cookies, he didn't say anything, to anybody—why he sat quietly chewing the carrots his parents had packed him—because talking, getting things through his mouth, meant having to break his thoughts into pieces.

What was the meaning of a seagull suddenly soaring into the cafeteria, swooping over the tables of stunned children, and then veering into the hallway, headed toward the gym?

What did the malware hate? The malware hated power. The malware hated seeing people in positions of inferiority, hated inequality of any sort, hated having power over anything. Restaurants, he hated being taken to restaurants, hated being led to a candlelit tabletop and having a chair pulled out for him, hated sitting at a table where people in collared shirts (#FFFFFF) and spotless aprons (#000000) would run back and forth through swinging doors, pouring iced water from a carafe into his glass whenever he took a sip, whisking away his menu, fetching another basket of steaming bread, navigating a gauntlet of scooting chairs and gesturing patrons while burdened under a tray of entrees meant for his family, stooping to pick up his knife from the floor after he dropped it, apologizing to him about the knife when he was the one who had dropped it, hurrying to get him another knife. He stopped sipping his water, so the people wouldn't have to run. He stayed thirsty, and the malware spread anyway, pooled into his feet and his hands and his

skull, into all of his extremities.

The malware hated garages, seeing mechanics having to scurry around beneath cars. The malware hated supermarkets, seeing baggers hustling to fumble groceries into the bags. The malware hated hotels, seeing bellhops loaded with luggage. The malware hated restaurants, especially restaurants, like this here.

His grandparents had ordered the same thing, the stuffed calamari, because they copied each other in everything. Everything except politics. His grandmother was a Democrat. His grandfather was a Republican. Together their votes did nothing.

We've read the news online for years, his grandfather was saying. But we always stopped reading where the story stopped, like you would with a newspaper. Then, yesterday, we made an incredible discovery.

His grandmother held her glass out, for the server to top off with water. Thank you, his grandmother said. The server ran through the swinging doors. His sisters were slurping fettuccini noodles, chewing spinach ravioli, listening curiously.

An incredible discovery, his grandfather said. We scrolled past the story, and there were comments. Comments! Do you know about the comments? There are comments, after every story—sometimes hundreds, sometimes thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands!

Dad, of course there are comments, his mother said.

You don't understand, his grandmother interrupted, folding her hands on her napkin. How it was. I had to call him into the room. I saw there were comments, and I had to call him into the room. And we read a few on top, and then we just began scrolling, and we kept scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling, and even at the end of the page, there was a button to click that would load the next page, there were pages and pages and pages of comments about this single story alone, and I realized suddenly—I realized—I realized suddenly who these people were. Strangers, complete strangers, from all over the country, who didn't know each other and otherwise never would have met, some sheep farmer in Montana, a pediatrician in Oklahoma, a housewife in Vermont, and gardeners and jewelers and plumbers and brokers in

Utah in Arkansas in Florida in Maine, all coming together, and actually meeting, actually holding a discourse, actually having a place to speak, and be heard, and listen, and most of them were so angry, and could not agree on anything, but, still, but it was so beautiful—

Abruptly, his grandmother had stopped, putting her hands to her face.

Mom, are you crying? his mother said, leaning forward.

His grandmother waved her hands, then smacked his mother's napkin, laughing.

That was never possible before, his grandmother said, still laughing, and pinching tears from her eyes.

Then, at that moment, he felt himself swelling with love for his grandparents.

Although could not imagine a world where that was never possible.

The other boys didn't hack. But every boy, everywhere, practiced some forbidden art. In his neighborhood? Predominately, graffiti and skating. He dreamt of cracking the Pentagon; the other boys dreamt of tagging Mount Rushmore or shredding the Hoover Dam. Weekends, they would don baggy jackets, ride trains around the city, watch each other unleash forbidden talents. Boys shaking cans of spraypaint, bombing glass doors and brick walls and concrete barriers with monotone throwies and polychromatic blockbusters and wildstyle totally illegible to everybody, boys who saw the city as canvas, that a dumpster wasn't a dumpster, a billboard wasn't a billboard only. Boys leaping onto beat-up skateboards, the decks twirling and spinning and flipping with their sneakers as they did tailstops and airwalks, lipslides and nosegrinds, heelflips nollie and pressflips fakie, boys who saw past conventional assumptions about an object's purpose to reveal the object's true form, recognizing fire hydrants as hurdles, traffic cones as targets, parkway benches as springboards, stairway railings as ramps, teetering ledges of scattered pebbles and shattered glass as legitimate pathways, garbage cans as platforms, street lamps as switches, parked cars as shortcuts, swerving taxis as detours worth taking. Oily, bleeding, splattered boys, giggling happily. He understood what graffiti and skating were. What the other boys were doing. They didn't hack, but they were hackers—hacking the city itself—changing how the objects were read,

the meaning of the architecture.

Some weekends, he was the entertainment. The others would slip into his basement, huddle around his computer, munching donuts and sipping juice, ice clinking in their glasses. And watch, as he hacked, hunched over the keyboard—typing scripts, sniffing honeypots and planting rootkits, shutting down the city website, reading aloud from emails of the sheriff.

They were painters, and dancers, and writers.

They had no mentors. They had heroes, but they had no mentors, so they could only teach themselves. And they did, spent night after night after night alone, studying their art. Weeknights, from his bedroom window, he might see the boy in the next house crouched under a crooked lamp, drafting murals in a sketchbook, blowing eraser shavings from the paper onto the floor, or see a boy with a flashlight sneaking into the ravine to experiment on the abandoned garden shed, testing acids for etches, wheatpastes for stencils, different lettering techniques. At nightfall, cutting between houses, he might stop at a garage window to watch a boy freestyling beneath a bare light bulb, practicing railstands, the garage door closed for privacy despite the sweltering weather, or stop at a mesh fence to watch a boy squatting beneath the moths whirling about the porch light there to examine a skateboard, knocking pebbles from the griptape, wiping wax from the deck, probing cracks. They were amateurs, essentially. They celebrated trivial breakthroughs, and dismissed recurrent disasters. They were considered toys, considered posers, considered kiddies, for their age alone. Acid burned holes into their tees. Wheatpaste crusted their sweatpants. Griptape frayed their shoelaces. Wax stained blotches into their jeans. They kept training. They were industrious, and studious, and did not do homework, ever.

Were they ever exhausted? Did they ever tear their sketchbooks apart, hurl their skateboards into the garbage, delete the script, delete all of the scripts, and curse the internet? Did they ever trudge together to the hill above the baseball diamond, collapse there onto the grass and clover? Wind blasted ripples into the grass, blowing twisting streams of seeds from the dandelions, knocking spotted butterflies adrift. The sunset was cloudy. There were no games today. Beyond the backstop, a couple, a man and a woman, had emerged from the dugout, now were walking the

line where infield became outfield. Silhouettes, updating constantly, the woman adding links, removing links, to the man.

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<body> <p> head arms <a href="man/waist">hands</a> </p> </body>
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<body> <p> head arms <a href="man/back">hands</a> </p> </body>
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<body> <p> head arms <a href="man/hands">hands</a> </p> </body>
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<body> <p> head arms hands </p> </body>
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He hated seeing the couple finally separate. He always hated seeing people separate. Even the other boys, who could not write code, seemed to intuit that there was something unsettling about being a page that nothing linked to, a page that linked to nothing. They were shouting at the couple to kiss.

Celebrations were predictable. Birthdays, he knew were coming. Holidays, graduations, weddings, were penciled into the numbered boxes of the calendar hanging alongside the refrigerator, could be foreseen. He could gather his strength, focus all his energy on suppressing the malware, prepare himself for the surge.

But there were also things that he could not prepare himself for, unexpected encounters, unpredictable events. Like this man for example, at the park, at the soda stand, in the shadow of the awning—like this gnarled elderly man, wearing his polo and his khakis and his scuffed loafers, shaking his wooden cane, shouting at the vendor who had spilled a lemonade onto his wife's purse—he could be sunning, yawning, sitting on a bench with his family, and then see this man at the soda stand, shouting insults, obscenities, slurs, as the vendor cowered and apologized and mopped the purse with napkins and appeared on the verge of tears—see a person with power

abusing somebody without.

Just like that, a surge could hit him, the malware could overrun his body—he was already crossing the plaza, leaving his family behind, cutting between patches of sunshine and tree shade, shoving between a pair of women with strollers, popping the lid from his own lemonade, his flip-flops snapping against the pavement, his body screaming with malware, he was already there, at the soda stand, where the man was still shouting, saw but didn't see him, there, trembling, breathing, raising his cup and then in a quick chopping motion swinging it at the man, the lemonade slicing through the air, hitting the man like a slap, drenching him and his clothes.

The man was not shouting anymore—now seemed only shocked, and almost sad.

He did, next, throw the cup.

By the time the cup had hit the man, had bounced into the grass, had settled into a nook between some tree roots there, he was getting dragged away by his parents. Toward the street, their parked minivan. The vendor, the boy in the striped uniform, now was pressing the man's shirt with napkins, apologizing, as if this spill too were his doing. Parkgoers were staring: dogwalkers from pathways, sunbathers from towels. His sisters looked bewildered. His parents looked furious. He had ruined their afternoon.

The ride home was quiet—the silence interrupted only by occasional gurgles, as his sisters sucked at the straws of their lemonades.

Only later, as his family sat down for supper, did his parents finally address what he had done at the park.

We understand that that man was being disrespectful, his mother said, buttering spears of grilled asparagus.

But, also, you do not know that man, or anything about him, his father said, grinding pepper, then shaking salt, onto his corn. He may suffer from chronic pain, migraines or arthritis or lumbago, some condition. He may have recently suffered the loss of somebody in his family. His wife may have recently been diagnosed with cancer. He may have been feeling overheated.

He may have simply been having a difficult day, his mother said, spooning grilled mush-

rooms from the platter.

He was staring at his plate, gripping his fork and knife.

But that kid didn't mean to spill the drink, he muttered.

Yes, but do you understand that you cannot just attack people with—

But that kid didn't mean to spill the drink! he shouted. Oh, yes, his body was still the malware's—he had leapt onto his chair, wait now onto the tabletop, had dropped his silverware, was still shouting, yes the malware had his lungs, had his trachea, had his glottis vibrating, had his tongue shaping phonemes against his palate, had his lips shaping phonemes against his teeth, had him shouting, at his family, that none of them understood him, that none of them even tried to understand him, that he hated them, hated all of them, hated every one of them, yes the malware had his muscles, had his tendons, had his bones, had his arms swinging, had him pointing, at each person, his mother, his father, then this sister, then that sister, then the youngest one, shouting that he hated her, that he hated him, that he hated her, that he hated her, that he hated her, specifically.

Then leapt down to the floor, hurried away toward the staircase, like somebody fleeing the scene of a crime, leaving behind a cluster of stricken victims, which he was, which he was.

He hid in the basement. All night, he hid in the basement, at the computer, thinking only about code, losing himself in keystrokes, focusing on letters and brackets and numbers and slashes, so he wouldn't have to think about what he had done, wouldn't have to feel shame, or regret, or sorrow, or guilt, wouldn't have to feel anything, about anything, whatsoever. His body was still bristling with malware. His family would never speak to him again.

Upstairs, there was the clatter of plates, the scrape of silverware clearing steak gristle and potato skin into the trash. Then the thrum of the dishwasher, footsteps withdrawing. Later, somebody, a sister, crooning a question. Later, the hiss and click as the dishwasher finished. Later, the murmur of the television, and then that too went quiet. Water gushed through pipes as toilets were flushed, face wash and toothpaste and hand soap rinsed down the drains. Then the lights shut off, and the house was silent.

The windows were cracked, downstairs, treefrogs warbling outside. Aside from typing, he had not moved in hours. He was stuck, trying to work through a new script, could not figure out where he had gone wrong. He had decided to keep coding, not to sleep at all.

He was troubleshooting—posting queries, skimming tutorials—when he was jolted out of the internet, back to the basement, by the sound of the staircase creaking. A stair creaked—the railing creaked—another stair creaked—a shadow was gliding into the basement. The shadow paused, at the bottom of the stairs. Then the shadow slid toward the computer.

In the glow of the screen, a sister appeared, the youngest one, wrapped in a blanket (#FF00FF) and wearing a wool ski mask (#FFCCFF).

She could not sleep, she said. Her room gave her nightmares, she said. Somewhere between her bedroom and the basement, she had lost a sock. She said she needed to sleep here.

He was almost certain she had invented the nightmares, so that he could not tell her to go back up to her room.

As he typed, she slept under the desk, curled around his flip-flops, on her blanket, like a watchdog. The malware finally receded, gave him back his body. This time she had found him.

Classified printouts truly did help him sleep. Military reports soothed him. Operational messages, written in obscure jargon, riddled with references to vague entities with vague ambitions, usually dropped him straight from wide awake to deep sleep. Tonight, however, he had read a document that made sleep impossible. The document concerned a missing bomb.

Hundreds of nuclear weapons had been lost, fumbled into different habitats worldwide: a fjord in Greenland, seabed off the coast of Spain, a marsh in the Carolinas, seabed off the coast of Georgia. But those were the bombs that jets had lost—warheads on missiles. Worse yet were the bombs portable enough for people to carry—the nukes that could fit in a backpack.

The document, dated eleven hours earlier, reported intelligence that an unnamed terrorist organization had recently smuggled such a bomb to Pennsylvania, plotting that upcoming weekend to incinerate the city of Philadelphia.

As dawn began brightening his bedroom through the curtain, he lay staring at the spackle on the ceiling, clutching the printout, imagining what a bomb like that could do to a body.

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Mutate everything. A total breakdown of code. Leave behind a city of corpses, pinned beneath rubble, clutching at air.

In the kitchen, on the television, the news had nothing to say about the plot. There was no emergency bulletin, no evacuation announcement. He ate yogurt. His sisters ate soggy cereal. His parents stood sipping coffee, waiting for bread to pop toasted out of the toaster.

He wasn't supposed to know what he knew.

So, he told nobody. Not his family, none of the other boys, nobody.

How did he spend the week? That final week? Before his grandparents, out strolling their neighborhood, would be charred to death by the nuclear firestorm, before his parents at the university would be blinded by the flash of light and then crushed beneath the collapsing library, before his sisters would be poisoned by a whirlwind of radiation, and days later perish after suffering nausea and tremors and delirium and seizures, and such great thirst, begging him for water he could not find?

He spent the week doing things he never would have done otherwise. Totally ordinary things. He was afraid, very afraid, of dying, and so he was selfish: he stopped protecting everybody, instead put his family within striking distance of the malware constantly. When his sisters called him from the backyard, he didn't step back from the window, crawl into his closet, hide there until his sisters had quit trying—he ran into the yard, and knelt at the fence, and inspected the smudged pawprints his sisters had found there in the clay. When his parents called him from the kitchen, he didn't jam headphones on, hunch toward the screen, pretend he hadn't heard—he bounded up the staircase, and sat on a stool at the counter, and sampled the steaming tarts his

parents had baked with their new recipe. When his grandparents drove in from town to visit, he didn't slip away to the ravine, sit in the abandoned garden shed, pass time throwing rusted screws at the wooden planks—he swung on the porch swing, between his grandparents, and listened to them tell anecdotes about landlords, as jets sketched contrails onto the sky, as jets sketched distails into the clouds.

And the malware struck, and struck, and struck. He shrugged at the discovery in the clay, spit out the tart and left the tart unfinished, didn't laugh or nod or even acknowledge that he had heard the anecdotes. He snapped heads from dolls. He interrupted movies with groans and boos. He kicked pillows, slammed cabinets, jammed toothbrushes into the drains of sinks, hurled board game pieces at the walls.

And only now did he see, truly notice, what he had seen so many times before. When he shrugged at the discovery in the clay, his sisters looked hurt—but then dragged him away to another discovery, a snail with a whorled shell journeying up the downspout of the house. When he spit out the tart, his parents looked offended—but then offered him a cup of milk, brushed some flour from his tank top, asked if he wanted to go for a hike or a bike ride or take a trip to the park. On the porch swing, beneath the contrails and the distails of the jets circling the airport, his grandparents kept making jokes, asking questions, telling anecdotes, as if willing to suffer any amount of rudeness in their quest to make him smile. The malware wasn't any secret. They all knew his malware was there. They were always so eager to have him near, not in spite of his malware, but because of. They fixed their dolls, then tracked him to his bedroom, ambushed him with hugs. They hushed his groaning, his booing during movies, then patted him from across the couch. He finally understood what he had begun to understand that night that his sister had slept under the desk, her hands linked to his feet. That he did not have to protect his family from the malware—that what he had to do was something far more difficult, something far more perilous, which was to let his family protect him. He could fall apart, during their board game. They would pick up his pieces.

At nighttime, while his family slept, he read articles about nuclear bombs, poured through

images of victims and survivors.

In daytime, he lived endless final moments. He jerked whenever sunlight flashed against the window. He winced, flinched, whenever the wind slammed shut a door, a truck backfired in the road. He waited, and waited, and waited. The weekend came, the weekend went, and the bomb never blew.

Had the bomb been faulty? Had the bomb been captured by the military? Had the bomb even existed? Yet another random experience: believing you are on the verge of losing everything, when you are actually on the verge of eating a sandwich.

The sandwich had mozzarella, basil, and heirloom tomatoes. His parents had made the sandwich for him after getting home from work. He loved the sandwich, although the malware wouldn't let him say that. He stood barefoot in the yard, chewing the sandwich, scowling. His sisters were chalking hopscotch courses on the driveway. The other boys roared by, pushing each other in clattering wheelbarrows, shouting his name. Dragonflies flurried past, a glittering swarm of flickering wings. His parents stepped from the house onto the porch, eating apples, having changed into tees and shorts. He was damaged, he was infected, his system corrupted. They could have been happier, much, much, much happier, without him. But here they were anyway. Crossing the grass. Munching the apples. Linking their pages to his.

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## Song Of *i*

Nicholas Surrey is at the kitchen table wearing a normal green t-shirt and normal blue jeans and normal white socks and just starting his homework for precalculus that's due *tomorrow* when his aunt comes banging through the door still wearing her work uniform and shouting about how his goddamn cousin ran away again. Nicholas Surrey's mother is flipping through notes in her briefcase at the counter. His mother is divorced and his aunt is never-married which in the 17th century would have meant that Nicholas Surrey was a boy and that his cousin Taylor was a bastard. But now it's the 20th century and that doesn't matter. What does matter is that Taylor's grandparents are what they call Hispanic which means that Taylor's father is what he calls Latino which means that Taylor is what he calls Native and what everyone at school calls Wetback, Spic, or Nigger. Nicholas Surrey is learning about imaginary numbers such as *i* which is the square root of -1. *i* does not exist but mathematicians use it anyway because it is useful for solving certain problems.

"The little shit has an algebra exam in the morning and hasn't even started his English homework," his aunt says [forte]. "I locked him in his room, so he jumped out his window."

"Going where?" his mother says [mezzo-piano]. His mother pours a glass of juice but his aunt doesn't want anything.

"He wasn't about to tell me," his aunt says [forte]. "But I'm guessing nowhere good."

His mother hands the juice to Nicholas Surrey. Nicholas Surrey already has a plan. He pretends to pencil in an answer.

“We'll find him,” his mother says [mezzo-piano], taking her purse down from the wall. “We'll drive around all night if we have to.”

“I have to wake up for work again at three a.m.” his aunt says [staccato]. She sits at the kitchen counter, taking off her nametag and her apron. “Three a.m.” [decrescendo]. “That little shit is on his own.”

Nicholas Surrey knows that calling his cousin a little shit is what might be considered his aunt's *ostinato*. Nicholas Surrey has been playing the violin since he was five. He drinks the juice and says he's going to the bathroom and then runs upstairs to his room which is not the bathroom. Nicholas Surrey lies only when lying is better than telling the truth.

I leave the house at nightfall, wearing my brass spectacles and my very best hat. It's a black top hat I obtained recently on a trip to the islands of Malta. It's spring, and the air is sticky, and the air stinks of ragweed. At nightfall on a school night, all of the local roughs are out—Phil “The Big D” Deroos sprawled out on the trampoline in his backyard; Jordan “Rotten” Otten and the Beatriz sisters cranking off on their bikes toward the bus garage and the abandoned tennis courts; Amy Green and her friend Katie B., hunched on Katie B.'s porch, eating what appear to be sandwiches. I wear my fanciest union suit—with an actual fireman's flap—and yellow galoshes. I also wear a yellow sailor's jacket, in the pockets of which I carry my matchbook, a tiny knife, and a couple of chocolates. I prefer dark chocolates with an orange filling.

I hop the fence into The Big D's backyard. The Big D has Valerie P. lying on the tramp with her shirt off and also her belt but not her pants. I offer The Big D a truffle.

“Piss off,” The Big D says.

“Don't pay attention to him, pay attention to me,” Valerie P. says, tugging on The Big D's shirt.

“I can't when he's just standing there like that,” The Big D says.

I pocket the truffle.

“I'm looking for Taylor Whitman,” I say.

"Hey, okay, I don't know where Taylor is," The Big D says. "So please will you go terrorize someone else?"

I pick up Valerie P.'s shirt and take out my knife.

"If you don't tell me where Taylor is I'll carve up the girl's shirt," I say.

Valerie P. crouches at the edge of the tramp.

"Put down my shirt, Queerley," Valerie P. says. Which isn't my name—she's confused me with someone else. I find this often happens with high schoolers.

"Is there a party tonight?" I shout. "Are there any girls with parents out of town?" I poke my knife into the silk of the shirt, just enough so the knife doesn't actually pop through but so Valerie P. still gets the message.

"That blouse cost me a hundred dollars," Valerie P. says. "If you so much as nick it, Queerley, I'll knock you straight through the top of your hat."

I don't say anything. Valerie P. reminds me of a sailor I once met in the Galapagos. I hated that sailor.

"Anyway, there's a big fight at the gravel pit, so maybe he went there," Valerie P. says.

"Grazie," I say, kissing the collar of her shirt and draping the shirt over the edge of the tramp. I take off my hat, and I bow, and then I patter off into the night, knife still in hand.

What Nicholas Surrey likes about his cousin is that parts of them overlap and parts of them don't, so that they're the same but also different. One of them is descended from a circus ringmaster; one of them is descended from a convicted bootlegger; they're both distantly related to Boris Karloff. Nicholas Surrey's grandparents are what they call Italian which means that his father is what he calls Italian which means that Nicholas Surrey is what he calls Italian and what everyone at school just calls White. His cousin Taylor says that Nicholas Surrey isn't White and that in the 19th century Nicholas Surrey would have been called Wop, Guido, or Guinea. Taylor does not believe that White exists. Taylor thinks that White is just an imaginary word people use for solving certain problems. And Nicholas Surrey believes that, because he knows someone who is part

Vietnamese who everyone calls White and someone from Israel who everyone calls White and someone half Brazilian and half Colombian who everyone calls White too. But he knows someone else who is part Vietnamese who everyone calls Korean and an exchange student from Israel who everyone calls Al Qur'an and someone from Central America who everyone calls Fucking Cuban. At school, what White actually means is +, and everything else means -.

What Nicholas Surrey got from his father was a brain that's good at learning things, which is why as a seventh grader he is in precalculus and anatomy and chemistry, which are all high school classes, and a heart that's bad at pumping things, which is why he failed his physical and couldn't try out for the basketball team *or* the baseball team *or* the soccer team, which made him feel sad<sup>sad</sup>. What Taylor got from his father were muscles good at building themselves, which is why he is big and good at fixing things with his hands and why Nicholas Surrey wants to be him, but Taylor got cut from the basketball team anyway, he says because he's Native, the coach says because of his attitude. What they got from their mothers was each other.

I cut through the bus garage, sneaking through rows and rows of empty buses, then across the abandoned tennis courts and the meadow and into the gravel pit. This isn't the first assignment I've taken in Michigan—I know the area quite well. I wiggle under the fence and light a match to look at the map posted along the gate. Back in the meadow the crickets are screeching, but in the gravel pit it's quiet, only rocks.

I creep through the hills toward the pit. The Jeluso twins and Unibrow Tommy are hunched along the top of a gravel pile, peeking at something beyond. I scramble up the dark side of the pile, shadowed instead of moonlit, and drop alongside them.

"Greetings," I say.

Unibrow Tommy ignores me. The Jeluso twins nod at me, then turn back to the pit. Below, the high schoolers are perched in the beds of pickup trucks and on the roofs of minivans, some of them with bottles, some of them with pipes. Jordan "Rotten" Otten and the Beatriz sisters are sitting across the pit halfway up a gravel pile, their bikes stashed below. I recognize some of the high

schoolers: wakeboarders, hockey players, most of the homecoming court. Not a flutist or mathlete among them.

“I’m looking for Taylor Whitman,” I say.

“So was everyone else,” a Jeluso twin says. “That’s why we’re here.”

“Go on,” I say.

“Today Taylor told Crumb to fuck himself,” a Jeluso twin says. “So now Taylor and Crumb are going to fight to the death.”

“Crumb?”

“Adam Martindale.”

“I’ve heard tell,” I say. “Biggish fellow? Jaw like a horseshoe?”

“He’s the one who got Kelsey Green pregnant last year, before Kelsey Green got hit by that bus,” a Jeluso twin says. “He made a speech about it at the homecoming game.”

“His mom owns the bar that does karaoke,” a Jeluso twin says.

“He sounds like the sort of fellow who would get along swell with Taylor Whitman,” I say, adjusting my spectacles.

“It all started because Crumb called Nicholas Surrey a faggot,” Unibrow Tommy says, still watching the crowd. But then one of the Jeluso twins elbows him and gestures at me. “Oh,” Unibrow Tommy says, looking at me for the first time. “Sorry.”

“Please, speak openly, I’m accustomed to such vulgarities,” I say.

Unibrow Tommy mutters, “Well, down there they’re about to kill each other over them.”

Then I spot my quarry: Taylor Whitman has stepped into the ring of high schoolers, squeezing past Graham “The Little D” Deroos and the Pitsch cousins and peeling off his shirt and tossing it at a girl wearing a black bikini. The girl in the bikini ducks his shirt and lets it fall to the gravel. Someone shouts Spic at him, and in a town where most everyone thinks they’re White, no one’s about to shout otherwise.

“He doesn’t look that scared,” Unibrow Tommy says.

“He looks scared shitless,” a Jeluso twin says.

If I had brought my pouch of banknotes, I could have bribed these middle schoolers into becoming my temporary sidekicks. But the pouch is back in my rented room, along with my pocketwatch and my lantern, and anyway I lost most of my banknotes a few weeks ago during an incident in Nepal.

I wiggle up the hill, trying to see better.

“Hey, keep down, are you crazy?” Unibrow Tommy says. “Those kids hate middle schoolers. They’ll bury us alongside Taylor Whitman if they catch us watching.”

Adam “Crumb” Martindale and about the entire wrestling team lumber out of a minivan at the edge of the ring and shove their way through the crowd. Taylor’s big for a tenth grader but Crumb’s a twelfth grader and just big for a human. He has a man’s worth of blond stubble and a bellybutton the size of a silver dollar. Crumb knocks past kids in jerseys into the center of the ring. When he sees Taylor he just laughs.

“Those are some dark nipples,” Crumb says. Crumb’s chest is covered in fur. He has tattoos on his shoulders and most of his back—the number from his football jersey, the number of his weight class, the name of a girl, the name of another girl, a flag. The other wrestlers back into the crowd, looking like they’re waiting to get tagged in.

“Fuck a corpse,” Taylor says.

“He’s about to,” one of the wrestlers shouts.

“You don’t have to fight me,” Crumb says, taking a bottle of beer from someone in the crowd. “If you would just accept that Nicholas Queerley is a giant faggot, we wouldn’t have anything to fight about.”

“He probably is a faggot.” Taylor ducks as someone throws a can. “But that’s not the point. The point is that you’re all faggots too. And I’m a faggot, and Pitsch is a faggot, and Katie Bree is a faggot, and your mom is a faggot, and the people that work here in this gravel pit are faggots. We’re all each other’s faggots.”

“If you’re a faggot,” Crumb says, “then we have something to fight about.” He downs the rest of the beer, then palms the bottle, stepping toward Taylor.

"That sounds like my cue," I say. I stand, the wind snapping my jacket, my galoshes sinking into the gravel.

"Oh Jesus," Unibrow Tommy says, and I hear the middle schoolers skittering off down the hill behind me.

"Hey Tidbit," I shout. "Want a chocolate?"

I slide down the hill and walk into the crowd. Everyone stares at me, not making any noise, not even breathing. Crumb's laughing again. Taylor's holding his hands over his face like either he's ashamed or afraid of what's about to happen.

I poke at a girl's name tattooed on Crumb's stomach.

"Choose a pocket," I say, sticking my hands into my jacket.

Crumb's laughing too hard to choose.

"Be idiotic if you choose left," I say. "Be annoying if you choose right."

He's still laughing.

"You're being annoying, so you chose right," I say. I offer him a truffle from my right pocket.

"How very thoughtful," Crumb says, still laughing, but tossing aside the bottle and bending for the truffle. "And totally gay."

"But you're being idiotic too, so you also chose left," I say, and I take the knife from my left pocket and grab his wrist and stab the knife into his hand. Crumb shouts and tries jerking away but can't, and I take the knife again and stab at his cheek, but he bats it away and then knocks me off onto the gravel and all of the high schoolers are either screaming or cheering. Taylor comes running but one of the wrestlers grabs him and tosses him down and one of the other wrestlers kicks me in the stomach and then for a long time I'm just trying to suck in some sort of air but can't. Crumb's wrapping his hand in his shirt.

"Get him out of that silly shit," Crumb says, not looking at me.

Then the wrestlers take my spectacles and my hat and my jacket and then, one by one, my

yellow galoshes.

Nicholas Surrey is sitting in his pajamas in a gravel pit with his cousin Taylor Whitman. Nicholas Surrey is feeling < a hero and scared<sup>scared</sup>. Taylor's hands are tied with his shirt and Nicholas Surrey's hands are tied with the sleeves of a yellow sailor's jacket. The jacket belongs to someone Nicholas Surrey knows who even in these circumstances would be feeling = a hero.

"Your mom's going to freak," Taylor says [piano].

"Your mom already did," Nicholas Surrey says [pianissimo].

Crumb and his friends are trying to decide whether it's wrong to beat the shit out of a seventh grader or whether under these circumstances it might be okay. Regardless they think it's okay to beat the shit out of a tenth grader. Most of them have taken off their shirts. They all have tattoos—the school mascot, the numbers from their jerseys, the name of a dead grandfather. Crumb's playing with a knife that belongs to someone Nicholas Surrey knows.

"And I still have algebra," Taylor says [portamento].

"I'm only halfway finished with my precalc," Nicholas Surrey says [piano].

"Fuck," [fermata].

Nicholas Surrey is named for a county in England that borders the Kent, East Sussex, and West Sussex counties. Nicholas Surrey is 0% English. His great-great-grandfather who was what he called Italian and what everyone else called Wop, Guido, or Guinea changed his last name from Monte to Surrey when he was fifteen years old.

"Cut that faggot up!" someone shouts [allegro] from the roof of a minivan.

The remains of someone Nicholas Surrey loves are scattered around the gravel pit: the girl in the black bikini ashing a cigarette into the top hat; the spectacles on The Little D, as he impersonates someone Nicholas Surrey loves for the Pitsch cousins; the Beatriz sisters wearing the galoshes like puppets. A body's been ripped apart and people are wearing it. Nicholas Surrey thought it would be fun to have an adventure with his cousin but knows now that an adventure with his cousin is only scary. It had never occurred to Nicholas Surrey that it was possible for high

schoolers to hate a high schooler who had muscles and could make his free throws. It also had never occurred to Nicholas Surrey that it was possible for Taylor to get into a situation that Taylor couldn't get out of. Taylor is supposed to get away with everything.

"Why aren't your friends here to yell things at Crumb's friends?" Nicholas Surrey says [mezzo-piano].

"Because they're going through a phase where they hate me," Taylor says [mezzo-piano].

"So they're not going to save us?" [mezzo-piano].

"I don't want to talk about it," [piano].

What Nicholas Surrey knows about limits is this: say you have a function, like  $f(x) = 1/x$ . When  $x = 1$ ,  $f(x) = 1$ . When  $x = .001$ ,  $f(x) = 1,000$ . When  $x = .000000001$ ,  $f(x) = 1,000,000,000$ . So as  $x$  becomes smaller—as  $x$  approaches zero— $f(x)$  approaches infinity. Nicholas Surrey knows he is a function too, and sometimes he feels like there is a sort of infinity his brain is approaching, like when his arms are saying things with his violin that there are no words for, or when his fingers are saying things with numbers.

"Why did you say I'm probably a faggot?" Nicholas Surrey says [mezzo-piano]. "Do you really think that I am?"

"I could not care less," Taylor says [mezzo-forte].

Nicholas Surrey enters a series of variables into his brain: the number of high schoolers in the gravel pit, the number of trucks and of minivans, the distance between Nicholas Surrey and Taylor Whitman to the bikes belonging to Jordan "Rotten" Otten and the Beatriz sisters, the tightness of the sleeves of the jacket tied around his wrists, the number of matches remaining in his matchbook, the probability of finding a container of gasoline in the bed of a high schooler's truck, the speed of Nicholas Surrey, the speed of Taylor Whitman, the speed of a six-feet-six-inches two-hundred-and-fifty-pounds on-the-football-team on-the-wrestling-team high school senior.

"Are you?" Taylor says [mezzo-forte].

"I've never really thought about it before," Nicholas Surrey says [mezzo-forte].

“If they give me a fair fight I’m going to tear that ape’s tongue clean from his skull,” [forte].

“They aren’t going to give you a fair fight,” [forte].

“Spay the gay!” the high schoolers are shouting [homophony].

The wrestlers are laughing at something that Crumb said. Nicholas Surrey is still feeling scared<sup>scared</sup>, but now he’s also feeling smart<sup>mastermind</sup> + strong<sup>superhuman</sup>.

“I have a plan,” Nicholas Surrey says [forte].

“An escape plan or a revenge plan?” Taylor says [forte].

“Both,” [pianissimo]. “How tightly are you tied? I’m going to call the Beatriz sisters over here, and when—”

Nicholas Surrey never finishes saying his plan, which was genius + perfect + mere-seconds-away-from-being-initiated, because Crumb has tossed the knife onto the gravel and has bent into the cab of his truck and is now walking back through the crowd toward Nicholas Surrey and Taylor Whitman with a tattoo gun in hand.

[Caesura].

One of the wrestlers kicks Taylor Whitman in the stomach and Taylor curls up coughing up blood and one of the wrestlers kicks Nicholas Surrey in the stomach and Nicholas Surrey curls up coughing up nothing but what feels like everything, and then they untie both Taylor and Nicholas Surrey and unbutton Nicholas Surrey’s union suit halfway and yank the union suit down to his waist, and Taylor and Nicholas Surrey are splayed out on the gravel, and the high schoolers are cheering [falsetto + contralto], and with his gun Crumb writes a name onto each of them, somewhere they won’t be able to see it, at least not without a mirror, but where everyone else will be able to see it, all of the time, forever, if the cousins are ever again brave enough to walk around shirtless.

At midnight on a school night, even the local roughs are at home and in bed, but it’s been a hell of a night for me and Taylor Whitman and his cousin Nicholas Surrey and we’re still walking. I have my jacket and my knife and one of my galoshes, but my top hat is gone, and so are my

spectacles—I’m hardly feeling like myself. This has been worse than Morocco, worse than Pakistan, worse than that entire week in Siberia. As we hike out of the gravel pit and through the meadow and across the abandoned tennis courts and through the bus garage with all of its sleeping buses, Nicholas Surrey tells me he won’t need me anymore—his cousin has been found, he’ll take things from here. Nicholas Surrey folds my jacket over his arm, doing me the courtesy of carrying home what remains of my galoshes. I bid them adieu, and then patter off into the night, disappearing into someone’s backyard.

“I want to move,” Taylor says [mezzo-piano].

“I don’t,” Nicholas Surrey says [mezzo-forte]. “As bad as it is here, it’d be even worse moving somewhere else and having to be the new person.”

They walk through the middle of the street, Nicholas Surrey in his pajamas, Taylor wearing his shirt again. The lights are off in every house. There are no cars. Nicholas Surrey is happy to be with his cousin, who is so strong he didn’t scream or make even a single noise when it was Crumb’s turn with him. Nicholas Surrey’s back hurts like it’s very cold and very hot all at once. He knows that even though Crumb has won, this is not the end of it. This is the Da Capo. They are a song that Crumb will want to keep on singing.

“Next time don’t come looking for me,” Taylor says [forte].

“I know,” Nicholas Surrey says [piano].

Nicholas Surrey is thinking about his precalculus homework, about how many problems he left unsolved. Then the headlights come swinging around the corner, flying toward them, and Nicholas Surrey and Taylor Whitman stop in the street, blocking the light with their hands. Their mothers climb out of the car, leaning over the tops of their doors, yelling at them to get in, and calling them things that they know that they’re not.

## Proof Of The Monsters

*May Ninth*

I found a novel, at the library, after work today. Basically, that was all that happened. Monster season should begin in about a week.

*May Tenth*

Well, this year the bodies came early!

I didn't have to work today. Living in the attic, above the trees, from the (somewhat grimy yes) lattice attic window I can see the beach. A point of land. A narrow strip of black sand. There weren't any bodies yet. The beach was deserted. While I'd slept, a bit of yarn had gotten tangled in my beard.

I ate a few apples. Red skin with gold flecks, very good, tasty. I read some of the novel. I ate a grapefruit. I composted the seeds, the stems, the peel. The novel has gotten strange. Although it began in a seventeenth-century city—ballrooms, carriages, a neurotic soldier with debtor troubles—it has since relocated to a mythical city beneath the Arctic Ocean, constructed over the course of several centuries by omnipotent czars with impotent khlops. The debtor soldier is seated at a feast. For one hundred and eleven pages the narrator has been describing a certain woman's hat. I understand now why obscure seventeenth-century writers remain obscure.

Afterward I was lonely, I felt like being around people, so I considered walking to the cafe in town. Straightaway, however, a new problem occurred to me. To sit in the cafe, you must buy a

coffee. To socialize, you must consume. Now: the cafe stocks paper cups and plastic cups. I could ask for a paper cup for my coffee, but that would hurt the planet, ∵ paper is made from trees. I could ask for a plastic cup for my coffee, but that would hurt the planet, ∵ plastic takes approximately three hundred years to decompose. ∴ I should use neither a paper cup nor a plastic cup. However. The paper cups and the plastic cups have already been manufactured. Whether I drink from them or don't drink from them, the tree has already fallen, the plastic already been made. ∴ I could use a paper cup or a plastic cup. However. If I use a cup, the cafe will have to buy more cups from the manufacturer, which means the manufacturer will manufacture even more cups, felling more trees and making more plastic. ∴ I should use neither a paper cup nor a plastic cup.

I could ask for a mug, but afterward the baristas would have to wash the mug, which would consume water, soap, electricity.

I never bought a coffee.

I never went to the cafe.

Instead I rambled down through town, to the beach, wearing the same boots, the same jeans, the same baggy forest green woolen sweater as always. I had the novel, a tattered paperback, bent in half and stuffed into the seat of my jeans (the pocket is worn with the faded outline of a vanished wallet, the wallet of whoever wore these jeans before me). The ocean lunged onto the sand, crept away again. I stepped across rocks, still arguing with myself (silently) about coffee.

That's when the seals began washing ashore. A body—another body—a few bodies bobbing on the same wave. Disfigured, skinless, bloody. Misshapen carcasses. Only the whiskery snouts, the bulging eyes, untouched. The crumpled flippers. The surface of the ocean was littered with dead seals, from the sand to the horizon. I stopped, watching the bodies float to shore, like indecipherable messages from a faraway land.

It always begins with the seals. But never this soon, before, and never this many. Most people consider the beach unlucky, jinxed, during monster season. I sat on a boulder and read the novel a few minutes, then got spooked and trudged home.

### *May Eleventh*

When Grandpa Uyaquq could still speak, he often spoke of his childhood, and how the monsters were back then. In those years, according to my grandfather, the monsters never killed other creatures. The monsters were peaceful. The monsters lived in the depths of the ocean, drifting through kelp forests, enjoying their monstrous lives. Then—here my grandfather would frown, puff at his cigar, glance beyond the porch railing—something, nobody knows what, happened. One summer, bodies began washing ashore. Seals. Then worse. This was in the seventies. Only Alaska, only our town, only this stretch of beach. Nowhere except here. The monsters must have been reacting to something. Something we had done. Even monsters have motives. And how else could ocean dwellers communicate with us on land? Would we have listened to anything except for bodies? Even then, with all of the bodies, had anybody listened? Here Grandpa Uyaquq would laugh, and cough, and stub out his cigar on the porch railing.

I have never heard the monsters referred to with a name. Simply, “the monsters.” Or, occasionally, “the bloodsuckers.” (An illogical moniker, considering the monsters leave the blood, yet take the skin!) Whether the monsters are nonextinct megafauna, evolutionary aberrations, maybe products of abyssal gigantism, is unclear. There has never been a reported sighting.

At daybreak my stepbrother came by the house. I was sitting on the table in the attic—reading through yesterday’s entry, chewing an apple, still blinking awake—saw him arrive through the lattice window. He parked his truck, crossed the driveway toward the backyard. He was dressed for work: dark blue suit, light blue tie, leather brogues; an unbuttoned trenchcoat; a bright red woolen hat. The attic has a separate entrance—I heard the rusted attic staircase groaning on its bolts, the ramshackle attic balcony shuddering—my stepbrother ducked into the attic through the doorway, pulled the chair out from the table, sat there chatting with me.

“There must have been sightings,” Peter said.

“There haven’t,” I said.

“Then how do people know they’re like us?” Peter said.

“Like how?” I said.

"Anthropomorphic. Humanoid. Merfolk," Peter said.

"Are they?" I said.

Peter ran his fingertips across his cheeks, squinting, as if he had just discovered that stubble was growing there. His brogues were crusted with mud and soil, which for him wasn't usual, to have less than shiny shoes. A murky dim light was filtering through the lattice window. On my mattress, my sheets lay tangled together in a coiled shape, the inscrutable conclusion of my movements throughout the night, a pattern somehow representing my dreams. The spider that lives above the cupboards was asleep on a shut cupboard door. I don't own this house. Grandpa Uyaquq owns this house. He lives at the pioneer home, now, where he shares a room with a stroke victim. Peter asked me to live here, to watch the house while our grandfather is "away." Peter is in denial. Grandpa Uyaquq has dementia. Grandpa Uyaquq isn't coming back. Peter asked me to live in the attic, for Grandpa Uyaquq, so that when he "returns" the house will be "exactly" how he "remembers." It is illogical. I don't mind. For somebody like me, the attic is ample. The attic has a sink, a stove, a toilet, a bathtub, even, but I rarely bathe, ∵ bathing wastes water. I wear only castoff clothing, ∵ that clothing already exists. I salvage food from dumpsters, ∵ otherwise that food would go to waste. In any town, meeting somebody like me would be difficult. In this town, meeting somebody like me would be impossible. I am the only person here who salvages food from dumpsters. Sometimes I feel like a lone member of a rare species, cut off from the rest of its species by geological formations. (A species whose diet, understandably, revolts all other species.)

Peter had tilted the chair backward, with only its back legs touching the floorboards, was poking the loaf of (somewhat moldy yes) pumpernickel on the counter.

"That does not look okay," Peter murmured, frowning.

He turned toward me. His trenchcoat had swung open, exposing the inner silk lining. The chair was still teetering, just balanced.

"You want to grab a beer tonight?" Peter said.

"I can't," I said.

"Even if I buy?" Peter said.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Please?” Peter said, grinning.

I made some gesture that was supposed to be an apology.

Peter pouted, and tipped the chair forward, its front legs clacking down onto the floorboards.

The pout was exaggerated, but beneath lay some genuine hurt feeling. He slapped his knees, then rose from the chair.

“Had to try,” Peter said.

Before leaving, Peter fixed the sink in the attic (a drip) and fixed the steps on the porch (a creak). He jogged to his truck (shouting he was late), bent to check something under the cab, then drove away. Peter works for a bank, which is a good cover for an ecoterrorist. His degree is in economics. My degree is in philosophy. I work for the city, planting flowers and shoveling snow. I don’t pay rent, and I don’t buy food, so my only expenses are the monthly payments on my gigantic loans.

1. To pursue something pointless is illogical
2. The point of earning a degree is to become qualified for a job
3. Earning a degree in philosophy does not qualify one for anything
4. (2, 3)  $\Rightarrow$  Earning a degree in philosophy is pointless
5. (1, 4)  $\Rightarrow$  It is illogical to earn a degree in philosophy
- ∴ It is illogical to earn a degree in philosophy

Consequently,

6. One is a philosopher  $\Leftrightarrow$  one has a degree in philosophy
7. (5, 6)  $\Rightarrow$  Philosophers are illogical
- ∴ Philosophers are illogical

That's a proof I've been working through for some time now. Still, there is a noticeable difference between carrying an idea around in my head and putting an idea down onto blank paper. A feeling of relief—just having somebody to talk to, to vent to—even if that somebody is a glittery notebook with rainbow unicorns on the cover, salvaged from a garbage can. (Sorry—I don't mean to insult you—that's just what you are.)

I am still sitting on the table, overlooking, beyond the window, the gravel driveway, the swaying pine branches, the ocean blue shingles of the terraced houses on the hillside, the distant beach below. (Through camouflage binoculars with chipped lenses—also salvaged—I'm surveying everything magnified.) Just now, a walrus washed ashore. Bent whiskers, a snapped tusk, strips of skin hanging from the carcass. A blubbery gouge torn into its belly. Its body dwarfs the dead seals.

Usually, walruses don't begin washing ashore until midsummer.

### *May Thirteenth*

Yesterday was heinously boring, so let's just skip ahead to today. (Are you rainbow unicorns bored easily?) (Yes, yes, you are.) (Don't worry then, ∵ today was a disaster.)

Work was grueling. I came home with pine sap crusted in my beard, burst blisters on each thumb. I felt too drained to climb up to the attic, so sat in the backyard a few hours, on a rusty foldout chair, sipping from the hose. I had nearly exhausted my food supply. I wasn't ready to think about that. I dug through my backpack (also salvaged, with bright neon straps, the pouch is phosphorescent!), ate my last apple, tossed the core into the woods for the squirrels. The birdfeeder was empty. I wasn't ready to think about that. I zipped my backpack, read some more of the book.

Each chapter opens with a brief quotation from an imaginary novel. This latest chapter opens, “The planet itself was alive! — Mohiam Yueh, *The Sharif's Orrery*. ” After the accidental destruction of the undersea city, the novel has relocated (again) to a mythical city in the skies above the Arabian Desert, constructed from gigantic golden balloons by despotic sultans with oppressed kapikullari. The debtor soldier is slated to be beheaded at dawn, for a combination of

mistakes, miscalculations, and misunderstandings, including the inadvertent deflowering of the vizier's daughter.

At nightfall I tramped down through town to the local grocery store to harvest some groceries. I have a rule, which is that whenever I see litter I have to stop and pick it up and then properly dispose of it (compost or recycle, if possible, otherwise garbage), so getting around can take me a while. Fortunately, the first thing I passed tonight was an empty plastic bag (fluttering against a guardrail), which I could use to gather all the litter that came after (plastic soda bottles, plastic water bottles, a wet rag, a plank of wood, a tattered gardening magazine, a cigarette carton, cigarette butts, an empty condom wrapper). Otherwise I would have had to use my backpack, and I try not to mix my food with litter.

The grocery was closing soon, the parking lot nearly empty. A runaway cart had gotten almost as far as the street before having its breakout thwarted by a speed bump. I set my bag of litter on the pavement, climbed into the dumpster, and sifted through today's garbage. Bruised apples, withered carrots, hardly stale oats. Bent cans of chickpeas. Inexplicably, an entire box of raw almonds. As I stocked my backpack, a pimpled employee in a dirt red apron emerged from the grocery lugging knotted garbage bags. He nodded. I waved. He flung the bags into the dumpster. I found overripe bananas there, added a few bunches to my backpack.

Hiking back to the house, I felt dizzy suddenly, probably from thirst or hunger. I stopped, sat on a guardrail, ate mushy bananas, my bag of litter between my boots. Across the street, the windowfront of a closed shop glowed with stacked televisions, the televisions all flickering with the same image, electricity pouring into unwatched screens. Onscreen, a presidential candidate was faking emotions for an audience, appearing to hold back tears. He had been coached by his consultants to exhibit these emotions, had rehearsed and now performed a scripted scene. Politicians were people once. Animals, with cravings, feelings, idiosyncrasies. Now politicians are products, manufactured by teams of consultants. The candidate wore a necktie that was not the candidate's, but was rather the necktie that had tested best during marketing research. The candidate wore a wristwatch that was not the candidate's, but was rather the wristwatch that had tested best during

marketing research. The candidate professed beliefs, asserted convictions, claimed intentions that were not the candidate's. Like the design of the label on a plastic container of dog food. Whatever consumers will buy. I do not vote. Consumption of this politician, like any non-degradable product, would be wasteful. His legacy will never decay. His policies will pollute this country forever.

The bananas tasted great. Afterward the dizziness vanished. Just then, I saw a girl with gray hair and monstrous gauges was staring at me from the windowfront with the televisions.

"Are you homeless?" she shouted.

I stared at her.

"A bum? A hobo? A tramp?" the girl shouted.

A couple pushing a stroller passed. They glared at me, as if I were the one shouting at the girl, rather than vice versa. I tried to clear my name.

"No," I shouted.

I had assumed that would end things. Instead, the girl hopped over the curb, then crossed the street (without checking for oncoming traffic), tugging at her sweatshirt as if trying to stretch the collar. Her sweatshirt looked preowned, but her jeans looked expensive. She tripped somehow on the pavement, caught herself. She stood under the streetlamp, at the guardrail, the circle of light.

"From over there you looked too cute to be homeless, but from over here you look too homeless to be cute," she said.

She laughed, like something that had only ever observed laughter trying to imitate the sound. Her mascara was smeared. Her hair was damp. Her gauges were the size of mussels.

"Let's eat something," she said.

"How old are you?" I said.

"Twenty-two," she said.

I stared at her.

"Twenty-one," she said.

I stared at her.

"Eighteen, but that's the truth, so stop giving me that look," she said.

“I only eat raw food,” I said.

“Raw?” she said.

“Uncooked,” I said.

“I like raw fish,” she said.

“I don’t eat meat,” I said.

“I live for meat,” she said.

“I don’t eat at restaurants,” I said.

“Why?” she said.

I don’t know why but having to say it out loud was incredibly embarrassing.

“I try to avoid consuming resources unnecessarily,” I said.

“That’s annoying!” she said.

She yanked me standing by the straps of my backpack.

“Whoa,” she said. “You’re a giant.” She did that laugh again. She patted the straps of my backpack, as if brushing off invisible dust. She nodded. “Alright, giant, you’re coming with me.”

She began walking. To get home, I had to go that way too—so, well, I did. We both walked toward town (not together, but together), past the roundabout, a hotel with vacancies, silhouettes of humans leashed to silhouettes of dogs. She had an unplaceable accent. Like a lisp, but not?

“I hate chitchat, so before you ask, I don’t go to school, I don’t have a job, and my parents are dead,” she said.

She tripped somehow on the sidewalk.

“I’m a cryptid fanatic. I’m here for the bloodsuckers. I’m going to catch one, to bring the world proof that the monsters exist, which will vault me like automatically into the cryptozoology hall of fame,” she said.

She glanced at me, guiltily.

“There isn’t actually a hall of fame,” she said.

(Yes, yes, I was in love by now.)

“Oh and my name is Ash,” she said.

As we passed the cafe, the smoky taverns, the overpriced steakhouse patronized exclusively by tourists from cruise ships, I argued with myself (silently) about the girl, counterpoint after counterpoint after counterpoint. Despite my (admittedly) disheveled appearance, and my (okay) sour odor, this girl was actually talking to me. However. Maybe that was actually more concerning than comforting. (What was wrong with her?) (Didn't something have to be wrong with her?) However. I was really curious about her, suddenly. However. She was very young, and would be easy to hurt, accidentally. However, however, however, however.

“This place looks amazing!” she said.

She had stopped at a diner (pleather booths, checkered linoleum, chrome stools along the counter), pressing her hands to the glass, her face lit from light within. She stepped to the door, tried pushing it open, failed, tried pushing it open, failed, tried pushing it open, failed, squinted, frowned, scowled, tried pulling. The door swung open with a whoosh of heat and music. She did that laugh again, triumphantly, standing in the doorway.

“Hey, giant, aren’t you coming?” she said.

I felt that familiar plunging sensation (like being hurled off some cliff) (the ritual sacrifice) I get whenever confronted with something I want to do that I know would hurt the planet. I stared into the diner. People laughing, chewing hamburgers, tearing apart napkins absentmindedly, shoving aside plates dolloped with unused ketchup, sipping cola through plastic straws that never would get used again. Electric lights shimmering, electric heater whirring, electric stereo blaring country songs. The cook dumping a tub of wilted lettuce into the garbage. There was so much waste in that diner I could hardly breathe.

“Sorry,” I said.

I left the girl there, standing in the doorway, looking heartbroken, fragrant heat and twanging music billowing out around her.

Why does the wrong thing always feel like the right thing? Why does the right thing always feel like the wrong thing? Do there need to be so many feelings?

I was much happier before I knew that girl existed. Now I can’t stop thinking about how at

this exact moment she exists and is doing something somewhere and how I could be there but I'm not. I want to split some fries with her and listen to her talk. I want to split a pitcher of beer with my stepbrother and listen to him talk. I want to drink coffee and eavesdrop on strangers. The worst thing about trying to live an ethical life is how it isolates you from other people. I am going to die alone.

(I didn't capture the proper moments, didn't capture the moments properly, but if you had been there, unicorns, you would have loved her, too.)

At the harbor, moonlight shone gleaming on the propellers of seaplanes. Waves crashed against the beach. Among the flayed seals, the shredded walruses, the sand was littered now with the carcasses of porpoises. Their fins battered. Their mouths yawning, frozen in terror, ringed with nubbed teeth. For me, nothing is ever as hard to see as the porpoises.

Back home, I filled the birdfeeder with pinched morsels of banana, a shake of oats. Some bulky animal was lumbering through the underbrush just beyond the backyard, in the darkness, huffing. (Oh, be sure to tell Peter: the gutter above the porch got knocked off, blown loose, something?) I haven't sorted through the litter yet, will have to tomorrow.

### *May Fifteenth*

Another grueling workday, yesterday!

I do not work alone. There are a few other workers. We shovel together during snowstorms, plant together in the rain. Their impression of me seems to be: quiet, pleasant, young. They are not aware of my lifestyle. When they ask about my life, I murmur something vague, smiling, then change the subject. The thoughts in my brain would only upset them. I usually avoid talking about anything except the weather.

But I cannot just keep the thoughts in my brain. The thoughts are volatile. My brain would explode. So instead the thoughts end up here—the worst thoughts, the worst ideas, the worst notions, all the theorems I would never speak aloud.

But I have other thoughts too. I have best thoughts. Thoughts about how coral and krill and

clams can glow bright neon colors. Thoughts about how mouthbrooders like jawfish hatch eggs in their mouths. Thoughts about how tuataras have third eyes on their foreheads, as if enlightened, coated with opaque scales. Thoughts about lavender thunderheads swelling above an otherwise empty sea, headwaters swirling through leafless deadfall, amber beetles coated with gritty pollen, rainbowed minnows frozen underwater, dewy toadstools sprouting from honeycomb cliffs, macaques soaking together in thermal springs, owls on gnarled branches grooming downy chicks, galloping reindeer trampling alphabetic patterns into the chalky rims of crater lakes, frost-ed grasses on otherwise lifeless prairies, icicles dripping in grottos, creeks white with muddy silt, deserts of flaky cracked earth, vast briny salt flats flooded with glassy water, frothy waterfalls shooting from a gap in the side of a ridge and plummeting dizzyingly past crags past nests past weeds and misting the snowy rocks below, and there is lava, and there are forests, and there are islands, certain flowers grow only on the slopes of certain mountains, moose grow antlers, geese lay eggs, snakes shed skin, bees make honey, all of the clichés actually are true. I love this planet. When I think about things like, “our planet has a moon,” I feel awed.

(Honestly, unicorns, using words like “awed” embarrasses me. Having emotions is archaic, outdated, as unfashionable as wearing periwigs. Sentimentalism is a practice society has rejected altogether. But I’m my own society. A rogue country. Here, I will offer refuge to that hoary exile sentimentalism. Here, I will exile what others won’t. I exile apathy. I exile cynicism. I exile the emperor itself, sarcasm, that frightened tyrannical prick, ungrateful grandchild of sentimentalism, ruling on a stolen throne. It’s everything sentimentalism is. The same face, the same blood, the same feelings. Only younger. And false. Hiding itself behind a sneering mask.)

Today, I had the day off. Even after dawn, the sky stayed dark. Winds shook the attic. The clouds poured rain. A moth had gotten inside, which I caught and then set free on the balcony. I ate a few handfuls of oats, a couple apples. I brushed my teeth (salvaged baking soda), trimmed my fingernails, snipped my toenails. Then I zipped myself into my raincoat (halfway) to go visit Grandpa Uyaquq. (The zipper is broken, is why the raincoat only zips halfway.) Thunder crackled above the ocean. My umbrella shuddered under the force of the rain. As I passed the diner, the

wind blew out my umbrella, snapping its frame through its fabric like bones through skin. From there I ran to the pioneer home, leaping puddles with the broken umbrella, rain battering my hood.

In the lobby, dripping rainwater onto the carpeted mat, I overheard a group of nurses quarreling about the monsters. Most locals don't believe the monsters exist, refer to the monsters as a "superstition" of the "natives." Still, this season is always tense around town! There is a direct relationship between the level of tension and the number of bodies on the beach. Even for those who don't believe in the monsters, the possibility is terrifying. That the monsters themselves might come ashore. That this town might get consumed alive overnight.

"The monsters have gotten bigger," whispered a nurse blinking through browline glasses.

"No one has ever seen one," laughed a plump nurse.

"But an octopus?" said a nurse with a flattop haircut.

Oh, yes, I forgot to mention: that night before, a gigantic scarlet octopus had washed ashore, its arms tangled dementedly, its mantle crushed like a piece of rotten fruit. It is rare for the monsters to kill something of that magnitude. Until last night, an octopus had not washed ashore for seven years.

"The animals get killed by boats," the plump nurse laughed.

"Propellers," called a passing nurse embracing a clipboard of paperwork.

"Or poachers," the plump nurse said.

The nurse with the flattop haircut was shaking his head, huffily.

"The monsters can take human form! That's why no one has ever seen one! We probably have but didn't know!" the nurse with the flattop haircut argued, his hands on his waist.

I racked the broken umbrella, keyed the code for the elevator, rode to the floor above. It wasn't illogical to think that the monsters could take human form. Organisms often evolve cryptic features. Jellyfish have evolved transparency. Sharks have evolved camouflaged skins, turtles have evolved camouflaged shells. Squid have evolved skin that changes color, sea slugs can mimic coral polyps, frogfish can mimic stones, pipefish can mimic seagrass, scorpionfish can mimic dead

brown leaves. So the monsters might mimic us. That sort of crypsis would have an obvious logic, evolutionarily. Another species might have been living among us for centuries without us knowing. Perhaps so many centuries that the monsters themselves had forgotten, by now, that they were mimicking, that they were something separate, that human form didn't mean human, necessarily.

The hallway upstairs is the length of an escape tunnel, although, for people who live there, it never leads to that. My stepbrother stood gazing out a bank of windows, lightning flickering across him, a puddle forming around his heels. Bright red woolen hat; unbuttoned trenchcoat; red tie, charcoal suit, polished brogues. A nurse was murmuring somewhere, checking charts.

"He's still sleeping," Peter said.

He was gazing at the mountains in the distance, through the haze of rainfall.

"More loggers came," Peter murmured. "They're clearcutting the backside of the mountains."

Lightning flashed again. "Destroying the whole ecosystem for a bit of profit."

Peter and his girlfriend share a rundown drafty lodge in the mountains overlooking a logging road. The lodge is smoky, and cramped, and leaks during storms, but nevertheless gives Peter and his girlfriend and his coconspirators an isolated location to prepare for their fires.

Just then, a number of seemingly unconnected details connected in my mind, images from that morning in the attic a few days ago: his unshaven cheeks; his mucky brogues; the fresh scrapes (barbwire, probably, maybe thorns) that had marked his palms and knuckles. It finally dawned on me where he had been, what he had been out doing, before coming to visit me. He had been scouting.

"Are you planning another event?" I said.

Peter blinked, glanced at me.

"Do you want to be a lookout?" Peter said.

"No," I said.

"Because we could really use another lookout," Peter said.

"No, no, no, no, no," I said.

Peter grinned, teeth flashing. His grin faded. His voice lowered.

“Did you see the news last night?” Peter said.

“I don’t have a television,” I said.

“It’s like the media can sense the fires are coming,” Peter said, voice lowering even further. “Yesterday the stations in Juneau ran recaps of the other fires. Maps of the locations, photos of the buildings, random theories of different citizens.”

“There probably aren’t any other stories to run,” I said.

“Everybody interviewed referred to us as ‘ecoterrorists.’ Never ‘activists,’ never ‘guerillas,’ never even ‘extremists.’ The ‘ecoterrorists.’ Every single time,” Peter said.

“Just, whatever you’re planning, please don’t get caught,” I said.

“Terrorists,” Peter grumbled, digging through the pockets of his trenchcoat. “With that word, in this country, you could hang anybody. In three hundred years we’ll have museums about terrorist executions, same as we have museums about witch burnings now. If Guantanamo isn’t the new Salem, I don’t know what is.”

Peter slipped a pair of date bars from his pockets. Date cashew cardamom, based on the color or of the wrappers. Or, maybe, date pecan ginger. I no longer have the colors memorized.

“Hungry?” Peter said.

“Those have wrappers,” I said.

“I’ll recycle the wrappers,” Peter said.

“Those kind you can’t recycle,” I said.

Peter ate the date bars—four bites apiece—and stuffed the wrappers in a pocket.

“And whoever made those bars must have consumed electricity, with overwhelming odds the electricity was sourced from a coal plant or a nuclear reactor, which profit from the destruction of whole ecosystems,” I said.

“You have to make certain concessions, if you’re going to live a life,” Peter said through a mouthful, still chewing.

“That’s what the loggers say,” I said.

He swallowed, and laughed, and grinned again.

“Time to work,” Peter said.

He slapped my back, and turned to leave.

“Make sure he eats his breakfast,” Peter called.

As his footsteps receded toward the elevator, past doorway after doorway of wrecked bodies, I stared at the mountains, thinking through another proof.

1. Terrorism is the use of violence in pursuit of political objectives
  2. The purpose of a soldier is to use violence in pursuit of political objectives
  3. (1, 2)  $\Rightarrow$  The purpose of a soldier is to perform terrorism
  4. One is a terrorist  $\Leftrightarrow$  one performs terrorism
  5. (3, 4)  $\Rightarrow$  Soldiers are terrorists
- . $\therefore$  Soldiers are terrorists

Consequently,

6. Practically every government in the world has a military with soldiers
  7. (5, 6)  $\Rightarrow$  Practically every government in the world maintains terrorists
  8. Practically every government in the world has avowed hatred of terrorism
  9. (4, 7, 8)  $\Rightarrow$  Governments hate funding some programs
- . $\therefore$  Governments hate funding some programs

Grandpa Uyaquq’s room faces the ocean rather than the mountains. Filtered through the storm, the daylight cast a sea green tint across the curtains, the wallpaper, the furniture, the motionless shapes of sleeping men. I sat in an upholstered chair alongside Grandpa Uyaquq, holding his wrist with my hand. A nurse pushing a cart clattered past the doorway; Mr. Nome, Grandpa Uyaquq’s roommate, blinked awake. He stared at me. He reached unsteadily for the eyeglasses on his nightstand, hesitantly hooked the eyeglasses to his ears, carefully adjusted the eyeglasses on

his nose, and then stared at me, again, through the eyeglasses. After that he ignored me. He unbuttoned and rebuttoned the upper button of his pajamas, performed a grooming ritual involving his eyebrows, and then began writing an entry in his diary (just a plain leather journal, no unicorns, sorry). Mr. Nome has no family, never gets any visitors of his own. Since his stroke, he can use only a single hand, a single arm, a single leg, a single foot. Only half of his face can frown and smile. Furthermore, he has lost certain brain functions, suffering from a condition known as asemia. This means that Mr. Nome cannot understand symbols. All signs, all symbols, to him are now meaningless. The letters of our alphabet, with their loops and tittles and tails, are as inscrutable to him as the tildes and cedillas and breves of a foreign alphabet. Ditto marks, pound signs, ampersands, pilcrows, commas, are indecipherable. Numbers are incomprehensible. An exit sign, a voltage warning, the gender symbols on public toilets, are utterly unintelligible. Cautionary crossbones might as well mean “recyclable,” slashed circles “support fascism,” curved arrows “beyond this point no hats allowed.” There are authors who experiment with asemic writing—writing novels and poetry in meaningless symbols—but he is not experimental. He simply cannot express himself any other way. Nonsense symbols are now his only outlet. Like glossolalia. Speaking in tongues. Writing the symbols seems to calm him.

I’m writing in my own now. A nurse has wheeled Mr. Nome off to the cafeteria for breakfast. Grandpa Uyaquq is wheezing in his sleep, drooling a bit on his pillow. I don’t know what he dreams of. Maybe he dreams of the monsters. Grandpa Uyaquq always wanted proof. He has six hundred dollars in an account at the bank where Peter works, reserved for whoever can document a sighting. Maybe that’s the truth about why I’ve been watching the beach so closely. I don’t want the money. But, just once, before the dementia totally consumes him, I wish that he could hold it. A photograph, a sketch, a description, anything. Proof he wasn’t wrong.

### *May Sixteenth*

Just read some. This latest chapter opens, “Feelings? Feelings? Any animal can have feelings! — Octun Odrade, *A Makeshift Homunculus*.” After the accidental destruction of the floating city,

the novel has relocated (yet again) to a mythical city in the volcanoes of the Congo Basin, constructed in gleaming magma chambers by sovereign ngola with enslaved abika. The debtor soldier, concealed behind the stuffed hide of a mountain gorilla, is eavesdropping on a bizarre ceremony, after being forbidden, on eleven separate occasions, from watching.

Take note, unicorns: I've decided that just holding the proof isn't enough. I want my grandfather to see the monsters himself. . . , after work today, I walked to the pioneer home, signed him out, and wheeled him down through town to the harbor (stopping occasionally to pick up some crumpled aluminum, a stained napkin, a pink rubber band). A plaid woolen blanket was slung over my shoulders, and the camouflage binoculars hung from my neck, and the novel was stuffed into the seat of my jeans. Grandpa Uyaquq was zipped into a sky blue down parka. His hair was plastered to his forehead in the front and matted chaotically to his neck in the back and puffing out wildly on both sides, which if it had been an actual hairstyle might have been called a "napper." His wheelchair has wheels that squeak with each rotation. Along the way, I tried to talk to him, but his mind wasn't there. A seaplane with bright pontoons landed in the harbor with a splash, which made his eyes widen, but that was as alert as his mind ever got. Unlike Mr. Nome, Grandpa Uyaquq can still use both sides of his body—both hands, both arms, both legs, both feet—and the linguistic consequences of his dementia are also different than those of asemia. He can't speak anymore, but he can still comprehend written language, and he can still communicate. When his mind is there, he can shake his head "yes" and "no" to answer your questions. He can smile and frown, can laugh and groan, can rap his knuckles on your chest to scold you.

At the end of the boardwalk, I helped him stand, collapsed the wheelchair, and (lugging the wheelchair) then helped him totter across the black sand toward the point in the distance. The beach was deserted. There weren't even footprints, just rippled divots molded into the sand by the wind. Flies hovered above the seals, the walruses, the porpoises, the giant octopus with the tangled arms. Birds fluttered from carcass to carcass, scavenging rotten meat. Crows, magpies, shrieking crested jays. At the point, I expanded the wheelchair, and helped him lower himself into the seat. I wrapped him in the plaid woolen blanket, set the camouflage binoculars on his lap, and

then settled onto the boulder. Okay! We were ready now! Let the monsters come! I thought.

"If you see anything, use the binoculars," I said.

Grandpa Uyaquq was blinking as if about to fall back to sleep. Behind us, the pines obscured any view of the houses looming on the hillside above the beach. Pinecones occasionally dropped from the branches into the underbrush.

We hadn't been there long when back toward the harbor a distorted blurred figure stepped from the boardwalk, into the sand, and then began, like a mirage, flickering toward us along the shoreline. The figure gained definition gradually, took on form, but not until it somehow tripped over the sand, caught itself, did I recognize who it was. She was marching directly at us. That girl. Ash. I was overwhelmed suddenly by contradictory emotions: joy; dismay; relief; panic. I became very aware of the stain (chocolate, salvaged) on the sleeve of my sweater. I was possibly blushing, and definitely sweating. (None of this made any sense, whatsoever. But you unicorns deserve to know the truth. I can be that illogical.)

For the entire length of the beach, the girl marched directly at us, intently, resolutely, without wavering—and then proceeded to walk directly past us. Not far, but did. Then stopped, and—still ignoring us—bent to look at a dead seal. (One of the hundreds—who knows how she chose it.)

After perusing the carcass, and sniffing the air, and gagging dramatically, she straightened again. She glanced at us. As if just noticing us sitting there, she waved, and strolled back over.

She stood between the wheelchair and the boulder, her hands propped on her hips, scrutinizing my grandfather, then turning to me.

"So, giant, you're on monster duty today too?" Ash said.

I pointed at Grandpa Uyaquq.

"He's the expert," I said.

Her face changed abruptly—an aspiring musician in the presence of a rock star.

"You know stuff about the bloodsuckers?" she said to him, in almost a whisper, awed.

Grandpa Uyaquq blinked at the ocean, oblivious.

"Sorry, his mind isn't always there," I said.

She frowned.

“Oh,” she said.

She pursed her lips, and cocked her head, peering at him.

“Hey, gramps, I like your hair,” she said.

Grandpa Uyaquq blinked at the ocean, oblivious.

“I like his hair,” she whispered at me, like a secret.

She nudged the novel aside, brushed the surface of the boulder, as if sweeping off invisible dust, and then sat with me. Her hair hung from the raised hood of a gigantic anorak. Now that her hair was dry, it was a paler gray, almost white. There wasn’t any rain, today. Nevertheless, just in case, I had brought my umbrella, which is fixed, partially. (At the pioneer home yesterday, while I was sitting with Grandfather Uyaquq, a nurse found the umbrella on the rack in the lobby and—probably assuming it had been abandoned—garbaged it. I had to dig it out of the dumpster, afterward.) Ash examined the umbrella, touching the duct tape, hesitantly, as if attempting to read the pulse of a sleeping animal.

“How did your hair get that color?” I said.

“Dye,” she said.

She shoved her hands into the pockets of her anorak.

“I have to use special shampoo,” she said.

She hunched, shivering.

“If you knew how much the shampoo costs, you’d hate me forever,” she said.

She turned toward the horizon. I couldn’t think of anything at all to say. Wind thrashed across the ocean, making the waves whitecaps.

“We aren’t going to be lovers,” she said.

“Okay,” I said.

“Good, great, you didn’t even put up a fight,” she said.

I hoped Grandpa Uyaquq hadn’t caught that line about lovers. (I did agree though that anything romantic was totally out of the question.) She tucked her hair, within the hood, behind her

ears. Her lips were crusted with something like raspberry jam.

"Let's pretend that I'm a monster," she said, "a monster that ran away, and now I've come here searching for the others, waiting for my kind to come for me, but, I haven't decided yet, whether I actually want to go back."

She examined the novel, flipping past dog-eared pages, water-damaged pages, the varicolored marginalia of library patrons.

"Maybe I'm only eighteen—nineteen in a month—but I've already been everywhere and seen everything," she said. "My parents wear boring clothes, my parents have boring haircuts, but my parents are into cryptids. Teachers, totally ordinary, except for that one weird thing. We didn't take trips to monuments, to amusement parks, to sightsee big buildings. Every trip we took, we were looking for cryptids. Here, there, all over the country."

"But your parents are dead now?" I said.

She squinted, thinking.

"Yes," she said.

She set the novel aside again.

"Thanks for reminding me," she said.

She batted at some flies hovering near the boulder.

"We took camping trips looking for Urayuli, Sasquatch, Chasquatch. We took road trips looking for the Grassman, the Goatman, the Mothman, the Beaman. We took boating trips looking for Bessie, Tessie, Chessie, Sharlie, Champie. We took hiking trips looking for Wampus Cats, Skunk Apes, Thunderbirds. The Beast of Bladenboro. The Mogollon Monster. The Fouke Creature. The Jersey Devil. The Dover Demon. The Loveland Frog. Momo, which supposedly has a head the shape of a pumpkin. Melon Heads, which supposedly have heads the shape of melons. Chupacabra, which suck the blood of goats and sheep. Pukwudgie, which are supposedly scary, but are probably cute. Even things nobody else considers cryptids! The lights in Paulding, Michigan. The lights in Gurdon, Arkansas. The lights in Ballard, Utah. The lights in Marfa, Texas. The lights in Hornet, Missouri. The lights in Oviedo, Florida. The totally unexplained humming

sounds in Taos, Arizona, in Kokomo, Indiana, in Hilo, Hawaii. My parents thought the hums were from some unidentified species of giant bat, like their song or their call or whatever, when the bats were mating.”

She inhaled, as if gathering breath to launch into another list, but then exhaled and was quiet.

“Did you see anything?” I said.

“We saw some lights in Paulding.” She scraped at the raspberry jam with the curved rim of a thumbnail. “My parents thought the lights were these living fossils, like maybe enormous fireflies that are born underground and live there and molt there and mate there and then after laying their eggs there finally come aboveground and float into the sky and die.” She glanced at me, sheepishly. “They looked like headlights.”

∀ those monsters, ∃ a sighting of that monster. Theories of their existence are based on claims of these sightings. Our monsters, however, have never been sighted. Their existence is instead implied. By the bodies. Death must have a cause.

The seals, the walruses, the porpoises, an octopus occasionally, are the worst things ever get. The otters never wash ashore. The otters never die. Sometimes a few scamper along the beach, weaving through the carcasses, looking puzzled. Like, why so much wasted life?

“Hey, gramps, did you know this guy eats dumpster bananas?” Ash said.

She had turned to Grandpa Uyaquq, was adjusting the blanket, patting the wool smooth.

“You saw me in the dumpster?” I said.

“Will you please explain to me why you’re such a freak about food?” she said.

“I probably shouldn’t,” I said.

“Because I don’t get it,” she said.

“I don’t want to make you feel bad, or make you upset, or hurt your feelings,” I said.

“And I want you to tell me,” she said.

“I actually would rather not,” I said.

“Just say it!” she shouted.

I think that shout is what got my blood going. I felt this rage, suddenly. Technically the question was about dumpsters, but I apparently had quite a few other topics that had built up, ∵ I immediately strayed into unrelated territory and never came back around.

“Okay,” I growled, “obviously, if I stop driving cars, that isn’t going to change anything, if I stop using plastic, that isn’t going to change anything, if I stop using electricity, that isn’t going to change anything, the oceans will still rise, the landfills will still rise, the nuclear reactors will still dump radioactive waste with a half-life of a million years, and if I stop eating meat, yes, obviously, that isn’t going to change anything, the meat companies will keep electrocuting cows, and braining cows, and gassing cows, and culling chicks, and trimming beaks, and leaving chickens in overcrowded unventilated factory farms to trample themselves to death, none of that is going to stop, unless everybody, all together, the whole country, stops eating meat, but somebody has to start, and I’m part of everybody, so I’ll start, I’ll take the lead, and if everybody follows, the killing will stop, and if nobody follows, then I tried, I did my part, and the rest of you can blame yourselves.”

I had gotten so upset that I had begun trembling, but now wasn’t upset, anymore, only mortified, and ashamed. I couldn’t even look at her. I pretended to wipe something from my beard, picked up the novel, put down the novel, frantically needing choreography, something to do. I could feel her staring. I looked at her finally. Her eyes were huge.

“I just remembered I left a light on at the hotel,” she said.

She beamed.

Just then, Grandpa Uyaquq stirred—grunting, and shifting in the wheelchair, and fumbling for the binoculars.

“Grandpa?” I said.

He raised the binoculars to his eyes, focusing on something out in the ocean.

“You see something?” I said.

Ash had ripped her hood from her head, had whirled toward the water. I scanned the waves, searching for something other than whitecaps. Seagulls, water, seagulls, water.

Together, we glanced at Grandpa Uyaquq as he lowered the binoculars back to his lap.

He shook his head: "No."

But there was a spark in his eyes. Things weren't too late. His mind was still there. He wanted that proof, too.

### *May Nineteenth*

Assume every person has, at the core of their psyche, an idea. One lone axiom. One idea given primacy over all others. The origin of the whole spiraling chain of logic behind each of their mundane, everyday, predictable choices.

I have been obsessing over this, all day, trying to work out the precise wording for the cores of different people.

Grandpa Uyaquq's core idea: protect yourself. He obviously felt some empathy for animals—a memory of seeing him tending to, scratching the belly of, whispering into the ears of a neighbor's ill dog—but he still ate animals, ∵ he knew meat would give him energy, vigor, health, and, at his core, that axiom overruled all others. He kept a shotgun at the door, ∵ given the choice between shooting a trespasser or risking bodily harm, he would have shot the trespasser.

Peter's core idea: save what you can. Though rooted in selflessness, the idea gives a nod toward compromise, toward certain limitations, toward exceptions that inevitably must be made. A memory (photographed) of a fifteen-year-old Peter picketing a local cattle ranch in a pair of leather loafers. A memory (televised) of a nineteen-year-old Peter chaining himself to a pine tree scheduled for removal from his college campus, only to unchain himself hours later when threatened with expulsion. A memory (firsthand) of a twenty-three-year-old Peter buying a truck, a gigantic gas-guzzler, for the sole purpose of hauling around drums of still further gasoline, so he and his coconspirators could burn paper mills and shale mines (unoccupied, always) to protest industrial pollution, which fires, obviously, consumed gasoline and created garbage and polluted the ecosystem with smoke and with ashes and with drifting particles of noxious burned plastic. ("A few bombs dropped in the right spots can save a billion lives," Peter said.)

My core idea, in college: pursue happiness. (Worldwide, possibly, the commonest core idea?) When I felt like grilling steak, I bought a steak and grilled it. When I felt like drinking beer, I bought a beer and drank it. When I felt like driving around, watching television, microwaving leftovers, taking an hour-long shower, I did it, I did it, I did it, I did it. (If I didn't have the money for a laptop, my core idea overruled my sense of financial responsibility, and I bought the laptop on credit.) Like anybody, a number of other ideas hovered around the edge of my core, which accounted for certain idiosyncrasies. (I bought cage-free eggs, free-range chevre, pasture-centered pork, purportedly humane beef, precursors to my veganism.) But only when those edge ideas didn't interfere with my core idea: that was the idea that ultimately dictated my choices, and ∵ my actions, and ∵ my nature, and ∵ my life. Then one week Peter visited me at college (his alma mater) and, during a drunken (whiskey) dispute, drew a complex diagram on the wall above my bed illustrating all of the tangled connections between honey bees and corn syrup, light bulbs and nuclear reactors, chimneys and acid rain and shampoo and algal bloom, a vast network of cause and effect, and there we were, two stick-figure stepbrothers, tangled up in it. His basic argument: your happiness ⇔ this suffering. He wanted a lookout (the burning of a slaughterhouse), which he didn't get. Instead, he managed to dislodge my core idea, and a new idea thunked from the edge into my core. The transition was gradual but unshakable. Within months, I was scavenging. (Peter later claimed fault for having "created a monster.") Now, basically, my core idea: avoid causing suffering. Or what an ex-girlfriend (already an ex, the breakup had been with the steak-grilling, beer-drinking, showering me) characterized as: push away everybody close to you by pretending to be a hero. Or what an ex-roommate (not yet an ex) characterized as: be a total slob because you're sad about some dying penguins.

I am not, obviously, a hero. I am a bottom feeder, a brainless detritivore, the hollow-eyed greasy-haired man picking through the local dumpster. Peter is a practical vigilante; I am a psychotic vigilante. I do not make exceptions. ∵ I can't. You cannot choose your core idea. You can try to dislodge your core idea, but that takes a lot of force. Peter didn't dislodge mine just like that. Pressure built for years—an exhibit at a zoo, a boring lecture in a random elective, a photo of

beached kelp black with tarry oil, a roadside billboard, a television commercial, a spot of pavement shimmering with a rainbow of spilled petroleum—until, that night, Peter flicked it, and that final pressure sent it pinwheeling off into the outer limits of my psyche.

That was also the point at which I became unable to read modern novels. Novels were fiery once. Opinionated, with messages, lessons, morals. Now novels cannot have opinions. Now if a novel has opinions, it has to undercut those opinions elsewhere, disprove anything it's proven. Affect apathy. Pander to conservatives and progressives alike. I prefer older novels—novels with opinions—novels that breathe fire.

1. Society has rejected moralism
2. Moralism is the expression of belief in a right and a wrong
3. (1, 2)  $\Rightarrow$  Society has rejected belief in a right and a wrong
4. One is a moralist  $\Leftrightarrow$  one practices moralism
5. (2, 4)  $\Rightarrow$  Moralists express belief in a right and a wrong
6. (3, 5)  $\Rightarrow$  Moralists believe things deemed nonexistent are existent
- ∴ Moralists believe things deemed nonexistent are existent

Consequently,

7. One who believes things deemed nonexistent are existent is a cryptozoologist
8. (6, 7)  $\Rightarrow$  Moralists are cryptozoologists
- ∴ Moralists are cryptozoologists

(True to form, unicorns, this latest proof likely would earn a flunking grade!)

Anyway, sorry not to write the past few days, but the monsters have been occupying all my spare time. Each day, after work, I meet that girl at the roundabout, and from there we walk to the pioneer home. (Along the way, she tells me things, unprompted, about her day. An exemplar from

yesterday: as we rode the elevator to the hallway upstairs, she announced, “Today I ate a hamburger with bacon, threw away a whole bottle of nail polish for being the wrong color, and kept using a hand dryer even after my hands were dry because the air felt nice.” She glanced at me, curiously. “Do you hate me yet?”) We sign out Grandpa Uyaquq and Mr. Nome, and wheel them through town, to the harbor, in their wheelchairs.

At the beach, we set up our makeshift camp: a salvaged beach umbrella spiked into the sand, shading the wheelchairs; assorted woolen blankets bundling the old men; for her and me, rusty foldouts from the house; the camouflage binoculars, and a disposable camera, set out on the boulder. (Ash says film images are best for proving the existence of a cryptid, ∵ digital are easy to forge.) Ash buys a carton of milk, a stack of cups, a container of frosted vanilla cupcakes, sets all of that out onto the boulder, too. Grandpa Uyaquq and Mr. Nome (whom Ash refers to as “hairy gramps” and “baldy gramps,” respectively, or, sometimes, “our chaperones”) sip their milks, and chew their cupcakes, and nap, occasionally. Ash sips her milk, and chews her cupcake, and monopolizes the binoculars. I eat mushy bananas. Together, we scan the ocean, and keep lookout for signs of monsters.

Mr. Nome, like me, always brings his journal along, and writes sometimes.

Ash, meanwhile, has ceaseless questions for Grandpa Uyaquq.

An exemplar from yesterday:

Grandpa Uyaquq had just shut his eyes for a nap, creased face relaxing into a drowsy smile, when Ash suddenly dropped the binoculars into her lap and nudged him awake again.

“Hey, gramps,” she said.

He blinked, blearily, his face a startled grimace.

“I’ve heard the monsters live out deep, but have to come in really close to shore to drop off the bodies,” she said.

He wiped some crumbs from his parka, and then shook his head: “Yes.”

“Yeah. Yeah! Or how else could the dead stuff always float to this exact beach?” she said, enthusiastically, and then jammed the binoculars to her face again.

Another:

Grandpa Uyaquq was taking a turn with the binoculars (although had gotten distracted, focusing on a tangerine yellow seaplane circling high above the harbor). Ash nudged him, and leaned toward him, speaking in a whisper almost.

“Is it true that people vanish sometimes? Unexplained disappearances? Like probably just runaways, but maybe not?” she said.

Grinning, he shook his head: “Yes.”

“You think maybe what happened was that they saw the monsters, and the monsters dragged them out to sea, so nobody would ever know?” she said.

He thought, hesitated, and then shook his head: “Yes.”

“So if we see a monster, it won’t let us live?” she said.

He shook his head, and then shook his head again: “Yes,” “No,” he wasn’t sure.

Ash cackled, delighted.

“Gramps, you’re a genius!” she said.

Then handed Grandpa Uyaquq another cupcake.

She seems to have experience caretaking. She’s very good with the old men! Mr. Nome, she keeps his mouth wiped clean, helps him turn his pages, does handstands and headstands to entertain him. When Grandpa Uyaquq gets confused, she waves it away, as if misplacing your memories were nothing to feel ashamed of, and then chatters at him about some random topic for a while so that he doesn’t feel any need to try to think, but can merely listen. (Or pretend to.)

Sometime before dusk, we wheel Grandpa Uyaquq and Mr. Nome back through town to the pioneer home, sign them back in, then say goodnight at the roundabout. I carry home the umbrella, the blankets, the foldouts, the binoculars, alone.

I haven’t dated anybody since college. I never will again, probably. My lifestyle practically guarantees it. And even if I met somebody who didn’t mind my diet, my garb, my lack of phone and car, I couldn’t let myself get involved. ∵ of my core idea. In relationships, you can’t help but cause suffering. I can’t, at least. (I don’t mean to speak for you unicorns.) If possible, I would like

to go the rest of my life without making another person cry.

That's what's nice about being with Ash. Things are simple. Platonic. We can just sit on the beach together, for a few hours a night, with some old men in wheelchairs.

Oh, I forgot to mention: so have we seen any monsters?

No. So far we have seen nothing. Ash has wasted six photos (of the disposable camera) on pictures of Mr. Nome.

*May Twenty-First*

Technically, by now today's probably tomorrow. I'm going to try to get all of this down, although I'll have to do so very quietly. (This may turn out sloppy: the patch of moonlight I'm using keeps moving across the floorboards.)

What that last entry said about never dating anybody again doesn't mean I haven't been lonely. Actually, I've been brutally lonely lately. Eavesdropping, chatting, being near people isn't enough. The loneliness is spiritual, yes, but also intensely physical. A need for contact. Lately, waking on the mattress in the morning, I've had this sloshing feeling somewhere in the region of my navel, as if all the loneliness had pooled there overnight. My skin hums like an electrified fence. An object that cannot serve its purpose unless it's being touched. But would only hurt whatever touched it.

This morning that electric feeling was especially bad. I already could tell my skin was going to be humming like that all day. I could hardly bring myself to get out of bed. Nevertheless, I had a job to do! ∴ I ate some oats for breakfast, a few bananas, brushed my teeth, got dressed and trekked down to work, secretly wishing every person I passed would just reach over and touch me. A hand pressed to my cheek—even that would have been enough. I cannot even describe how intense that longing was. If somebody had bumped me, unintentionally brushed my wrist with some knuckles, I honestly believe that quick touch would have brought tears to my eyes.

At work today we laid sod outside the library, mulched the shrubs. Not too grueling. Fairly minimal blisters. The day went fast.

Afterward, I went home to eat a can of chickpeas, then gathered our supplies for the beach (the umbrella, the binoculars, the foldouts, the blankets) and hauled everything down through town, to the roundabout, to meet the girl there. I sat on a guardrail, getting bitten by mosquitoes, getting bitten by flies, waiting, for about an hour. But Ash never came.

I couldn't wheel both Grandpa Uyaquq and Mr. Nome on my own, and signing out Grandpa Uyaquq by himself felt really wrong now, as then Mr. Nome would be left all alone.

I never went to the pioneer home.

I hauled our supplies back to the house.

I was out of food again, so at nightfall I wandered back through town to the grocery and filled my backpack in the dumpster. Overripe pears, overripe apples, golden potatoes with downy sprouts. Expired cans of soybeans. Hardly moldy raspberries. An expired jar of peanut butter. Sealed bars of (vegan!) chocolate, crusted with spilled sauce (pesto?). Wilted radishes. Inexplicably, an entire box of brown rice. I accidentally stepped on a carton of eggs, had to wipe the yolk and shell off my boots onto the weeds.

Walking home, I passed the windowfront of televisions. I glanced at the screens, glanced away, glanced back. I stopped.

Identical images flickered on the televisions. Shaky aerial footage of a gigantic building, flames jerking in the windows like frantic trapped people waving for help. Another building, company offices, sooty firefighters wandering about the smoking wreckage. Another, a one-story, something like a hanger or a boathouse or a garage, ablaze with golden light.

Not recaps. The footage was live. Three fires had been lit in a single night.

“Nobody came through the gate, the fire just appeared, no warning!” shouted a uniformed guard wielding a lit flashlight.

“Really sad to see your workplace just gutted,” commented a squat bald man either cradling or smothering his infant.

“Senseless, senseless,” commiserated a random woman lugging plastic bags.

“These terrorists have hijacked the whole movement,” explained somebody wearing a tweed

suit and gold watch, but nothing else was said of the eco-terrorists, whether they had been captured or spotted or escaped undetected, and then the program cut to commercial, a flashy advertisement for a racing championship, cars whizzing around in meaningless circles.

I had no way to get ahold of Peter, would have to wait for him to get ahold of me. I was worried, but not really. He knew how to take care of himself; he had never been caught before.

I wandered down to the beach, nibbling chocolate. The motorboats and seaplanes were all moored for the night in the harbor. I could smell the harvest in my backpack, a pungent ripe smell. The moon was ripe too, hanging full and gold above the beach, glinting off the crests of waves, the wet stones. The tide was all the way out.

I was about to head home when I saw somebody was standing out at the point, perched on the boulder. Ash was. Gazing at the ocean, her hair rippling in the wind like kelp in a wave, her anorak billowing around her.

I wandered down to the point, went and stood at the boulder, still nibbling chocolate.

Her hair was damp, like the night when we had met, and her moccasins lay abandoned in the sand. Her fingernails and her toenails were painted saffron orange. Her nostrils were flared.

“Sorry, giant,” she murmured.

She glanced at me, then hopped from the boulder into the sand.

“I overslept,” she said.

We sat on the boulder together, as waves crashed quietly onto the far-off tidal shoreline. I offered her chocolate, which she refused. (“Is that dumpster chocolate?” she asked, suspiciously. She pinched the bar between a pair of fingers, flipping it this way, flipping it that way, squinting, scrutinizing. “It looks normal,” she said, less suspiciously. She tucked her hair behind her ears, and bent over the chocolate, sniffing tentatively. “It smells normal,” she said, even less suspiciously. She grimaced, like somebody bracing for a leap from a cliff. She raised the chocolate to her mouth. She cracked her lips—just barely. She parted her teeth—just barely. Eyes shut, she leaned in toward the chocolate—then shoved the bar back at me, and bleughed, saying, “No, no, it’s still just too gross.”) Clouds drifted across the moon. As the moonlight vanished, the bright glints on the

waves and the stones vanished, everything vanished, the world was reduced to sounds and smells, the touch of the wind, the temperature of the boulder, the texture of the sand. I glanced toward her, but couldn't see her, only hear. She had begun to ask me a question, I don't remember what, :: before she could finish, the clouds drifted beyond the moon, moonlight lit the landscape, and her voice caught.

Staring off toward the ocean, her mouth opened and shut, opened and shut, opened and shut, like the mouth of a fish in a net.

I followed her gaze, turning to the shoreline, then dropped the chocolate.

In the shallows there, among the waves, something gigantic was splashing toward shore.

The thing was approximately the size of a dumptruck. Breakers broke against it, spattering foamy water. Moonlight hit a wheeling fin.

"Bloodsucker," Ash whispered.

Then clouds drifted across the moon again, and the beach went dark.

I now understand why descriptions of monsters are always so imprecise, unreliable, contradictory. :: when you find a monster—even if you're looking for a monster—you don't actually look. You run.

We hurried along the beach, stumbling over driftwood, slipping over stones.

She whispered, "We saw it."

She whispered, "We're hall of famers."

And, anxiously, "It won't want anybody to know."

We hurried down the boardwalk together, passed the harbor, headed into town toward the glowing windows of the restaurants and the neon signage of the taverns.

At some point I became aware that we were being followed. Something was following us. Silhouettes. Merging, separating. Sometimes forming a single six-armed silhouette, sometimes breaking apart into triplet silhouettes with a pair of arms apiece. As the silhouettes marched across the street, a streetlamp illuminated their bodies. Three people wearing black jackets. The people were large—bigger even than me.

Ash saw.

"Did the monster turn into those people?" she whispered.

The silhouettes had crossed back into darkness, merged back into a single shadow.

"Turn into?" I whispered.

Ash clutched my sweater, pointed at the harbor, where silhouettes were marching in off of a dock.

"Are those other monsters?" she whispered.

We stopped, under a streetlamp, as the six-armed silhouette continued drawing closer.

"You're panicking," I whispered.

Silhouettes poured from an alleyway.

"I think sometimes the best thing is to panic," she whispered.

If the monsters could mimic us, that would have an obvious logic, evolutionarily.

If the monsters came for us, it would be logical to come at night.

In the diner, people were shaking pepper shakers, squirting ketchup, singing along to country songs. In the taverns, people were ducking darts, shaking hands, spilling foamy beers across the bartop. In the cafe, people were sipping from paper cups, were sipping from plastic cups, as outside monsters overran the streets. In the morning, newscasters would report a slaughtered town. Hotel rooms, littered with overturned room-service carts, overturned room-service trays, twisted sheets, twisted bodies. Hospital hallways, littered with overturned wastebaskets, overturned wheelchairs, spilled gurneys, spilled bodies. Schoolyard playgrounds, littered with shredded raincoats, shredded backpacks, bodies. Misshapen, skinless, bloody. Carcasses stripped to the bone.

The six-armed silhouette broke apart, merged again, broke apart, rushing toward us.

"Can we run please?" she whispered.

"Yes," I said.

But as we ran, we ran apart from each other, she vaulted the steps and yanked open the door and didn't realize until she was in the diner with those other people that I wasn't there, that I

wasn't with her, that she had gone somewhere I couldn't follow, ∵ I was already running through the roundabout toward home, my boots pounding against the pavement, my backpack thumping against my back, and then up the hill, where what ensued probably seems ridiculous given the circumstances, but on the hill there just wasn't help for me, only heated houses with shining windows, and my survival instinct was telling me to knock on a door to hide in a house, but my core idea was overruling that ∵ if heat escaped from the houses then the houses would have to consume additional energy to heat additional air, so I kept running without looking back, but as I ran beneath a streetlamp I found myself facing a mammoth cloud of hovering gnats, and my survival instinct told me just to bat the gnats aside ∵ stopping might mean dying, but my core idea overruled that ∵ if the gnats got batted the gnats might be harmed, so I stopped, and paced squinting from curb to curb, until I found, finally, a passage through the gnats, but as I ran through and scrambled over a fence and rounded the corner I found myself facing a monstrous garden of budding herbs, each labeled with a handwritten tag, and my survival instinct told me just to cut through the garden, but my core idea overruled that ∵ if the herbs were trampled the herbs might die, and then whoever had planted the herbs would have to buy herbs instead, in a plastic bag, which would take three hundred years to decompose, and those packages of store-bought herbs always come with way too much, so that the bulk of the herbs are wasted, so I didn't cut through the garden, but instead looped around, and felt weak, and felt dizzy, and felt hungry, and had to stop to pick up a plastic spork, and a stray hound was barking at whatever was behind me.

The house of course was pitch-dark. I flew down the driveway through moonlight and shadows, bounded up the rusted staircase bolted to the house siding. From the balcony, I glanced back at the driveway, but didn't see anything following. Still, as I threw open the door, I reached for the lamp, ∵ with a lamp lit, I wouldn't be as frightened. But, as I stood there in the doorway, staring at the lamp in the moonlight, my hand on the switch, I felt another sort of terror, ∵ when I looked at the lamp, I saw the cord, and when I looked at the cord, I saw the outlet, and when I looked at the outlet, I saw beyond the outlet, the whole twisting chain of power (the electricity at the outlet,

there, and beyond, wriggling along its wires through the walls of the house, from the attic into the unlit den below into a wallpapered bedroom into a carpeted closet twisting past the darkened stairway into the empty pantry past the kitchen alcoves into the sunroom and without warning plunging sickeningly into the circuit breaker in the basement workshop, now, and outside, shooting through the electric meter with its spinning dials, leaping through the sky to the transformer on its pole, swooping from pole to pole with the power lines, above the roads, over vehicles with headlights, past a lake of wailing loons, and over the barbwire fence and through the switch tower and into the substation, flailing through the distribution bus and the capacitor banks and the regulator banks there, and then leaping with the power lines over the barbwire fence into the sky again, swooping from pylon to pylon, above the pines, over a farm, above the pines, across a deserted highway, above the pines, past a burning building, above the pines, alongside a flock of scattering bats, above the pines, toward in the distance what looks like another burning building, but isn't, it's not, it's home, the birthplace, the power plant, and as you head toward the billowing smokestacks, against the flow of all of that newborn electricity, you can sense that neonatal fear in the power lines there, the terrified humming, the electricity there existential, already haunted by dreamlike visions, prenatal memories, of the generator's whirring rotor, the turbine's whirling blades, and, beyond everything, that monstrous womb, the fiery furnace of burning coal).

I propped a chair against the door. I sat in the dark, on the mattress, under a heap of blankets, watching the window in the door for signs of movement.

I wasn't there long before I began hearing noises. Gravel skittering in the driveway; the rusted staircase creaking on its bolts, creaking again, again; the balcony groaning. A blurry form crossed the window. Stood there.

I kept still.

The doorknob squeaked. I stopped breathing. The doorknob squeaked again. The chair scraped; the door thudded; the chair toppled, clattering to the floorboards.

The form stepped through the door.

"Hello," it whispered.

Like a lisp, but not.

“How did you find this place?” I whispered.

“I guess once when I was stalking you,” she whispered.

She shut the door.

“It’s freezing.”

“The heat’s off,” I whispered.

“Have you got any cocoa?”

“There’s an old tin in the cupboard,” I whispered.

“I’ll make some then.”

She sniffed the kettle, cranked the faucet, stuck the kettle under the faucet, dug for the lid (the faucet running, the kettle overflowing, water spilling wasted into the drain), stopped the faucet, poured some water from the kettle (glugging wasted into the drain), wiped the kettle with the cuff of her anorak, capped the kettle with the lid, lit a burner. Beads of water gathered mass on the sides of the kettle, zigzagged abruptly toward the burner, hissed to steam. The whistle on the kettle is broken. Instead, when the water boils, the kettle rumbles. I never use the stove.

She sat on the mattress, hugging her knees like somebody protecting frightened children, as the water heated.

“You live like this?” she whispered.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Your brain is awful to you,” she whispered.

She scooted toward me, under the blankets, her anorak rustling against my sweater. The pale light of the burner flickered across half her face. Her eyelashes were clumped with mascara.

“Is there a lock on the door?” she whispered.

“No,” I whispered.

“Will the monsters find us here?” she whispered.

“Maybe,” I whispered.

She whispered, “The bloodsuck—”

Mid-word, mid-sentence, mid-everything, she grabbed my sweater, kissing me. Her lips to my lips. Her nose to my nose. Her eyes, unshut, at my eyes. She stared at me. I stared at her. She yanked the zipper of her anorak, wriggled out, kissed me again, gripped my shoulders, kissed me again, yanked the zipper of her jeans, wriggled out, kissed me again, straddled me, her sweatshirt swaying, our hands battling, mine trying to block hers, forcing them away as they clutched at my chest, forcing them away as they clutched at my hips, forcing them away as her fingers clawed across my jeans and slipped between my legs and squeezed me there, the kettle was rumbling, my hands pinned her hands, she stopped kissing me.

“Stop thinking,” she said.

“I shouldn’t,” I whispered.

“Stop thinking,” she said.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I whispered.

“Stop thinking,” she said.

“The stove is still on,” I whispered.

“Please, please, please, please,” she said.

Then her fingers found my button, my zipper, everything underneath, she eased herself onto me with a whimper, and as she sat on me, all of my logic broke down, verums toppled, falsums flipped, negations couldn’t negate, conjunctions were disjunctions and disjunctions were conjunctions, tautologies weren’t, contradictions weren’t, things nonexistent were existent, and the truth is that I cried while she moved on me, ∵ she was touching my skin everywhere, and the electrified fence didn’t kill her, ∵ she was electric too.

### *May Twenty-Second*

In the morning we ate breakfast together, on the mattress, huddled under the blankets—pears for me, peanut butter for her, dollops spooned from the jar—and she had her cocoa, finally. Something made her laugh, I don’t remember what, and she almost spit a mouthful of cocoa across my chest, which, after she swallowed the cocoa, only made her laugh more. We split a glass

of water, brushed our teeth (the baking soda scared her, but her breath horrified her, so she had no choice), and got dressed. She claimed my sweater, so I had to dig out my spare from the box under the sink. Now there was daylight, I wasn't as worried about monsters, but, honestly, I was still worried—until, before leaving, I glanced through the lattice attic window at the beach below—saw just how simple the truth was. I laughed, then, too.

I didn't have to work today. We left the house, wandered down through town together, past other couples out for strolls (some probably those silhouettes we saw last night), toward the harbor. A warm, calm, weekend morning. There weren't any bodies littering the playgrounds. There weren't any bodies littering the streets. The only new body was at the beach.

A crowd had gathered—a crowd of people milling about the black sand, a crowd of birds hovering in the bright sky—circling the body. The gigantic carcass of a right whale. Its fins scraped; its fluke crushed; its baleen in tatters. The tide had swept the body in, then receded, leaving the carcass beached not all that far from the boulder. People were snapping pictures. Children crouched in the yawning mouth. Peter was there (jeans, plaid shirt, leather loafers, bright red woolen hat), had driven Grandpa Uyaquq down to see the body. (We've just sent Peter back for Mr. Nome.)

"We aren't hall of famers," Ash said sadly, standing alongside the body, running her fingers across the barnacled skin above the lid of a shut eye.

It's not proof. But it's the closest thing to a footprint, a sighting, our town has ever had. The monsters have never, ever, killed something of this magnitude before. Grandpa Uyaquq can't stop grinning. He lived to see something this town will be talking about for centuries.

Ash clenched her fists, and set her jaw, and cackled, just once.

"Then that means we've still got work to do," she said.

We've got Grandpa Uyaquq settled on the boulder, now, where he has a good view of the whale, the birds eating from the blubber. I'm lying against the boulder, in the sand, reading from the novel, writing in my diary. Ash is napping, her head propped on my legs, her hair rayed across my lap. The final chapter opens, "Bankruptcy is your inheritance. — Veuillot Al-Ada, *Nuncupative*

*Testaments.*" After the accidental destruction of the volcanic city, the novel relocates (still yet again) back to the home of the debtor soldier, a city that, like all of the world's cities now, is in ruins. As the mythical cities were being destroyed, offpage, across the planet, all of the world's cities were being destroyed. Windstorms, sandstorms, hailstorms, floods. The soldier's debts are wiped clean. Humanity's debts are wiped clean. The planet is a wasteland. Among the ruins of his family's estate, somebody, a stranger, is throwing a party. Women in dirty gowns mill about the rubble. A man with an ashy face climbs a staircase to nowhere. Children topple from crumbling pillars clutching glass bottles. It's only after the soldier has begun drinking that somebody mentions what's in the bottles. What everybody's drinking. Hemlock.

It's a contradiction, but, nevertheless, the book was simultaneously the best and the worst that I've ever read.

## About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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