The Eulogist

Matthew Baker

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I do not know if other sects of the cult exist—if the cult can be found in Sapporo, Saint Petersburg, La Paz, Bruges—or if the cult in our village was the cult itself. If it was, I am all that is left of it. And perhaps the cult could have only emerged in a landscape like ours, in a village teetering along the glacial waters of Lake Superior, a village whose cottages and mailboxes were buried under snow most months of the year, a village in which there was rarely ever anything to do. The cult was seldom referred to as the Cult Of The Deathself, instead was most often referred to as the Yooper Cult, which would seem to suggest the cult was an invention of our village alone. But our father—a mustached Scandinavian American, with knuckles the size of my kneecaps, droopy earlobes as plump as my thumbs—he often spoke of the cult otherwise, as if it was something very old and widespread, something far larger than just the thirteen families in our village at the northern tip of Michigan.

My sister in contrast often spoke of the cult as if it was something either very funny or very fake. Like me she had been adopted by our father, but from Jamaica, instead of Korea. I loved her, not like a brother loves a sister, but like a boy loves an older girl with dark curls and an upturned nose and a beautiful pealing laugh. At bedtime, I would chant her name to myself—Kayley, Kayley, Kayley—as if whispering a spell to make her stay. Kayley said the cult was bogus. I believed our father when he said the cult was real. Like all of the

cult's followers, he referred to it as Temple. I loved him, not like a son loves a father, but like a soldier loves a general who will teach him to be strong. He was the lighthouse keeper for our village. He wore black snow boots I could stuff both legs into and then, bending over, both arms. I was stunned by the size of him. If I had had any friends, I would have told them all.

Ours was a harmless cult. If a cult is destructive, then that is its downfall—if a cult is harmless, then its downfall is that. A more destructive cult might have died by a sudden police raid, by the mass suicide of its followers. Ours was simply smothered by more compelling cults—the Cult Of Meth, the Cult Of Cyberspace, the Cult Of Everything That Somehow Found Us Here. It was already happening when we were children—Kayley hated our cult only because her friends belonged to another, the Cult Of Meth. Her friends lived in villages beyond our cove, would come for her in a minivan with snow chains and a rusted hood, flying down our road with reggae or metal or opera blasting over the stereo. Owen Puck had a tattoo of a handprint on his face—the black palm just under his jaw, the black fingers pressed into his cheek—as if he'd been handled by a demon. The others didn't have names, just hooded parkas with missing buttons and broken zippers, pants stained white with the salt from the roads, sunflower seeds whose shells they'd spit out into our sink. After school Kayley and I were supposed to do our training, but she trusted me not to tell our father she hadn't, and not to tell him that Owen Puck and the parkas had come to our cottage, and not to tell him that Owen Puck had taken her into her bedroom and locked the door. Before our father got home she would claw the slimy seed shells out of our sink and fling the shells into the garbage can, raking coffee grounds and meatless ribs over the shells so our father wouldn't notice, and when he got home I would say that I had done my training for three hours with only a ten-minute break and that so had Kayley. Our father would ruffle my hair and tickle my sides and fling me onto

the couch and leave me bouncing there, still giggling, as he shut himself into his bedroom to do his own training. Kayley would throw a book at me from the chair where she was pretending to read, then shut herself into her bedroom to call Owen Puck.

"Brought her here for a new home.
Left too soon, but not alone."
— from the gravestone of Kayley Groot

Like many cults, the teachings of ours—as I was taught where followers met in the school bus driver's cottage, sitting on mismatched folding chairs in the basement as the school bus driver stood with a stick of chalk at the blackboard shoved against his boiler, powdery chalk dust wiped onto his beard—revolved around the afterlife. I was taught that after dying I would meet my deathself: an identical doppelganger. If I had died that first night in the basement, for example, my deathself would have had bony arms, a flat hairless stomach, and a missing tooth—one of my teeth had fallen out at breakfast that morning while I was chewing some toast. If I died tonight, however, my deathself would have flabby arms, a fat stomach speckled with hair, and a full set of teeth, now coffee-stained. As I was taught, after dying I would have to compete with my deathself in a series of mental and physical challenges. Only the winner would pass on to the afterlife. For the other—oblivion, nothingness. Because of this, followers spent much of their lives training for these unknown trials, so as to improve their odds of defeating their deathself. Kayley referred to the deathself as the bitchself. We'd had a mother, but she'd taken a train to New Mexico to study karate as part of her cult training. Kayley said that our mother had only said that to get away from the cult and our father and that our mother wasn't coming back, but I believed our father when he said that she would.

The various things I was taught in school—a musty brick building inland from the lake—were modest compared to the things I taught myself after school for cult training. In

school the teachers honed my English, taught us how to identify ratios and simplify fractions, taught us how to differentiate between reptiles and amphibians, taught us how our father's ancestors had slaughtered the natives of this peninsula before building oak cottages where the natives had kept birch wigwams, before sailing oak sloops out onto the lakes where the natives had paddled birch canoes. After school the kids from other villages would stay—for drama club, basketball practice, dance rehearsal—but Kayley and I would ride the bus back to our village, sharing the seat behind the school bus driver as he listened to recorded language lessons over a pair of headphones, preparing himself for any deathself feats that might require a fluency in Russian, Swahili, Hindustani. Back home, Kayley and I would check the mailbox for letters from our mother and then knock the snow from our boots and go into our cottage empty-handed. Days our father was inside—if he had no more duties at the lighthouse, and if the yellow-sailed sloop we kept at the boathouse on the lake somehow needed no repairing or repainting or tweaking whatsoever—Kayley would have to do her training. She'd hang a stuffed bear from the pull cord on her window blinds, leaving the stuffed bear strung up by the neck in her bedroom window—her warning sign to Owen Puck that it wasn't safe to come. Then she'd sit on the couch with me, our backs resting against the arms, our legs sharing the middle cushion—never did I love her as much as when our knees were touching—and we would quiz each other with whatever puzzles our father had assigned. When bedtime came, I'd cocoon into my blankets, hyper with fantasies about Kayley and me dying—our school bus careening through a guardrail, an electrical fire burning down our cottage, Owen Puck killing us for fun—and us meeting our deathselves together. In my fantasies, I would have to fight both my own deathself and her deathself for her—I would wriggle around my bed, pretending to struggle against her deathself in a riddle-solving contest, to struggle against my own deathself in a breath-holding competition. From her bedroom across the hall, her own

cult keeping her sleepless, Kayley would shout at me to stop rustling around. I wanted to stop rustling, but when I thought about fighting for her, I just had to rustle.

Later that winter, Owen Puck's brother came to our cottage. He was an elder in the Cult Of Meth, all jittery and chatty, his tongue slurring words. The meth had already taken teeth from him. I kept doing my jumping jacks as he stared at me. I was at one hundred and three.

"What's his name," the Elder Puck said.

Kayley told him.

"Simon," the Elder Puck said. His eyes were more yellowish than brown. "A new Simon. The dark Simon." He looked at the parkas. Apparently one of the parkas was named Simon too. They shifted around, none of them looking at me, the fabric of their parkas rustling. "Simon the dark." I kept doing my jumping jacks. "How many jumping jacks can you do?"

I told him.

"More than I can count?" The Elder Puck shook out a bag of ice that was not ice onto the kitchen table. "You could do twice that on this shit." Somehow he was even skinnier than me. His face was like what Owen Puck's would have been if Owen Puck had been buried alive as a baby and dug up just now still alive. "Kayley, you gonna work with us in The Factory tonight?"

Kayley told him.

"What do you mean no?" the Elder Puck said.

"I can't," Kayley said.

"You mean you don't want to," the Elder Puck said.

"E, I told you," Owen Puck said. "She doesn't want to get caught up in that. You don't want her to get caught up in that. Her dad is one scary guy."

"Caught up like that," the Elder Puck said. "Caught like that. Caught up in the up in.

Like that, caught that, like." He fingered what wasn't ice. "Simon the dark, want to do some crystal?"

I didn't say anything. I wanted to tell them to leave but they were Kayley's guests and I wanted Kayley to love me—not like a sister loves a brother, but like a girl loves a boy who has tiny teeth and huge ears and a scar on his neck given to him in a faraway land. So I kept doing my jumping jacks. I kept doing my jumping jacks even as the Pucks and Kayley snorted powder at the kitchen table, like I had known that Owen Puck and Kayley had always locked her bedroom door to do. I kept doing my jumping jacks even as the Pucks took Kayley into her bedroom and locked the door, even as I realized that whatever Owen Puck and Kayley had been locking her bedroom door for, it was for something more than the powder. I kept doing my jumping jacks even as I heard the Elder Puck laughing, even as the parkas spit shells into our sink—kept bringing my arms down and then up and then down and then up, like somebody getting robbed again and again and again and again.

"A bird, a man, a loaded gun.
No bird, dead man, your will be done."
— from the gravestone of Eric Puck

Our lakeshore was littered with the burned-out husks of abandoned sheds and barns with holes blown through the sides. The chemicals used when cooking the Cult Of Meth's sacraments were unstable—the cult's followers had been trained to handle the chemicals, but even then, sometimes the lakeshore would be shaken by a faraway boom, and the plates would rattle quietly in our cupboards, and a dark plume of smoke would rise from the trees. Before the Elder Puck, there had been the Elder Olsons—one Elder Olson had been captured in a police raid on the shed in the woods behind our school, and after that the other Elder Olson had moved the chemicals to a sloop with a bright pink sail, where he had kept the chemicals in the boat's cabin, until one day we felt the faraway boom,

heard the plates quietly rattling in our cupboards, and Kayley and I stood at the window with our mother and waited for the dark plume of smoke, but when it came, it came rising from the lake instead of the trees. Our mother made a noise and then went back to cooking divinity at the stove, spooning fat lumps from her pot and then dropping the lumps onto her cookie sheet, as Kayley and I stood at the counter, waiting for the candy to cool.

"God you will be missed."
— from the gravestone of Jonah Olson

Months before Kayley announced she and Owen Puck were turning runaway, our father brought me to the boathouse. We kept our sloop berthed alongside the mail carrier's black-sailed sloop and the retired snowplower's white-sailed sloop, the three boats strung up by rusted chains on metal pulleys. While our father adjusted the rudder's fittings, he muttered geometry proofs and astronomy facts to himself. I scrubbed the hull of the sloop with a sponge soaked in bleach.

He had caught me telling Kayley about my birth parents. "Forget your birth parents," he had said. "They weren't followers—they've already met oblivion." I had cried when he'd said this, and so he had taken me to the boathouse to work the memories out of me, to erase the memories with the fumes of the bleach. As bleach ran between my fingers into the sleeves of my jacket, I tried to be strong like our father—tried to forget the smells of my birth parents, the shapes of those faces.

Our father would be proud, if he were still alive, to know I now have no memories of my birth parents. I have only the memory of forgetting those memories, and even that has faded.

What I do remember is driving back to our cottage with my fingers reeking of bleach, clutching a porcupine quill I'd found that I wanted to give to Kayley. When we got home I ran to her bedroom and threw open her door, where I found Owen Puck and the parkas

dropping out her window, one by one, Kayley giving each of them a boost. As our father dropped the keys to the boathouse onto the counter, Owen Puck dropped down to where the parkas were waiting, and the floorboards in the kitchen and then the hallway creaked under our father's feet, and Kayley slid her window shut, and our father walked past her doorway, glancing at us as he did.

That was the closest our father had ever come, I think, to catching them.

"She came and left and came and left.
This leaving now, no coming back."
— from the gravestone of Anna Groot

I stopped doing my training exercises, but unlike Kayley, I was not willing to pretend. When we next came home and found our father hunched at the kitchen table—his notes on labyrinth designs, avian migration patterns, modern hypnosis techniques, M-theory sprawled out between his coffee mug and a plate with a venison pasty—Kayley hung the stuffed bear in her bedroom window and pretended to do her balance training on the living room floor, but I did not pretend. I went to my room and squeezed between my bed and the wall and propped a book on my knees, a book about enchanted kingdoms and talking animals, a book that could not possibly help me in the fight against my deathself.

I heard our father's chair scrape. I stared at the words on the pages.

He stood in my doorway. "That's not a training book," he said. "Come do your training."

I told him no.

"Have you ever known Kayley not to do her training?" he said.

I lied to him.

"Then do like your sister does."

I told him I wouldn't. He plucked the book from my hands, squatted down between my bed and the wall—his hips jostled my bed—and palmed my knees. His sweatshirt had

faded from the bluish color it'd once been to something almost colorless. "What's going on?" he said.

I didn't want to tell him my question—I was afraid of how he might respond.

After I told him he just stared at me.

"That's a lot for a little guy like you to be carrying," he said. "When you have questions like that, don't sit in here worrying yourself. Just ask me." He let go of a knee, flattening his mustache with his thumb. "A lot of followers struggle with that—if my deathself is identical to me, won't training just strengthen my deathself too?" He palmed both knees again. "We teach that, although the deathself is identical in appearance, it must somehow be different—otherwise it would be impossible for one to defeat the other. I know that's not a great answer. We don't always have the answers. I thought you were too young to bring to theology debates, but maybe you should come. It's not part of training. It's optional. It's extra. But you can come if you want."

He said the theology debates were at the school bus driver's too, just on a different night than regular cult meetings. I felt so relieved, I hugged his leg. I had thought that all of my training had made my deathself only the more strong—had worried that with all of our father's training he had made his deathself too brilliant ever to be beaten, that our father would lose and become nothingness and there would be nothing anybody could do to save him.

Kayley said he was lonely without our mother. I said he still had us, but she said that our mother was the one who'd wanted us, not him, and that to him we were followers, not children.

A letter had come from San Francisco, the writing on the envelope like our mother's but loopier. We thought it was from her but when our father opened it and read it and tore it up and threw it away, he said that it wasn't. He shook the garbage can, mixing the paper

with wet coffee grounds and lumps of gristle, getting the shreds too soggy to piece back together. Then he said he was going to the department store in Marquette.

"Tonight?" Kayley said.

"I need a suit," our father said.

"Since when?" Kayley said.

Our father's car shadowed its headlights into the road, driving off into a flurry of snow. Kayley called Owen Puck. The Pucks and the parkas came slinking into our cottage before I'd been doing my training for more than ten minutes.

"Simon the dark, what're you reading?" the Elder Puck said.

I told him.

"Nursery rhymes?" the Elder Puck said. "You better lay off that cult shit before it fucks you up for good."

I ignored him and did what our father had told me to do. I was supposed to memorize the nursery rhymes, to develop the memory skills our father was so famous for in our village. "London Bridge," "Humpty Dumpty," "Ring Around The Rosie." Kayley stared at me—I knew she could tell I was afraid of the Elder Puck, as much as I was trying to feel brave.

"The Yooper Cult," the Elder Puck said, prodding the spine of my book with his boot. "The Cult Of Data. The Data Cult. The Cult Of Books And Words And Signs And Numbers."

"Owen," Kayley said.

"The Homework Cult. Cult Of Work At Home. Cult Of Home At Work At Home At Work."

"*Owen*," Kayley said.

"E, shut the fuck up," Owen Puck said. "You're doing that thing again. Just relax, man."

The Elder Puck stared at Kayley. Kayley stared at the kitchen counter. The parkas stared at the Elder Puck, chewing the sunflower seeds. I whispered "Ring Around The Rosie" to myself without looking at my book.

Then the Elder Puck shoved Owen Puck, who tripped backward over a chair. The Elder Puck palmed our father's coffee mug, and as Owen Puck rose off the floor, the Elder Puck hammered Owen Puck in the forehead, the mug leaving a trail of leftover coffee hanging in the air, which then fell—with Owen Puck—onto the linoleum.

Owen Puck curled up under the kitchen table, his knees at his face, his fingers holding his forehead, trying to keep in the blood. "Fuck, E," Owen Puck said.

"If you didn't misbehave, I wouldn't have to hit you," the Elder Puck said. "I told you not to embarrass me like that. Owen. Like that, me. I told you."

"You can't even talk like you're not tweaking anymore," Owen Puck said.

The Elder Puck mustered the parkas over at the front door. "If you're big enough to boss me around in front of some nobodies, then you're big enough to walk yourself home," the Elder Puck said. The Elder Puck and the parkas piled out into the snow.

Kayley peeked out the window blinds.

"The Factory gone?" Owen Puck said.

Kayley told him.

"Eric driving?"

Kayley told him.

"He should not be driving with that shit in the back. Especially while lit."

"If it blows, at least you won't be in it," Kayley said.

"*He'll* be in it," Owen Puck said. "He's my brother, K."

Kayley sat next to Owen Puck on the couch, asking him about his head. I whispered "Jack And Jill" to myself, memorizing the illustration that went with the words. Kayley

muttered questions about the meth that he couldn't answer. He said his brother was only like that because he used too much and sold too little—that it'd kill him the same way it'd killed their uncle.

"Owen might have a concussion," Kayley told me. "I'm walking him home."

"You can't leave him here alone," Owen Puck said. "He's like seven."

I told him how old I actually was.

"Okay, nine. Still."

I hated Owen Puck for caring about me like I wanted Kayley to. Kayley said to him, "And what if you pass out in a snowbank somewhere between our house and yours?"

"If you come, he comes too."

"Our dad comes home and finds me gone, he'll freak. But he comes home and finds *both* of us gone? He'll freak and then kill me. How long's the drive there and back to Marquette?"

Owen Puck told her.

"Damn. We're going to have to walk fast. Simon, you going to keep up?"

I told her I wasn't going. I wanted to be good.

Owen Puck hunched over the closet anyway, tossing a pair of boots back at me.

"If she's coming, then you're coming," Owen Puck said.

Outside the snowstorm had turned to a blizzard, the snowflakes floating down quietly from the sky. We left the door unlocked—Kayley and me wearing our boots, Owen Puck wearing his neon hightops—and followed the minivan's tire tracks, which were already filling with snow. I was zipped into the orange down jacket our father had given me, Kayley into her pink. Winter in our village was a dead world, all of the smells—the loamy dirt, the polleny wildflowers, the rotting compost heaped in crates behind the cottages—muffled under the snow. All sounds replaced by silence—the pine trees and the spruce

trees empty of birds, the yards empty of people chopping firewood and hoeing herbs, the lake itself empty of sloops, rowboats, motorboats, freighters, its shallows empty of waves, frozen to ice from the beach out as far as the lighthouse. Everything white or gray or brown—the colorful siding on the cottages coated with snow, the pines white, the spruces white, the birdbaths and birdfeeders and coiled garden hoses white, the mailboxes white, the cars white, the sky murky with gray clouds regardless of whether snow was falling. Nothing for any of our noses or ears or eyes to sense, aside from the sound of our soles making prints in the snow. My soles, I dragged, wanting our father to beat us home, wanting us to be caught so that I wouldn't have to lie anymore for Kayley.

"I thought you said you'd keep up?" Kayley said.

I told her I hadn't.

"It's hard when you've got those shorter legs," Owen Puck said. "I remember. Come on, little man, I'll give you a boost."

I didn't want to but he hiked me onto his shoulders anyway. I was trying not to have fun. Owen Puck pretended I was too heavy. He sank onto his knees. I didn't want to laugh but I knew he wouldn't get up until I had, so I did. He got up and we kept walking. I held his jaw to keep my balance, with my hand upside-down over his tattoo. I had never been to his village. His village looked like our village, except the cottages were on hills and snowmobiles were parked in some of the driveways and there wasn't a lighthouse. On his road, through the window of a cottage, I saw the face of a bearded man lit white by a bright screen. I didn't know then, but the man belonged to the Cult Of Cyberspace—the first I ever saw, though I would see many more.

The Pucks' cottage was at the end of his road, with fallen clumps of pine needles and spruce needles scattered across the roof, and snowboards and wakeboards and a scuffed plastic sled leaning against the railing on the porch. In a glowing window we could see the

Pucks' mother wearing a plaid shirt and burgundy sweatpants, folding laundry. The Elder Puck was standing next to her, chewing something. Kayley and I hid behind the minivan in the driveway, watching Owen Puck slip through the door into the mudroom and then reappear in the glowing window to kiss his mother on the cheek. The Elder Puck shuffled over to the mudroom and knocked the door open with his hip—a sandwich brimming with iceberg lettuce in his hands—and squinted out into the dark. Then he shouted, "The Cult Of Infinite Chores." He took a bite from the sandwich, shut the door, and then reappeared in the glowing window, where their mother was poking at the gash on Owen Puck's forehead and Owen Puck was pretending the gash didn't hurt him and hadn't been given to him by somebody who was standing right there in their living room. The Elder Puck lobbed what was left of the sandwich onto their mother's pile of laundry and wrapped Owen Puck in a chokehold, tickling his sides. Their mother pretended to be mad at them for roughhousing, but once her back was to them—facing the laundry, and us out hiding in the snow—a tiny smile surfaced, a tiny dimple in each cheek.

Kayley and I walked back to our cottage and sat on the kitchen floor and ate frozen yogurt out of the carton. Our father still wasn't home. Kayley called Owen Puck, but he didn't answer, so she got out markers and paper and flopped across the carpet and stared up at the lifeless ceiling fan, trying to remember every memory she still had from Jamaica. Whenever she found one she said it and made me write it down. I gave each memory a different color. In pink, *birds outside the window with eggs with spots*. In yellow, *before someone an old woman leaning over me talking holding something in her hand*. In violet, *the smell of the mattress Kiyana and me slept on sort of indescribable just a human smell like the humanest smell you've ever smelled*. In blue, *the feel of these cracks in the wall in the dark in this closet where we would sometimes hide*. Kayley let me keep the paper with her memories. She said having her memories written down wouldn't help, that she kept losing more

and more and more and soon she wouldn't have any memories left from that place where she'd been happy, only memories of after, of here.

Sometimes at night while I was trying to fall asleep I would talk to my deathself, as quietly as possible, with my eyes shut and my face in my pillow. I would imagine it, myself but with blank eyes, and then once it was looking at me, I would taunt it—whisper something like, "You're not as good as me," or, "I'll beat you, you stupid thing." That night, though, I just asked it questions. I whispered, "What did you do today? Did you learn anything I never have?" I asked, "Did you get to ride on somebody's shoulders?" I asked, "Did your father ever come back home?" When we woke up our father was back and eating burned toast in the kitchen. When we got home from school our father was gone again. When the Elder Puck came over with the parkas, he told Kayley that from now on she was working in The Factory too, and this time Owen Puck didn't stand up for her, and so she left in the minivan—they took her away.

"Fifty years you drove our buses,
now you are a box of ashes."
— from the gravestone of Peter Boor

Whenever our father put on the suit from the department store—it looked like it had been tailored for a smaller man—we knew he'd be gone at least until dawn. After our father left in the suit, the Pucks would come for Kayley and she'd leave in the minivan.

"Don't you get bored?" Kayley would say. "Go somewhere. Do something."

I told her I wasn't supposed to.

"He doesn't care. He's too busy trying not to get divorced."

When our father asked about Kayley, I lied to him like always. While you were gone she did her jumping jacks and practiced drawing perfect circles, I'd say. I'd say, we read what you left us to read. Whenever she heard me lying for her she'd walk through later and

touch me on the back of the neck, at the place where my hair met my skin, as a way of saying thank you. Her cheeks had caved in drastically. Her undereyes were dark as bruises. She had burns on her fingers now almost always. Our father hadn't noticed.

Kayley was working hard in the minivan but I was working hard in the school bus driver's basement. Our father and I would shovel the driveway, then sputter off to the weekly theology debate. Sometimes the Pucks' minivan would go spinning around a bend in the road, heading to our cottage to go nab Kayley from where we'd left her. Our father would wave—like he'd wave at any car in our village—as if he knew the person behind the wheel. The Elder Puck wouldn't, as if he didn't.

Then for a couple weeks Kayley didn't go anywhere.

"We messed up a batch," Kayley said. "Some people Owen's brother sold it to ended up in the hospital, people from only a couple towns over. So we're shut down, least until we hear if anyone died. If they do, we're down for good. No way anybody'd buy from the Pucks after that."

I imagined these followers from the Cult Of Meth strapped into hospital beds, in comas, not understanding what they were seeing—seeing nothing but this vast black lake they were going to have to cross, and beyond the black water, perched on a black rock, somebody who looked just like them. The teachings of their cult, like ours, revolved around the afterlife—that there would be none, that the bliss their powder gave them was the only eternity they'd ever have. They held no funeral rites for the dead. Nobody from our cult had died since I'd come, but I'd been taught that when somebody did die, we would hold a sending for them—each of us lying in the snow, our arms and our legs spread starlike, our boots facing inside of the circle, our heads facing up toward the sky—as the school bus driver led us in a chant, a song of words that were not words. Kayley said when she died just to get it over with, skip the bitchself rituals, mail her ashes back to

Jamaica.

"It's too easy to mix up the chemicals," Kayley said. "Whether we're driving or even just parked. They tried to say it was me who messed up. Owen said it wasn't, that it was Simon, and even then only because he couldn't say that it was his brother, even though it probably was."

I asked her if she'd come with us to the theology debates, at least while The Factory was shut down, but she only laughed. Usually at the debates we'd argue about the particulars of the cult teachings, sort through the facts. But the first night I went, all the others did was listen. I had so many questions. What was the deathself? Was it a fake me—just an animated double? Or was it a real person, meaning that oblivion for my deathself would be just as much of an oblivion as oblivion would be for me? Or was my deathself a me from another place—another universe, maybe, or the me I would have been if I had never left Korea—and was I destined both to be destroyed and to pass on to the afterlife? And the question that worried me more than any other—how could I know that *I* wasn't the deathself, and that the deathself I'd meet wouldn't be the *actual* me? The basement was scattered with empty seats—the mismatched folding chairs that the stooped gravestone maker, the gap-toothed schoolteacher, the faintly manure-smelling apple farmers, the apple farmers' straw-haired children, the wrinkled dentist, the acne-spotted convenience store cashier, and Kayley occupied at regular cult meetings. The school bus driver, the mail carrier, the retired snowplower, and our father were the only ones who came to the theology debates, but they came every week. They sat around me that night just listening—the school bus driver nodding, the mail carrier hunched forward with her chin resting on her fist, the retired snowplower leaning back with his sleeves rolled to his elbows, our father saying nothing, just rubbing his temples with his thumbs.

"We haven't had a child like this since, I can't even remember," the mail carrier said.

"Since before we were even born. Somebody *excited* about Temple, actually *wanting* to learn."

I told them another one of my questions.

"Dreamself?" the retired snowplower said. "What do you mean, *dream*self?"

I meant the person I was when I was dreaming. What if my deathself was the same as my dreamself? Would I be able to steal training time from my deathself by keeping myself awake?

"Simon," our father said, smiling, not like a smile that was just a smile, but like a smile that was an apology to the others in the basement. "Questions are one thing, but you can't start making things up. That goes against—"

"No," the school bus driver said. He wiped a diagram from the blackboard, then pinched a stick of chalk between his fingers, looking at me. "We need to start writing these down."

Owen Puck came over sometimes when our father wasn't home, just like he'd used to. Kayley would cuddle with him on the couch, kissing his nose in the twitchy glow of the lamp. Sometimes he would come talk to me, do jumping jacks with me to keep me company. I hoped the meth would make him dumber, make him forget everything he'd ever learned. He was the only person I knew I hoped would lose to his deathself—he had used to seem scary to me, but now he was always nice to me, and I hated him for making it so much harder for me to hate him.

"My baby, our clown,
some nights I talk to him,
pretend he's still around."
— from the gravestone of Owen Puck

Our mother wanted a divorce from our father. She had met somebody in New Mexico, was living with him in San Francisco. Our father told us he was going to bring her back.

"She's not coming back," Kayley said, shaking her head. "I knew she wasn't."

Nobody had died. The Factory had been open again for weeks. Kayley was getting worse at pretending she wasn't a student of the theologies of the Cult Of Meth. That night instead of yelling at me from across the hall to stop rustling around, she just kept hacking and coughing.

Kayley called me into her bedroom.

"Stay in here with me tonight," Kayley said. "I want to go through my memories again."

I told her I wanted to sleep—I knew our father would hear us if we kept talking.

"I can't sleep. My insides feel like cotton. Like a bunch of stuffing," Kayley said.

I lied to her.

"I know it's not nothing, Simon. Fuck those fucking fumes."

She was turning into somebody else—some other Kayley, one who looked the same as the Kayley before, but her face misshapen, her eyes seeming grotesque. I was afraid of her. I hated myself for being afraid of her. I was, though. Back in my bed, I said my spell over and over again just like before—Kayley, Kayley, Kayley—crying but not wanting to, chanting her name into my pillow, trying with my spell to turn her back into the Kayley she'd been.

At the next cult meeting the others assessed our current skills. We got tested on the sending song, chanting the words that were not words. Then we took tests at the blackboard with everybody watching as the school bus driver showed us colored flashcards, challenging us with different brainteasers, giving us mazes to solve. I was a third-class linguist, second-class acrobat, second-class mathematician, first-class memorizer. Kayley was ninth-class everything. The school bus driver wouldn't even look at her while she was doing her tests for memorization. Kayley was shaking the whole time.

"I don't understand how she could have scored so low," our father said. "Are you sure

she's been doing her work?"

I wanted to tell him the truth so he could keep the Pucks away and turn her back into the Kayley she was supposed to be. But lying was the only thing I could even do for her anymore.

"Then again," our father said, "I don't understand how you could already be a first-class memorizer either."

He thought we needed photos of us, photos of me and Kayley to send to our mother to make her remember who and where she truly loved. We'd drive into Marquette, get the photos done at the department store, he said. Mail the photos to her first-class.

Kayley had scissored a notch between the legs of her stuffed bear, kept a wad of bills fat as a blackboard eraser hidden inside, her pay from The Factory. She'd made Owen Puck promise he was going to take her away from here. Neither of them had yet learned what I've learned since—that the cults weren't for those of us who were leaving, but those of us who were never going anywhere other than where we already were. Owen Puck said they would move to Florida, live on the ocean, eat peppery shrimp for breakfast lunch dinner. Kayley had said okay, but to me said she'd do Florida for a year tops, and then she'd be moving back to Jamaica and taking him with her, whether he wanted to or not. Kayley couldn't wait until the Elder Puck was dead. If they left beforehand, she said, he'd haul his twitchy self after them wherever they went, come tracking them down, not for any reason at all, just out of boredom, out of pure spite.

"When you meet your other you,
give that fiend what it is due."
— from the gravestone of Tom Groot

Our father drove me to Marquette to buy me a suit for the photos we were going to have taken. He wore his own suit so I wouldn't feel embarrassed about trying suits on. He

bought me one on clearance. Like his mine was a size too small. It could've fit the me I'd been when I'd first moved to our father's home. We drank vanilla milkshakes and ate vegetable pasties and then drove back to our village for the theology debate that night at the school bus driver's cottage.

When we pulled into the driveway the driveway was empty. The school bus driver's minivan, the mail carrier's pickup, the retired snowplower's pickup, none of them were there. Our father went trudging through the snow to the school bus driver's door, knocked on the door with his fist, waited awhile, pounded again. At the theology debates the others talked as if I was a prophet—as if I would bring about a new era for the cult, bring its teachings to villages and towns and cities all over the Upper Peninsula, the Lower Peninsula, the states beneath ours. But they had not been sent a prophet. They had been sent a eulogist—had been sent somebody who could not save the cult, somebody who would someday have to watch the cult die.

Our father said, "Maybe they left a message for us at home."

We drove back toward our cottage. Farther down the lakeshore, I saw a dark plume of smoke above the trees—we'd been too far away to feel it when it had happened, and the smoke was already going from black to gray. Neither of us said anything about it. It didn't seem like a fact we needed to memorize, a fact either of us would ever need to know.

Then the gravestone maker's rusted car swung onto the road behind us, flashing its lights and honking its horn. Our father braked and the car came skidding up alongside of us.

"Tom, I'm sorry," the gravestone maker said, shaking her head, avoiding eye contact. She said she had tried to call us: once just as a formality—the same as she had called everybody in the cult to tell everybody at which part of the road to come gather—and then again, a minute later, when the school bus driver had spotted Kayley's pink jacket in

among all of the parkas.

"Follow me," the gravestone maker said, and she cranked her window back up and went spinning off down the road, the same way we had already been going.

My father and I drove without talking. The medics had already cleared the bodies away when we arrived. The school bus sat just off the road—between the school and our village, where the trees stuttered away into a blank stretch of snowy lakeshore—a couple of windows in the back shattered, the tail of the bus ashy with black. Overturned on its side, just shy of the lake's frozen shallows, the Pucks' minivan spewed smoke from where its rear doors had been. The Elder Puck and one of the parkas sat next to the school bus driver along the curb. The Elder Puck's hands and cheek were smeared with black, and the parka's parka had scorch marks up and down the sleeves with a hole the size of a face burned through the back of the hood. The school bus driver had a bag of ice taped to his neck. Nearby, a police officer was talking into the radio in her cruiser, her heat on, her windows fogged. Everybody from the cult was already there, all huddled around knee-deep in the powder.

"Were you driving, son?" the mail carrier was asking.

"No, no," the Elder Puck said, his twitching blending in with his shivering, the snow doing to him with temperature what the meth had done to him with chemical. "I was in the passenger seat. In the, I was. I wasn't driving. Simon was driving."

He was holding Owen Puck's hightops to his chest. He wouldn't look at me—he was staring at the trees beyond the road.

The mail carrier asked the parka, "Are you Simon?"

The parka shook his head, staring down at his boots.

"He was one of the ones they took away," the Elder Puck said. "With my brother."

The retired snowplower noticed us. He tried to hug my father but my father backed

away.

"She was supposed to be at home," my father said. He wasn't crying—wasn't even upset.

"I was on my way back to the garage when it happened," the school bus driver said, his beard tipped with teary icicles. "The kids weren't on it. I was done with dropoffs. That van got into the other lane to pass me, and in my rearview I saw the van hit a pothole and the back of the van bounced, and then my windows blew out and the van was on the beach."

"What was my daughter doing in your van?" my father said.

But the Elder Puck just muttered, "I can't ever go back home. My mother will blame me for Owen forever. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Can't go, ever."

"You can go home, son," the mail carrier said, trying to comfort him, but he just shook his head no.

I hadn't yet found the page of my own memories I'd given to Kayley—in orange, *a loud rattling noise that came from somewhere under our floor*, in violet, *a friend whose name I can't remember stealing some food from me*, in yellow, *the chicken wire across the windows and the burned smells from the kitchen*, in blue, *all of the aloneness*—where the paper had slid between her wastebasket and the wall behind it. She hadn't even bothered to make sure the paper had made it into her trash.

I stood behind the school bus with my father, where the others couldn't see us, with his gloved hand clutching my mitten, my new tie flicking with the wind. I told him it was my fault.

"This had nothing to do with you, Simon," my father said.

But she'd probably already failed, I said.

"The tests don't mean anything," my father said. "Ninth-class doesn't mean she wasn't ready. You know how hard she worked. Every day. She'll beat her deathself, Simon. She will."

I used my other mitten to cover my eyes.

"It's okay," my father said. He squatted down and drew me to him. "She was ready."

"But she wasn't," I cried. "She wasn't, she wasn't."

The rest of the cult came to where we were standing, bringing the Elder Puck.

The school bus driver said, "Simon, do you want to lead us?"

"He's never seen it done before," my father said.

But I said that I would.

So my father took my hand, the school bus driver my other. Then all of us walked beyond the school bus, beyond the billowing smoke of the minivan, trudging through snowdrifts out onto the frozen shallows of the lake—the Elder Puck never singing, just muttering to himself, clutching Owen Puck's hightops, his fingers tangled up with the laces—where we lay in our circle, and I sang the hymn the others had taught me, first alone, and then with my father, and then with everybody who had come for Kayley's sending, all of us singing out into the silence, chanting a hymn of luck to her, a hymn of ruin against whomever she now was facing. And as we did, I took all of the love and the hurt and the sadness for Kayley that I was feeling, and I killed it then and there. I knew my deathself could use that love against me. It would use any weakness, and I would yield it no advantage.

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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