

Perfunctory Title: The Prudent Alchemist

A land is considered by its borders: A forest, a cliff, a valley, a river, grooves that give way to smoothness; earth's beauty marks. However, the flatlands cannot be considered in this way. Extending onto infinity or perhaps only a hint beyond what the eye can see – the Western wheatgrass growing uniform and uninterrupted over its graded lands worked by human feet, cattle, horses, and plows; its only distinction from the setting or rising sun cutting distant on the horizon – they can only be considered by assumption, and so belief is formed by assuming this or that consideration.

A plantation owner oversaw the cultivation of a piece of the flatlands two generations ago. A generation ago the workers left the land – some on foot, some with horses – and crossed through the flatlands and beyond – noting distinction and corroborating belief – walking right up to the river that cut through it. They found work in the big cities and their children now live where they died.

Three of the plantation owner's children employed themselves into the enterprises of their time and followed the workers into the cities. The oldest lives on his allotment and sat alone at the reading of his father's will which distributed the land in four large chunks; one per child. He made his first million excavating the land and found ancient things – whose eternal value disseminated into the dust which swirled and then settled at the force of the hands that separated them – filling spaces in the breathing world for a hefty sum. The other three sold their chunks of land to a property developer who textured the land with large machines which picked up the dirt from the once-flatlands and distributed it into mounds and holes filled with water. Fish were planted and then sprouted birds, snakes, and foxes – gathering to the energy the men had endowed upon them.

Today, the beneficiaries of that plantation owners' cultivations pour poison onto ant-mounds – disrupting the pristine gardens and lawns on their land bounded by picket fences and concrete driveways into three-thousand and seventy-two lots of clean decisive division: That's Mary's, that's Joe's, that's the Patel's, the Chinese people's, the black family's, the gay couple's. The first son's unsold land is enclosed by wire fencing through which if you drive far enough north outside of town, you can see the cows, horses, and the rusted metal of his first excavations. Beyond that usually you just take a plane and fly right over it.

Sunlight darkens curbsides where parked cars glisten and heat up. A young boy – dressed in slacks and a white shirt under a tie and half-suit, his skin dark, his black hair growing out from a recent trim – and a woman – young, wearing a garment of hard brown twined material loose on her shoulders and billowing from her waist and down to her feet, her skin as dark as the boy's, her hair matted thick and dark-brown around her shoulders and down the length of her arms – stand on the empty driveway – the Parent's Place. Their journey drew them further and further south – across the Mississippi and into this new land – all of their blood left in the dirt. The smoldering fires put out by the rain and cold (the watchful keepers) and the ashes dispersed through the winds – sea to shining sea. Whatever gold they were promised was left with their blood and their only possessions in the world were what they could carry.

Inside, The Other Kids waited in the yawning of a long Summer day. John laid upside-down with his feet in the air, leaning his back against the cushion of the couch – blood rushing into his small head. From time to time a clear string of saliva traveled from the back of his throat to the tip of his nose and he would wipe it on the back of his hand– feeling the cool and glistening wetness. Like that he looked at his watch and made adjustment to its and his orientation before realizing it was somewhere in the late afternoon. He was formulating some idea for the night. How many successful ones had he had with The Other Kids by now? He was pulling himself up in the ranks, but did he really care about that? He turned to see two of The Other Kids silent and focused on precise button combinations and timings which would bring victory... He looked at the flipped images on the TV screen and then back at the two kids. “I’ve got an idea,” he said. The two kids grunted and he pulled his upper body towards his feet and finagled his way – twisting his body, he swung his legs over one kid’s head and dangled them over the floor – to an upright human position.

- Spaghetti

Night falls nuclear – unbidden by the powerful sun – which shrinks impossibly out of sight as the Princes of Darkness sweep through the town distributing substances in aluminum cans with the label *Yeshistura*. They were old friends. Nothing to be afraid of the parents thought; *Yeshistura*, an innocuous juice of tunnel dwelling China-men. The father had even bought a six-pack once, entering an unfamiliar store and into the exchange a nervous wreck – off of the safety of the high-speed highway which rises imperially over the quilted sprawl – slowing into the feeder, stoplights, and parking spots of a distinct square complete with pagoda roofing and an offering statue (underneath which laid plastic-wrapped food and the store’s first dollar)– tempered only by the thought, “Why not, its for the kids after all”. It has since adapted over time to the local community’s palettes and can be found without difficulty in the supermarket where the parents shop regularly.

Immigrants to this place and new to dreaming, the parents began their first ones with the discarded dreams of veterans who have since left them – already realized – to the newcomers (a welcoming gift perhaps). Old dreams perhaps, but they held confidence in it or at least they made it feel that way. They bought jeans, sedans, dogs, tennis rackets, golf clubs, held membership cards, shopped for groceries in ecofriendly bags, exchanged niceties with old dreamers lost deep within the comfort of it, and began to adopt the history of it into present day – into schools, jobs, and social gatherings they filled out the spaces previously emptied by those who up and left – made whole again. The dream was now theirs and they intended to keep it. But twenty-some-odd-years into it, it became restless and extended its reach – infiltrating newer ones and absorbing pieces of them into its own – crudely stitching on the aberrations. With it, the kids were in a predicament of never-ending consideration – traversing the stitching into unknown realms.

Smrithi Namboothiri (the second kid) sat on her bed clipping newfound before and after testimonial images of patients who had lost up to three-hundred pounds with *LipoLASER*. The idea began when she saw the ad - a thick cardboard paper leaflet of innocent size, tree-green bordering the zoomed in fat-bellies and prime-cut appendages. As always she assured herself that something would come out of the goop. In any case she cataloged them in her journals

piled high next to a night-stand filled with project ideas, phenomena analyses, lyrics, doodles (sharp-edged cuts in distinct shapes across the page), word-associations, impressions, imprints, dark depressions of three-dimensionalized pen ink, patterns swirling around the metal coils in free association, all lodged into the folds of old unreliable memories cataloged but documentable and retrievable with good luck – hitting the right page in the right way.

Her black un-put-up hair dropped to her thin crossed legs which formed a deep V-shape in the soft mattress as she leaned in closer to her work. It was nothing more than child-like wonder – the best artists after all she reminded herself – Reanimating the Surface, hmmm, or Jumping Over the Gap. In the beginning of the summer, she had begun a collage from magazine advertisements which was drying on the kitchen table and would end in the *Yeshistura* logo; a mess of curving lines, the dark frame of a bird with no beak or a man with wings. Most of these summer nights you would find her putting together the collage after the day's work of collecting new artifacts, but tonight she was waiting...

Divya(the first kid) spoke to her mother on the phone in the hallway. Smrithi leaned on the wall next to her, and Arun (the third kid) stood by the table playing the bouncy spiral chord like a guitar string. "We're making pasta tonight...Yeah, I won't burn anything...Can Madelyn...She's not...It's fine... No, Madelyn Thomas...yeah." Divya hung up and made a noise, pushing her tongue against the backside of her front teeth.

...she moved into the kitchen, took the collage off the table – passing Divya and John, through the hallway and into her room to the right of the front door. She looked at an empty can on her nightstand. Where did that come from? A memory of taste came to her mouth bitter-sweet – ahh that's the stuff. She could not quite place its imprinting, its initial breach into that netting in her brain, but by then she was already familiar with the feeling (from her parents, her brother and sister, a bright or rainy day) and had begun an internal effort against it. But for now she began to rock and sway like a gyroscope in place – moving and feeling it – pushing blood around her head and knocking things around. She caught onto something and began working again.

Arun moved next – meandering without time he filled the open spaces of the hallway – tracing wall to wall with his small body. He walked into the kitchen and cleared the table of discarded ads and cutup ribbons of colored paper. He had been indoctrinated into the garbage-collector's guild by none other than its glorious ring-leader John. John who? He lived in this house, but also in that one – bouncing around laws and gravity without consequence. It was all very confusing to young Arun, but when John spoke about garbage it became gold – the glossy pages measured in carats by their thickness...

Divya followed Arun into the kitchen. She took a sharp right passed the refrigerator and stood between the counter jutting out of the wall and the granite island. From one of the drawers below the stove she produced heat-proof mittens and moved a pot of boiling meat sauce off of the stove. She took the mittens off, turned around, and clutched the counter behind her, "You like pasta?" He looked at her and opened his hands to display the strips of paper and glue. She smiled, took a strained pot of pasta, poured it into the pot of meat sauce, mixed it around, and placed the bowl in the center of the table. Her laptop laid next to an open book on the short-end of the table – her work for the summer.

... He took his treasures through the hallway, passed Smrithi's room, swung around the banister and up the stairs, took a right at the top of the flight of stairs and walked into a hallway

with two rooms, his on the left, John's on the right. He walked into his room and emptied his pockets of the ribbons and balled up pages. He flattened a page out on his black wooden desk (well more like on the dust, paper bits, paperclips, loose change, and old treasures that covered most of it) which sat opposite to the foot of his bed. It had a large black and white picture of the Davies Family. Daniel Davies stood proudly in the center of the white porch with his wife at his side and his four children below. The article was titled **THE FOUNDERS OF FORTUNE STARTED FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS**. He took the clipping, found a pin lying on his desk and put it up on the wall among his other prizes.

He looked through a large window crossed with a lowercase t – his TV. Of course he hasn't told anyone about it yet. He knew it was abnormal, but certainly not impossible. He remembered walking through a large electronic store with TVs all lined up against the wall, their electrostatic windows displaying the world through True-Color High-Definition displays. With the TVs all turning into windows, was it really so unbelievable that his window would turn into the TV...

She closed her book and laptop and walked through the hallway, left at the phone, right to her door. She heard a deep thud upstairs – Arun's gypsum-concrete free floor – a metal drop – Smriti's wireframe trash bin. She walked to her desk – old hardwood shining polished and clear of debris save for a loose page titled *Novel Idea*. She put her laptop down and to the left she placed her book. She looked up at Rukmini Devi wearing a (perhaps unintentional) sringrara expression – curling her lips upward, pupils to the left and off-center, fanning her painted hand under her chin – and smiled. Whatever lay hidden there was for her to know – puritanical as she was, surely no one would doubt her intention.

...He looked out across the developing land, he could see straight through the weak wooden structures of would-be homes – sometimes he would walk his dog looking past the brick and mortar in his own neighborhood, right to the wood of their making. It held him there. Each one had a terrible power over him. He would go into private fits – shaking, sweating, a draining from his finger-tips – symptoms of a ghost-allergy, the houses the allergens – a wafting smell of carcass and rot into his dreams, but day was little relief with the reflections the sun put out from the large lake housing something unknowable but certainly wrong. Where did it all go? Back then the clear lake held no fear, but its refractions of sunlight were an unearthly peace. Maybe there were graves here or shamans who had curses. Worse yet would be a legend of cowboys and Indians (which he played with John among stacks of old National Geographic's in the garage – John's treasure trove – but could it have been here?). Something was tickling him, some energy that emitted through the noise of A/C vents and the sound of exhaust pipe whispers. He could remember some channels on the window-TV but with them came all of the background – the white noise of it – only it wasn't white noise but fuzzy signal screaming which he mostly would tune out and focus on the program, but now it cut through like a contrary baseline to a melody which lodges itself into the subconscious waiting for its red-curtained debut – the spotlight lighting an empty space presently. The memory of it was worse because he knew his shows would come back on, and he wondered if he would be able to ignore it anymore.

A woman appeared on the street in leather trim. She stared right through the window – an actress on one of his window-TV shows. But now she stood there – clear signal, no white noise – glowing beneath a light-sensitive lamp which flickered on as sunlight faded away.

The doorbell rang. Arun stood halfway down the steps and Smrithi poked her head out of her room. Divya opened the door. The actress stood, smiling, holding a pack of *Yeshistura*. Her eyes were pools of black which stared with an intensity accented by a sharp long nose that directed their movement. Her hair was black, braided tightly, and dropped to the small of her back. Her complexion was of coffee with a bit of cream. Her outfit seemed like a modern take on The Western Cowgirl: little boots made of some grainy, hard gray material with a zipper on their side; synthetic leather jacket trimmed with synthetic leather tassels which covered a frilly white shirt that enclosed around her neck in a V-pattern; fresh jeans with swirling patterns all the way down the side and across the back-pockets. She even had a little hat on which she took off and did a bow – hat on her heart – as she presented the drinks to Divya. “Hello Madelyn,” Divya said smiling and taking the drinks. She moved parallel to the door, arm outstretched, palm out, and showed the guest onto the white tiled floor of the entrance. “Well hello,” said Madelyn, now inside, unzipping her boots and pulling them off. She looked up standing in her socks at Arun. He walked downstairs and swung around the banister towards the kitchen. Smrithi opened the door wide and looked at Madelyn. Madelyn smiled and said, “Hello Smrithi, how are you holding up?” Smrithi turned back into her room and shut the door.

The actress looked back at Divya and asked, “The parents?” Divya responded, “Not home.” “Well then we should go.” “We should eat dinner first.” “Okay then.” Divya knocked on Smrithi’s door. “Time for dinner.”

Arun sat at the long end of the rectangular table. His eyes following Madelyn to where she sat – right across from him. Smrithi walked in with her brow furrowed as she looked at the back of Madelyn’s head. She walked to her right and took her seat on the short end of the table. Divya got four cans of *Yeshistura*, gave them each one, and sat across from Smrithi. The parents came in to the kids’ hellos. From the fridge they pulled plastic containers of curry, matta rice, and upperi, piled them into ceramic plates, warmed them in the microwave, and ate with their hands standing over the kids. The kids filled Styrofoam plates with spaghetti and ate twirling it with white plastic forks.

Divya asked, “So, what are you doing down South?” Madelyn was shoveling a large spiral of spaghetti into her mouth and said, “Wrrell, *gulp* corporate has me on assignment. Apparently they found some brownish goop spurting up from the ground where that rich rancher ... uhhh Jimmy Davies right? Where he lives. I think he had some people digging around. They call it brownie mix. I’ve got to go make sure we can make brownies with it.” Smrithi let out a short “ha”. Madelyn turned to look at her still smiling and said, “Well that’s nice. Finally I made you laugh.” Smrithi’s smile faded, “Isn’t that something?”

John introduced the idea to The Other Kids and was applauded then dismissed since his weak arms could not lift the large barrels of piss-poor wine which fueled delinquency in an unwritten exchange where workers worked in the day and the delinquents kindly waited for the night and its gifts: emptied parking lots, transgressive road signs and lights, pissing in the grass, throwing light bulbs against brick walls. John was not too concerned by the exclusion and went home to his treasures.

- Extraction

It was morning in the household and the parents were moving quickly – pouring coffee into insulated travel mugs and grabbing breakfast bars. Divya stood in the threshold between the hallway and the kitchen speaking to her mother. The father called out from the front door, and her mother waved goodbye as they stepped out into the foggy dusk of the day which hung outside of the doorway soliciting entrance. Their figures shaded white – submerged in the pixels of dew reflecting the morning light – as they walked down to the driveway, shrunk into the doors of the car, and drove away.

The woman and the young boy holding onto her leg stood with a hammer and nail and unseen in the haze struck the bark of the tree in the backyard and left a treasure hung to it.

Divya closed the door, poured cereal and milk into a bowl and sat to read and eat in the quiet before the rest of the house awoke. Smrithi walked into the kitchen and greeted the morning and Divya before looking on the counter for the day's sale pages which would stimulate her work in the hours between day and night. Her face brightened when she saw the catalog she had ordered containing odd technologies of an alternative future in which tasks were distributed among distinct objects for reading, writing, music, communication, games, computation, video, recording, scanning, distribution – all devices perfectly tailored for their singular purposes. Smrithi looked up from her catalog as Madelyn walked into the kitchen and read off the music device's description.

"The Music Wonder™ consists of analog knobs in the center of a small box with a convex curvature filled with small speaker holes for unmatched sound quality. On the bottom of the uniquely adapted device, a 32-pin connector connects albums off cartridges of uncompressed hi-fi quality sound files and the device stores them in its memory (over 10,000 songs). For playback, enjoy the unbelievable sound of the scientifically curved speakers or push the grooved edged to retrieve the built in ear buds uniquely engineered to mold to the wearer's ear."

Madelyn yawned and remembered an idea, "A path is determined by discounting alternatives. Each alternative branching to different paths of different possibilities, and each path branching to another infinite alternatives. Each decision we make destroys an infinite of infinite number of alternatives. With the ability to only pursue one path, how could we ever know if we've made the right decision?" Divya looked up from her reading and said, "The pathways are not far off from each other. Although its difficult to cut through the forest, once you do begin to realize its pretty easy to move between them, you then have the freedom to decide which one is right." Madelyn asked, "But what if there is a hungry bear roaming the forest?" Divya responded, "While the bear rips apart one person, the rest can make it to the pathway. A body takes a long time to consume and digest." Madelyn laughed and looked in the cabinet for a cereal bar. Smrithi, absorbed by the catalog, ignored them and still flipping through the pages took it into her room. Arun appeared some time later and dodged around her and behind Divya slipping through the door to the backyard. Madelyn told Divya she had to go to the plantation to look at the brownie mix. Divya said it wasn't a plantation anymore and that stuff was not brownie mix.

She stepped out through the front door and into a day which had brightened considerably since the parents left. All the other cars had mostly vacated the curbsides and the road seemed unnaturally wide without them there. She took a right and walked through the front lawn – unfenced, but instead housed two large oak trees that appeared like sentries guarding the home – foregrounding a garden of blooming flowers which welcomed those willing to relegate themselves before the arbiters – and opened the gate into the backyard. Arun held a long stick which had been stripped of its branches and leaves and with each movement, which stopped just short of the tree, tensed excitedly. She moved closer. A thing was stuck to the tree, the skin on its head had been precisely stripped away. She walked closer and saw Arun poke the figure with deliberation – observing the movements of the body at each prodding. He looked up briefly as she moved to the space directly to his right and continued prodding with purpose. She said, “How lucky.” Arun replied still focused on his investigation, “You’re the actress.” She paused for a moment and said, “No, I’m a scientist. I work for the Bellevue Corporation of NYC. Did you see an actress that looked like me?” He turned and looked at her, “No, I saw you in my TV.” An inexplicable expression flashed across her face easily mistakable as transitional to the relaxed-muscle smile with which she said, “Okay then, I’m the actress. What’s my program?” “Well, you do a dance in a headdress.” Her smile faded. “Your show hasn’t been on in awhile.” She nodded to the thing on the tree. Arun said, “A gift from the director. The station’s logo.” It had wide wings into which two nails wrapped it around the bark, but it had no beak and oddly had two openings opposite its head when birds categorically had only one.

“Well, that was a nice gift wasn’t it? It must be nice to have as good a sister as me.”

“You’re my sister?”

“I’m as good as one.”

“Did you nail that thing to the tree?”

“No, but I’m no actress. I’m an employee of Mr. Jimmy Davies Jr. The owner of the ranching lands to the north and I’ve been sent here to pick you up so you can look at the brownie mix.”

Arun sat in the car, a two-door coupe which smelled of something damp that permeated into and out of the cloth backs of the seats. Around the rearview window hung an object of tiny mirrors plastered onto a three-dimensional hexagonal structure which captured Arun’s face in its entirety quite a number of times. It shook as the car moved and on its periphery the images changed in step with the passing of spaces through time and light as the car moved out of the neighborhood and onto the highway. He looked out at large department store strips strewn lengthwise across parking lots and highways – like The Louvre cutup into sizes somewhere between grand and efficient. He felt a stirring in his pants. His mind conjuring up escapes. From what? It felt like the houses again, or maybe it was Madelyn sitting there. The old shows came flooding back into his memory superimposing themselves on her. He remembered her in that Western where all the Cowgirls sang to a fiddle:

*Oh! the day is warm and the air is fine
The boys are off to the dark coal mines
Black they’ll be when they come home
But wash and clean and be as good as old*

*(Response) Wash and clean and be as good as old!
Oh! My poor old boy's in the dark coal mine
I wonder, I wonder what there he'll find?
Maybe a light that shines bright white
So he can work all through the night
(Response) So he can work all through the night!
Oh! The road we took without no end
All we have is a song to spend
But the boys will bring us back some hope
A rainbow road which leads to gold
(Response) a rainbow road which leads to gold!*

Odd to see her there with her dark skin against the white porch in a frilled dress and apron of plantation wives. How had she landed that role? He watched her put her elbow against the pane and her head in her hand ... She thought about the quasi-experimentation gap – limiting factors, confounding variables, a Difference in Differences between Arun and what? It was getting out of hand though – the best kept secret of scientists in new fields of study – just make up a new word if you eliminate an element of *proper* experimentation. Well, she would make her stand here. No more fresh ideas from the snot-nosed, fresh-out-of-college boys who thought the rules did not apply – quantum distrust aside, this was getting religious ... There was no mistaking it. That was the actress, but maybe it was better to not bring it up again. She did not seem to appreciate the title.

She glanced at Arun and asked, “Do you like Mr. Davies?”

“I never met him before.”

“No, you never met him, but you admire him. You’ve got all of those pictures of his family. Those articles are all hanging up on your wall.”

“I don’t know him enough to admire him. I’m just interested.”

“He’s employed you before. He thinks you’ve got a keen sense for things. Marketing strategies and such I mean. You were familiar with the label on the *Yeshistura* can before your sisters. John gave you it before it even hit the shelves.”

“John knows Davies?”

“Yes. They are, uh, business partners I suppose.”

Arun looked out. They had driven farther than he had ever been. Now he saw farmhouses and swaths of land which rolled by in chunks separated only by the edges of the window. Sad lots in the foreground of the lands sat like barnacles on a whale that could easily brush up against a rock and scrape them off. He floated off into some brilliance as the sun set and cast pink against the sky sparse of clouds, the shadows of the small houses occupying bigger and bigger chunks of the land – infiltrating and imposing themselves in a temporary power grab against the impossible mass which they were up against. In the darkness they were grand – as their shadows melded into the now unseen land behind them. The foreground with lights turning on in the windows captured Arun and whatever grandeur behind it was lost.

Madelyn yawned and turned on the radio. Out of the speakers came a pop country hit which she, New York girl as she was, listened to with a smile in an irreverence and depth

comparable only to Nietzsche's matter of fact "Well, God *is* dead, so don't bother with the rest of it." She looked at Arun who had dozed off with his arms folded into his armpits – the occasional light from the streetlamps passing through the window and illuminating his long nose and large eyelids beneath which held a power she did not envy.

To go through all of that. Poor little boy should have been interested in video games or gotten better friends. Instead she was taking him straight into a world where he would have to use that god-forsaken gift like so many before him because he could see too deeply into the dirt. That brownie mix was fucking it all up for him, and he would not look away even if she asked him. Not that she did of course. She killed the radio and drove through the night in silence. She saw a neon light and slowed down a little as she tried to breathe through her mouth slowly. One. Two. Easy. That's it.

Arun woke up as the car rolled onto a gravel pathway towards the neon sign which read **DAVIES RANCH** – a wood panel crudely attached to the sign said *pie*. The gate was open and the car rolled under the sign and into the ranch. To the left, the car lit a rusted metal shed which appeared many years out of use. There were bright white lights flooding the darkness directly in front of them underneath which sat an idle backhoe filled with dirt. To the right, with what little light illuminated it, Arun could only see a small wooden shed – perhaps a stable. Beyond that a large mansion stood with two old-looking lanterns illuminating the front door with modern light bulbs in place of oil and matchstick. The car rolled towards the floodlights and stopped short of them at a modern looking structure – dome-shaped and chrome – hidden in darkness save for the light which bled out underneath the metal door. Madelyn stopped the car, opened the vanity mirror to fix her hair and stepped out. Arun sat in his seat and stared at the flooded center. He saw a pool of mud with a large coiled metal rod sticking straight through it. Madelyn ducked her head through her open door and said lets go and Arun unbuckled his seatbelt and opened his door into the cool summer air. He shivered and Madelyn looked back at him. She walked to the trunk, shuffled through a bag and produced a men's jacket of some tightly intertwined weaves which she threw to Arun, and then walked towards the door. Arun put the jacket on as he followed behind her. They walked onto a porch covered by metal rafters and Madelyn hit the metal door with a resounding boom which echoed out into the night and made some dogs out there question their safety. A couple of minutes passed and there was no answer. "Damn," said Madelyn, "Sometimes they go to the house." She sat down on the metal steps and immediately jolted up again, "Fuckin' freezing." Arun stood looking out towards that old metal shed and beyond into the small pieces of highway road which were illuminated. There didn't seem to be anything else in sight, but maybe the light just played him that way. Madelyn banged on the door again and waited a couple of seconds. "Well, you see that?" She pointed at the flooded space. "That's why I'm here. I'm a scientist. I find what value there is in a singular occurrence. Usually the earth produces just dirt. Any other thing it produces is more valuable than that."

BANG-BOOM sounded along the inside of the walls – tracing a sonic pathway circular around the edges of the metal dome. Trung Nguyen mumbled to himself as he walked quickly around the structure. He had just rushed to finish a sterile experiment at the second sound of the door which irked him to his boiling point...

His subject sat on the aluminum table with all mess of wires and catheters – what stuff was foreign and what was its own it couldn't really tell as strange colored liquids moved around

the tubes – some in, some out – one of which put the subject in an unnatural state of tranquility despite the pressurized movements all around. The subject looked up at his doctor as he jerked his head and dripped a test-tube he was holding onto the table. Then the doctor probably said something reasonable but it sounded like “hmmbggan nannan.”

...He stopped in front of the large metal door and pulled the bar which sealed the structure and pulled it open. He stood dark in the doorway as the light from inside the structure fell over Madelyn and Arun’s faces. He shook his head and smiled when he saw Madelyn and welcomed them in with a nod.

“Good you’re here. He,” he said as they walked along the hallway which wrapped around a large rounded structure – a dome-inside-a-dome – dotted with double-doors and held up by square support pillars. “He. I have found a spirit in the substance.” Madelyn looked at him and asked, “Where are the others?” He laughed, “Ha. The others? They’ve all gone to enjoy the company of the mister. He he. The bastards only work for such breaks. He hrm. Well, I’ll tell you I’m just here to find the value of the brownie mix. After that I’m out.” Madelyn laughed, “He means well.” “He hrm. You trust him too much. He’s impractical. I think he believes this land is cursed. That’s why we’re here – as modern-day shamans who can get rid of this spirit. He he. I just want to get the results and I’m gone. Ha ha. Dinner?” Madelyn looked down at her shoes – open-toed heels. What was she thinking? Trung looked down. “He hrm.” Arun saw the man was not laughing but had a grave look on his face. They stopped at a door which read in silver letters inlaid in wood **BREAKROOM**.

Madelyn asked, “A spirit?” “Well. He he. Yes, we’ve been calling it that since it moves. Its in the mix and is messing with the value of it. We want to pull it out. Maybe when its pure its fuel or at least glue. He he.” He looked at Arun – eyes wide beneath round thin spectacles, “Ha. Maybe you can tell what it is even though its all mixed in like that.”

The night got dull in the empty streets and the other kids wanted some fresh experience. So they went far up north into “pie” Ranch and snuck around in the darkness. They heard the voices of foreign men excitedly walking along the gravel pathway towards a large house. The plan? Fuck if they knew. John was the Plan Guy, and now they were free – more danger means more fun! They followed a beaten pathway – off-roading into the night – and came upon a pasture where a lonely cow grazed. They tiptoed up to the pasture where it looked at them in the moonless dark – dead in the eyes –and gave one mighty push. It stupidly fell over.

-Analysis

The subject lay with its eyes half-closed. Its hoof was wrapped in gauze and it barely moved its head in recognition of the stimulus of wafting air and footsteps. “He. Poor girl,” the doctor said as he walked back to the table. He looked at her vitals. All normal. Damn. He thought maybe an irregularity – some signal that the injected spirit was doing anything, but it probably just shat it out or something. Fuckin’ body wasn’t pulling its own weight while the poor doctor was forcing his own out of sleep, food, and the party. Trung smiled weakly and looked at Arun and Madelyn, “Hrm hrm. I’m getting nowhere with this.”

The white lights flush against the ceiling of the room flickered and the cow began to heave long sharp breaths. “Yes, I know. Poor girl. He he. I’m sorry. I’m very sorry.” He pulled out a syringe-full of the cow’s blood, filled a vial, and handed it to Madelyn. “Its in there. They

grazed it up. Ha. Trace amounts all in the soil and grass here.” The light shuddered again and the doctor looked worriedly up at it. He turned to Arun, leaned down, and said, “He ha. You’ve got something we wish we could have you know. You’ve got to use it. Look right into that thing with conviction. Don’t run from it.” Madelyn put her arm in front of Arun, “You don’t have to tell him that. He came here didn’t he? No one made him.” Trung went into a fit, “Ha ha he ha hrm hrm hoo ha hee hee. I suppose so.”

The doctor began removing the catheters from the cow’s veins and arteries one by one in a flowing movement between him and an experienced partner with all of the colors of liquid sloshing around the bags and tubes like a vibrant fiesta dress dancing – its partner glancing over to the woman waiting in the corner ready to ask for her hand next. Arun looked up at Madelyn whose tense grip on his shoulder relaxed as she watched the doctor. He looked back at Trung who stroked his dear cow’s head and mumbled soothingly over it and thought the man laughed because if he didn’t he might cry instead.

Trung worked like that his whole life. Whatever stray connection existed between him and whichever partner was shorted by gates of persistent (cruelly so he thought) logic. In the dark of that laboratory was it his or Madelyn’s physics which began the cascading Jacob’s Ladder of bytes towards such an ill-fitting result? But now that he thought about the incident more and more, he hoped the order would cease once again if only for a moment. It couldn’t only happen once could it? It was so marvelous that he wanted to destroy it just so he could see it made again. Sex and logic mix well if you think about it enough and that he had consigned this to Madelyn many years ago he thought was no fluke.

They heard a sound of metal creaking from outside of the lab and the pit-pat of footsteps on the metal floor followed. “Ah, they’ve returned. He he. Let’s go then.” Arun led them outside of the laboratory and Trung killed the lights, said, “sleep now,” and left the cow in the dark. Behind him Arun heard Madelyn and Trung whisper in hurried tones. Eventually Madelyn capitulated – apologizing for something. The laboratory was ninety degrees around the circle from the front door. They traveled deeper into the place – one-hundred and eighty degrees around from the front – and stopped at a set of doors above which read **AUDITORIUM**. The door was embellished with a carved stone border. The panels along the sides of the doors were mirrored images. Birds soared over men pulling at their hair and scalps as the men struggled and swatted at them. Some successfully pulled whole heads from the men’s bodies and flew straight up to the frieze – the gates of a kind of heaven where birdmen stood guarding the entrance with scepters. The heads that made it through were thrown atop spearheads and were shouting angrily sticking up through the clouds. Trung sucked some saliva back up through his nasal cavity, “Ha he. What kind of eternalism is this?”

Madelyn shrugged and opened the door to the auditorium. She gasped as she entered the vast space which dug deep into the earth and excavated out a marvelous cavern opera house complete with red curtains and royal balconies trimmed in gold. The place could seat at least five-hundred people, but now there sat only ten or so scientists in the front row all talking amongst themselves. She stood at the threshold and looked around. Close your eyes and you can see all the people, a full audience – their whole beings the bouncing echoes of only ten scientists.

Trung pushed past Madelyn and Arun and the voices quieted only for a brief moment as he melded into the white coats on the seats. Madelyn shook her head, grabbed Arun’s hand

and walked down the aisle. As she walked up the stage steps the scientists quieted and stared. She stood at the podium with Arun by her side.

Her voice boomed mic-less, "I believe we have our boy." She paused as the scientists stirred and settled. "But naturally I have concerns about his usage. I will stress that The Method will not be put aside because of him. If anything, we must more diligently practice objective observance – limiting external factors and incongruities with hard data. We will assume nothing on intuition alone." A murmur rose among the scientists. One shouted, "Isn't that why he's here? To find what isn't in the data?" Madelyn looked at him and said, "Nothing is not in the data. However, it may have been overlooked." Trung's laugh came up through the silence and Madelyn continued, "I know you all have seen Mr. Davies tonight. While his words may warm your hearts and fill your heads, he does not understand the finer points of analysis. Few laymen do. I do not believe the spirit exists. I don't think you should ever have called it that in the first place. The Method has never failed to illuminate the simple truths men once believed mystical. There is no Mystery about this "spirit" other than that it is something we do not understand." Arun shifted in his shoes, lifted his head, and looked out at the scientists for the first time. They were all nodding or smiling at Madelyn's words. "We have illuminated the world through careful observation. We have noted the slightest distinction not knowing whether it would come of any use. The Method has destroyed the worst of mankind's ignorance. Let us not forsake it now." Trung stood and clapped vigorously at this and some scientists followed suit – the sound resounded pitifully against the distant walls. "Good. Then we should begin." Madelyn motioned her hand for all of the scientists to exit. They walked out chatting amongst themselves. Their voices trailed out behind them. When the last of it had left the room, Arun turned to Madelyn and said, "This is your stage. Where you danced." Madelyn sighed and said, "Let's get this over with."

They walked one-hundred and eighty degrees around and out of the doors where they had first entered. Arun saw the scientists standing around the pool of dirt. The wind had picked up and the night had cooled considerably. Arun pulled on his coat and leaned in to Madelyn who wore a black pea coat and held him close to her leg. The scientists' coats flapped in the wind, and some turned to look at the pair walking towards the pool – careful and emotionless observers of some phenomenon in the mappings they'd laid out for the universe itself. Someone had turned on the metal spiral and it slowly churned whatever substances had separated over time.

They stood opposite to the scientists. What were they waiting for? Arun looked up at Madelyn, but she looked straight ahead waiting like the rest of them. He began to feel heat rising along his arms and up his cheeks. They wanted him to do something. But what? A scientist from the other end of the pool shouted, "He needs to walk around it. Like, uhhh, three times I think." Madelyn let out a grunt only Arun could hear, but didn't move. A couple of minutes later the scientists began to endorse the idea by shouting, "Why not try it!" "Maybe it will work!" "The Method is broken!"

Madelyn sighed and shrugged, grabbed Arun's hand, and began walking. She glared at the scientists each time they walked to their half of the circle. They all held hands and closed their eyes – each mumbling under their breath. Three times around she stopped right where they had started. She looked into the churning substance and spat. She watched as her saliva melded into the mixture – her own spirit now a part of the equation. The scientists were now

all looking at Arun. They must have expected something. Maybe convulsions – some kind of performance – but all Arun could feel was cold against his fingertips. Should he get down on the floor now? He looked into the mud and saw it all mixing together slowly. He felt a tingle – a flight or fight response which zeroed in towards... A hard-on? He felt sick. Madelyn squeezed his shoulder and he looked up. She smiled at him. “Okay!” She yelled across the moat, and they began walking towards the dome structure. Behind them the scientists followed in silence – defeated.

They walked past the dome and in the blackness Arun saw the outline of a long wooden structure. Behind that was a pathway which led up to the ranch-house whose lights had been shut-off. He wondered what time it was. They walked up to the structure which looked like rows of motel-rooms fashioned For the Outdoorsmen In You. Madelyn led Arun up the wooden steps to Room 118. She opened the door to a room dressed like a cabin. It had a bearskin rug, a fireplace, two twin-sized beds in carved wooden frames, and old portraits of some prairie landscapes hung up on the walls – tall brown-green grass and red sunsets – oil on canvas. She laughed looking into the room and then turned to Arun and said still smiling, “Time for bed I guess.”

The other kids had wandered around the ranch after the cow-tipping incident and happened upon the horses stable. One of them, a blonde girl who kept her hair in a ponytail, thought it might be clever to ride a horse and so she broke into the stable and saddled up. She sat on the horse and yelled “hyeah” and “go girl” and finally “Move you fuckin’ idiot,” before she gave up, got off and smacked the horse on the behind. At command the horse jolted off into the night and through the entrance – into the unforgiving outside world.

In the night Arun awoke to find Madelyn’s impression on the bed sheets. He heard movement in the room next door and walked to the window to see Madelyn walking out of Trung Nguyen’s room and heading towards the ranch-house. He could hear Trung let out a quiet, “He” before he closed his door. Arun went back to bed. Over him stood a blonde woman in wheat-worker’s clothing. She looked kindly at him with brown eyes and dirt on her brow. She carried a dark-skinned baby who suckled her breast as she held his head there in one hand. In the other she held his hand and moved his arm in tune as she sang softly:

*Hail the Son of Man is born
Bring gifts of oil and gold
So the sky the sun and stars will know
Sing praises to heaven’s door
Gloria, oh Gloria the earth again made whole
Gloria, oh Gloria the Son of Man is born*

He fell asleep to the sweetness of the song and awoke the next day to find Madelyn sleeping on top of the sheets of her bed.

They stepped outside into a bright day. Arun realized the amount of land between the structures was much greater than it seemed at night, but there were not many more revealed in the day. He saw the horses stable close to the entrance and across from the old metal shack

between the stable and the scientists' dome was an old well which was covered with netting and had probably not been used for some time. He saw tall grass behind the ranch house which stood at least a five minute walk from where he slept. The light illuminated a land lush and green all about it except for the brownie-mix which had formed a thin hard surface over night. But what really was revealed besides the fact that there were more secrets? What lay hidden behind and inside those three-dimensional structures may have just as well have been in the dark.

"It's another world here." Madelyn said looking around as they walked down the wooden steps towards the dome – a dirt path winded that way, cutting between the dome and the brownie mix. Arun asked, "How am I going to do it today if I couldn't yesterday?" She looked at him and responded, "You know, they just want to see something. They've seen it before. Someone like you who could look into things. Not that it helped any purification process. Anyways, if it doesn't come you're going to have to stay here until it does." Arun considered this as he looked in the distance towards the crusted pool of mud. He had the feeling that some monstrosity would pop out – a great-winged child's fantasy that would give him the answer tied up in a neat bow. He tried to conjure up something, "How am I supposed to feel?" Madelyn responded as they turned in front of the dome, "However you want. They'll find the data they need to back it up."

They walked onto the metallic porch. The door was slightly open and Madelyn pushed it the rest of the way. In the hallway, dead ahead was a door labeled **CONFERENCE ROOM** behind which they heard someone yell, "buy!" and voices cut off mid-sentence, "... and cloudy skie... ring brings petuni ... ohn, how could yo ... ose is a rose is a ...". Madelyn opened it and they walked into a small room with a long rectangular folding table in the center. There was a light fixture above – rounded with bulbs exposed and shining down on the faces of the scientists who all sat on one end of the table. On the other end was a feast of pastries: chocolate-infused croissants, kolaches, donuts: sprinkled, glazed, crème-filled, fruit-filled; banana-nut bread, strawberry toaster strudel, rum cake, cookies: chocolate-chip, snicker-doodle, sugar, oatmeal. All of them were laid out across the table in round plastic trays with their clear Bundt-tops placed to their sides. A thermal carafe sat on the end. "Buy!" and then "ugh," they heard again coming from the end of the table where they had entered. The scientists were engaged in a two-deck card game of Shanghai Rum among six contestants who were sitting in unnatural positions – leaning far back or at an angle contrary to the person behind them as they attempted not to bleed while all sitting in a single row – enemies on all sides. On the other end three men sat and watched a television which hung from the wall in the corner behind the pastries. The program showed a reenactment of the Mahad Satyagraha with the volume muted and replaced by a radio which was emitting frequencies of a voice that read a poem:

*What else do I know?
But the tall grass that grows
In the dirt without question
Until one day turns browns
And I too turn
For the grass
Has left me alone*

They turned from the TV and looked at Arun for a moment and then went back to watching their quiet show. Trung sat in the middle of the table, engaged in neither activity with an empty chair for Mary Magdalene to his right. He drank *Yeshistura* and said good morning. Madelyn sat down, picked up Arun, and plopped him on her lap. "He. This is from home," said Trung as he sipped the drink. "I'd know the taste anywhere. Ha hrm. They stole it from home." "Its just good marketing," Madelyn deflected. "Like shingled pagodas. There's nothing too special about it." Trung said, "He. You're too forgiving. The symbol wasn't created, but discovered on this very ranch many years ago. Hrm. Something they dug up had it engraved into it. A pot I think." One Jessie Sleater from the card game looked over. She was young, had pale skin, and blonde hair – a recent native of the West. "It was created in a California marketing firm. A round-table discussion where I personally sat and witnessed a young boy and young woman draw the symbol and show it to the group. An instant success!" "Ha. Plagiarism. The youth don't know consequence. The Museum got their hands on the pot. He hrm. The symbol is unmistakable. Etched in there. He. The spirit of this place is probably cursing that old rancher with this bacteria." An Errol Winsor from watching the TV turned. He was older with gray hair and a soft nose on top of which sat round glasses and underneath which was a thick moustache connected to a beard that covered half his neck. "The modern-day natives had already bastardized the symbol years before. They have them glowing in neon-lights to attract deep pockets. Then they made some deal with an East Asian I think who brought the drink over. 'Just like mother used to make' was its slogan and they slapped the symbol on. They're making their way off of it – eternal only if you've no other uses for the damn thing." Madelyn said, "In any case, its meaning has been lost and if it was eternal it would have remained with it – throughout time, untouched. Its now simply a can of drink which this town enjoys way too much." She took a can and popped the tab.

The boy and the woman were on foot. The journey through to the morning of Davies' Ranch. They stood next to the abandoned shed and watched as a young boy with brown hair and brown freckles stumbled drunkenly around the horses stable. He fell suspended into the air over something hidden in the hour before light came. "Aagghh," they heard him struggle back onto his feet and stumble along towards the bright floodlights like a fly towards its bright death.

-Research

Smrithi Namboothiri gave a good grunt as she ducked below the lintel of Divya's four-door SUV and Divya looked at her – starting up her vehicle – with playful contempt. "He's probably in John's garage. He gets lost in his Play sometimes." Smrithi looked at the polished hard-wood trim and moved to manipulate her reflection that stretched across it, "Yeah, that's fine." She really did feel okay about it. It was falling into night anyways. Although to see it go down always took much longer than she liked. She preferred opening her blinds after looking at the clock for the weather-man's sunset time which she recorded every morning. Oh well.

Divya's lights came on, sensing and alerting them officially nighttime. She drove with both hands steady on the wheel and left at the stop sign of Millroad Place. That was the corner where Madelyn appeared and disappeared again and again – eventually taking Divya with her in those sneaky summer nights. She felt apprehension driving through there although she never

felt any real danger when they did go – only that of college boys who would half-swoon on top of her with Luded-up smiles at which she would stand up or Madelyn would kind of pull them off. They called it The Meeting Place though she thought of it more as The Exchange: of bodies, minds, time and space; the people always filtering in new, but capturing the essence of the old (maybe because they graduated). She smiled. No, it wasn't so grand. In retrospect it wasn't much more than mood-altering introspection and then confirmation from horny boys who sat-leaned on that off-brown-red carpet – all of them spiking *Yeshitura* with god-knows-what (she kept her nose clean) as they spoke invincibly about death and its after-effects. She remembered the headspace it got her in – the notes all came together at once, layering in triplets over duplets, lower tones droning emotional but unintelligible – a data limit breach which lead to one of two celestial emotions – it leaves you stranded, but fucking certainly brings you full tilt. She wondered if they were *that* clever or just needed to clear out their BIG thoughts – the loosely balled up pages filling up the poorly filed filing cabinet without color-coding or alphabetizing of any kind. But she hadn't been back since Madelyn left for New York after college – about three years now – and tried to remember more of the place that surrounded that carpet. It came to her vaguely: a foyer, then the big party room on the right, and the bathroom...

...*Pisssssssss* She looked up to the door a dude was banging on. "Coum eon baeeb. I'll jusss wanTta see." "ugghh. Fuck off," she groaned. She wasn't in any mood. The seat was cracked and blood had filled it in and crusted over. She thought of escape – diving right in and draining out of the other end – a Slothropian hawk of shit and piss, yes, but still a mighty transformation. One of Madelyn's old pals has this thing. Sexual somewhere in there, but not in anyway that she could engage in. "Ceeom awwwwn. Heeehaaaaaheeehuhuhuhuh!" His laughter rose and a deep thud told her he just slammed his back into the door. She was finished anyways and let him in. He stumbled and turned around.

Joshua Zain stood lanky, tall, and handsome with a smile wide across his gaunt face. He looked like The Reaper coming to sow with his black hoodie over his head – no one but he could like death or a dirty bathroom. He leaned up against the frame and sniffed hard - aaahhhh... "I knew yeou waes drinkin' eit. Yeou jusst ceean't gieet enuuf ... wiell, nlthurr cean I," He sniffed again and took a sip of something in a water bottle, "Yeouu kneow I deont reely gietit. Peis and coum and spaet aere eyall couñectid – feaaces eon a thraeeee-daeeee box. Whaits the feuorth feace?" He switched to his Elvis Presley voice and spread out his hands with whatever sober muscle memory switch turned on his act, "That's me baby!" She shimmied by the door out under his outstretched arm, and on her way out saw a bird carved right into it...

...Divya heard Smrithi, "We're getting him from John's place ... Okay ... Be home soon." Smrithi hung up the phone and looked out as they came upon a small one story house – perfectly symmetrical – with two windows on either side of the front door, its roof shingled with soft brown asphalt. They parked on the curb stepped out into the cool summer evening and walked up the driveway to the garage. The weakest point of contact gave in to the pressure of Divya's balled up fist. *Duhn Duhn* "Yeeeeaaaaaah?" someone yelled behind it. Smrithi yelled back, "Open up John!" The wheels turned the belt which grinded the door slowly ... slowly ... "Where's Arun?" Divya asked John who was now squatting over an opened cardboard box on the floor – a stack of ripped out magazine pages of landscapes next to it – sorting them: mountains, grasslands, snow, sunsets, sunrises, hill-country. "Arun? Haven't seen the boy in too

long,” John turned around – a lighter-skinned boy with short brown hair, a short nose, and a smile which appeared friendly set against his wide greenish eyes.

...Now she looked in the corner at a couple walking to the north – along the large expertly planned lake– sunken below the houses that watched over it like a reverse-panopticon – an idea for her book she noted.

It was dusk when the other kids realized they had left one of their own to fend for himself on “pie” Ranch. Well, he should be able to find his own way back they collectively agreed. The boy they left behind was smoking a cigarette he’d expertly lit with sparks from a flint and stone maybe an hour before sunrise while contemplating his return journey. He walked through the ranch and saw white coats and a young boy walk past a large dome structure and into the dark. Eventually he came upon a great pool of dug up something. Well, he thought he might put out his cigarette fashionably and with finesse he flicked it dead center into the pool. It went out in a hiss and stood firmly in the thick liquid. He smiled. But behold, the magic cigarette was alight again and then the whole pool like the fresh end of a long draught – red and glowing. The kid looked wide-eyed and ran.

The boy and the woman stood in the shade of the dome looking at their luck.

- Burning

This is a short excerpt from the novel I am currently working on. Thank you for taking the time to read through it. Hopefully there will be more to come.