

The Beacon

Arthur Challenger
Oemke

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To you, Dear Reader

THE BEACON

The Letter

Dear Sir or Madym,

In the interest of preserving the past record of discovery and the founding of our rebellion, we present to you our story. Readers have spread this tale alongside fires, and throughout pilgrims' trails, as will you. The actions of the principal players having long been concluded, it is the logic behind the actions and consequences thereof, which we set about to reconcile. Recorded herein, their fates and an interpretation of events based on hearsay and rumour are ready to be divulged to the remnants of this world. This story is the seed from which our rebellion has sprung. Without this narrative, far renowned among the people, our movement would lose a most valuable tool. Although these records are author-less, you may rest assured that we are distinguished authorities; the claims and events portrayed by these records are a most accurate representation of the static history.

As you endeavour to educate the illiterate masses, convince them of the reality of our struggle, and the

worthiness of our cause, feel free to add or subtract details to suit your current audience. It is imperative that some core events and ideas remain the same; for although the narrative might be embellished, the core philosophy, The Beacon, and our perseverance embodied by the principal players must be foremost and uncorrupted.

We trust you to bring our ideals and tenants to the lost generation, those sad individuals scattered amongst our ruined world. A great hardening and gathering of conscious will, times of trouble, taxing juncture, and confrontation hastens towards us. Spread the tale Sir or Madym.

PART I

End of the Preterit

While the world yet lived, a man, his wakefulness unborn, crept through ruins of a forbidden time. Innocent of outcome, he inched toward the moment that possibility returned. "There is no going back now, I've reset the traps, and I'm moving forward, hush!" A pregnant silence, "Keep it down back there, I swore- "

Chunky keening swells to a screech, the intonations of a grinding slide, a gate closing. Franklin, cat suit and pliers, slinks across the scabbed linoleum of the abandoned building, Site 3. There probably is not anything here at all; does that worry him? No, he's been on busted jobs before, jobs where shit's been blown and all they've found after all their hard work of disarming security and bribing guards is an empty box with strange runes up the side. Increasingly these boxes have been showing up but he can't worry about that now, what with this next job to pay off his loans.

"Easy money, get in - get out. 'S like I say." Some crumble-assed bastard's words of wisdom. Probably the score is dope, or antique pennies. In this, eruhm,

whatever this building used to be it is now a morgue. The ghouls have been stashing the dead here before they ship them off or bury them or grind them into cement for the walls. Maybe even cannon shot and G rations. Franklin knows that men taste better than rat, especially those who've been breathed on a great while. A nice sunny day with crows, beetles, other larvae, gently massage and tenderize the meat before it's fit for regurgitation. With wiry arms, Franklin heaves himself into a puckered channel.

He inches forward on his belly. Slithering mutely, his mud-frosted clothes snag on the vents. He slowly raises his back, rotates his left foot, and pushes again, splits a fresh but quiet tear down his trousers. He'd talk to the tailor about this later; maybe even get a new pair of shoes. "Shit." He has to keep moving. If this last box has what it was supposed to, it wouldn't be long before – "Well now, I mustn't get ahead of myself. The job comes first." Slowly, painfully, cold and awkwardly forward he slithers through ceramic ducts. He feels a pull on his right leg. The signal rope. Parker had tied it to Franklin's right leg. It ran down through the duct, over and through some rats, trailing a dark stain on one side, past a leaky gas valve that had sprayed Franklin in the face nearly turning his black hair white, then down, down, along, along and out where it sailed gently through the cold dark air. The rope probably tasted sweet out there, swinging freely, inviting womyn to dry their clothes in the presence of ashen rain.

Parker had been responsible for spending their money back at the last town to bolster their inventory, but obviously Parker preferred clothesline to actual rope.

“Is a lot harder for ‘em to bite through y’know?”

“And a lot easier to strangle rats with.”

Whenever Parker walks his ass over and stops pulling on the rope then he’ll witness firsthand the string of rats upon which to feast. As for Franklin, a man of distinguished taste, rats might be an appetizer, but human meat was what made him drool at Thanksgiving.

Nadine, in her cute knit mittens and pockmarked face tugs again on the line. She nervously eats a cigarette butt, shredding it in her broken knife teeth. She hates night-runs into the pantries. Mostly on the account that she hates doing anything that isn't putting dope into her veins, mouth, nose, or whatever soft tissue she divines will fill that achy need. She is short, short for a femyle and maybe that is why Franklin lets her tag along. He had found his sister, dead, when he was only ten, in the Dream Days, the days before life. Nadine, chomping on burnt leaves and soggy filter. Nadine dirty mildew flower. Nadine awoke the Day After. There was nothing and then a sudden everything, cold and heat, thousands of slow e-volts, a pressure all over. Then a falling as she hit the grill and began exhaling cerulean tar. One moment she was getting some routine surgery on her legs, the next, she was throwing up blue goo into a dark room with a drain. White People staring in at her, waving lights. Franklin brought her out of that. Told her he was her brother or cousin, uncle.

Nadine reluctantly gives one final tug on the line and three short tugs return the communication. Franklin is where he needs to be, wherever that is, and he is just waiting for her. She strains to hear past the splat of grey drops. Nadine cannot see anything and strictly speaking, is not supposed to move.

Franklin flings himself on to his side, takes out an ultilitool, and begins to disassemble a part of the ceramic tunnel. It feels like an air shaft for ventilation of whatever used to be inside Before. No one remembers much of what happened Before, but as it was later recorded and eventually the Canon rebuilt,

society was again successful. The First, the inaugural generation of bio-engineered probes, discovered texts in a place consisting of broken towers, clocks, and immense bridges like lines of coke crisscrossing mucky streams. Naturally, this was before anyone knew how to read and the books were at first burnt and smoked. After the horrible trauma of waking to find the world unlike anything in your dreams, labs filled with things to smoke. Thus, Smoking became the first tradecraft, smoking to forget, smoking to kill, smoking to heal, smoking to see, and smoking to smoke. The Trades that followed were similar: Drinking, Feeding, Making, and in time, Reading. It was that way for as long as Franklin could remember. His “School,” as he referred to the hangers-on and children that did odd jobs with him, were all too young, or so he thought. Nadine referred to him as “nostalgic:” life wasn’t like it was in the dreams anymore. Neither were dreams like those dreams that used to be. All perceptions had shifted blue, but Franklin, a Reader, was hoping this next cache would hold what he needed. He was searching for clues, any answer that could tell him about how the world used to be and what had happened.

When Old Merv had first told him about this pantry, he had hardly believed his ears. “What do you mean Merv? That there’s just a whole shelf of books, stacks of books in this here building? How do you know?” Old Merv’s lips curled around a long exhaust pipe with some sort of spigot fitted crudely to one end. Franklin had scavenged a bottle of green pills, ever the currency in which he was loathe to trade Merv, what he could easily trade Nadine, or gift her. Old Merv exhaled a blue plume as he gleefully fingered

the pills. Franklin was shooting his wad; the Dreamtime pills were hard to come by, yet Old Merv had a knowing way. The old city lived through him. Maybe his gaping sooty pores absorbed the memories of the Builders or his ears the howls of imprisoned ghouls in the Ways beneath. “Librax for information.” If the score was adequate, Franklin thought he might come out on top. He hoped the old Smoker hadn’t deceived him.

“In answer to your queries, young man eighter, I ‘eard it fr’ a man down in the Airzone, we was sweepin’ the filters and he says to me, I say to him,” A puff of blue and black stripped haze issued leisurely from sooty nostrils, “What’s this in this pantry then? Useless guns? I’ve more metal than I know what t’ doe wit’. I’m no garbage collector, I’m a smoker see, and ifn’ it cannae be smoked then I don’t take no part. The man tells me, settle down and epsplains that tai’nt no ordinary pantry but it be filled with what might haps be books. As good as gold, no one knows about these books, them that haven’t been burned or read afore. I just knows says he to me. An’ I say to you, I just knows it too Frankie, there be unspoilt books. An’ just remember me to read us a story, I used t’ have stories in dreams, but they long gone. You know I’m sayin’?”

The Pantry itself was one of those sideways horizon scrapers, part of the old rich section, with fake plants and broken water pipes all throughout. Like a can used for target practice, all its peaches run out and been picked up by the Feeders. If you came across old food, the Feeders could tell if it was safe to eat or not. Franklin thought of bringing one along, but if the School drew too much attention- let’s just say, Franklin wanted to play this one safe. Skeletons with

their guts hanging out, desk intestines, globs of paper fused to veins of wire, miles of cable, and vitreous fluid of the long burned dead, a glacial afterbirth of still things sliding onto the husks of cars on the streets. There was movement amongst the debris. Sheltered under a flagging banner of one of the rich builders a girl chaws a mouthful of plants. Her grungy hair is short and greying. Thumb-sucked fraying gloves hold limply onto a line. She shuffles from foot to foot in a decaying puddle watching the street for movement.

*We dream, we're born, we live, we read, feed, smoke,
make, and drink*

*Some remain dreaming, never to be born.
Those who live read, feed, smoke and drink
Readers know the word*

*Feeders know the food
Smokers see and Drinkers sing
Makers do and so we must all do our part
If we don't want our dream world to fall
The Builders rose to such a height
That strong winds blew and put an end to their might
Never shall we defy the sky but live on land until we
die*

Nadine hums the verses quietly to herself thumbing the lifeline all the while, waiting. Parker claims Nadine owes him one and abandons her in order to relieve himself. With a greasy smile, he slinks off behind a corner and leaves Nadine two soggy cigarettes that she grinds to paste.

Cramping sore arms lower Franklin bodily into the unknown space around him. The tang of mildew is a welcome change in air quality. His hands slip on the rim of the vent, legs freewheel in the air (if he had had a tail, it would be swishing back and forth looking for balance). Dust blows up around him: spider wire tangles his feet and face. Its ethereal itch offers him a dream of grass. In it, he helps a red haired womyn, keeps her safe with the help of friends. In a field, they meet an angel with no feet, and the womyn is happy. He has no feet because when Franklin presses on his shoes there's nothing inside. Rising, Franklin begins to grope about his person. His hands find the rope, tight against his foot, threatening to pull him back up into the ceramics. He cuts the rope and begins to shuffle forward, stirring up a penumbra of disturbed history that eddies in his wake.

Petrified wooden columns rise to the ceiling; some broken or toppled at incongruous angles. Unhinged trees spill their secrets into the dusty miasma. Tiny crunching of some borer beetles, grinnt grinnt-ing as they bury themselves in aged pulp nourish the organic ambiance. Wooden pallets stacked with effigies of robed figures, some boys and some girls, entirely bewitching and beautiful populate the space. Franklin stands one up, a girl. The effigy is hard as stone and the colour faded, but the pale beauty that meets his eye steals from him a great hollowness. Staring at this tranquil, faerie womyn, he begins to weep softly, ash and dust rolling down into sooty puddles. His eyes burn but he cannot break her gaze. She looks at him. "Me! She's looking at me!" It burns deep within his core that she will never speak, nor he learn her name. He feels saved having found her, this mute queen of beauty, platinum tresses, milky white skin and pale pink lips, like the best dream he had ever had.

A girl on a bus, sitting across from him. When she rose and was leaving- turned and said, "Nice shirt." The vision became her, a seizure of rememory - present images supplanting and corrupting the dream of the girl on a bus. Franklin feels he will rediscover dreaming, he doesn't know how, only that this figure of a womyn, his dream bride, will help and guide him. He begins to wash her, damps his breathing rag with sweat, tears, and precious drops from his water-skin. Scrubbing. Leisurely, a courtship between hand and womyn, with cloth as chaperone. As more time wipes from her body, inch by damp inch, Franklin begins to salivate. Her creamy skin so soft and sweet with light perspiration. The nape of her neck tender and yielding against his yellow teeth. His hand holds the small of

her back and finds warmth in the small curve. He trembles at the thought of her ancient unstained blood filling his mouth when he bites into her. Soothing and heating his parched throat. "You were once flesh, I'll bring you back. I promise," he whispers to the ivory maiden frozen in two dimensions.

His labours concluded, he begins to examine the stack of imprisoned people, their flat personages inviting exploration. One by one, he props them up, pausing now and again, staging a circle around the first, his immortal love. There is a man with long white hair, a severe look and a cane. *He's arrogant*. Next to him stands a boy of similar hue, wearing a suit, not a robe, the man and boy share the same malevolent gaze. Another girl there is also, with auburn hair, knowing eyes, pointing a stick and daring action. Two boys and an old man join their fellow immortals in the circle. One of red hair, broad shouldered and sneering, the other a tangle of black, round spectacles and a grim look of determination. The imposing personages Franklin sets slightly out of the circle. Finally the old man, in long voluminous robes and a strange cap is propped up, *Their father?* Having assembled and reoriented the frozen individuals Franklin moves past the first pallet and towards a wooden crate.

Taking a spike from his equipage, he pries at the lid and well-rusted hinges. Each lever action induces a silence-destroying crack that fills the hall and rattles the rafters. Things come alive up there, rats, spiders, unknowable bulbous hoary uneatables. With a shudder of effort, a board flies loose, splinters, cutting Franklin's clothes and lodging wood deep in his arm. With feverish perseverance, he continues pursuing the

mystery from Before. He wrenches and cranks, forsakes his spike and rips at the wood with ungloved hands. Wood tears at him, his blackened fingernails gush as he pulls and mangles the lid. He, unconscious of a growing cry; throat hoarse with a sustained yell, ignores particle upon particle in his quest. Heaving and exhausted, he chucks the remains of the inconsequential lid aside - perfect, matte pictures and faces, rectangular frames repeated, stare up at him. The strange box is not significant but the profit to be had inside. It is the spectacled boy, or rather, a representation of him. His hands gained purchase upon one of the objects, a book, and he lifts it from the chest, feels the letters on the cover. These must spell out name of the boy, the immortal. These must be a record of his life, the images out of dreams on each cover, creatures, and faces of others not yet found. *Maybe they didn't survive.* Their story was here he was sure of it. These were important people. Their words survived, an artifact of the past, a record of it. The story of Before. He crumples at the waste and retches, heaving dryly and finally- on hands and knees expels yellow grey fluid. His nose stung, he was dizzy. Franklin sat, clutching the book in both arms; his heart beat hard against it. He wants to know her name; he knows he will find out all their names. Maybe they were the fathers and mothers of all the dreamers. It made sense, "Such great lengths to preserve. Such a quantity of records." They are no mean curiosity.

Records Inhabiting Earth

Parker's single hook, dull brass with a barb, wrenches free an unopened can. "O-I-L, oil." A grin fought its way onto Parker's doughy mug. Again, with feeling, "Oil." He rolls the can between his appendages, his right arm ending in a hook; it had been that way since he could remember. With a gentle push, the can rolls through the reeking muck. He picks it up with his six-fingered hand. The sixth finger, a floppy worthless thing named Winky, juts out at a depressing angle between his last knuckle and wrist. Parker staggers to his feet. Looking towards the forbidden sky, he tucks the oil-can into his deep pockets, where it joins spools of wire, mouse bones, needles, grease, four years of lint and whatever other gubbins he keeps in there. Stories overhead, a lanky grey figure slinks and chitters. Parker reels, his torso twists ahead of his slow feet. Parker scrambles in the muck, treads grime and decay, noggin spinning like a globe searching out the ghoul's location. Although his ears perceive the hunter's chittering, he doesn't see it. He begins to moan. On his feet, he retreats towards Nadine. Unbeknownst to him his vocal chords begin to tremble with a mewling, a supplication to mother.

The corner thuds closer as Parker's flabby chest heaves, his claw rakes the air dangerously. Splashing, he turns the corner to find Nadine humming to herself. "Ba-ba-barker!"

"Whuh?" Nadine leers over her shoulder.

Parker stands, Winky outstretched and twitching, “B-barker! Barker!”

Nadine stares past him into the crepuscular gloom. “I don’ sawr shit.”

Parker raises his hook to his lips, “Shhh! Listen!” Yelling at Nadine always makes Parker feel better, she was simple after all; they listen; Parker’s ears thud and throb.

“I cain’t hear nothin’. You sure you din’t sawr a plastic bag or somethin’?” Nadine spits out the pureed remains of her cigarette butts.

“N-n-no, but if it hasn’t followed me yet, won’t be long before a pack of ‘em show up.” He fondles the oil-can in his pocket. “Is Frankie there yet?”

Nadine chews the inside of her cheek, she needs something to gnash, some high. “Gusso. We need good work.”

“Y-yea-yeah.” Nadine was new to Franklin’s School, and as such was not present for the first job that Parker and Franklin had pulled together. It had been a beautiful event, beautiful but hollow. “I hope it isn’t another Yellow-Pages.”

The Yellow-Pages event had been one complete fuck up as far as profit goes. Some long forgotten Feeder had told them about some breadbox filled with books. The Feeder had been there gathering cans a month prior and had described a room, filled top to bottom with yellow books. Franklin said they were called

Yellow Pages; they were records of the people who lived Before. They were divided by clans, the Anderson clan, the Goldberg clan, the Johnson clan, the Smith clan. Some clans only had one member, like the Zywiek clan. Their records had been preserved, the person who had lived in the ruin, Before, must have been a Reader, charged with keeping the records safe. The discovery had the unfortunate result of a rise in Parker and Franklin's popularity; the Litigators tasked the duo with the distribution the Yellow Pages to every town they came across.

Ultimately, Parker could take no more endless delivery and as Franklin slept, he stacked the volumes in a great heap and set fire to them. The blaze was enormous; and, as the funeral pyre spread the clans' ashes up to the sky, a great warmth filled Parker. Franklin woke choking, burning ash raining down, the clans' records aflame in front of him. Parker grinned at him, "I guess they must 'a done it when we's were sleepin'." That's when Parker lost his hand. Franklin tackled him. As they struggled, they rolled into the burning pile books fell upon them. They choked, acrid blue smoke climbing in through their noses, ears, and mouths, seeking and scorching soft tissue. Franklin crawled away from the fire while Parker struggled to free his trapped hand. He screamed, lips splitting as blood sizzled, and eyebrows roasted to join the clans.

Franklin pulled him out and nursed him back to health. They traded what remained of the Yellow Pages, a few glossy ads, to an industrious Maker for Parker's new hand. After that, Franklin began his reading lessons and things got a little better, until the day that Franklin came back with Nadine.

The clothesline thrashes across the silence of Parker's reverie, stealing Nadine's attention as well. She pulls hard on the line twice, and drops it. She and Parker circle the Pantry until they come to a jumble of cars through which they had previously cleared a path. They bound through the unoccupied conveyances; a shut hatch halts their progress. Ragged breathing fills the air as Nadine flashes her knives; Parker returns her smile with a determined scowl. A skull busting shock vibrates the hatch as it swings outward on ancient hinges. There, in the tube's opening brandishing a fire axe is Franklin.

Nadine and Parker examine the figure before them. He stoops in the tube, cat suit torn, with one arm wrapped in wet rags. White greasy mane drips sweat, he beckons them in. "I don't quite know what we've scored, but it's huge." The news does not sound good. "Very many books, and more." He leads them down the tunnel, axe raised in anticipation of rats. "There are clothes, some sort of long overcoats, oh and I didn't forget about you Nadine." He spins gracefully like an oleaginous door, "There's also some of that paint thinner and spray cans!" Nadine beams back appreciatively, if there were cleaning supplies there's probably a first aid kit nearby. Every well stocked Pantry holds similar delicacies. Mayhaps the Builders had also been Smokers? Hell, maybe she'll find some nicotine or, at the very least, an ashtray with old butts to chew. The tunnel ends in a wall of shorn metal, curving dangerously inward like the teeth of some steel sphincter. Franklin steps gingerly over the opening onto the dusty floor, saunters towards the figures a moment then halts. Behind him, Parker and Nadine stand like well-dosed Smokers on some new drug.

The room - no, room was too small a word - a word from the Dream floats out of reach, walls climb from the floor to close out the sky, the horizon a wall and everywhere great columns of boxes. Heaps of clothes, clean black clothes, colourful packages, books, sticks, a cornucopia of unknown shit, like some rainbow eating giant had sprayed plasticized

diarrhea all over the Pantry.

Parker shoves Nadine aside, a blubbing blur intent on the assemblage of sticks and clothes, innumerable small plastics. Her head swims with crushing pain, a twisted blossom of nerves constricts and swells; her feet begin to move forward. She wants to resist, to cry out and stop, the large room sloshes through her watery grey eyes. Destiny swallows her inertia; an inescapable tractor beam has been activated between her soul and the numbing material of the supply closet. She falls to her knees, quaking hands bound with potential. Nadine twists and pulls at the familiar blue tin container, fragile with rust. The lid between her and nauseating ambrosia. Unscrews the cap, squeals of rhapsodic glee, of holy reverence, she cups hands and begins to breathe, really breathe. The fresh tang of turpentine elevates her among the Builders, high as the forbidden sky, or higher. She bounces along the roof like an astronaut piercing virgin clouds.

A scarlet and gold turban bobs among the undefined loot. Winky twitches madly as Parker's hand grips and massages the treasure. Small piles of classification begin to spring up around him, an orderly spiral of ancient relics. His lecherous mind sexes the objects according to an esoteric system of his own diseased mind. On the right are "boys" and on the left are "girls." The boys include phallic objects, the wooden sticks, brooms, metal tipped feathers; the girls include jewelry, square things, vacuous frightening things, clothes, dolls, and things in wrappers. He wants to name them, he wants to know their names, some of them have letters but he cannot make sense of their arrangement. He yelps in desperation, "Frankie! Franklin!"

"What, Parker?!" Franklin shouts. His words hammer the cave, dust motes fall like soldiers. He stands reddish book in hand. Parker, ever the dejected, remains quiet. He thinks stupid thoughts and curses his inadequacy. The memory of fire in his right hand. "Well, Parker?!" Franklin kisses the

cheek of the platinum haired maiden and makes his way toward Parker.

“I-I-I was wondering if you could, y’know, if you could read something for me. Cuz I wanna know what these things are, y’know?” Parker was really pushing it, he trembles, Winky limp.

Franklin bent his knees. His less mangled hand reaches for Parker. “So do I Parker.” He clasps Parker’s shoulder and squeezes the scars underneath. Parker’s eyes well. He used to be the strong one. “Let’s take a look.” Franklin scoops up a purple box and turns it over. “Shifty Taker’s All Flavour Beads.” He bounces the box in his palm, “I guess these are beads. But they don’t look like the kind that we’re used to. I wouldn’t eat them until we can figure out if they’re safe. We’ll either have to see a Feeder or,” a rare white smile, a flash of sharpened canines, he dangles the book as a taunt, “read about them.”

“What’s that? Who’s he?” Parker’s having a bold day. His hand sneaks into pocket and thumbs the oil-can.

“I’m not sure yet, but I’ve been entertaining some theories. I’ll let you know when I do. I need some time to *read*.” Franklin stands and stalks arrogantly back to the strangers. Parker relishes not the way he heard that, “*read*,” a grave and unbearable sound. Parker quivers and recommences his classification; he’ll wait for his answers if he has to, but in the meantime, he has plenty to occupy his idleness. This whatchamacallit might be able to wait, but he has plans for the oil. The other Makers are always willing to make good trades for oil. It has many uses, running generators, keeping light, and fire of course. Some Smokers use it in their concoctions. Maybe he can pay someone to kill Franklin with it – his options are limitless. Parker’s selections had been dwindling as of late, but this treasure might just be a signal of changing prospects. At the least he is thankful for Franklin’s initial lessons, learning to read “oil,” “gasoline,” and making sense out of subway maps had led him to more than one good score. The rest of the written word doesn’t interest Parker, but he likes listening to Franklin read. He

likes listening to the sound of dreams.

Parker has two treasured dreams, in one a womyn, Mother, coos and comforts him before leaving him at a dark building. This is a dream of fear and loneliness, but the moments before she leaves are the happiest memories he possesses. After he awakes, he attacks the White People and asks them what they have done with Mother.

“You have no mother. You have not been born. You are a maker.” The White People dump him on a hillside and he has since stayed away. Crying, sick with hunger and neglect, he wanders into First Town. At the gate, a Reader asks his name.

“Parker. I’m Parker, where’s Mother?” The reader scribbles with a dowel and turns the crank to open the aluminium gate. Trembling, he passes under the guillotine, Winky limp.

The aged Reader hobbles into view. Wrapped in a garbage bag the Reader asks, “What’re you then Parker? A snively Smoker, a grubby Feeder? You aren’t a reader that’s for certain.” The Reader hops closer and prods him with a bloodied stump of plumbing. Parker shoves the old wretch away with two strong hands.

“No! I’m a Maker.” The Reader scrawls another note. Parker’s stomach clenches.

“Oh! Well in that case, welcome to Main Street. Our current maker has been bellyaching about needing an apprentice for at least a month.” The arm of the

Reader points his cudgel toward a primarily petrified cardboard structure, a jutting rectangular thing that leaks smoke. “Her name’s Miya. Just tell her you’re a new Maker and she’ll see to getting you trained up.”

Parker’s stomach grinds, “But what about food?”

“Food? We’re all hungry here. If you can’t be of use, Feeders might make a meal out of you. Move your ass.” The Reader lurches towards the crank and lowers the guillotine.

A feeling like dreaming, ghosts possess Franklin. They cover his anagogic world. The book jacket marked with the image of a boy on a broom in long sleeves and good shoes reaching out for winged salvation. He rides through arches, a horse with a horn prances behind and a large doghouse holds a mutant. Franklin has seen two headed dogs, but never so perfect. Perhaps at the height of civilization, Before, all dogs were as beautiful. A dwarfish brown harpy with over-large eyes clasps paper retreats as if guilty. An old purple man flees from the boy, a lecher or a pervert. Some schemer escapes judgement. The trees. Blessed trees. Franklin has only seen them in the dream, but here they are on the cover of the book. A stage, marked by tent like flaps along the perimeter, frames all. The flaps separate the audience from the spectacle. The audience must be tainted. Franklin wants to speak with the boy, to ask him who the girl is, who they all are. Larry Miller. What does straddling a broom have to do with giants? Larry. “I love you Larry Miller.” Franklin strokes the spine of the book. There’s another name, G.J. of clan Irving. Perhaps G.J. was the official stenographer or record keeper. A Reader tasked with archival duty. The embossed print makes Franklin hard. He needs to find a place to read. Someplace serene. He can read here, but the others, well, they will have to do without him for the coming hours. This book is key. It is clearly no encyclopedia nor dictionary. Those are common and their covers, when they have them, lack any sort of

picture. Merriam of clan Webster is a great owner of dictionaries; it is through him that Franklin has unlocked the secret of every word.

A wakefulness pierces Nadine's dozing like a cold needle, her eyes bleary with the possible futures seen in her woozy prognostications. As if cigarette paper, unfurled on hands and knees she drifts upwards with a feeling of frustrated climax. Her brief head-trip has not produced the results for which she was hoping. It must be potent thinner to resist her invocation of vapormancy. Her most recent splash, she believes, interrupted the leisurely decline she had adopted and prompted Franklin to this most recent action. The whole affair can be attributed to a small capful of acetone she and Merv share beneath 2nd Ave. Merv could live much better than he does, but chose to adopt a family restroom underneath the sand as his home. Earlier, Feeders had tried planting there and the paste-crippled walls were so rich in miasmatic fungus that Merv could scrape for a tarry harvest. The resulting paste isn't as bitter as the phosphorescence that Nadine has found in other post-aquatic locales and has the beneficial effect of rendering the user paralyzed after ingestion. Another reason Nadine is glad she was a Smoker; among your own trade, violence of any sort is forbidden. She and Merv lie unmoving, unblinking, unbreathing for fifteen minutes together on the floor of his "Genesis 'Sylum." With a sound like a muddy vacuum, Nadine gulps air into her lungs, chokes and coughs until she sees stars, "Fuckin' shit Merv."

"Eh?" Merv grins; dark pits in few teeth, a more organic mirror of the sharpened points that fill Nadine's gob. A sooty hand lights the exhaust and Merv begins to puff. Thin blue trail of calm remembrance leak preciously into the air and snag apart on dusty currents.

Nadine recalls, “I need ta buy some Vapor. I gotta bad feeling about where I’m headed. Please Merv, I brought trade.” Merv’s lighter threatens to set his thumb to blistering as he aims a relight.

“Eh? Eyem listnang.” With a triumphant inhalation, he refocuses his hypoplastic irises on Nadine’s mittened hands. “Frankie brin’t me sumin’ nice afore yew come down ‘ere. ‘Ad ‘e some gon’ time.”

“What’ll ya give me for tchwelve blues?” As luck would have it twelve blues is enough to get Nadine a capful of nail polish remover and several dozen cigarette butts which she quickly eats. Merv might not mind smoking his cave dung but the time spent in gathering could be better spent rummaging through the ancient ruins of the Builders.

After her deal with Merv, Nadine seeks out the tool shed of the Makers. It is just after opening so the factories will be loudest but the tool shed will remain undisturbed until something breaks, misfires and someone gets lazy and wants to take five sharpening spoons. With practiced rhythm, Nadine douses her mittens in the nail polish and clasps them over her face like a surprised aunt who has caught herself blaspheming. The fumes: an immediate spike through overused permeability, an invasion of bliss and crystal lucidity rams itself into the expired cells in her brain. Fallen crushes and erasing anxiety and installing a puppet government of "no one cares." Such was the haze that Nadine explores through her wet mittens. The geology of the earth, she invents all utility far from a Kwik Stop. Unknown, it is going home. All scholars went and raised it there. The pantry is full of boxes. A pleasant thwarting of the somnambulist world a treasure of faerie dust and the dewy juice of dreams. What is, she found – as a mangler of thought – a cohesion or a melting or a sloth-paced birth for insanity, the gradual surrender of blind over-shadings

couple with a dreary pursuit through spacious vagaries and ruined occasion.

Franklin, Parker, even Nadine, hasten towards a glorious burnout that promises to bring back the sense of marching time, an accumulation of things instead of an endless parting of unfortunate survivors. There are to be White People too, maybe Nadine can get new parents, and she won't have to follow Franklin around anymore. She'll acquire breathing room to escape though the work shed doors rattle with the sawing, thudding, machinations of the Makers. Their machinations an eerie collection of dissonance that greet each foggy morn like so many clockwork birds, their pipes ascending forbidden tones

Nadine submarine from page
tchwelve

The present whiffs reveal no further details of their errand, but Nadine, doubting the reliability of her memory, begins to tour the pantry. Parker struggles with a tiny bag, his hook caught in one end while his freakish dick scratcher pulls. A blossom of coloured beads springs from the tear into the stiff air, and they hit, clatter like the broken teeth of children. Cocaine marionette, Parker scrambles after the beads. Grasps as they tumble through the dust, their inertia unaltered by their age. Much potential is quickly lost forever. Parker manages to recover a paltry amount of the goodies. He coos over his hand as Nadine approaches head bobbing in curiosity. “Water doughs?”

Clutching the beads, “Ss-S-Some beans. All flavors Frankie said they was.”

“Day safe?” ever-cautious Nadine wonders.

“Dunno.” Parker shakes his head and a slow smile spawns. “Wanna try one?”

Nadine blinks her farseeing eyes, grey in the shade.
Her lips curl. Her knives wink at Parker.
“Shore.” Resolutely, “gimme one that tastes like
luck.”

The slow smile of Parker’s erupts into a scowl. He
claws amongst the beads, dowsing for luck. “It’s this
purple one. That’s luck.” Nadine plucks the purple
bead from Parker. She rolls it around on her mitten,
tests its action.

She pops it into her mouth. Her tongue slides over the
bead, taps it, pokes it against her teeth, into the tender
spots where mint tastes best. Slides along the bumps
and presses it into open sores. The bead becomes a
submarine hemmed in by a razor corral, an opening
appears and the tongue rushes the sub. It’s pinned
between two stained reefs. The passengers inside wail
and beat on the portholes, but the pressure too great
for their vessel’s structural integrity. The depths of
Nadine’s mouth are the death of many a seamen. The
brine punctures through seals, and what starts as small
spray propagates into a gaping tear. The bastion of
lucky flavor leaks out in brief evacuation; the acids
begin to break down the occupants, their purple
jumpsuits not worth a damn in the inhospitable maw.
The Kraken awakes. A large tentacle slaps the waves,
the craft is lost as more, and more waves pound it. The
reef expresses its self violently, grinds the ship to bits.
The survivors climb between the sharp rocky
outcroppings and hold on for dear life - they know not
that their dull, eons long, slumber will result in the
eventual capture and destruction of their lives. Their
prayers go up, guttural hallelujahs, and oaths of dark
gods, Black speech, White speech, Elven, Irish,

prayers sing out as the Muslims intone a dolorous chant until they too glide down, backwards into the pit.

“Whoa, Parker, not bad. You should get more of dem. I’m ‘pressed with you.” She bends like a pornstar, reaching out a femyle hand and patting his lank hair, her lips zoom across space and halt their present course, then back away at one quarter impulse. “Whoa.”

“Y’alright?” Parker thinks the bead he had given Nadine exploded in her mouth, that she might turn to rock or decide to start crying or speaking about his mother. “Y-y-yo-”

“It. Was. OH Parker, I doun’t know how to tell ya’. It’d be easier if we all smoked, then I could share, but.” She stands, maybe even with some perkiness that had heretofore been rarer than a zit on Jesus. “If you were all Smokers then I could tell you, but you’re a Maker and he’s,” gestures towards a loose blanket camp that had apparated among the statues. “A Reader. So we’ll never know what the fuck were dooenn jus’ only the things we are doing. Don’t get me wrong Parker, it was great. Maybe my luck will change. That’d be nice. Find a carton, or some big red horses.” The world is dope, for all, and Nadine has brought it about, she feels that way and mayhap it is. For Nadine it isn’t worth pondering; things will either look up or get extremely volatile.

It is known, that at town meetings, all it takes was one election or one Tradesperson not doing their job, disagreeing, a stubbed toe and no Smoker- and then

like a frozen bottle: An up-spllosion, with mad ladies and loud thundering males beating their chests and the womyn flinging shit from trees and broke branches and snarling at the latest proposal or duty shift. “But this is the pledge that sets us all free! If we sign this then the White People will give us our deaths back and we can move on.” There might be a silence after such a proclamation but for the most part it’s not about to stop what’s going on in all those tiny gorilla brains, as they crash, fuck, and wreck about the hall. All their pots have been pissed in and their womyn are now fighting over the babies they only dreamt about. Some gooey ass shits. But the males stay out, offering a calm indistinguishably loud holler that could be encouragement or a discreet shut up.

Those purple beans, every flavor. Must be more of those. She wonders what other flavors. All Flavor beads. This is it; regardless of what else Franklin thinks is here for them, these beans will change the world. No more chopping down baby trees that the ghouls erect each night. Fear is birth control now, fear that you wake to a floppy and empty womb while a tree somehow sprouts beneath the head of bloody half formed baby, a smaller you - but without skin and webbed hands, holes for ears and dripping green and charry red. Some folks, either by design or accident have the misfortune of being awake while Qall came to visit. They’d pop awake in their mud hut or aluminium tent, whichever dilapidated dogan they happened to nest in, and between their legs, rising out of some icy depth. One clawed hand on the womyn’s thigh, the other scrapes out the child to fill his back sack. Oily hair, barnacled ears, rough cold, scaly things. Sometimes, Qall brings giant butterfly nets

like white bones with filters, wispy bags, even though there are no more giant butterflies. Most of the time, after playing midwife, he retreats into the hollow of the earth, untraceable, like a hologram or divine apparition. Birth control pills were always at a premium.

The book rests upon a stack of others, all the same copy of Larry Miller hardcovers. Franklin's hands grip his knees, his blackened nails like claws against the thin fabric of his cat suit. A low murmuring hum, a repetition of words, curdled syllables, and phonetic charms spin in the dimness of the blanket fort. Various tapestries emblazoned with green and silver, crimson and gold, blue and bronze, and one yellow and black, upon each were mutants, monsters out of dreams. Their presence upon their respective fields lent importance and gravity to the marvellous banners. A Lion? A Snake? A death bird and a strange groundling animal. Their wavy presence aids Franklin's seclusion and withdrawal from his fellows. While they muck about, true to their Trades, Franklin reads. Diving into the words and conjuring a great de-unreality from his most recent find. The words snag and tear at rationality, sundering the pillars of his basic recognition. Phenomenological reasoning caves at the half-comprehended actions, setting, characters, and words of the novel. A layered suggestion begins to seep into Franklin's lenses, what he has formerly perceived as the way things work, the hierarchy of reality, is supplanted. By what he has not an idea, unknown. Chemicals and nerves reweave connections and disintegrate circuits' thought laws.

Why is this happening? What is this? Why me?

Franklin would have very much liked answers to these questions, but in this moment of depressurization, vessels explode to thwart cognizant control. He hums and shakes; the shackles of non-fiction devastated. It is hard to imagine a man whom bases his actions on logic and present realities. It has been a long time since he had dreamt, and those few experiences were shades compared to the veracity of these new books. Larry Miller isn't telling him how to do anything, or how anything works, the reasons behind hydroelectric dams or the expiration dates on food, advertisements for products found only in the waste of the destroyed earth in which he lived. Many words and books he has encountered and from these he drew knowledge, the intelligence to manipulate objects and people based on fact. Here though, he careens towards mental collapse. Do the White People know about these books? A treacherous line of reason, yet they had to know. They told him he was a Reader. A Reader's charge, beyond the song, was to know the word and that behind it were facts, ideas, meaning. Larry Miller utterly defeats meaning. Most puzzling of all to Franklin is a note written in strange hand upon the first page:

Dear Reader,

*You hold in your hands a reminder that even in our world
there exist unique individuals of surprising power.*

Magicians able to change things for the good or bad.

This book is one magician's attempt to change the world.

*If the events chronicled herein lead you to a better place
then it has not been a waste.*

Their preservation and discovery are the gifts I give to you.

The world is in your hands Dear Reader.

Read and Change,

Peter Evendire Mendeh

“Peter Evendire Mendeh.” Lips fumble to articulate this gross accrument of a name. Is he Peter of clan Mendeh, from Evendire? Or Peter Mendeh, formerly Peter Evendire? It’s Possibly a direct message from the Builders to Franklin. The asynchronous communique does nothing to ground Franklin, if anything unHINGING begins with this obtrusive splinter out of time. The implication of which, that the Builders had thought this book important and kept record of a magician who changed the world. Franklin cries out, “Nadine! Nadine I need some drugs! It’s terribly wrong. Wrong! Nadine!”

With augmented luck, Nadine boots her way through jumbled paraphernalia. Her valves crush life into little used limbs. Franklin tears out of the blanket fort, its collapse unnoticed. He arches his back and retches; blue ichor squirts out his nostrils and fountains over his lips. He sags to his knees vomiting into a long ragged hat. Nadine grasps his head in her hands, forces him to look up with a quick jerk. Colourless eyes loll, blue bile remains in his beard. Phlegmy strands drip between them. “I’m. I’m.” He jerks. Holds his mouth closed. Swallows puke. “I’m in rough shape Nadine. I need help.” Sweat breaks out all over his body; he begins to shake violently, thrashes against her and some boxes. He rolls onto the hat, flopping hopelessly in the freshly expelled goo

while Nadine just stares. She backs away slowly and bumps into Parker.

“So he’s dying then? ‘Bout fucking time.” Nadine’s eyes swivel towards Parker, her delicate brow furrows.

He ain’t dying moron. He Trespassed.” The capital of her word hammers against Parker’s ears.

“N-n-no.” Parker, despite his expertise in industry, is extremely superstitious. Trespassing is the only crime that gets you punished by the White People.

Admittedly, no one knows what constitutes as Trespassing, but everyplace in the world has the sign against such activity.

Returning to the Construct can be considered Trespassing, people running from towns have had their heads explode, and Tradesmen yearning to be what they were not or learn a new trade are most regularly punished for Trespassing. The borders of the world are non-permeable and those attempting to cross dealt with. Sometimes it is a seizure, a rough warning to cease and desist, other times. Well, “This isn’t the first time Nadine. You weren’t there to see him get punished, but when he went to collect you...” Franklin’s clamorous wriggles consume Parker’s words as they fall dead on the floor.

Private Property

Whilst touring the streets block by block, Franklin, by himself, becomes increasingly unnerved. A doubt shadows him, trails him through the detritus of the old forsaken city. As he wraiths among the fragments of the Builders he comes across a tiny red plastic casing in an old purse, a disposable skin pocket filled with unmet conditions. He reads the faded label, "Midol." His hand holding the bottle rattles, the percussion of the pills blasts the sand from Franklin's steps.

A quivering serpent of thought, *We need a girl, a Smoker*. In Franklin's mind, he is no mere Reader of books but a transcendent discoverer who will bring dreaming back into the world. To do this he convinces himself that he needs a girl to do it, not just a girl, but a Smoker. Someone to help him and Parker heal after getting into scrapes. Someone to pawn off on old Merv when the going gets rough. A perfect simpleton, a rube, a complete maroon. It is through his manipulation of this girl that he will achieve. Pocketing the Midol, he tramps back to tell Parker his plan for securing them a femyle.

Relaxing on his back, Parker counts ashen faeries as they wisp about the air above his hammock. The faeries are Parker's favourite distraction. He enjoys the leisurely arcs they take and the way he can scatter them with a slight exhalation of hateful breath. A cluster gathers above, a staggering clockwise that descends on weepy eyes. A knock at the door upsets the room's pressure and the scattered spools, washed out prints, and string that decorate the walls threaten to throw themselves to the creaky floor. A voice pronounces doom, "Get up Parker! We're going to get a girl." Reality asserts itself over Parker's pocket dimension, the leaky edges permitting baleful news. "We leave tomorrow, I'm going to go and take out a loan. See you then." Parker gazes past the dust motes up into the rotten aluminium grain of his hovel. The whole idea of getting a girl, only Franklin would be so pompous as to simply accomplish his proclamations. As if stating, well maybe Franklin wasn't that pompous, but still – the reality of the situation is that tomorrow they are going to be at least approaching First Town. The momentum is all wrong. They should be moving forward but instead they retreat towards birth. The vague notion of trespass causes an eye welling tremor of pain to jolt Parker's hook. He wants no part in this proposed adventure. Roaming the earth searching out mats suits him just fine. Gather, make, and repeat. Occasionally trading what he doesn't need for food or other more refined mats- the odd bone, or file – is a pace of life that pleases Parker. He's no spectacular machines nor gadgets to his name but he is adept as any maker at lighters, bombs, and listening devices. He will pretend to be sick tomorrow then Franklin can't make him go. He'll have to go alone and Parker will just stay in bed blowing dust off his

things and pretending to have two hands.

A small bottle of vodka, a coil of coaxial cable that Parker has found suspending a desiccated Barker, a brick, and a pamphlet about water parks – all weigh down Franklin's swollen bindle tied to a petrified pool cue. The distance from 2nd Avenue to the First Town is about a full days trek towards the edge of the prefecture entire. He sets off before the horizons brighten, bothers not to harass Parker into action. At least one person has an idea of which way he travels if he dies or goes missing for longer than two days. The pre-light silhouettes castigate asymmetrically across the collapsed cityscape, entire blocks tossed in the air like some concrete deck of cards only to land slanting and impossibly balanced. Humping across vacant lots was a luxury of unknown time, everything had been occupied Before. The living world a snarl of excess dumped between small gathering places of people. The collection of rooms that is 2nd Avenue is habitable only because the people there are too weary to move any further; whereas First Town marks a reinstatement of civility, a waypoint for regulation. The citizens of First Town are all either prototypes or entrenched elders incapable of change. A dredged junkyard of loss languishes between the two points of lights. There is a path, marked by cairns of ancient masonry splashed with yellow paint, which presents the straightest line. However, there are certain shortcuts familiar to Franklin that lead under earth or down and up swampy berms. During the lightless day, these areas vibrate gently with the contractions of the planet, delusional sojourners like Franklin the only shapes living.

At midday, Franklin catches sight of the hill: adorned with a giant erector - all scaffold and phosphorescent plinths. It is at the base of this urban geologic formation that tessellated pods deliver waking life. Everyone begins life facedown purging blue fluid while the White People sentence them to horrible endurance of situations and occasions. There is no age. Every individual manifests no passage of time except as events, like fires, eviscerated pregnancies, and drug use and the resulting scars or amputations. While on the outside, a person appears a certain height and oldness, growth is unpronounced.

In the fading light, an advancing shape startles Franklin. He continues to walk; eyes track the progress of the shape, straining to discern an origin, a genus. The shape heaves a prodigious burden behind it, moving in fits and starts like some sputtering inchworm. It is a tarp, a flappy blue sheet heaped with somethings. Franklin squints. The flagitious agent of motion reveals itself, a hazardous femyle towing human remains piled in gourmet bacchanal seduction. "Alloo!" The meat steams. "Alloo there! Got trade?"

"I'm a Reader." The entrance into negotiations is a cobbled ritual that establishes early on the goods or services that might be on the table. Franklin trots down the craggy metallic escarpment. The Feeder lowers the corners of the tarp, fetid waves roiling off the assorted torsos, buttocks, legs, and necks.

"Whelp, seeing as how you ain't tackled me, I s'pose we can deal. What's good?" The Feeder thumbs her chin as Franklin withdraws his water park pamphlet.

With trepidation, he presents it.

“It’s a guide to ‘aquatic attractions.’” The Feeder’s eyes narrow. “There are three major parks in the area perfect for family recreation.”

“Yeah? Howzat valuable to me?” She shakes her head and stretches her arms above her head.

“Well you, can, go there and -”

“Lissen,” She stove in his sales pitch. “I aim to move this ‘ear humie meat but if all you got is,” she waves her hand. “that. Then I’m can’t trade you my most. Howzabout a neck?” Franklin restrains his breath.

“I suppose. But. Ahh, It’s got pictures.” Her eyebrows rise. Franklin continues, smiles gently, white teeth and all. “Pictures of children.”

“Hmph. Alright. Two necks.”

“Consider it a deal.” Franklin holds out the pamphlet, the Feeder snatches it up. Franklin swoops down upon the disassembled cadavers and rummages for his fatty prizes.

Franklin slurps at the yellow and white globules clinging to thin muscle, milky sweet tallow coats teeth. A thick suet coats the roof of Franklin’s mouth a clinging memory of the present meats. A knot of gristle by front teeth caught. He grinds this on sharpened molars. He resumes the march. First Town looms ahead like a bejewelled swastika.

Revisiting First Town

The untimely ghosts of Larry Miller, the long-dead boy in the book out of Peter Everndire's collection, coalesce in Franklin's mind. He judges the newly discovered reams of paper with a traipsing of melancholy worlds. The sad tale begins with no parents for the bomb of a baby. There is a recorded vastness of experience ahead for him to become. The Volumes of Larry Miller are a grand chronology of his and others' deeds. The heroes fought for the future that those now living are the product of. The text is hazardous. Larry, soaring about on his Crimbus brooms, a jolly malnourished child-hostage-philosopher. Sad parts and grab-boxes filled with subliminal texts, a full eight volumes of Larry Miller. *Larry Miller and the Witch's Gallstone*, *Larry Miller and the Un-Tucked Conspiracy*, *Larry Miller and the Trespassers of Aeten II*, *Larry Miller and the Faustian Gold Sink*, *Larry Miller and The Ordo Veritas*, *Larry Miller and the Equine Dalliance*, *Larry Miller and the Shackles of Lemuria*, *Larry Miller and the Exsanguinous Glamour*.

Dry dusty urine cakes Franklin's scanties, blue

crystals that need brushing off lest they begin to chafe. A trembling arm digs at his crotch. The cat suit is indeed crusty and his fingers come away blue lavender aroma. There has been a despoiling of thought. Franklin's mind buzzes. He grinds the ghost of the gristle, forlorn. He blinks back an after image of tall Whites, sterile, mechanical and beyond them on a slab, a burning light, the jaggging pain and the Sawzall apprentice. Great chain saw hands rev *Bzzzzrrrtzzzz*. Franklin spits the wand out of his mouth, a knobby thing, and ball bearings in a pipe?

Whispers tickle his buzzing ears. He breathes slowly. Lung cracks rib. Something reeks beside him, a leather and cloth sack with a floppy brim - fishy old bones. Lunch. His last meal. "How long was I out? His pupils join him on the floor. Parker moves to kick the soggy hat away but Franklin, like a prisoner, tucks it to his chest. Apparently the hat has holes. Parker can patch these holes. Parker can mend clothing, make anything. "Parker." Nadine sniffs her mittens. Slow Parker, kneels and cradles Franklin's head. "Did you tell her?" Parker's face quakes, Winky flaps noisily against Franklin's head. "Well good. She would have found out eventually." He pats Parker on the cheek. "Keep calm, I'm not dead yet."

Parker expresses himself, "Huuh?" "Why?" Franklin briefly looks at Nadine and notices her licking something from lips.

"Well I'm obviously not done yet. I've been sent here to read and read is what I shall do. What we've got here is amazing. The last and maybe best chance we have at returning to the dream." Franklin winces, his

rib worrying him. “These books,” motioning to the stacks, “they’re not normal. They’ve got a power that well, I suppose the White People must be afraid of it. This power. Yes. I’m sure.”

“Y’ don’t sound sure ta’ me. Y’ sound ill.” Nadine’s mittens clap as her eyes roam the space of the pantry. “Yur fuct,” gesturing, “in th’ ‘ead.”

“Well thanks for that vote of confidence Sis, But I’m going to pose a theory to you now. Just bear with me.” Franklin rises, boxes as crutches, the two other beings offer no assistance. “The White People don’t want us reading these.”

Nadine and Parker, “Duh.”

“We could get back to the dream, We could sleep with dreams. Dreams. Do you remember dreams? You Nadine?”

Nadine bites her bottom lip then directs her gaze downward. She shakes her head slowly before burying her face in her mittens.

“Tell me you remember dreams – Parker?” Franklin glares, cats eyes iridescent in the lowlight.

“Y-y-yes. I ‘ave one.” He shuffles his feet and begins to stroking Winky apprehensively. “B-b-but I-I don’t want get in trouble-” whispering, “t-t-tresspass.”

“Ohh bub-b-but! Shh.” Franklin puts his finger to Parker’s lips almost smothering him. “Don’t worry. I’ll do the trespassing, you can both just come in when

I've unlocked the doors." Franklin grins, white teeth, sharp. Unwholesome shadows cross his sunken face as a torch flickers.

Again the rafters shake. Knell of ancient ducts, bending and popping. The sky falls. Splinters of the other buildings long to rejoin the earth, the other decomposing cements, and iron.

The First Town held the Oldest people, the ones who witnessed the first collapse of the ruins. A town had been built inside a great structure, the best structure. Round glassless windows, marble floors, plastic plants, scattered papers cooed seductively, and the first began to inhabit. Gradually reports came in that a wild wind was blowing, stirring up dust and even some large rocks. The oldest chose to relocate, higher, deeper into the tower to keep out of the wind. The building, the field dressed hanging corpse, suspended overlong. Long had the insides dried and the skin cut away. Scavengers gnawed the meat away and all that remained were brittle bones. Greying, bleached, angular spaces, in one there was space for a table, open area between two chairs and a lamp- but the table never came. The bones had stood too long, and this new stirring in its upper chest assumed that the Builders equally valued form and function. As the storm resorted the lands, depositing trains, dumpsters, toy cars and parking meters in ironic places, the Oldest clung to their windy tower. At night, the storm rocked them to sleep. Their brief stint in zero gravity disturbed the dreams of many but of their bodies - few were recovered. Harvest before morning.

The sinking sound of overextension cracks across the

roof of the pantry, decay marches on, the natural erosion of the urban blight, Nadine looks. Her stance suggests a leap. A hole opens in Franklin's heart. Winky twitches expectantly.

“Shit.” A boozy wave rolls over Franklin, he swoons, wondrously aware of the static in the air and the impending collapse of the roof. A breezy win for him. “Get the shit!” Inert. The other geneforged probes are inert. The room is inert. Boxes, cardboard cutouts, each ancient mouse and fossilized turd is inert. The sum total of work getting done is a negative and Franklin's heart quails. “Get the shit! Get. The. Shit! Move- move- move!” Franklin pirouettes, scoops up the hat, *The Witch's Gallstone*, and falls with the blonde cutout.

The ceiling descends. Recent internal ruptures have created within it a sympathy for the horizon. Blessed line of heaven and earth, the horizon recedes ever forward. The ceiling weeps violent flakes of rust, each unique. They cascade down and slice into the ground. Just cold enough for some accumulated inches. The flakes cling at angles to one another, fractals appear as their cacophonous geometry propagates, spreading a metal blanket over *Larry Miller* and his three biggest fans. A reddish crumbling man in an elven cap shows up to celebrate his favorite season. Gloriously unique stars that he's cut swirl around him, a razor wind. A glimpse of Nadine through the snow, she's leaking in an attempt to create an angel in the drifts. She'll need new mittens but that bothers her not and Jack Rust is happy. His paintings begin to peel from the walls, thinning until discreet artsy pinpoints of light, like stars, shine through. The constellations urge another

moo from the ceiling and one corner gets a little too excited. It slips, the wall beneath it accordions like a crushed throat.

First Town, blessed hole and home of the first born. Franklin creeps up to the sheet metal gate. A familiar voice, the advanced Reader. "Who's there?"

"Sir, It's Franklin, sir." The first Reader likes to have his ego stroked now and again. In his love of pomp he's apt to overlook small transgressions.

"Oh ho! Come to slum with your old Reader eh?" The first Reader cranks open the gate. All round First Town are the shed exoskeletons, their alloys implied a dead-fence, a palisade from which one could spot good bugs and bad bugs.

"I'm merely passing through, sir. I'd love to stay the night, but I'll be on my way soon as you can manage to open the other gate." The first Reader expels a bit of lung butter.

"Suits me just fine." He opens the gate. First Town - echoing stain and first stop of fresh pilgrims born, cursed to the long walk and persistence - reveals itself. Planks over muddy rifts, the messianic web connects various structures. The town hall looms. Its corrugated iron propped against bent metal pillars held by elastics like a training bra. The maker's shack cranks, fumes and blows non-terminal repeating phantasms into the forlorn sky. Shallow evening flutters against Franklin's neck, the inevitable summoning of such twilight delights as Barkers and unholy humans retreat.

Beyond the outer wall: the terminus of Franklin's errand, a hill of singular description. Not an everyday tangle of cars and ancient edifice, nor yet a grassy, green, dirt hill: but an accumulation of organic layer upon organic layer, freeze-dried, blue viscous abortions expelled from a hovering array of cold white light.

A malfunctioning searchlight peers eternally into the stack of corpses, panning for forgotten souls, or lost change; down beneath the bodies perhaps indeed some souls lay trapped, ignorant, immobile, illiterate, and damned. Murmur of a single dissonant buzz accompanies the metallurgic cyclopean tube. The dispenser of forms lullabies to the underlying casualties, failed gene-forged. Franklin descends the packed earth track, his treads ruffling the edges of dry dirt as he walks against the grain. Retracing generations of footsteps, even his own, seems perverse - an internal law or code broken, a dream beats inside him, but it is the feeling of waking oneself - a cheat, a punishing acceptance of reality. Franklin has been free to forget where he was born, free to fabricate his own backstory. This confrontation tears at the person he pretends to be. An admission of his own irreconcilable defect, a mere "another person" no longer unique, everyone he knew and would ever know a product of that vast metallic vagina - squirting out bodies at the White People's behest. At the base of the hill, Franklin's mind begins to break. Concussion, the soft bleeding brain death, triggered remotely from atop the hill surely awaits this backwards motion towards birth, and yet he needs a girl. Any newborn will do. The wind of arrogance

propels him up the hill, heels sink into open mouths. He skull-fucks bodies with his knees as he climbs toward the nest-like apogee.

Unwarned, Parker slumbers in the shelter of an empty, age-hardened, ceramic crate. Gendered bits of treasure gathered to him like a gluttonous softheaded squirrel. Winky twists fretfully, seemingly awake independent of Parker, yet attached to the dumb form and dependent on his heart. This conjoined-twin of a finger strains for any sort of tool, its long nail scrapes the back of Parker's hand. A fretful hook lashes out, strikes the disobedient witch-finger. Winky recoils and sends out a message to Parker's sleeping mind, he jolts into consciousness. Clogged and gritty atmosphere replaces cold void. Twinkling beams bleed through the tangled ruin of a roof, the lean-to of ceiling. Had he a moment to prepare, Parker may have constructed something half so clever for protection. He sustains only minor cuts and bruises, the most grievous wound a large gash on his right hand, torn clear and wet with his blue blood.

Parker stuffs his right hand deep in his pocket. Fingers twiddle the small oddities therein that provide a worrying comfort. Parker is content to watch the shadows on his legs dilate, and the dust faeries dance for his amusement. A lonely life indeed if not for his faerie friends. One of the faeries, grey wings and shimmering legs, ballerinas seductively above his knee. Her gyrations communicating in some apiary fashion, "*Get up.*" Parker pleads with the faerie, begging one more dance, just one more twirl. Hand clammy inside his pocket. The faerie flees up and away from Parker, through a spotlight and out. Parker

emits a blue-balled groan and shifts his position. He folds over himself and topples out of his shelter.

Around Parker, the pantry has become a Technicolour abattoir of hopes. Bottom halves of bodies mark the circle where Franklin has been. Their un-collapsed verticality entrances Parker. His steel boots grate on the descendant architecture of the fallen floor. It is day. Or morning. Smothering bright grey colours the land and Parker is relieved it's no longer night. One of the figures leans toward Parker, slanting at him in a violent faerie-summoning shift. Parker halts, his progress arrested under the gaze of an impotent visage. The old man with robes undimmed by the recent cascade of dust, an ethereal halo surrounds. Parker circles out of this figure's line of sight. Parker turns to digest the destruction done to his own gathered materials. The crate he was hiding in is exposed, sticks, beads, and the countless possibility for improvement, all trapped. He makes up his mind to return and begins sifting through the debris, a regular afternoon. He busies himself with uprighting the crate and filling it with the newfound gubbins. Spontaneously Parker has formed an attachment, partly out of admiration and partly out of a needful hoarding desire, to collect the objects in this set. All these implements and various oddities betoken transmundane occupation. The cataloguing begins again, on this side of the box, males, femyles on the other. He hurls reinforced concrete away from the supposed excretions of other containers, always on the lookout for useful junk, or divine trash. The din of his exertions sounds out of the gaping hole in the pantry, a sonic ruffle in the bereaved buildings.

In a lavender dappled meadow, wavy in the heat of a far off star, jewels glint like wet barbed wire across a saccharine no-man's-land. Wafts of drooly taste produce moisture in Nadine. Memory of previously unknown nectar enlivens the experience. The details of the meadow fade under scrutiny, a tremulous construct that wavers as she becomes aware of feeling flat. A machine gun rattles over the field - beheading flowers, they scream under fire. She reaches out a naked hand, but it's bit as a lowly orange man is cut down.

A blazing salvo of blue-rimmed light fountains from the hovering gimcrack, its cyclopean height shudders with the discharge. Voice, alive, reaches through present space. Inches its way into a bodiless reality.

“You are unwanted here. Continuing in your present course has consequences for your established destiny. Trespassers will be punished. You do not want to leave your friends. Or do you? Are the questions driving you forward, such gnawing curiosities that you would risk mental death for mere glimpses of answers? You are not the first to approach the barren tracts surrounding the cradle. Our record has been established and our reputation well deserved. We, a benevolent chorus, and this, this is your final chance to retreat. Further imposition will not be tolerated. Still, the unloving cradle hums and glows, its seductive aura transfixes you. You're halted. You will cease to manufacture memory if you take one more step. Consequences will irrevocably alter, leaving you to a dysfunctional association amongst your surviving peers. We do not task you beyond your faculties. It is within each of you to survive amongst the pits and

innumerable ashy remains of your predecessors.

Dear Reader, stop. To go further is to commit yourself to a drowsy spiral of an unknowable catalogue. We have gone to great lengths to provide for your happiness. All that you could want is present, behind you in the reality you are attempting to depart. We have seen this behaviour before, in those of greater and lesser capacity than you. Some of those individuals chose to continue their lives, others are beneath you, the ground you wish to tread lined with their unanswered corpses. You have chosen to transgress. You have desires and curiosities that you believe need to be fulfilled. This is not so, but evidence that the enemy, the core discontentment, has not been genetically altered. When in your world have you been satisfied with learning? We have given you everything, a complete experience. The lack you perceive is an illogic outside temporal and tactile reality. We foster hope still, Dear Reader, that you are satisfied with what we have given you. No detail has been overlooked in the world we have imposed on you. You should be grateful for all the time you have spent wandering its descriptions.

We insist you go no further. Beyond this point, we are utterly absolved of responsibility. Ample warning has been given. An eye blasted waste bereft of hope is the destiny we've tailored for those who would trespass."

The gravity of the words press against Franklin's brain case, a vessel pops and his nose runs. His hand comes away, wet and grey in the strange light. A shift occurs, a slippery shoulder sinks beneath his feet. Loss of balance, Franklin tumbles, unbalanced by the

dead. His back tugs towards the bottom of the mound, the dreary black sky above curtains his vision as his stomach lurches in the spontaneous free-fall. Bones fountain into the air as his back hits. He, unable to think, failing body.

She weeps, arms clutch knees and she cries. The White People declare her a Smoker. "What day is it?" she asks the White People.

"It is, as it has always been, today. There is no tomorrow. You are a Smoker." She howls at them in response. A wordless fury before the abrupt silence of her ejection onto the top of the hill.

She sits, sobbing atop the crown, beneath the eldritch lights of the White People and their person factory. She is slick with the goo, some of it runs off in clingy streams into an iron grate. She bawls, and feels the need to smoke. The fresh need to pollute her lungs. The craze, her body's need, to smoke. To feel fire alive in every cell and bring that relaxing. Nadine already pines for the dream. Her fields are gone, only reality remains and reality is all she hates. She begins scavenging. She searches for pockets, finds, then searches pockets. Olive brown lint. Something to smoke. She needs a fire.

Nadine discards her white coat, slick with blue. It crumples sadly atop the pile of pockets. Looking ever forward, she strains, pale pink eyes scanning the slope. A shape below, an inactive heathen, with blood on his face. Far more attractive than the bodiless stack of pockets. Short, almost shorn black hair, a swarthy complexion and a leotard? His dress is repulsive.

“Clothes like, like that, does deserve better than you. Like a dream, bawt I’m up.” Legs and arms, splayed like an aphid, she reticulates toward the bloody face.

Like a bird, she examines the figure, one eye and a titled head as if she is unsure. Is it for my amusement? Can I use him? A gutty cough. Arms drag across the bloody face’s mouth. Ragged breathing resumes, and Nadine freezes, perched above the body, fiending. A humorous groan, like being told a joke you made up, years ago. Franklin sits up, his face smeary with blue blood. Nadine flinches.

She stands, awkwardly, no pants, her diminutive breasts like mosquito bites. Words from the face, “Ahh, My apologies Miss. My deepest, most sincere, apologies.” Franklin rises from the bones and turns his back on Nadine. “I came up here, you know, to pick you up. I’m your brother.”

Her head cocks, eyes squint.

“I ain’t had no. I ain’t had no, no bro-ther ‘efore.”

“Oh yeah? Before when?”

“Today.”

“Well, sis, I’ve been looking all over for you. It’ll be alright. I’m supposed to take care of you.” She sits, still a ways apart, piggyback riding a body of a forty year old. “I’m your brother, and today is your birthday so I brought you a gift.” Franklin rummages through his kit bag. Nadine stands slowly, wondering at the possible smokeables that her newly discovered brother has brought her. Something to burn away her lack.

“You see, I knew I’d find you if I just kept looking. I hadn’t considered how grown up you’d be since the last time I saw you. Back when I swore I wouldn’t leave you alone, unprotected. I bet you hate me for that. But don’t worry now, I’m here and I’ll do my utmost to see you’re taken care of. It’s good to have you back sis.” Nadine cannot remember a brother. Was he a yellow flower? A wheelbarrow?

“I ain’t got a brother.” Her body tenses, readying a defense against whatever trick this man has up his stretchy sleeves. His back bends over his bag; hands dig around in papery debris.

“Sure you do, and it just so happens I’m he. I guess you might not think so just now, as you’ve not heard my name, it’s Franklin. Welcome.” Proffered in his hands are two things, one a grey scratchy looking hoodie, and in the other a canteen that sloshes and thunks. She takes the hoodie and pulls it over her head. The sleeves are a bit too long and cover her hands. She sniffs her fingers through the hoodie.

“If you is my brother.” A dark stare. “Why din’t you bring me an’thing to smoke?” She takes the canteen and opens it onto her mouth, the heavy water flat and stained. A sober moment as the first sips slide down Nadine’s throat.

“I didn’t realize, you see sis, that the world had any shortage of Smokers. But I know a guy, and they say he has the best things to smoke. He’ll see that you’re trained right.” He stands and blurs his blood into his face, breaks up crusty streams until it looks cleaner.

“If you really is my brother,” she hands him back the canteen. “What’s my name then?”

“Sis,” A wolfish smirk of sharp white teeth, “you know your name is Nadine.” He winks. “Now let’s introduce to you Old Merv. Watch your step Sis.”

A bloody great racket of shifting stone, and deep lung-collapsing thumps disturb the great concentration that Franklin has summoned in order to finally fucking read. Parker is probably going ape shit pretending to be some sort of large tool wrecking about the collapsed pantry. Heaving stones and slamming wood. He can be such an arse-face. Or a complete benign little fixer of things. Using an aged chemlight, Franklin has read through the night. From the time of collapse up until the current tantrum that Parker is throwing. Franklin has managed to read *Larry Miller and the Witches Gallstone* just around two and half times. The first time he tore through it, quickly turning the pages before the book disintegrated in his hands. The girl’s name is not in it. Maybe he missed it. So he re-read, going slow, finger on the page, he mouthed each word in the dark, felt every sentence, salivated over every paragraph and stroked each chapter until the abrupt climax. He has begun again, his mind bent on recreating details, holding each scene under the microscope and comparing them with what he remembers of Before and After. This Larry Miller, a mere boy, has catapulted Franklin’s horizons. Larry Miller and his extraordinary adventures in school. Franklin has a school.

It’s strange. Larry Miller spent all his time at school, but what he mostly did was get into trouble. His

chums adored him and teachers ignored him. But he had a great thing. Magic. In all the encyclopedias, in all the dictionaries, in all the lightway maps, never had Franklin hoped to dream of a discovery like this. A hope and ambition burn within Franklin. All the doubt, all the grime, has been flayed from Franklin's mind, picked out. The sticky gelatin that remains is full of only possibility, no fear. It's like dreaming awake. A real dream. A dream that is real. He isn't quite sure what he wants, now that he has found what's been missing. Larry Miller fills a strange void deep within Franklin. He needs to do more reading, but maybe his schoolmates can help, just like Larry's. Parker can be the poor, stupid blue haired boy and Nadine can be the ignorant priss. There is much work to be done and Franklin, dusty, hungry, cut and trembling will do it. He will educate all he can about the wondrous world of Larry Miller. A hook through his navel draws him towards the narrow end of a blinding tunnel. The Beacon compels his guts to its point of origin.

Atoning for educability
through delicate beauty

“You’re s-s-sure you’re not dead?” The trio camps around a small box fire. Franklin reclines against a crate of undamaged books, while Nadine and Parker stare unbelieving, through the flames. “I-I mean, what that books says, it can’t be true- today that stuff isn’t true. ‘Specially if it’s from Before.” Nadine nods agreement. Franklin stretches his lanky arms. Daylight fades.

“Do I need to reread it to you?” Franklin picks up the book. “Listen, ‘Shallazar’s face was gone’ and then Dirk explains how wizard people in pictures *move*.”

“And so, what? You think just cuz that books says that wizards move that these aren’t wizards? Cuz that one lookt like Larry Miller and it don’t move.”

“No, no, no. I’m saying that the magic must have died when, you know, Before. But maybe me finding all this, is well, like magic, like coming back alive again!” Parker snorts, Winky wanders too far up his nose. Nadine facepalms, nibbles a bit, and frays her

mittens.

“Frankie, that’s not. That’s just a book. Y’know, like we find them all the time, they tell you how stuff works, what people used to do. I’m sure it used to be real... you tell ‘im Parker.” Winky mines for gold. “Parker! You old shit head,” a quick slap at his deformed hand. “Tell Franklin magic isn’t real. No wands an’ shit.” Parker hides his hands in his coat, fondles his treasures. “Go on, tellem.”

“Well, Nadine, I-uh-uh. Uh, You know magic is real. It is. I see faeries. Aren’t they magic? When I’m in trouble, I see ‘em, and they make me safe. I see the faeries, they make me safe.” He looks at his crotch. “Magic is real. Maybe magic will help us find mother.” He has no mother, or so they told him. Wasn’t even born. Animals are born, some babies have mothers, before they get taken. Nadine has to know. She is a Smoker and that’s like magic the way Franklin explained it. Feelings, visions, and knowing things. Being a womyn is like magic.

“You see, Parker’s on my side.”

“But-”

“Fine, you don’t want to learn to do magic. Fine Sis . Bawt,” Franklin steeples his long and clever fingers. “I’m sure potions are a lot like drugs.” Nadine quivers at the possibility of creating new drugs. Maybe even if just improving the drugs they have. This is worth knowing. That part seems real enough. Mixing things to make things happen or to make people sick, or better, or feel a certain way.

“Naw, I didn’t say I won’t learn potions. I’ll be the best at those.” Nadine’s distant eyes entertain a wobbly vision of a new super drug to share with Merv.

“And, and, and all them many head dogs and centaurs. I think we’ve all seen things that could be those. The Barkers could be their babies, and the other ones their mommies.” Parker was sure of it. If the animals had mothers that Larry Miller knew, then maybe Larry Miller knew his mother. “I’ll help. I-I- I can learn ‘em.”

“First things first then, we need robes, and wands and books and things.” Parker dashes away to the piles he made earlier that morning. “And cauldrons and bottles for potions, but we can probably use bowls and sinks or other apparatuses you and Merv do your cooking in.”

“And ingredients. Nettles, fangs, plants and animal bits. That could be tricky, getting’ animal bits.” Her brow furrows.

The trio spent the rest of the evening dissecting *Larry Miller* and the utility and change of life that would come with the solving of its mysteries. A gateway to the past and an illuminated future had come to them from ages past, out of the ruin of time: a way to do more than survive, a way to improve. And the most amazing part is they had basically everything they needed to do it. Explorers of the waste went less prepared than the trio. Journeying across the earth, looking for food stores, lootable ruins, based on the

hope that discovery would yield beneficial fruits or artifacts that could be given new purpose. Purpose, an ingredient that has been lacking in the past days as the world's decay persisted. A soul sucking forlorn existence of blindly groping after the Builder's trash. No longer are they be dependent on old pills, old buildings. They found a greater thing.

A languorous clotting of their dreams as bit-by-bit Parker gathers and Franklin reads. Nadine scavenges the perimeter with the last chemlight, searches the dirt and shit outside for material components to use in her brews. Work consumes idleness. Gradually they make a new home out of the pantry, carrying their belongings across the various hazards of uneven earth and packs of barkers. The tapestries secure on the clothesline, strung up like a heathen prayer flags. They heave and shift, clearing a space in the pantry. They rename the space the Grand Hall, for study, and eventually for exercise and practice.

The product of their efforts is a diligent kaleidoscopic. Their minds set on a woeful course, they plan to set reality on fire and resurrect the world of dreams. To dream again really. It happened that first night in small bits.

Parker is in the arms of a womyn, she smells faintly of dung, and animals. Her short coarse hair like a scratchy mat. She is warm and holds him in her arms. She tells him about the stars, and points to the one after which he was named. The star grows near, and enters Parker's house. It sits and has tea that his mother prepared. She chews leaves and tells the star about how kind and clever Parker is. She sends Parker

from home. He departs into the forest. Tall pillars of metal, with gravel paths. Their shade is not gloomy but comforting. It's night now and Parker sees more stars, winking at him. They are all his father. Smiles all. Then he rides on his mother. Clinging to her mane as they traverse paths through the forest and down to a ditch to drink the sweet brown water that flows there. Midday, they picket at a crossroads; Parker leans against the large stomach of his mother as she gently swishes her tail to delight the dust faeries. Parker tells his mother of all his adventures and brave things. Grows sad when he tells her how he lost his hand. She nuzzles him gently and he is amazed to see that he has both hands. He hugs her and cries.

A quiet stone tower rises out of the ground, a patch of grass on an island of lemonade. Bees buzz around, and hum in Nadine's ears. They tickle her cheeks and make her smile in the glow of the strange yellow ball, the sun. She lies prostrate, relaxing on the warm grass, in the shade of the tower. She is in the tower, pristine staircase of cobbled material twirls up the inside. Inside there are several womyn wearing black and white, holding chains and crosses. Each smiles and reads together. Further up the tower is a man in black, he reads from the same book and smiles. At the top of the tower is a deformed soul whose job it is to greet Nadine. Nadine rings the bells from the lowest to the highest. In the joy of that vibration, she forgets her worries.

It's dark. Franklin knows there is something moving. Heart racing, and head throbbing with the sound, he braces himself against the cold wall. He sweats and drips on the floor. He's cold. A shape moves against

the opposite wall. A scrape. A boney something drags against stone. It grows in volume, contests in Franklin's lobes with the pounding of his heart. The cadence is maddening and each beat brings the scraping shape nearer. Horror immobilizes Franklin, he cannot move and he cannot breathe. Scrape. Franklin wails, his voice violently echoes in the torture chamber, a cacophony. Black flecks swim in his eyes, or are they more scraping shapes? He flails at them ineffectually until the room quiets and he seems alone. Silence. No. Just there. He can hear a soft twinkling of laughter, a mocking beyond a door eyes refuse to see.

*All along the tower's walls
A pond sat there stewing
Filled with sweets and sour too
A pond sat there stewing
High upon the tower's walls
A man sat there scheming
Hands for strangling
hands for mangling
Man and Pond along with tower*

Three best friends arrayed in green flowers

Outside a person beats pans, a ringing drill of mangled tunes. The mists of dreams are blown from each slumbering form's mind. It is an aspect of reality, a figure making noise in the ruins outside the pantry. Franklin stretches; he hears the clanging. "Parker." He shakes his friend. "Parker, get up." The slow dawn peels Parkers lids from each other. "There's a clanger." Parker is thrilled at the news.

"A CLANGRR!" Parker is up, he gathers his coat about him. The clanging is getting louder, each tinny smash rockets off the stone ruins creating a valley of noise. Nadine is elsewhere. The duo edge to gain a better spot from which to harass the Clanger. The crashes and rattles are nearer, and there, in the dust of the thoroughfare a man clad in the music of spoons, jangling metal plates, rusty pipes, an assortment of chopped cans, bing-bonging ball bearings in glass jars, crashes two large lids together. Each collision shakes his body and the beat of the crashing-bashing Clanger lifts the hearts of Parker and Franklin. Their dreamtime woes splinter as the music maker meets their eyes. Fully attuned to their presence, he bows low, his tin flamingo shaped helm scrapes against the fallen city. Franklin and Parker step out of their headquarters, sporting hostage grins in the face of booming freedom.

"Ahoy there dust drifers, I done been clanging up here most of the morning. Had thought I was alone. I forty-nine ometh'e clanged louder. You must be slackin'." His voice barreling through a conical shape, overwhelms any rebuttal. "There are sinister things

need chasing away, that rain done invited barkers and others back into our fair...well, here anyhow. Come join me you drifters and I'll forgive your slackin'. Our racket will be glorious!" He leans expectantly from left to right while shuffling the instruments adorning his legs to a quiet brass brushing. "Come, come!"

Franklin turns to Parker. Parker grins and hands him some nails and couple of larger building fragments. Franklin observes that Parker is holding a bulging can as ammunition. Parker smiles wryly.

"Okay Clanger! We're ready for you –" A tool chest of discount sound thuds across the open street, the Clanger is a furious blur of ill timing and messy distortion. The men are stunned by the early start but they recover quickly. With a holler, "Hooaooooohhghh!!" they each begin to hurl their ammunition at the man, small rocks bounce harmlessly away from his armored face and hands, body, legs, arms a fragmented rotor of the most dulcet tones and dissonant percussive jingling louds through the surrounds. Franklin produces fusillades of aged rock and nails, the creaky rebar gums up the dance of the Clanger, the noisome snarl of rebar ridges tangled amongst the plates and spoons. Franklin hoots in triumph the thrill of creating music, such a lucky day, he never guessed to see a Clanger, much less while out doing important things. Franklin turns to regard Parker.

Face sweaty, pulpy ash running down his chin, mouth fist wide as he hurls a can of O-I-L at the pandemonius monk holding service in the street. The can is punctured, on its flight - viscous grey streams

and undulates like a zombie ribbon in the dull grey light, fanning itself across the landscape and all about the Clanger, who embraces the can and begins to thrash himself upon it while Franklin and Parker toss ball bearings and nails at his head. The buildings groan, some maddeningly unbroken windows crash down on metal remains, a shuddering of clapping glass. All three are out in the street, scavenging bits both small and medium sized, bird heads, hammerheads, hammer shafts, coffee cups, and delicate springs. They gather the material for the second verse. The Clanger still crunches the can down with his whole suit of armor. Then again led by Parker, “MY NAME IS PARKER AND MY MOTHER IS A CENTAUR!” He heaves a beaded chain at the Clanger. “WE RODE FOR HOME AND THE NIGHT AND I LOVE HER AND SHE LOVES ME!” His voice was a fever yelling into the day, against the sky and Franklin’s shut ears. Franklin quails and takes a step back, he hands Parker the remaining noisemakers he had gathered. Parker scoops these up and adds them to the barrage of object and memory. “WE RODE IN THE WOODS AND SHE HELD ME AND I LOVE HER. DAD IS DEAD BUT SHE LOVES ME” bricks, metal discs, cubed bits of iron, scored gears; he flings all in the fever of his sermon. Franklin skitters away to get a better look at the Clanger, who must have fallen over under all that junk.

Franklin sees the Clanger, upright and moving. Beneath the shouts of stone and metal, the Clanger jumps and shakes, whips around to redirect from his face to his metal tortoise shell. A great bass crash and thumping boom. As Parker grows in volume and

intensity, the Clanger keeps up, gyrating like a four motor auto horse on a pinwheel. They feed each other. At this moment, the crescendo pops sunk cans out of the ground, and doors long closed rattle open. The earth moves in response to their garbage truck gangbang, steel flowers and soda fountains paste the street. The jubilant noise is a curative, for low fallen souls and has the additional property of keeping critters away.

A tremendous swelling of buzz babble and the chatter of spools of wire bristling across metal plates, thunder with accelerating cogent lumps. Then, the sound of something being undone. A ghoul, perhaps, hollowing out of a hole in the newly dusted nesting materials, silently drags away the layers of noise until the Clanger and Parker lay utterly knackered.

Franklin assesses the situation. Apparently they're both still breathing, although each is prostrate on the ground covered with detritus, some milky white fluid, maybe paint, and the ribbons of oil splatter the two as one long exploded magnetic tape. An aftermath that must be dealt with.

Franklin sidles over to the Clanger, grips him by the metal shoulders and begins dragging him out from underneath the pile. Nadine returns. She extricates Parker from the jumble. Each are chortling. A suppressed belly laugh, the waning of a great joke or orgasm.

"Welp, that one sure had fifty-three something' to celebrate. Bes duel I had in a long time. I-I-I outta reward that therr boy." He shambles to his feet,

spoons, plates, dented and blunted. Parker crawls like a worm over to the Clanger. "On this, most fantabulous of mornings I rise over hills and down valleys urged to fulfill that man's need. And He, I presume" A glance shared. "had a mission and now has some inspiration to do something great. Good on ya boy." He smiles from behind his grated mask, arm outreaching. "Pleased to have met you feller." Parker shakes his hand, tries to let go but the Clanger has it. "And, I may not have much to give to him now, I'm sure that what be do have will have to do until it won't." A bright gleaming stone star is held in the greasy mits of the Clanger. He presses this to Parker. "Now don't you ever go loozing that."

"Oh, oh, oh Sir, don't worry I wont. Can't loose it now. Its important. Help me with mom." Tears wash Parker's face clean as a smile worms its way to the surface. He pockets the star.

"Well young fella. I'll be sure to remember you, but there be miles left of streets left to be clanging down, settin' things right and doing the good work." They all wave a somber goodbye.

The enchanting respite of the Clanger precedes hollow sinking into dead reality. Parker is happy enough, twiddling his star. Nadine is high. She knew the Clanger was going to be there, so she left early to get her fix in peace. Outside a small patch of limescale eats at the building. It is hard, an iridescent leaky abscess of concrete. She sits there, left foot against the wall, a small glass pipe in her mouth. She grinds brittle grey rocks into the bowl, then lips around pipe. She lights flame under the bowl. The grey rocks

smolder while Nadine sucks all the joy out of them into herself. Her eyes grow perceptive and her callused hemorrhages writhe with new life. Her dream is instantly recalled to her, not in its entirety, but she is sure it is her dream. What do you think? What she remembers comes in a song. She supposes she heard it in the dream. She sings it aloud.

*All along the tower's walls
A pond sat there stewing
Filled with sweets and sour's too
A pond sat there stewing
High upon the tower's walls
A man sat there scheming
Hands for strangling hands for mangling
Man and Pond along with tower
Three best friends arrayed in green flowers*

The three last lines bother Nadine. There is an offness that her gooey brain cannot articulate. Perhaps she may be able to later with different friends, a fuller communication with other essences. She is scared now, of a prospective reading or another lesson about Larry Miller and the wonders of his world. They are unreal to Nadine. The book is phony; it should remain buried like the bodies and the stories of the Builders. Second trespass. Franklin lives. He says magic is real and that they will all learn it. Nadine does not want it interfering with her trade. Smoking is who she is, her entire being. If magic tries to overtake that, she will destroy Franklin and all the books. Life is a series of downs and highs. Highs achieved through smoke, pills, and sometimes spirits both supernatural and the jarred kind. To truly engage in life, one must detach oneself from the shackles of perception a freedom

only found when subverting systems of the body. Pain, sight, other senses, other strengths. When these are warped, you begin to know more fully the world around you. Magic does not offer this. It is a trap, a false fog of intoxication that works only on a sleeping mind and does nothing to awaken it. Or so Nadine thinks as she slowly lowers herself to her knees. Slides the pipe into her shoulder bag and begins chewing on a wand she must've just picked up from inside the pantry. She mouths the long spidery thing with a branching nub. It's black with grey veins. The wood tastes old, but it is not painted. She moistens the tip in her mouth, gnaws casually. It has not been painted. It is the wood that must be black with silver streaks.

Wrapped in the warm furs of her numbness, her greater connection with reality, she drags the wand over her bare arms and legs. It slips into frayed holes in her clothes. She scratches some dry skin with the nubby bit, "Yow! Oww!" She drops the wand and rubs where it stabbed her arm, just above her elbow. Or did it bite her? It felt like a quick sting or pinch. Just a flash and then it was gone. She picks up the wand and throws. It hits the ground several feet away and rolls in a long arc. She ignores it. Nadine rubs where she was "Zapped," the only word she has for it. She glances towards the wand. It is still being blown around, rolling, now completing another spiral, and another, arcing towards her. The patterns transfix her as it weaves in the rubble, subtle lines and swirls of smoky undulation. Nadine starts. In her hand is the wand. The black and grey stick which zapped her mere moments ago, has woven its way back to her. She decides not to throw it away; instead, she grasps it

tightly and begins looking for more fungus.

Flopping on the floor like empty tentacles, Parker thumbs his new star. He has looped it with a piece of wire and wears it as a necklace. It's a stone star and Parker likes it. It's red, like arterial spray, or the fetlocks on his mother. Parker cannot wait to show his mother the star. She will be thrilled. Parker is thrilled just thinking about it. Although he does have questions for mother like, "Where do you go when I wake up? How long have you been here? How come you didn't come looking for me?" These questions make Parker sad, but their answers will delight. He's certain that mother has a great story for each answer. Her life as a centaur must be grand compared to that of an illiterate, one handed, simple, Maker. Perhaps he ought to make her something, a gift for when he sees her next. He understands the need for a wand and magical tools in order to work magic. He has plenty of tools, his pockets are full, and he has been careful not to throw them at the jolly Clanger. He must find a wand. He searches out the catalogue. The box holding the wands beckons, flaunts its angles and symmetry. Parker is shocked to see a wand missing from the bundle. No matter, it was not one he had liked the look of. He approaches the box and withdraws the bundle. He spreads the wands out on the ground between his flabby legs; his hook divides them into groups while his mouth nurses on Winky. Seven wands remain. A dubious number and most unlucky.

After several attempts Parker has the wands organized by length and width, the longest on the right, shortest on the left. Wands of varying height are intermixed according to their girth. As he finally has them sorted,

one of the wands seems to stick to his hook. Parker freezes with fear. He drags his claw and the wand follows. Squinting, he lifts his hook, the wand flips; one end touches the hook, dangles like a pendulum. Parker blubbers, the wand dangles. He reaches out with his fingers and the wand falls but briefly before Winky somehow manages to secure it. The tiny finger curls around the wand. Winky feels an unprecedented dexterity. Winky manages to twirl the wand, a very short but thick knotted piece of wood. Parker moves his hook towards it. The wand bends awkwardly, slips from Winky and is held by strange attraction to the hook. Hastily, Parker unscrews his hook, yanks it out of his stump. His eyes well with tears, but he is brave and blinks them back. Franklin is not around, neither is Nadine. Parker hesitantly slides the wand into his stump-hole. It fits smoothly. He screws it in; the knobs are as receptive to the threading as his hook had been. The wand feels warm. He finishes screwing it in, removing his hand. Now it feels cold. Parker gasps. He looks around furtively, then hides his new wand hand in his coat. He feels the leather and wool, the buttons and warmth of his body against the wand. He knows not how, but he can feel through the wand. A dust faerie swims in front of Parker. "Thank you faerie. I always believed." He bows his head and the mote sails into the winking air.

Parker moves off to go grope things, to explore them with his new wooden feeler. Franklin raises his head from between his bony knees. His cat suit needs stitching. The weight of debt is a subtle pressure on Franklin's mind. A future approaches, one that will necessitate the repayment of the loan. What does he, as of just now have to show for it? Some books, a

couple of broken wizards, some food. The short list cheers him like a good fatty neck. Actually, he will probably just sell the cleaning supplies, the clothesline, and all the other supplies. Maybe even the fire axe. His creditors know where he is. Of that, he is certain. They must know. The clanger will have met others, but perhaps his rapturous afternoon will persuade him to silence.

Such are the worries on Franklin's mind as the shade grows cool and the light begins to fade. Parker and Nadine discuss something around a fire at the other end of the pantry, near the entrance tunnel. Franklin would like to join them but his mind still blazes from the revelation of Larry Miller. Actually, he has not been directly thinking on Larry Miller whimsical badass that he was; he has been pondering the source of Larry's magic. From the entire text, all Franklin can glean is that in Larry's world magic simply *is*. Nevertheless, the world is the same isn't it? This is the same world of Larry Miller's, just older, right? Sure. People seem overall less magical, more mundane, and stale, but there are things that cannot be explained. He is proof of that enough, having survived trespassing more than once. A loathsome doubt grips Franklin and seizes his current worries, consigns them to the depths of his mind, only to have a sneaking, umbral fear surface: Could he be dead and all of this a dream? A dream to be forgotten upon waking, perhaps even, not his own dream but that of some other being?

He retches at the thought. Sickly purple bile leaks like a worm in the rain from his lips. He is on his hands and knees; the small purple pool connects to his body via viscous spittle. The floor seems to drink it in,

bubbles of Franklin slide down the string into the floor. He smells rotting flesh a moment before another roiling flush forces its way out his nostrils, burning, and through gaps in clenched teeth. No longer purple but a nice dusky brown, like flayed skin. His stomach clenches once, twice. Franklin is ashamed and crawls forward out of his sick. His right hand brushes against something. A clatter. Through blurry eyes Franklin sees the wands. If magic has gone from the world, what then, can he hope to find in old wood? Less, he imagines, than what he finds in old books. Words speak to him, not things and bits. Parker knows about shit like that. He bundles the sticks and stands. Outside it is dark and motionless like a corpse's stolen breath. The Clanger has pushed back the agents of entropy that stalk the ruined city, a sonic delay that Franklin deems to take advantage. He examines the longest of the wands. Turns it over in his hand. It is pliable and dense. He doesn't know what he expects. Nothing happens. He sets it aside and withdraws another from the bundle; this one has a slight bend and a knobby end that fits his hand nicely. He flicks his wrist. Nothing happens. It is sweltering. Franklin dabs his forehead. There are five remaining. "Just five." He swoons, head light for a moment. Franklin's knees buckle and he sits, a piece of rubble digs into his anus, he shifts, less uncomfortable. He licks his lips and clacks his teeth. He wants what these twigs offer. He yearns with every dream he has never had to wield these to shape things, to ruin lives and crush. Dreams he knows. Dreams. Is this a dream? He rolls the wands between his hands. He selects one; it has a greenish tinge, a strange patina. There is notching as well. He takes a deep breath. He gives his hand a little shake. Nothing. Inhales. He waves the green stick

overhead, as if he is trying to lasso a cloud beast.
Nothing.

Franklin spits. He spits for failure. He spits because his mouth still burns with the haunting idea that this may all be a dream that is not his. He gingerly sets the green wand aside. His right hand is sweaty. He rubs it on his knee. He begins to rock back and forth. Four wands remain. He would love to shatter some fool's brain, to beat the mind out of some animal or thing. To render a being irrelevant and no more, like the stacks of persons he climbed over to acquire Nadine. Would he? Yes. If killing Nadine allowed him the use of a wand, he would do it. He spits again. His eyes flinch in their sockets as he looks to the remaining four wands.

One is barely longer than his middle finger. It is black and straight. Another is a zigzagging white shape, aggressive and crooked. The third wand is ugly, grey and thick, with crude knuckle like bumps, its end is broken. Franklin is transfixed. Was it always like that? Did he break it while he was railing against his unexceptional existence? He grinds his teeth, spits all over like a raving Smoker. The last wand is of medium length with charcoal coloring and a curious bend. To Franklin it appears to have two ends. He cannot decide which end to hold it by. Both ends are rounded and there is no tapering. Each way looks wrong. He hates them all.

'Miya and the beginning

A small fire burns. Parker warms his feet and holds his hands out towards the fire, feels it's warmth through his wand finger. Nadine's eyes have grown dark as she gazes into the fire. Her wand tucked away in her bag with her pipe and lighter. Parker mouths words and occasionally smiles as bits of ash glide on miniature thermals. He giggles and waggles his digits. Shakes his wand hand. He thinks about today, how he never expected, after everything, to have it be such a great one. He knows he'll find mother and thanks to the wand he can feel, actually sense the world in his right hand again. It might not be a lot right now, but it is enough for him. Just having the wand finger has improved his disposition. If he was a disgruntled cripple before he is now an unbearably jolly fuck. No one has noticed yet and he wants to keep it that way. He fears what dark designs Franklin may have. He doesn't feel threatened by Nadine, and at the moment she is, well, they might be sitting by the same fire but her fluttering eyelids and general bearing suggests that she is on an adumbrative vacation. Parker remembers the day Franklin returned with Nadine. He scowls but briefly knowing that things have changed here today,

yesterday and he looks forward to the future. He resolves to no longer persist for the next day, but to begin searching out mother. He has a lead. He knows she is a centaur, and that centaurs live in the woods. He has only to find some woods to find his mother. When he finds her he will make sure she never leaves and tell her he loves her. They will build a house and he will ride his mother through the forest and they will be happy together. Sometimes it will rain and they will instead stay indoors making things. He will make jewelry and clothes for her. She will cook him food.

In First Town Parker stands in a doorway, mute. The womyn before him has her head in a large metal box. Her arms move in small increments and metal chinking comes from the box. Parker cranes his neck, trying to look without moving. She wears an apron of flattened tires, sooty streaks coat her neck and back. Although he isn't sure, Parker doesn't believe this is his mother. "Uhm." The womyn either ignores him or does not hear him. "Th-that guy." The womyn continues working, tweaking, clinking inside the box. "I'm a Maker too." The womyn pries herself out of the box, she is also bald, and she is old like everyone in first town. I'll never be old, Parker thinks. Somehow, he knows this. Perhaps it was in the dream. As long as he can remember, he has always been as he is, never older, nor younger.

The womyn shuffles towards him her tire apron is smeared with grease and her bald head is dark and dirty. Something about her is not right. "Miya." Her voice is croaky, like ratcheting gears. There is a cloying unease about this hut. The walls vibrate and thrum. Actually, all of First Town seems to thrum,

threatening to unmake itself. It has structures, frames and silhouettes, but the people are almost blurry. Is it their age or something else? They're faded. The White People were stark and solid, harsh even. The inhabitants of First Town are burn shadows on desolation's surface. Everyone comes through First Town. Right now Parker is here. Miya points to a barrel next to the door. Parker obediently peers inside. Black slivers float at varying depths, barbed. He looks back to Miya but her head is inside the box. He reaches in. The liquid is cool. He grabs one of the sickle shaped things. The barbs cut his hand and it begins to bleed in the water. He yanks his hand out of the water, blood flows down his arm, drips on the dirt floor. Parker sobs. Unable to release the hook he begins to shake and cries, "P-p-please. I just want my mother."

"You have no mother." From inside the box. "You were not born. No one has a mother." Miya stands with a gloved hand out. "Bring that here. Come. Watch." Sniffling Parker edges next to Miya. She grabs his wrist and forces his hand into the box. It is cold in the box, and one by one, the barbs slide out of Parker's hand. "The heat."

Parker lies awake. The ceiling of Miya's shack grinds passively against the walls, the entire structure a scab on the earth. Miya is hushed in sleep. Her chest barely rises. Parker's nose itches. Something flirts with his nose hairs. He snorts. Dust, vague phosphorescing angles, coruscates before his blinking eyes. A petite maelstrom of particles clouds the space of Miya's workshop. The drifting vortex draws Parker's attention. He cares no longer for the tiredness of limb,

nor the loneliness of the unquiet night. He wanders with the flecks and dubs them faeries. His faeries are all femyle; they have shapely limbs and curvaceous seductive bosoms. Parker is shy amongst them, but their coy drifting delimits his bashfulness. The faeries relax Parker, sweeping fear and anxiety away; he embarks on a euphoric raft, blown about on listless currents. The faeries pet and coo to Parker. Placid zephyr, whisking worry away like a discarded wrapper, a discarded child. Motherless amongst the motherless, yet he clings to the idea that from something he must have sprung. Some hole to have writhed out of. He knows of femyles and males. He's dreamt of them. Their violent sexing a preoccupation of his sleeping mind. Nuts and bolts, washers, screws, knobs, drills. The ambiguity and flexibility of wire a welcome departure from the pegs and holes.

Miya is asleep whilst the dust faeries calm and sooth. In the morning, Parker learns more of Making.

During a cooling break, as Parker breathes the uncramped air of First Town and not the choking smoke of Miya's shack, a voice summons Parker's attention. "Hey big guy." It belongs to a lithe male around Parker's own age. He grins too white of teeth at Parker. "I'm talking to you. It is customary for two to communicate." The man is impatient and somewhat feline. "My name is Franklin, and I'm setting up a school. I'll need someone to help me with my recovery and share the workload. If you've not got any current employment..." This fop is persistent; and while not weak looking, it is obvious he wants Parker for his physical strength. "Are you a Smoker or a Drinker or a what?" Parker is almost determined not

to speak. He nods slowly at some part of Franklin's interrogation. "Fantastic. I've wanted to be friends with a drinker, after all our trades are very similar." A pose. Is he striking a pose? Like some sort of ungraspable flat image. Parker's head hurts trying to think of what he means. "I spread what Was and help keep order while you make everyone happy and handle communication between settlements." Winky, Parker's mutant extra finger, decides to waggle around. Franklin's eyes practically pop out of his head like two frantic birds aiming to gobble a single grey worm. "What the shit's that!?" Franklin's hands cover his mouth, is this mock dread? "It's uuh, it's Winky." He shakes his head. "Don't worry about it. My name's Parker."

In the dim light of the pantry Franklin burns. The wands taunt him from atop a stack of *Larry Miller and the Faustian Gold Sink*. Four yet remain out of all those ever made. What if none of the wands resonate with Franklin? Nonsense. They have to. There would be no story otherwise; magic is unworkable without the focus of wands. Poor Franklin, he's caught on the cusp. Like the first Feeder to try canned peaches, or the first Smoker to smoke, the first womyn to give birth to a doomed child, he must be brave. Around *Larry Miller and the Witch's Gallstone* curls an ingrown Franklin. His face smears the words, eyes exaggerate the text as he pans for instructions. How is he to choose? Although the world is inert without a wizard, Franklin is inert (magically speaking) without a wand. Apparently, Larry Miller just tried them all on until one fit but he had access to a whole pantry of wands, not a mere eight less four.

When a ghoul stalks through ruins, it generally goes for the slowest and weakest prey. Imagine however, that this ghoul, terribly hungry, has to choose beforehand which prey is most vulnerable. If he fails, he will perish. The ghoul chitters amongst halved blocks, crumbled masonry. The toppled accumulation of steel and stone a hill from which, it will flush game onto the open roads. It swoops through conduits and funnels, hounding. A final push to ensnare an unfortunate among the twisted crags of the Builders. Harried through a blasted land, cornered and fierce. Snarls, quick growls, met by the dog-like chortle of the ghoul as it menaces. Back and forth on piqued hinds. Maybe it has a club and swipes at the ghoul. Slurred gibbering accompanied by an afterthought of a lunge. A lunge so blurred and noncommittal that the prey fails to recognize the true life-ending rip across its torso. An accumulation of experiences spill from the body, flop into the streets. The ghoul cackles like a knowing crone as it twists the head off the neck, twirls the skull in its muzzle and peels bone from brain. Memorable dainty.

Franklin grasps the knuckled wand. Hackles itch with an unfamiliar hunger, the urge to commit wizardly acts. He knows no spells, but the wand- there is a thin fibre that connects he to it. Conjoined vein, this wand has inexplicably leached itself to Franklin. A tugging string between the essence of Franklin and the core of the wand. He feels his life running into it and if he were to work his will upon it, a manifestation of that energy would come out the end. He imagines it will be like creating, only every object invested with more than an accumulation of materials and a rearrangement. It is a transference, from him into the

world. Wand as fabricating vampiric birth canal. The cost he does not yet know; what do we lose when we create? He holds the wand betwixt his hands like a sacred shard of the universe's light, apotheosizes this one crude stick as the crucible of his dreams.

Potential energy of all his delusion, this wand. He thinks it is indispensable in returning dreaming to the world. Yet this gnarled caduceus bespeaks of achievement, a shifting and breaking, the sundering of current paradigms. Franklin grips it firmly in his right hand, now his wand hand. He wields it to anonymous purpose, merely enjoying the feeling of it slicing into him and sharing his life without cost. He teeters on threshold of ecstasy, a tantric dam tempered by his ignorance of spells and incantations.

His teeth grit. Seldom used molars grind like mice, effacing each other in the absence of trapped cheese. His feline slackness flees, rigid determination replaced by a forcing of imagination. Through which he intends to draw out the secrets of Larry Miller, boy wizard. This ecumenical text holds he knows, he fervently believes – just as every action of his entire preexistence has been in preparation for this task, orders of magnitude greater than any project or single excursion, the text a bomb to explode all society and meaning, a dissembling of rank and role – the illumination with which Franklin, chooses to spread into every abysmal crevice of this dying earth, and penetrate every rotten mind, to bring dreams and their frivolity of hope back into being. Like the emptiness of every mode of escape practiced by his fellow denizens, dreams are but an illusion until they can be experienced again. Yes, through the dissemination of

dreams all will know the tyranny of hope. Or so Franklin hopes in his first moments as a wizard.

He gathers from a crate one of the black robes with coloured trim, a nice orange and green striping, and crest. He takes his bundle nearer the fire. Ahh, it is the strange winged serpent, his sign. Only one wing is embroidered and the creature apparently possess no other limbs but has a powerful toothy maw. It too is embroidered in the same green and orange. He drapes the robe over himself and is surprised to find it has a hood. He pulls it up over the ears on his cat suit.

Nadine sits around the fire misty eyed. Parker is happy and hopeful, Franklin resolved. Open in his lap is the chronicle of Larry Miller's second year as a student of magic. Each of the three contemplates this: the first of their magical nights. The fire sparks and cracks, melting plastic bubbles smoke thick. Parker adds some shards of a box, he'll sift through the ashes for the nails later, or not. "Can you read?" Parker turns his head to look across the fire at Franklin. His black eyes are sunken pits of hate. "I-I-I wanna hear more Larry Miller."

"Ooh. Yeah, I wanna hear more too." Nadine's hazy words weave their way over to Franklin. "What happens next?" Franklin strokes the book, foreplay. He opens it up and begins to read, his finger traces along the words, absorbing, feeling. As he reads aloud, Nadine finds herself wondering at her inability to foresee Larry Miller. Nowhere in the fumes has she experienced that narrative. While sucking greedily on her pipe she began to see, the moment, the aura around this place, those books, as through muggy

sheath. A clouding of vision her vapormancy was ill equipped to penetrate. So she casts outside the Pantry and, it seems, the world does hinge upon a choice. She has no way to divine what this choice is, but before she can foresee anything else, it has to be made. Uncanny then her previously dreadful prognostication that Franklin would lead them to their doom. Perhaps, reason sloshes, the dread is the unknowable outcome of this choice and the depth of Larry Miller's involvement.

The world of *Larry Miller* intoxicates Nadine. She can no longer abstain from its unknowable wonders. A brilliant magnetism surrounds Larry Miller, the poles of Nadine's thoughts align and she is drawn inexorably towards his fiction. Larry Miller's world, more closely resembles Nadine's dreams than her waking world. She suspects, that perhaps Larry Miller was silenced for his transgressive nature by the Builders. Who, as she understands it, strove for a great utopia in the sky, mastery over the earth and a station above others. Larry Miller seems to fight from a position of noble superiority. A position of prophesy. His struggle interests Nadine least of all. She cares more for the trades taught at the school. Nadine can learn them all if she wants. There are pockets of description, that, when Franklin reads them aloud whisk Nadine into that world. To the past. An experience, less like living, and more like dreaming, words permeate drug addled cells.

She submits, drawn into the woven word. It is peculiar to her that although descriptions are incomplete her mind fills in details. She knows not where they come from, the source material of gaps-

the sensation of filling them a blissful euphoria of completion and elusion.

As the story proceeds, Nadine continues filling holes, creating the faces of Larry and his gang. Their voices. She hears them. Girl rough and bossy, a sonorous rumble, her expletives the rusty screech of metal sheets caught between sky and dirt. Wincing filth vibrating coarsely against the glass of an extinguished lighthouse. Lone sentinel, impotent phallus with its light out. The keeper has died of heart attack. Whales beach themselves at his feet, ships coo and echolocate to avoid troupes of shrimp. The lighthouse keeper's elbow crooks around the switch as the whales flop like empty sausage casing onto the rocks, oil and blubber funfetti for the gulls. Ships mourn passing whales. A grizzled captain turns hard larboard, bars of gold rattle in the cargo hold. A surprise, lurking rocks beneath the sweeps and ominous blue crests. A comingling of matter as teeth of the earth pierce the wooden hull. Hull breached.

“What? That’s it? They just let him get away?” Nadine speaks with a tone. Like someone has stolen fire away from her. Franklin fails to realize and fondles the plot in his mind while Nadine accuses. “Why didn’t he jes’ kill ‘em? Bag of shit.” Franklin squints at Nadine across the haze of smoldering plastics.

“He wanted to be the bigger man. It’s a lesson in humility, knowing one’s limits and empowering the individual to choose for themselves. If he goes around killing everyone and forcing them to do things, then he wouldn’t really be a good guy anymore and they

probably wouldn't write so many books about him." Franklin speaks into the fire and gently rubs the spine of the volume.

"It's shit. I mean, if I'm Larry Miller, right, I just take my wand or whatever and kill him. There, done." She waves her own wand demonstratively. The blunt response unnerves Franklin. Most notably because Nadine has voiced his inner fear. Why doesn't Larry just kill him?

"B-but Nadine. He don't know spells like that. He jus' don't. Y'know?" Parker appears ruffled, his faith in Larry Miller's moral fibre is dubious, a trickling stream of pus at the very best.

"Listen both of you, it was a different time then, Before. Wizards were hunted and had to hide, if they drew too much attention then..." Franklin doesn't know what to say next, he shrugs. Both his fellows nod in agreement. The undefined reason haunts Franklin for mere seconds.

"What about us?" The boys focus on Nadine. "What are we doing? What's our plan?" Franklin scowls, Parker turns to him.

"Y-yeah. What now?" Franklin thinks, cells of his diseased brain conceive a glut of deluded betrayals of palpability. The engine of his designs still untested, he proposes a delay.

"Tomorrow we'll figure out how all this works." He waggles his wand like a floppy scrap. "We'll work from the first book and just *see* what's possible."

Doubt strobes across his mind. “No use trying to do anything else until we figure out what we can and cannot do.” The other two nod. “If we can it’ll be good to get some sleep. Who knows how hard we’ll have to work get our wands working?” Separately each grip their chosen instrument not daring more, lest they should discover before the others the insubstantial futility of their hopes. One more night of dreams will content.

Hellacious conflagration. Droopy stones. Gasping lakes. Bewildering mists and shades of forms howl indignantly. Baseless accusations and absurdities. Naked gathering places. Falling. In the transient moments before dawn, the cooling of the earth manifests as a cover seeking chill, a hallowed time when the body seeks warm body and shelter. In these twinkling hours, reality as we know it is most pliable. The threads of pattern differentiating night from morn and perception from shadow are at their weakest. Franklin awakes. His achromatic eyes suddenly seize upon blurry afterimages of conjured chemicals. He stretches, wakes limbs, and forces fluids.

Wandering away from the others, he gathers three copies of *Witch’s Gallstone* and some robes. They are real. The robes are exactly as those spoken of in the text. Emblems, colours. Their starchy feel enlivens Franklin to the truth of this moment. He is going to learn magic. He is resolute in this. He has his wand, his robe and his book. A thought wishes for paper and something to mark it. He desperately scratches through the boxes. Nothing, then the thought: “Yes.” He moseys over to the closet of fragrant elixirs Nadine was perusing days ago and grabs hold of a

ream of brown paper. Lacking ink, he spies an empty vessel.

Parker is hungry. Not that he needs to eat, but for some unfathomable reason he wants to. He can remember nothing from the dream of why he has feels thus. He ignores it. Franklin is already awake, one of his hands stained blue and gripping his wrist. Oh. “Wh-wh-whay’d you do that?” Parker points with his wand finger. Franklin gives a final squeeze and a stream of blue from beneath his clutch gushes then thins.

“For ink, for our scrolls!” He is having a reaction. Light headed the horizon revolts. He manages not to spill the contents of the vessel, but he collapses against a hunk of masonry and holds his head. Parker watches him. “We need to record. So we know what works and what doesn’t. Like instructions.” Parker nods, this makes sense, instructions. If only they’ll be written in a way that Parker can understand. He supposes that mastering the language of magic will be much more useful than capturing the thoughts conveyed by mere words. That is, the thoughts and ideas of magic having practical application versus the abstract uselessness of words in a collapsed world.

“I think we should use symbols instead of letters.” Franklin regards Parker with bemused curiosity. “That way only us wizards will know what they is.”

“Ahh Parker, I’m glad you’re on board with this. Yes. Excellent idea. Would you mind making us some pens to use?”

“Let’s jes’ use wands. They’re pointy enough.”

“That works for me.” Franklin nods in Nadine’s direction. “Should we wake her?” Addiction grips Nadine. The words of Franklin and Parker pierce the thin plastic wrap of her reprieve. She struggles to recapture the fading essence of her dreams, the substitute realities that visited her in the night. She clutches at the gossamer linkage to unbound possibility.

“Y-y-you do it. She likes you more, you’re her cousin y’know?” She shuts her eyes in crinkly denial against the world. The floor seeping cold is an enemy and hazard to be avoided. She moves not, breathes slowly. Lone digit presses against her shoulder. She feels a bruise bloom beneath the pressure but rigidly holds her eyes shut. Eyeballs convulse behind lids, casting for dreams.

<p>“Nade-ee-ine. Time to wakey uppy. Nade-ee-ine” Franklin grips the bruise. The figure beneath his hand twists. The shoulder sinks, and the head pivots. Nadine’s teeth are an inch deep in Franklin’s hand before his brain registers pain. Howl. The glass bites deep, but wondrously no blood. Franklin faints, head bangs against the forsaken shell of the pantry.</p>	<p>Something peels Nadine out of the dream. A pressure in her mind reminds her that she inhabits a body, the casing of Nadine. The reality of her imagination melts away under this insistent pain and the accompanying reminder. In the last few seconds, hours, days, time units, she clamps down on the oppressive force. Digs her teeth into the intruder. A</p>
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	<p>howl, outburst of bass and Nadine’s eyes reopen to reveal the world as it is.</p> <p>Franklin slumps awkwardly, his neck at an odd angle. Parker gasps for comprehension, lips plopping open and close.</p>
<p>There is a hand in Nadine’s mouth. She tongues it lazily. Franklin’s hand. She releases. “For fucksake.” In these early hours, she appears half formed her face droopy. Parker regards her as a stain, a human joke. “What? I was somewhere else, and then he fuckin’ wakes me up. Shiteater.” Parker decides not to comment and picks up the vessel that Franklin carried. It’s a small cylinder with a locking lid. It’s filled with blue blood, the ink. “Whatchya got there?” Parker clutches the ink close. Nadine leers at Parker. “What’s with you? Get over it. Hear me? Get. Over. It.” Parker nods dumbly. Nadine shuffles over to Franklin, moving her body against the forces of earth is a taxing reality she can hardly wait to escape from. She gently pets him behind the ears of his cat suit. “Wake up. Parker’s peeing his pants again.”</p>	

“Am not!” Franklin groans to consciousness. He smiles up at Nadine.

“I’m sorry Nadine, but I had to wake you up. We’re going to start,” He waves his arms as if chasing away bothersome insects, “do-ing ma-gic!” She pats him on the head.

“Good. I’m bored.” Nadine aches for this knowledge. Although still high on the experience of dreaming and

conjunction of details, events, people, she wants to learn more. She's willing to put up with any amount of Franklin's delusions and Parker's neurosis if it provides her another means of escape, a transcendence. Apprehension clouds the air, a murk of possible failure and disaster. Franklin's grasp of the principles of wizardry as outlined in the ancient text are tenuous at best. He's our beloved pioneer, spider eater, great sunderer of law manacles.

"Okay." They sit. *Larry Miller*, fountain of knowledge, spreads in Franklin's lap. "Now. Ahh. Lessee. It works like this, first, there is you. You who you are, your thoughts, your body, mind- all that shit." Nods. Elementary. "You are at the centre of the circle, a sort of agent. But the most important thing is your wand." He holds his up; eyes roam the pages of the grimoire. "All magic is conducted through the wand, basically, all the spells." Expectation flutters about the pantry like a pending facsimile, unsolicited. "Then there is, in like, the outer most circle, a thought, a memory. Essentially the base of the spell. Like when Jagati is casting the light spell. She thinks of a time when things were really bright, the first sunrise she remembers. With me so far?" Nadine scratches her neck with the wand, Parker nods. "Then, you think of another memory, one to give it shape, like squares or globes- shit like that. Now, both of those memories in mind you merge them, creating a synergy or an idea that mixes them. This is the change to the world she is trying to make. Lighting up a dark place." They are patient. Lessons with Franklin have always progressed in similar fashion. When teaching them to read, or outlining plans for heists or raids on other pantries he would backpedal, slip, repeat, and jumble

all in his excitement. A can of peaches tumbling down a stairway only to break open onto the fouled earth, an unwashable taint that corrupts what was originally going to last forever. The stacked gravity of Nadine and Parker's attention and yearning fosters Franklin's explanation. If there is anything worth learning, it is magic.

"Finally, keeping all these thoughts, memories, and wants in mind she, through force of will pushes them through the wand." Both sit rapt. "This part is a little unclear, but I think the words don't matter, or whatever, but you need to have a sort of focus and vehicle. The wand and you are the vehicle but the focus can be like a word, 'light.' Or a motion, like a special wand flick." Franklin sifts through the pages.

"B-but where does the magic come from?" Parker, weepy eyed. "Like for a fire, you need fuel. B-but what about magic?" Nadine's eyes are closed. She holds her wand gingerly before her at an upward angle. Her lips move silently.

"Uhm. It doesn't say. Maybe just the wand?" Franklin shrugs. Typical that Parker is missing the whole point. Fuel? What need of great magicians to worry about energy and fuel? Surely, those rules don't apply, or so Franklin thinks.

On the outskirts of town a faint tremble, a butterfly's virginal quiver as it alights on a mate. A climatic event wends its way through the canyons of unoccupied buildings, condemned spaces and demolished playgrounds of those who drowned with noses above water. Toothed dust careens through streets and a

maddened spirit spreads gritty revenge on the vestigial structure of its deceased creator. The angst ridden meteorological phenomena groans and whines, acting out. Seeks the attention of those who are no longer amongst the living. The Builders are extinct. Remains of their heredity wander harmlessly, flopping against closed doors, helpless brains in unresponsive corpses. The humans sheep through the valleys of their ancestors, idiots and unconcerned husks. Mobile meat farms for the instinctual survivors remaining on this cursed rock. The trio strains to learn magic amid this planet's twisting courses.

Outside their chosen ruins, brilliant light flashes, aluminium sheeting sparks against the dust of the hormonal maelstrom. Static pulses through the desiccated valley. Hollow eyes stare at the bright white shiver. A group of five humans falter, their leisurely jaunt distracted by blindness. Cloudy eyes pivot atop fatty necks and the transisting ball of gathered static crowds around them, involving them in the complete circuitry of impersonal ion and cretinous mammalian chaff. The storm flows on, servant of the current and whim of the Coriolis, arcing off Teslian fossils as it prowls the scape for collateral sacrifices. The frames of scaffold, internal ducts, and metal artistry phreak against the scowling progress of the dust turned lightning storm. A charge to all mankind to reconcile the blasted firmament of their ambition, a hollow order unfulfilled by the mindless who stroll from one danger into another. The slow ignorance of mortality a sponge left to rot.

White phosphorescence passes overhead. Nadine's periphery is a distracted tangle of hallucination and

daydream. “Come on Nadine. We’ve got to get you to First Town.” Franklin’s underarm is a balmy refuge from the dry unfamiliarity of the waking world. They descend the hill of the dead. The structure’s groan withers into the distance. Someone’s foot slips on somebody’s hand. A slide ensues, goopy slush of has-beens, a gory slide’n’slip, percussive thumps of chunky parts against the rears of the couple as they glissade toward the rest of their lives.

The base reached, Franklin yanks Nadine upward. “We’ve got to get away. There’s no time for this shit.” They flee over the unrecycled goods, unsorted plastics and paper hybrids, an endless receipt of a previous wallet cleanse. “You probably have a lot of questions right now. But there isn’t much of an explanation. Really. I swear!” Nadine glares. Her teeth flash all white dentine, enamel, pulp and cementum, not the glassy knives we are familiar with. “We’re alive and we don’t get older. The only way to die is to trespass. Going back, like I just did.”

“Uhhh.” Nadine’s expression questions Franklin’s authority.

“Whatever. I didn’t die. I got lucky. Let’s go see Old Merv.” Before the move to the Ways beneath 2nd Avenue, Old Merv lurked about first town. T’was Nadine convinced him to relocate.

Such is the memory cast to Nadine’s outer circle. A strong memory, her first, the light and confusion of autonomy. A shape, the single flame birthed from a sulphur match. Her eyes shut. She feels the warmth; it cascades over her like a liquid blanket, a deep warm

smoke in the cold hours of morning. Her eyelids are red against the light. "*Light.*" This simple declaration is the first spell cast within the memory of those now appreciative of life. The fully cognizant recognize this minute utterance as the harbinger of a fundamental transfer, the end of a paradigm. "*Light,*" she said, and so it is. Through the fatness of the air arrives, for a brief moment a single flame. Silhouetted against the fire, a perception barely recognizable, yet all know. Parker, Franklin, both see her cast the spell. Her wand points to a spot briefly illuminated by an evaporating flicker of flame. They blink. They fail to recognize what has just happened. Nadine looks to Franklin. "Like that?" Franklin squints.

"What? No." He raises an eyebrow.

"Yeah, no." Parker looks at Nadine blankly.

"Anyhow, like I was saying, you have to have like, two memories. One for the feeling or effect and one for the shape or change. Then the focus and the wand. That should be it." Nadine knows she used magic. As implausible as that sounds, she is absolutely certain of having cast a spell. No amount of disbelief will convince Nadine that she is wrong or that her perception is flawed, what Nadine believes, she knows, and it is whatever she says it is. She is convinced and the others are fools. Such ignorant fools, a hostile rejection of what was plainly real. She did create fire. Although it may have been hard to see, they have no reason to doubt her. She levels her wand in front, and concentrates on the two who insist on her error. She recalls their genuine confusion, their stupid looks.

“*Fuckin’ mooks.*” An instant slackness invades the muscles, tendons, ligaments stretched over facial bones. A droopy tug, sunken elongation pulls at their expressions. What their minds experienced during this period we can only speculate, as either has refused to record it. It is only guessed at through tales passed by Nadine to Old Merv, to random innumerable others, that for a brief space they were invaded by a seemingly less than intelligent force. A force like a drooling unskilled bot that rocked gently in hymnal confusion.

Both Franklin and Parker slump in the dwindling fire light. Shadows play about their uncomprehending forms and Nadine feels a rush. A jolting high that pierces the dull haze of her waking mind. It stems from the tip of the wand, and runs through eldritch capillaries up her arm and into her being. Full body buzz, an exfoliation of her senses. Her pupils dilate, fire erupts against her cones and rods and her concentration breaks. Her eyes shut; the unexpected force of this illumination interrupts the spell. She wipes tears from her stinging eyes. Parker licks his lips and wipes drool from his weak chin. Franklin snarls.

“W-w-what was that?” Parker looks expectantly at Franklin. “I just like. N-n-never mind.”

“Fucking mooks Nadine? Really!” He stands, irate. “How the shit did you do that?” He looms over her. “Tell me.” Nadine blinks rapidly, banishing the afterimage.

“Hmm. Oh, yeah.” She fidgets with her wand. “Don’t freak out. It’s just, you was being complete fucks. And I used that.” Franklin squints at her and reseats himself.

“Yeah well, I’m trying to explain. It’s complicated.” Franklin slouches over *Larry Miller* and relocates his place.

“No it isn’t.” The buzz is still riding through Nadine, a wave of painful euphoria. “You just use thoughts and memories, and a focus,” she waves her dainty hands, “all that shit. It ain’t complicated.” Her breath is short, these accusations and recent exertion have taxed her. “I needa sleep.”

“Sure. Fine. Whatever.” Franklin ignores her as she crumples alongside the fire, curled. Parker is drawing in the dirt with his wand finger. Thin blueprints of an upper torso with wings and a vaguely femyle face. He sketches streams. Wispy lines in the grit seemingly emanate from the figure. He whispers gently, a feather mumble. Sourceless currents lift a grey ephemeral fog. Parker coos and the fog condenses. She bobs inches off the ground, spindly threads and lazily swirling dirt. Undetailed and directionless she merely persists. Parker ceases his mouth sounds and her being sprinkles onto the floor. Need for her presence a hemorrhage of feeling in Parker. A soulful tearing and separation of he from her.

“Sh-she’s gone.” He grips is wand finger in his good hand, wrings it. “I-I-had her but-t she’s gone bye.” Franklin looks up from the book. Parker nibbles his lower lip, about to blubber from this new

abandonment.

“Just what is it you are blathering about? Can’t you see I’m trying to read?” He slams the book shut.

The gape in Parker makes him bold. “SHE was here, but now she aint.” He wrings his hands and Winky catches against his wand. Pain distracts him and he looks down.

“Fine. She was never here. Get over it. But if this is how you two,” he motions to the drowsing addict, “are going to be while I’m trying to learn magic then I guess I’ll just have to go somewhere else. Don’t follow me.” Parker nods, his desire to follow Franklin a non-entity. “I’ll see you in the morning.” Parker nods again, cradles Winky and looks longingly at a smeary pile of ash.

Below the wayst

After hitting the base of the corpse hill, the two run with speed borne of the desperate struggle to remain alive. The unceasing desire to breathe in and out push the pair on. Franklin tightens his grip on Nadine's wrist dragging her over the craggy decrepit earth. She is naked below the waist. Wears only the frayed grey hoodie an unsettled garment that has yet to cling or form to her through cold sweat nights. The breezy rush of the nighttime air cools her nethers. Franklin has yet to look back, Nadine's eyes draw a lazy line from his ankles to the horizon. Lights, not the haunting blue of the construct, but incandescent bulbs and flames dot the limits of her reality. It is First Town; knowledge imparted to her from the Dream is in accordance with this apparition. A memory triggers: First Town was created in the shadows of the construct as a place where the newest would find a mentor, and be taught their tradecraft. Nadine is to meet a Smoker then, someone to guide her on the path of the deception of her sensorium, an escape from this hellish carnage, the maddening spree towards an unknown end.

Yes friend, she is about to become student of the renowned “Old Merv.” Like many such wizened figures, he makes an appearance in more than just the principal tale of courage, but also in many other tales does his figure present itself; always, he is a source of mystery, pyrotechnics, and lore. As of yet in our tale Nadine has no preconceptions, about Old Merv nor what a Smoker is supposed to do. All she knows, all the White People have made her know, is that she is one, a Smoker.

The old Reader at the gate grudgingly lets pass Franklin and Nadine. As they enter, he assaults them with his clipboard. “Who’re ya?” Franklin brow beats the man and crams the answers down his ear canal. “Thas fine, Old Merv be yonder.” Franklin winks at Nadine. She looks to her left and right.

“Come on, I know Old Merv, I’ll introduce you.” Franklin pulls Nadine along, since her second birth she has been on rails, the rails of Franklin in his maddeningly stitched cat suit. The winding ways of First Town, although new, are not wholly unfamiliar to Nadine. She has seen them in the Dream, and now as her feet pad along behind her brother, she experiences the first sensation, one that we are all duly familiar with. You may have forgotten it, a faded memory, but trust me, we’ve all been where Nadine once was.

As she steps onto the muddied path, dragged by Franklin, heels slick with wet dirt, a jarring occurs. The feeling of having been, or done, or seen

something previously, yet still unique. If you could remember the first breath you took out of the tube, it might be like that. However, for Nadine, the experience that sets her mind barrelling, the instance in which her first doubt erased and the true nature of the universe revealed, is when they step into the Smoker's Quarter in First Town. No fogs roil out roofs. No fumes clot the dark air with sticky tang. Desperate loneliness saturates the atmosphere of the Smoker's Quarter. Four shadowy shacks of similar construction, corrugated panelling and darkened sloped roofs, quiver on the edge of being. Sensual nerve clusters these buildings, the dwellers of which seek refuge through the obliteration of sensory perception.

"I needa smoke." Nadine rasps. Franklin regards the creature known as Nadine with a cruel half-wink.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" He pulls her close. Right hand extends, then right index finger. "There, that's where Old Merv lives. Tell him you're my sister. Franklin's sister." Nadine, slimy malnourished waif, twists in his grasp.

"You're not my brother."

"Fine, I'm your cousin. Now go." He shoves her towards one of the forlorn structures. Her feet stagger through the loam towards Old Merv's abode. Her toenails are rough and scratched. The occasional pebble brushes longingly against the cuticle of her index toe. The keratin grinds against the shaped concrete ball; both slough off against the other, a droopy liquid made from so many minuscule particles.

She, an equitable hardness, arrives at a shut door. The seams of this door are rich with decay, a violent orange mold boils and heat wavers the vision of the door. Nadine is not acquainted with the visual phenomenon caused by rippling heat waves but she is bold. She raps against the door.

As I explained earlier, Old Merv enters into many tales but his greatest role is playing master to Nadine's apprentice. Without Old Merv's training, she may have never picked up magic, nor learned the art of vapormancy quite as well as she did. As a principal actor it is fortuitous that Old Merv yet lives. This account of their first meeting we draw mostly from personal interview with said personage. Let us not delay, but I was just making sure to train your attention on this moment, as others you have heard may have slipped you by, this meeting is significant. In our present situation there are many issues that come into play that Nadine and Old Merv discuss which, are not laid out here but the information will be available after the telling and I'd only be too happy to regale you with the ultimate of minutia after the main performance. Ahh, I feel I may have distracted from the principal action already, let us return then true believers, to the first meeting of Old Merv and Nadine:

Nadine is naked beneath the waist. The ratty hooded sweatshirt she wears ends below her nether lips. A frayed grey dangling sways in the heat before Old Merv's door. The door warbles and begins to open inwards. A root like hand, replete with branching thick wooden fingers, grows around the door, digs in. Beyond the door, brilliant orange haze veils the tin

shack. It is no accumulation of dust faeries but the odious spores of a heterogeneity of fungal birthings. The Valencia haze quivers and from its canal emerges the craggy head of Old Merv; deep ligneous wrinkles crown the man. Yawning brows the consistency of lichen sprout from crevasses above his eyes, his chin of a length seldom seen.

A sparse assemblage of white horses on a red hill present themselves to Nadine. "Eh? Whozat?" Scratched eyes blink. "Aye, Eye sea yew." A tremor occurs. The weft of reality buckles and trembles before Nadine can respond. The orange haze has taken residence in her lungs and her capillaries swell with the infusion of foreign particulates. Nadine's first exposure overwhelms. She begins to react just as Old Merv darts out from behind the door. Limbs grow to encompass her flailing form. Her arms do battle with amorphous shades conjured by neural-chemical reactions. Old Merv wrestles her across the threshold of his poisoned shack and haze swallows both. He casts not a glance to Franklin, whose thumbs stretch the waistband of his cat suit so his eyes may ponder the use-value of his genitalia. Old Merv inhabits the haze. The first Smoker, it is not without cause that his home is such a sense-deluded masterpiece.

I mean, from his initial encounter with this barren wilderness and the charge he received in the Dream, we can understand that he endeavoured to apperceive beyond the limits established by the White People. We know little about Old Merv's time in the Dream, but what we know is that he has never gone a moment without trying to re-achieve the state of craving fulfilled. Having never smoked it is hard for this

Drinker to convey with authority the feeling that comes from such ingestion of a foreign or natural substance. I hope that the Smokers in the audience will do their utmost to communicate to their less addled or enabled cohorts the feeling of the first realized high. Here I rely most intensely on the words of Old Merv:

On tyme, mah mine were asslippery
pinchushion of desree. Afta I scarped sum
chit fro' 'neath mah nailens an' let em bake in
da irradiaterd hair ferr da week. Mah bodie
were strugglin' ter live; I dun hard neither
warter nor flersh. Da week ov'r, 'rent
unnerstannin' putta week at foive daes, I
slurpped the furrie greh and yellor 'neath
mah tongue. Mah brian 'gan ter prickle, then
goo. I were not 'warey o' a shirft in mah
percepts but one dird occur. Is know thirs
'cause I next found, afta blirss, a spot on mah
knee I haddnae tchkognized afore. Whart I
means, t'rough mah 'sposure to teh
'ubstance, mah 'cepsherns were broke, an'
t'ings outside teh eye was made 'vailable ter
meh, 'companie' by a sortof lull, likre a bulb
on the back of mah neck parts.

I am sure any Smokers in the audience will agree. Perhaps you might not identify with your first exposure but more than likely to your fully realized second. It is a strange thing then when Nadine disappears into the haze of Old Merv's den. He tells her of his first exposure, just as I have related to you. Nadine, freshly hatched replies, "What?"

“Wha? Dunn yew jest ‘ear whart I say?” Old Merv’s gnarled brows contort in Nadine’s general direction. Acrid fumes billow from his rancid floor and walls causing Nadine to shudder involuntarily amidst the stench. She coughs. A luxation occurs in the omnipresent cloud that fills the totality of Old Merv’s dwelling: a ripple, semicircular like a long deceased moon pushes outwards from her orifice as it encounters the Valencia dusted atmosphere. There is a sudden pulse with a building wave that then falls and subsides, wobbles in the air against the sonic force of her gentle cough. As the waves move outward, the haze begins to lose integrity, at once, it is a solid fleet bound by orders and the prime directive, but in the next, a temporal distortion has birthed in them individual identities and responsibilities. Chaos ensues; the bald captains of these starships flee in apparently random directions dictated by their own unique time line. Some even remain, steadfast as tin soldiers in the unknowable hoary face of wretched orange haze meteorological patterns. Aboard one vessel, the crew despises their captain, a man, he has little to unite the others with other than a mutual hate for rules and command structure. They cannot, in all truthfulness, mutiny without calling down the wrath of their governing council. Yet, they still disagree with the order that the captain has just given: a sudden increase in speed. They push previous poker disagreements aside and reunite under the banner of a captain that must be overthrown. Little if any thought given as to who may replace the captain. His only way out presents itself in their common need for supremacy. Some believe that what keeps a crew obedient to its captain is love, but in this case, the orange anomaly in space unites, it is hate. A seething

mutual dislike so great it trumps rivalries and the dislike of increased speed. This has galvanized the crew. They plod forward on unlit wings, towards an unknowable just as Nadine breathes deep the indoor climate of Old Merv's home. The fungal spores attach themselves to her lung holes and seep into her brain receptors in order to bring her closer to a disconnection with the permeable reality within which we all must dwell.

Slivers free themselves from the grip of silvered wood, peeling, shaking away cragged husk, which sinks in water. It has become thick and loose with years of submersion but the slivers float. Buoyant thrusts propel the ends of the slivers to move up one end, and a lazy tip, the rear of the splinters rise in ladder like steps through the churning bubbles released by their separation. Scaled beings encircle the wood as it parts from itself and sinks deep. They are no fictive creatures but submersed torturous visions of loneliness and longing. Their insecurity feeds the parting slivers; they are after the bloated remains of this falling log. At most, the slivers will remain floating atop and cry out in their smol voices, brief bits and chips that contort the synthetic surface of this liquid. Hopes, aspirations, the metaphysical certitude that everything will be better, the slivers bob gently on the border of atmospheres.

Nadine is submerged, fallen like the log into a liquid world of distilled woe, and surrounded by what she perceives to be foes. There is no objective account of this, for a Smoker; there is no reality and unreality, and both a seamless blend of perceptions. For a Smoker, the world is a flawless hallucination blended

with reality, but they would not see it as such. If you ask a Smoker if their visions are real, the only reply you will get is a steady laugh.

Longing and inadequacy grip Nadine, choke her, and fill her with the pressure of this pond, a sweet liquid over-saturating a starved and barren sponge. The pulse has become so great that the log, so infused, begins to lose definition. The grained mass loses material veracity and its burls bleed away. Along the edges, a slime of dull wood. One of the creatures moving in the liquid nudges the log with a whiskered snout. It twitches. Having expected a solid mass the creature is surprised at the indent made by its gentlest of probes. The log suffers; blows only hasten its disintegration. As it blends into the liquid more solid slivers dislodge and float up. The log, now, dwindles into the gloomy ink of its surrounds and indistinguishable nothing.

Nadine gasps for air. She chokes. Phlegmy orange wads spill out of her lungs over her lips. Her nose discharges brilliant plasma the color of peaches. The weight of centuries pounds with rhythmic bursts in her ears. Blue drops dot the floor. Her hands clutch her throat as it slides back and forth with each spasm an ungainly masturbatory action culminating in fungal ejaculate. Old Merv hoots and stamps his gnarled toes. "Each a becha din' 'spect thart!" Hah. What freshly born and labeled person could have expected such a departure from their barely grasped baseline of reality? For those who are not Smokers, Nadine's induction to the way of the world may seem hurried and rushed, but for Smokers it is imperative that their training begin while they have yet to form many lasting impressions of the world as it is. Such

overstimulation frees the Smokers from the limits of the world and is one of the reasons that they're magically inclined. While for the rest of us, especially initially, it is more difficult to achieve the special state of mind and flexibility required of wizardly deeds.

Readers, as you may know, have a real difficulty. Their tradecraft revolves round the interpretation of found reality and the texts therein. They, at most, can visualize the past use of objects but never in such an abstract fashion as might a Smoker perceive. Franklin had the worst time of it, but this story would not be being told to you right now, if he had never mastered the ancient sorcery of Larry Miller.

Franklin, turgid with rage, regards the waifish platinum wizard he had earlier so lovingly washed. She has been haunting his thoughts. At once, he believes that she and he were meant to find one another, that this "she," is significant. When Franklin compares her to other femyles of his acquaintance, there is no doubt that this ancient is the most wondrously gorgeous and mysterious. Admittedly, she is two-dimensional, a flat petrified brick of a person. She is also one of the first wizards that Franklin has met. Well, to you and me we know her to be a wizard and Franklin suspects, but he has yet to read the volume in which she appears. This distinction is an important one, she is only believed, he does not know. There exists, for Franklin, very little evidence that she is a wizard. She dresses like one, but both Drinkers and Makers may look similar and yet not be. No two Ghouls attack humans the same way, and for that matter no two humans look exactly alike despite them all being human. What I mean to say is, for a Reader,

the surface likeness is a clue that might inspire further inquiry but not enough to draw definitive conjectures. Usually more evidence is needed for the drawing of such conclusions.

As I was saying, unbeknownst to Franklin, his firm belief that this womyn is indeed a wizard is a step on the road towards his gaining magical powers.

Irate and cutoff from the world by his forsaken longing to wield forces beyond imagination Franklin stares unblinking at her placid youthful face. Her eyes sparkle with an original blue and speckled white. Her smile half-cocked to the side with a thin slice of chompers showing, immaculate and white. “So what do you like?” Franklin waits for her answer. He nods. “Take your time; I don’t have any place to be.” She persists. “There’s really no rush, I just want to do what will please you aside from ceasing to be me. I am worthwhile and important, my feelings matter and so does my destiny. You may have given up on people, but I know that I’m not trying to hurt anyone and that, if you let me, I could be the best thing to happen to you.” A shadow appears on the brow of the womyn, a bent ceiling tile dangles precariously above. “I’m sure I sound arrogant and maybe dismissive. You’ve got your own issues of commitment and intimacy, I am willing to work with you. I’ve got my own problems as well, I’m insecure and clingy, but I think we can help each other as long as we’re honest and communicate.” Franklin lets the air drain from his chest sacs, a slow outpouring of fear and vulnerability. “I know magic to exist because I found you.” His eyes well with blue tears. His voice a touch softer and pleading, “I had no idea you felt this threatened by me

and my advances. I want to take things slow and not mess them up. You know?" The womyn has been frozen in time since before her discovery and remains so, yet Franklin yearns to make a connection with her, to be attached to her. Response is not forthcoming. She is mute. Franklin breathes deep, he will not lose control in front of her. He would like to remain calm, master over his feelings, but she tries him. This vexing minx makes Franklin feel as though he were being rent by claws, his entrails pulled through his navel and on display. A pall settles over Franklin, resplendent in his torn cat suit.

A procession of figures cascades across Franklin's field of vision, every object he regards labeled sonically and with characters. They are becoming familiar to Franklin but too late, the world slips away as Franklin is pulled back through the navel and sucked down. A slurpy plop heralds the arrival of Franklin, he has just been reborn. Cold water showers the life sustaining goo off his body, his eyes still burning from the world of letters. The residue of his tanked life disappears into a grated hole in the floor. Out of the wall steps a White Person, so pale and cruel with a mask of face. Emotions are not something the White People have; they are a humourless lot of overseers that masquerade as our caregivers. An arm points to the wheezing form of Franklin on the floor of the birth room. "You are a Reader."

The floor falls out from under Franklin, his stomach rises in his body struggling to come free. Overhead the White Person watches the swirl of water in a drain. Darkness surrounds Franklin. Then, with the thud of flesh against bone, unwarned light pierces

Franklin's eyes like a blue bolt hurled from beyond a prior cosmos. He rises from the heap and descends toward First Town. His stay with the First Reader is to be remarked upon at a later time. The focused mind of a Reader is capable of great leaps in thought where practical matters are concerned and it is not long before Franklin leaves the First Reader with a handshake and a charming grin, though still nude. Yes, for most of us, we would have been clothed already, but Franklin wants to discover his garment, uncovering it and investing the event with pomp and significance. To imbue the garment with an aura of singular power.

Franklin descends into ruts, ditches, old sluice and scattered canyons, the evidence of running water. His feet scrape glass, shards of earth, husks from Before. Knees exfoliate themselves to bleeding as he crawls into ducts and through tangled steel webs. At most, he stops to pick over the abandoned remains of a human, sinew and the elastic strings that once held muscle to bone are his chiefest of dainties now. Franklin flows through the landscape like a man bereft of worry, he might begin to move in one direction before he staggers and jogs left or opposite. Flutters thusly through the carcasses of Before. What urges him on none can say, his nude-self propelled by inner thoughts this narrator is not privy to. Perhaps he himself knows not. Alternatively, as has been speculated, the same destiny that draws each of us here tonight urges him, the pull of the future and its untold possibilities, The Beacon. The stirrings of revolution and change begin with his discovery of the zoo, but perhaps a change of Franklin was necessary before he was ready to lead us back to the Dream. It is

my opinion that indeed such is the case.

Bare he arrives. A vast dry-bed strewn with synthetic trunks, the remains of ersatz Oliphaunts. Each is an enormous flaccid tube. The head, ears, tusks, and body, including the long legs of the creatures, are not present. Only their prehensile snouts remain. Lined, gray, and flabby, each lies deflated upon a dusty stretch. Fields of sand bloom shriveled trunks. Franklin, fully erect, comes to not even half the height of these gigantic nostrils. Far overhead their thick leathery ceilings loom. Underfoot the nose is spongy and ribbed. Clams there are also, having made their beds in the moist recesses of the Oliphaunt trunk. The dim gloom illuminates a bare fraction of the interior, and as Franklin moves forward on tiptoes the light fades behind him. He moves up the bifurcated path with cautious steps, one hand rests on the wall of flesh that divides the entirety of the proboscis. He imagines the walls swelling and pulsing beneath his pressures, the spongy tissue growing rigid as he moves further in. His feet and hands are damp with ancient mucous, but he plods. A breeze howls down from behind, rush of warm air buffets his auburn crew cut. He goes rigid; the air playing beneath his ass cheeks has him hard. He scratches his taint and wipes the sweat on his upper lip before resuming his journey up the nose. Franklin's own stink is a comfort in this warm sopping tunnel, he grows lethargic, and his toe-heel movements cease.

His vision long since robbed, he feels about the ground with blackened fingers. He encounters an edge, hard angle of wood or plastic, he is uncertain. He divines the perimeter of the object, it is vaguely

rectangular, but he may be wrong. Hard to tell in complete darkness the shape of what blind hands feel. Fingers pause on a less than warm clasp. Uncensored humming issues from Franklin and resonates in the nasal canal; a soft low bass buzzes then crescendos to full body thrumming causing the walls to weep pus. Amidst the outpouring of such natural stink, the clasp becomes undone, the lid springs off and thuds wetly on the floor. Still blind, Franklin's hands dive into the opening and discover through tactile sense a garment of unfamiliar texture: gripping smoothness, stretchy and impermeable. He pulls it out, sleeves there are and legs too. A zipper runs up the front from the crotch to the neck. There is also a hood with, what feel to be, pointed nubs on the crown. Franklin doubts not the severe import of this garment. His skin tingles and flesh pimples in anticipation of the material clinging to him, caressing and holding every part of his body at all times, the need to be held fulfilled by clothing is a simple solution to a problem he had not realized he had. Prior to finding this cat suit, he hasn't really thought about how alone he actually feels. Poor Franklin, if only he knew then of his future import.

He flaps the suit in the tunnel. The snap of the material in the humid yet innubilous air causes his body to tense. His shoulders roll in erotic anticipation, knees quiver. A pointed toe slips into the leg of the skintight suit; the material glides over skin and coheres. The other leg. Naked against the suit, it isn't until his arms are through that the material cups his genitals. The sudden pressure of himself against himself and the suit induces a pleasurable rumble to escapes his vocals. He moves to the ground and slithers against it, feeling the ridges of the trunk

against his skin through the tight suit. He moves through the remaining miles of trunk in such a fashion that when he emerges a thin black slime trails him into the ruins of the old city.

The uncommunicative angel from beyond time occupies such space inside Franklin that he forgets his unmagical woes. He seeks a romance and begins to rub against her flat body, feeling her edge on his smothered unit. Her elbow his especially adept at massaging this erogenous zone, but her remote stare has Franklin feeling distanced. "Is this just routine for you? Because for me it is special. I-" he pauses, choking on his words, their implication and gravity not a reality he would like to compromise by giving birth to them. He ceases his grinding and pulls away from her side. "If you're not into this we don't have to do it, I just thought, y'know." She stares past him, eyes frozen. He clings to her, smothering her non-reciprocal self. He paws at her cloaked shoulder and watches her face for any sign of life. She is dazzlingly beautiful, and Franklin swoons against her, his breathe seizing in his chest and the weight of impossible reality crushes his shoulders. He wants to be her world as she is his, but he knows, deep down, that this is not reality. He yearns to make it so, to tear her, drown her, beat her, taste her, suffocate her, and to become lost in the sensual world of her presence. The ultimate pleasure for him, and he imagines, for her too would be their mutually assured destruction achieved through violent and sexual means.

"I'm wont to feel you alive against me." His knobby wand is unconsciously equipped and aimed at her. The flourish saps the heat from his limbs, and his right

shoulder tenses, rolls, and throbs in time with an unheard pulse. No flashes, lights, or crackling accompany this motion but a void of silence in which the creaking of the pantry, the exhalation breath, the skittering of insects, and the muffled crackle of the distant plastic fire are overwritten by a blank, erased from the entire perceptive organ of the earth.

You remember the moment, the palpable gap in perception that occurred suddenly then vanished, in which you felt reality skip a micro of sound and then reassert itself the total silence that wedged itself into your brain and has stuck there ever since like a maddening axe left in a mind-stump. A razor thin cut that caused you to blink and then proceed with your mundane task, but you didn't. Your expectations had been interrupted by thought you could put no finger on. What had happened? The world was irrevocably changed, a break had occurred at the level of your subconscious that your waking mind could not, and maybe still cannot comprehend. Despite your current worries, there remains the story to be told. Perhaps yet, you are unnerved at the power of this thing that you do not fully understand, and as there are not many trained in such wizardry, it is not unnatural for you to feel fear and revulsion. It is, I hope, that through the telling of this tale that you might become educated enough to understand the severe import of that day and the implications of our future and the fulcrum it has been in situating ourselves in this newly proposed way of living.

The spell brought us out from underneath the heel of the White People and their power over us. Their fingers poise on our death switches and the walls in

our minds limit the Dream. It is through this first absence of sense that the walls begin to crumble and our world open. We're no longer probes of remote masters, consigned to a fate that is not of our choosing but through our study of magic and magical arts we can come to master this world. However, it may not be our own, or native to us, it is where we live now and this habitation has freed us. We're no longer the rank and file guinea pigs of the White People, desperate geneforged drones fulfilling functions, but individuals, collectively with a want and a need to be free. Free of mind, free of body, free to die how we choose and also, free to create.

The manifestation of this silence shakes the flat panel of the frozen womyn. The air around her ripples in the silence and her edges embellish, thickening, coming to occupy space, to absorb the world into herself and be felt. The petrified material she is composed of dissolves into her and borders are indistinct. Although he may never really touch her no matter their proximity, always the space between molecules eludes. The texture of her frame is discernible. She at once was flat and occupying two dimensions, now all four with Franklin's brain convulsing and his heart wrenching. For not the last time the emotional weight of the moment has him on his knees heaving a froth of blue ooze.

She, however, blinks. Gasps. She falls to her knees, her robes billow in the immediate enforcement of reality. Her suspension is over and now her steady decline may begin. For she is from the time Before, and not in stasis as we. She ages. Nearby Franklin is on his hands and knees expelling foamy blue. The

womyn, for a womyn she is, no mere girl but a formidable femyle deserving respect, raises her hands upwards and extends towards the ceiling. Her body feels the tight pull of unused muscle. “Well. I feel quite a bit better.” Her blonde head swivels to regard the regurgitating man. “Are you in trouble?” Blue foam submerges Franklin’s hands. His head turns. The cat’s ears upon his head at attention. Thin line of spittle connects the ground to his mouth.

“I- I-.” He shuts his mouth, not wanting to ruin the only perfect moment in his life. It would be perfect if he could communicate his depth of feeling, but stymied he feels wounded, dishonest and a shadowy loneliness. His eyes well with blood and a smile leaches across his face. “No.” His hand wipes spittle from lips. “I’m absolutely fine.”

“Oh.” Her verbal confirmation is a minimal exertion of effort. Franklin cares not. He rises from the ground and moves slowly towards her, his head a blank space where no thought occurs.

Franklin rises and moves towards her. She retreats with a deft elusion. His hands hold nothing. “I thought you might be hurt.” Her empathy rends Franklin’s heart. His eyes and mouth close as in his mind’s eye he sees an image of fluctuating colour that signifies for him love. His body tingles and the feeling he interprets to be the reality of his situation. Never mind that this recently sentient being may have thoughts and desires of her own. “I do so hope that you are alright. I do not know what I would do in the event that you were no longer. Much is strange to me, though I know your face.” Franklin was pleased that

she knew his face yet he was still grappling with the fact that his perception had an observable effect on reality.

He, in his heart, reaches out to her. Caresses her face and feels her warmth beneath his fingers, the smell of her a liquid floral that makes his face rise with his nose into the air.

In the world, however, he barely moves his lips. She turns to regard his filthy form and odd attire. "What. Where. When am I?" Her final question one that can be answered in but vague terms.

"It is After; no longer does the dream persist."

"Dream?"

"Yes, what you've just woken from. Where the world was not as it is at this moment."

"My world has always been just as it is right now. This is my world."

"You mean it was," Franklin flaps his arms in a gesture of everything, "just like this before you were imprisoned?"

"Imprisoned?"

"Imprisoned. In that flatness."

"No. That's not it." Her eyes are flat brown. "I've never been in prison. I have always been just as I am."

Franklin stands to brush grime off his body. He wobbles. “Hmm.” He looks to her; the supreme importance of what has just occurred will never dawn on him. The achievement of his lifelong goal, his supposed destiny fulfilled means nothing in the face of such rapturous beauty. In the bathypelagic depths of her orbs, Franklin observes scintillating reflections of the plastic fire’s dull smolder. He closes his own eyes slowly as they fill with weightless tears. Against his lids, he still sees her; the vision made flesh, the want a person, his desire manifest. She pulls him towards her. Hooks gouge through skin around his shoulders and drag him painfully towards her, yet as the pain grows it numbs, and the rush of his endocrine system floods his body with only intensifies the half-reality he feels. His mouth works, a sluggish grinding of teeth, his yellowed canines scrape against one another in yearning for her throat. The tense pressure of her pale canvas against his mouth. Lips against her pulses. His hands are claws ripping her robes from her, his mouth snaps, as he throws her to the floor. He coughs. He blinks. “You’re what I’ve been waiting for. Ahh.” He cringes at his own words, poorly chosen. For though she is, Franklin fears such an admission will frighten her, will cause him to lose whatever advantage he has in silence.

“I’m here now. I suppose the wait is over.” A tremor rocks Franklin’s body. His muscles contract and relax rapidly as he licks his lips.

“I uhh. Uhm. I. Hoo.” The she, as of yet she is unnamed you see? The she crouches near Franklin and puts a hand on his back in a gesture of comfort. He shivers. He wants to murder her, to remove her,

her presence is unbearably rich, and instead he stands.
“My name’s Franklin. This- this is After.”

“Indeed.” She rubs his lower back and then steps away. Head swivels to find the distant fire. She takes a step but Franklin calls out,

“Wait!” She stops. “What should I call you?”

“Call me Leilani.”

Distributed

The trio plus one expands. Seated before the reshaped black mass that had previously been responsible for keeping shadows up on the scenery, they breathe in the morning. Both Parker and Nadine are surprised to see another person join them. Nadine chomps on a filter and Parker fiddles with a pile of plastics, some are replicas of Larry Miller and his cohorts. He kicks away the solid remains of the previous night's fire and stands figures in rows.

They stand in the cold, waiting the flame they know to be coming. As inevitable as every death they know their time runs short. Hushed goodbyes and secrets are told, graveside confessions of love and regret. If only the other knew how they had felt, maybe they could have had a future. All chances of any future now have fallen flat. They are about to be burned. The mechanism of ignition is not yet primed but a splash of accelerant pours upon them, they dare not move, fleeing while so soaked is no way to great death. They stand dignified and resolute prepared to cinder for their convictions. Plastic knees locked, eyes focused straight ahead. Death never saw such steadfast

pilgrims resigned to mass burning. They resolve to burn bright, to blaze so dazzlingly strong as to stay in the minds of those giants so assembled. The fuel reeks yet they cringe not. Sparks, white heat, a red glow erupts across their eyes, as their world becomes an inferno, desperate conflagration that sears and bubbles their faces. Some of them scream out, their gassy high-pitched whines punctuated by smoky crackles. Hands melt from arms, their clothing becomes runny, and dyes spoil their robes as colours intermix. Limbs drop and some of the effigies fall over into sticky fulgent puddles. How brilliant the heat, yet more so the visible radiation coming from them in waves. No mere flash but a sustained luminosity that causes all, Franklin, Parker, Nadine, and Leilani to guard their eyes and scoot back. Pupils cringe at the outpouring of light from the conflagration. The figures emit bubbly laughs. Inside one, a tall bald man, a pressure long sealed is released causing an explosion that sends bits of the figures flying through the air, burning plastic rains down upon all assembled, arms thrown up offer no shield against the miserable scorching liquid.

Leilani, platinum heroine, fears not this pyrotechnic threat and brandishes her wand. She utters, “*Sea spray!*” Wave of salted water crashes down amongst the party, flows out from Leilani. This surge of moisture nullifies the pyroclasm then recedes into the ether leaving no trace or wetness behind but soft hissing steam. The rest of the group lowers their arms. Parker and Nadine look to Franklin. Franklin directs his gaze at the ground, occupied by the still burning pile of plastic people. Leilani turns toward Franklin, the sway of her hips draw all their attention to her and

her unexplained presence.

“Waitaminute. Who tha fuck is she?” Nadine is physically upset, the cigarette butt in her mouth a thin slime. Parker swivels on his heels, watches Nadine seethe. Franklin mumbles. Leilani turns towards Nadine and smiles demurely.

“Leilani.”

A hearse cloth settles over the group. For some reason Leilani’s presence unsettles them. The trio has become a quartet. Even Franklin can barely stammer a, “Y-yeah. Her name is Leilani. She was. Well, I magicked her up.”

“Y-y-you. Franklin, you promised to not do, for no more people.” Parker is agitated. “It were s’posed to just be the three of us you said.” He wants to magick up his mother. The fact that Franklin has managed to bring this, this womyn into existence nags at Parker. He has failed to give his mother corporeal form. The separation and infrequent visits from mother plague him, he yearns to gallivant, but he reminds himself, he need only find the forest to find his mother. Until that objective is complete, he will only see her with his sleeping eyes. No one is speaking. “Do you know where the forest is?”

“No.” Parker claws at his own face. The scene is dead.

In First Town Parker claws at his own face.

Miya dismisses Parker after an unusually short-term apprenticeship. “You’re nothing. You’ll never be

anything.” Miya chucks a simple tool belt out after Parker. “Take it.” He scrambles, flops in the mud, trying to rescue the various bits that have spilled before they drown into the wet earth. “Go.” Miya stands in the door of her work shed, arm thrust out like a signpost, a declaration of “Go the fuck away before I suffocate your eyes with the blunt end of a spanner,” lends Parker speed as he hurries out of First Town in the direction of 2nd Avenue across the ruined expanse.

“Ahh you must know!” With a feral snarl, Parker launches himself at Leilani. Nadine blinks in astonishment. Franklin hisses and pounces Parker. They land with a thud at the feet of Leilani, her robes barely ruffled from the two colliding. Franklin’s fingers encircle Parker’s wrist and he jerks it behind his back and up towards his neck. The strain is too great for Parker, who, though foaming at the mouth like a starved ghoul, relents. “I- I- I take it back. I take it back you crazy asshole!”

Franklin growls, a deep throaty reverberation that causes all to tremor. “Parker, you don’t know shit from shit right now.” Parker winces. Winky struggles in Franklin’s grasps, unable to accomplish anything in the best of situations, its struggle merely underscores Parker’s desperate state of mind. Abandoned and forsaken, he feels the agony of never being reunited with the one that has ever made him feel safe and secure. The one being he trusts robbed from this denial of location. Franklin releases the arm and stands up. “Now just behave yourself in front of my wife.” Franklin’s vocabulary startles all – even Franklin. Wife?

Nadine pipes up. “When the shit was the weddang brother?”

“Just now.” Franklin’s arms reach backwards and his cat suit stretches accordingly. “I’ve declared her my wife and so

she is.” His upper lip lifts in a half snarl. “Isn’t that right, Lei-la-ni?”

“That’s right.”

There is a vacancy to her corroboration. Either that or an untested loyalty haunts her speech. Perhaps she knows not the meaning or implication of the words she speaks, but this does not matter to Franklin. He understands her to be his and belonging to no other. He possesses her, having brought her forth from nothing she is solely his. Before his working, she would not have ever been, but now she is. Franklin prides himself on the chain of events, appreciative of his own role in the production of another person of whom the White People have no knowledge. She is wholly outside the influence of them, yet, she needs Franklin.

An incompleteness permeates her being. She does not feel to be present. Not drugged, as Nadine, but still he cannot quite pin down what is missing from her. An effusive miscellany pervades her aura, the unnamable quality that gives her form and life dysphoric and haunting. Leilani overcomes all barriers to thought and the normative modes in which you may be accustomed to ratiocinating about thought. Like an oppressive and disobedient fetish genie, her kinks are deviant and suspect, though in the end they yield a pleasure never before realized. Hot wax on bound limbs is nothing compared to the untamable thrusts of Leilani’s anima. A chomping progression towards enlightenment via the stimulation of the genitals is but an illusion to the masses. We cannot procreate, Qall stalks every vision awaiting the chance to pounce and feed. To gorge itself on the unborn despite their looks. A hallowed ritual post-cedes such burials or abandonments. Though the child be gorgeous, its demise is a sad affair, a life circumscribed by a vengeful creature. We speculate that the White People sent Qall to curtail our evolution and growth. If we should begin to reproduce without their guidance and help, one only knows the limits of our offspring.

We can make such magnificent changes with the combining of bloods. Think of it, the spawn of a Reader and a Smoker might be paradoxical but also transubstantive in the grand scheme of things. Able to not only transgress but also realize the boundaries and order of the other simultaneously. A harmony of dissonance. Leilani is ephemeral. Franklin speaks on her behalf, "She will take us into the future." He waves his hands in a gesture of melons and bounty. "We're not to fear her. Although we may not understand the logic behind her expressions or animations we must trust that she is the realization of a magical truth. The essence of the world as it is revealed to us." Leilani grows in stature, at first it was thought the growth to be imperceptible but throughout rigorous review of these past records we've found that as public opinion of her did grow so did her stature. A verifiable effect but as she was not born but magicked up we've no reason to suspect this as being entirely out of place. After all, it is we who inhabit the mundane world and all others who are part of something more, something special, and ephemeral. A Maker, previous to these events, would never have been thought to make any measurable difference in the world. However, time and change marched forward despite the lack of military necessity and the production or pacification of others becomes the ingrained part of elaborate magic. We know that glory and tithes are foremost in the minds of the mothers of gentlemen.

Parker's 2nd Avenue Gluttony

2nd Avenue: Dreaded disjuncture between parts whole and gorges of civilization. Like a dragon bone fracture, the secondary encampment of those who now roam the earth in service to the White People juts incongruously from a thick armored hide of elder ruin. Reminiscent body bloated with greed. This bounty is what makes 2nd Avenue an oasis on the edge. The gorges beyond second avenue have little to offer, all autos, blankets, shopping carts, baskets, bags, watches, glass, bottles, rubber things, plastic things, numetal, adhesives, non-soluble artifacts, wrappers, wind chimes, waxed objects, brined remains, lint, screens, cracked and half glowing rectangles, magnifiers, knives, metal and plastic toothpicks, cram, cured leather sacks, the lucky feet of dwarves, album covers, instruments, wire, measurements, folding things, rigid things, crude leftover half formed consumables and desires, the weightless possibility of unopened things, not to mention gifts, have been scavenged and stacked in a wretched hill ominous and representative of the noumenal realm.

Crowded walkways and scaffold prop up sagging tits

where people wait to die. The maidenform bras of 2nd Avenue house a contingent of personages mostly consisting of drinkers and feeders, but there is no forced association, no government, no gates. This close to gluttony, there is no reason to restrict freedoms. They say that you can find anything that Was on 2nd Avenue. Parker endeavors to find his mother here after days of zero luck.

A screaming porch bellows down at Parker. Up on stretched canvas womyn call down to Parker, “‘Ey shiteater! Come eat mah shit!”

“Hoo! You be makin’ him squarm!”

“Yee-ah, I’d like ta make ‘im skwarm! Pfittt chehechehe Hah.”

The hair on the back of his neck stiffens and shivers, a rash spreads there and he scratches with his left hand. Winky twitches nervously and curls, trying to hide itself. Parker’s cheeks burn. He knows he’s not attractive and if these womyn think so, then they’re most likely unvirtuous or intend on having fun at his expense. He hasn’t even finished learning his trade. If they knew, maybe they do know. What if they tell the mayor, or whoever leads this place, about Parker’s disgrace? Will he then be booted unceremoniously into the abyss and forced to wrestle with humans over scraps of themselves? He shudders at the very notion. Parker scuttles under the womyn thoroughly embarrassed and harassed.

An isolate struggle to remain upright under their slings and arrows characterizes Parker’s forward

march. What is he looking for? His mother? Really? Or is his search for a mother something deeper, more complex? He watches a Drinker entertain a crowd. As one song ends and another threatens to erupt from the Drinker, Parker moves closer. He breathes sluggishly on the back of some older gentleman with shapely shoulders and a rough looking head. Parker ponders the heft of the man's dick, if in this situation a reach around would be accepted and appreciated. The shouldered man steps forward out of range of Parker's heated breath. Parker's stomach drops and his arms sag in their sockets, dejected. The Drinker sings out:

*You're a blessed mass you who see me now
For in the past we've might been blind as grown in
our tubes*

*Freed and birthed it is ours to do as we might
We're traveling this world you who see me now
Discovering its charms for those that grew us in our
tubes*

*Salvaging, exploring the world as is our right
The White People do think we're but goop given form
But it was for the delights of this bare rock which we
were born*

*So agree when I say, let the Dream return today
Let the Dream return today*

The crowd, Parker the exception, chant along with the Drinker. The refrain "Let the Dream return today" resonates with Parker. It moves his lungs and chords and stirs within his slowly awakening brain a desire to Dream. In the Dream, he has a mother. In this world, the crowd chants with the Drinker until, as the air grows dark a Feeder pulling a plastic sheet piled with red nuggets approaches. The crowd descends on the

sheet, mouths envelop the nuggets without the aid of hands or phalanges, tucking in to this gorgeous vermilion buffet. Parker has not eaten since his departure of the Dream and his subsequent plop into the world. It is not his stomach that growls, nor is it pain, nor necessity that compel him to join his fellows in cramming his gob full of the juicy meat. We've all felt the sympathetic bond in one form or another, to not stand out, to be like another and not dejected. The presence of community and its expectations draw Parker to glut himself on the nuggets, past the lining of his stomach he fills himself. A great weight settles in his gut and the soft morsels gradually stack themselves past his oesophagus. He lurches not, still caught by the need to remain similar to those around him. The nuggets ooze and cram themselves into his throat hole until he collapses the ducts necessary for respiration. With but mere moments of consciousness left he continues to stuff slippery bit after slippery bit.

A drop of slow rain touches Parker's forehead. He does not wish to open his eyes. "Hey, Parker, get up. It's me, Franklin." Parker opens his eyes, the slow rain drips into his right eye. He touches his fingers to the wet. It is viscous and sticky. "Get up. Don't make me spit on you again." Parker doesn't know what to think. The shock of having this strange man's spit on him is one thing, but to think that he, Parker, made him spit is just plain perplexing. How could Parker compel someone to spit upon him? The confusion is enough for Parker to be unaware of his next action as he rises from the ground to stand before Franklin. "I

thought I'd lost you. I checked in First Town and Miya told me you'd left. Glad I found you though. I didn't know you were a Maker! Why didn't you tell me when we met?"

Parker doesn't really know, he might somewhere have suspected that Franklin was just a bit much to handle and had held back instinctively. "I-I-I was busy looking for mother." Franklin squints his eyes and snorts derisively at Parker.

"You don't have a mother, none of us do." He Laughs. "Didn't you fucking listen to that Drinker? We're goo made solid!"

"Uhm. But they don't know everything y'know. Just songs and drinks."

"Hah. Right, you're a funny guy." Parker nods. "Anyhow, I got a bunk set up since we're partners now." He thinks that, just as you do, there is a connection between words and the language used. You may not be wearing a cat suit, but make no ungainly mistake that underneath, submerged in bubbles, the wreck of the world remains. An illusion of coherence. Lightning storms and flesh twins. Join the bread line so he may beat and beat and beat. Go away.

"Partners?" Parker's hands fidget, the cat-suited devil before him bends, stretches, and yawns demonstratively to show off the tone of his calves and ass.

"Yeah, why not." Franklin dips a finger into Parker's mouth before any reaction takes place. He sucks the

digit, cleaning whatever gunk was in Parker's mouth off the outside of his gloved finger. "It's better than you running around alone. You need someone to look after you." Franklin winks.

"I'm needa find mother." Parker puts a hand to Franklin's cheek, slaps it playfully.

"You can call me mother." He takes Parker's hand. "Let's get going." Franklin leads Parker through the open alleys of canvas spreads and empty baths, down dirt lined steps hewn from ancient cinderblocks. Although Parker isn't exactly expecting to leave and be thrown together with this latex clad skeeze, now that the situation is what it is, he squeezes Franklin's hand as he's pulled along towards what will be their bedroom.

Dumpster filled streets overhead, the couple descends. Steps wind down, leading like a serpentine reticulation that stutters and starts at discreet geological layers. They reveal the stacking of previous surface dwelling dynasties. The scraped together hodge of the Builders has a foundation in a vast tribal waste, skeletons of the deformed and disenfranchised form the sediment of this layer, further down are skeletons resembling humans in all but the frontal lobe. Perhaps these beings are the reason we're here, having sent the first interstellar communique. Their flat crafts and elongated dwellings long ago decomposed and fed to the plants of future ages. Beneath them, a combustible race that has long ago turned to unrecovered fossils. After which the current inhabitants of this planet have chipped away the layers having no recent connection worthy for review.

What care we how the ancient fallen beings lived their lives, the crimes they committed or the laws and logics that governed their societies? Not since our being freed from this archeological burden do we concern ourselves with the archeological past. The White People would have us data mining ad infinitum to satisfy their unending archival curiosity. An infinite number of recordable and observable facts at any one time exist and the importance of these phenomena occupy the mission of the White People. It isn't for us to question why. Our mission, our sole purpose, according to those that engineered us, is to survey, explore and observe. We're nothing but living probes sent to discover the cause of the White People's fear of infinity. Each concrete instance or commodity we nail down erases one off the impossible list that has never, nor can ever be made. Reality has its limits and it is the White People's drive to discover that limit.

Never mind our cares, our objectives. Sure, some of us do explore and feel exhilarated with our discoveries, proud and making a reality of an unknown, but need we do these things under the yolk of the White People? Why cannot we, as Franklin, Nadine and Parker, explore the world for our own enrichment? Experience all of this world's sensations before our expiration dates? Us lowly geneforged probes may be bereft of choice as far as remote detonation of our brains is concerned but the things we do to occupy ourselves and disfigure the geography of the land around us are entirely within our control. I do not wish to get ahead of myself but the door that Franklin, Nadine, and Parker opened will not soon be shut. Our horizons have broadened

indefinitely, a prospect that frightens the White People and with limits untested, there's no telling what we may or may not be capable of.

The compressed surface having long since retreated overhead, the duo make their way into the bunkroom. Door hangs limply on spun wire hinges, barely twisted ties secure it to the frame. It is not wood but a composite corrugated material. "Through here." Franklin pushes ahead; Parker reluctantly follows, still holding hands. The room is mostly rectangular with a few jutting spars that combat the homogenic shape. A bed there is not, but a large hammock. It hangs from the ceiling on heavy metal hooks, sways.

It rocks empty, longing to hold a pair of bodies, to cling them to one another. Up there off the ground in the full stillness of the air, nothing but the rhythmic momentum of mutual valve openings and flowings to urge the rocking back and forth of the suspended bed. The hammock is open and wanting, accepts all that mayhaps be plunked into it. An amiable piece of furniture. Franklin chivalrously gives Parker a boost up into the sleeping womb. He is overwhelmed with fatigue, having journeyed, as he remembers it, for two days with no rest. The cloth cups Parker's body and he relaxes without reluctance. Franklin moves to the other side of the hammock and begins to hoist himself up, first one knee then the other leg. He rocks the hammock, it swings courageously in the room, defying both to test its strength, daring them to find it wanting. Eventually both Franklin and Parker lay in the hammock. Franklin's head is on Parker's shoulder while he sleeps face up. Franklin's arms encircle Parker and cling to him.

This reversal of action, Franklin's clinging, steals Parker's breath. Usually he is the one to cling. Being the one needed puts his lungs into an unfamiliar rapidly expanding state. He has no problem with this sleeping arrangement. He's nervous and unprepared, but follows Franklin's lead, snuggling close, tucking the other into the crook of his shoulder. Parker's hospitable armpits relax the fatigued Franklin. Both spill into each other, a muddied blend. They do not dream, oh no, this is before all that, but that is not to say that they do not each entertain the other in their thoughts before slumber overtakes them. For Parker this is as close to feeling safe as he is ever likely to feel, at least until he finds his mother. For Franklin, this is as close to honesty as he will ever be, there is no hiding such innocent need, but it is an integrity he does not maintain while awake.

Recombinant

“We’re close to finding your mother Parker. Just be patient.” Franklin’s words both upset and console Parker. The manifestation of sudden belief in Parker’s mother catches him off-guard. Long has he searched in silence, hoping that whatever trail Franklin was leading him down would eventually end in a blissful clearing wherein his mother holds court. Perhaps it is Leilani, she herself an unbelievable apparition, that sundered his mental blocks of the possible. Parker’s eyes grow dewy.

“O-o-okay Frankie.” Leilani stands mute after her verbal marriage. She lacks motivation. Nadine chews a cigarette butt. The unresolved doom she has felt since the first mention of this trip to the pantry now has a name and a physical form. It wasn’t Larry Miller that was screwing with her clairvoyance, but this non-person, the femyle husk that has neither destiny nor fate. Temporal distortions aside, Nadine has unresolved feelings towards Leilani. Does she bleed? Can she get high? Is Franklin using spells to control her? The Wife is startlingly mundane and her presence has no weight. She is a haunting void that moves and

speaks, a calamitous absence that imperils the minds of all she meets. Nadine steps towards The Wife, her dull clothes hang like flaps before the elegantly robed Leilani.

“No shit. How old’s she?” What a question for Nadine to ask, as none now living could answer about themselves. Age as a number is one of the shackles of logic held over from the Dream wherein we learned of a world that never was.

“I’m believed to be young.”

“What she mean, ‘beliefed’?” Nadine glares at Franklin. Yes, it must be his fault. He created her did he not?

“My husband believed me to be young, and so I am.” She bows her head at Franklin. Nadine spits the pulpy butt into the fire.

“She’s beleifed huh?”

“Nadine, please.” Franklin blinks in wonder at his sister’s tone.

“So what you beliefs she is?” Nadine’s eyes are wild and her legs begin to shiver.

Franklin nods. “That’s how it works right? Magic is a belief channeled into being.” A veil lifts from the eyes of all save Leilani. This simple reduction a great breakthrough: to have ones fervent belief rewarded by an alteration of reality. Even if such a belief is fantastic in origin, through application and will it can

become.

Do I need to be clearer? Magic is much more than the act of making things appear, disappear, be or not, but the activation of a belief and its ability to change the world. What I mean to say, is that we might normally believe that tomorrow might bring good news or that we might find a horde of canned food, but magic pierces through causality and luck to make those desires material. Through the forced concentration of imagined change and perceived change, magic alters the world. Magic is not about the vain hopes or wishes one seeks ever after, but those yens satisfied through objects, the wand, and ourselves.

“Uh-uh.” Franklin and Nadine’s heads pivot towards Parker. Their eyes warm with amusement. Such gaiety usually follows his verbose preambles. “Sh-should. I mean, uh.” He points with his wand finger at Franklin then Leilani. “Put on robes?” His lower jaw juts forward in apprehension of verbal backlash. Parker’s pupils swell, all light pregravitates towards optical receptors, the embers ooze their red in thin trails, the vague brightness beyond silver-linings falls like stars into his orbs, each sparkle on every lipid surface thrusts itself into Parker’s brain, the culmination of so many luminaries blinds and time dilates. Robes? What was he thinking? To don such wizardly garb is not a destiny he, Parker, was destined for. He couldn’t even stomach training to learn to be a proper Maker, instead he drifts through this world a half-baked mangler of parts, a great organizer and nothing more. But with robes? Ahh, with robes he would at least look capable of magical acts. There is no uniform amongst us. One can usually tell a Smoker or a

Drinker on sight, but to identify a Reader or Feeder by their surface level appearance is a task more difficult. The costume of robes is a marked difference between those who practice and believe than those who refuse to remove themselves from the ruts of routine and insufferable duty. Robes! Both Leilani and Franklin are wearing them, so why shouldn't he and Nadine? Not that he cares for Nadine, but it might help to make his case. He expects, as the light shrinks towards him that they will rebuke him, his request denied and all access to distinguishing accoutrement severed.

He has seen the ill-fitting cloth and at first dismissed it as mere frippery. Now though, he realizes the power of appearances and the need to present a formidable face to the world despite inner misgivings or apprehension. He has no idea, you understand, what answer they will give and he fears. Oh how he dreads their denial! His mind teeters and his body begins to rock back and forth as if gusted. Franklin looks to Nadine. Her glass teeth flash. Parker sputters; Winky contorts spastically wriggling in climax-restricted anticipation. "Shore. Robes sound like a good idea. I mean, I've got mine. Go pick one out."

Parker closes his eyes and exhales relief out his nostrils. He is not a failure. Winky ceases its erratic movements and falls to stroking the rest of his left hand. Parker moves towards the stack of neatly folded robes and begins sifting through them with a set of different criteria in mind. He wants stately robes, not flamboyant or too gaudy. He wishes them to suggest poise and cunning. Wait.

Yes, he wishes them to suggest both poise and cunning. With a flourish, he whips out a set of robes whose crest is real estate to a sanguine mammal, a naked curling tail with a bristly body, clever paws; it is grey on a field of regal purple. The robe itself frayed at the edges and a bit too long for Parker. He puts it on anyway. His temperature rises, the presence of this stale diaper clings lulls like a warm hug. He smiles, hugs himself and thinks deep. There is a moment in Parker's mind of his reunion with mother. He is standing tall, clean and wearing these robes, except they are also clean. No longer frayed instead they were a thin grey trim that twinkles in the dim forest light. He lets out a meditative sigh and moves his wand finger along the ruined fringe of his robe chanting, "*Best dressed.*"

The dust coalesces into arachnid shapes. The faeries, winged spinsters, weave in vertical space. Polyester strands leak from grey spinnerets, shoot from bulgy abdomens of teratoid faeries. Though the cloud of faeries is innumerable, eight of them coincidentally enough, harden. Their malleable dust begins congealing and solidifies. Opaque grey becomes translucent plastic of an un-yellowed neutral tone. The faces of the faeries, once succulent and transfixing, give way to eight eyed chelicerae equipped visages. Their thick mouthparts pulsate; some use their front legs to manipulate the polyester as it shoots towards

the frayed hem of Parker's robe. They are diligent and precise, their weaving unparalleled. As they work their oily legs flash in the dust light of the other faeries, some recoil at the shaped devotion of their kin, others continue producing useful web from grey bodies. The robe comes together, bit by spidery bit. The plastic spiders launch sticky globs along the finished trim, adhere at measured distance to spot-weave any potential runs or sever any threatening pills.

It is now that selfsame twinkling robe. Parker "Hmms" to himself before wandering over to the other piles of wizardly gubbins he sorted what seems like weeks ago. The spoils have, aside from the earlier collapse of the ceiling, been undisturbed since their categorization and segregation. Brutish artifacts of solid manufacture and ineffable mystery items all. Parker steals himself against the unknown and crouches before the items classified as femyle. In this light, all is pale, the dark drains from their shade only to increase his wariness. Careful, as a lightly hung tarp, he must not move too roughly against the wind or catch too much to hold too quickly and be sucked into the air, out across the gorge as so many poorly secured window hangings.

His wand hand brushes against a small ovoid receptacle and a ripple runs through the wand into Parker's core. Shady blue, the egg like shape wobbles dopily on its unspecific edge. With a nudge it rolls. Winky twitches, warned of the blue egg by insecurities only it can maintain and interpret. The egg rolls. Pruned baby arm cooked in luxurious oil, heated to skin blistering temperature, the bubbles crack and

fat leaks between ravenous teeth. The egg entices. Parker howls and smashes his face against the blue ovoid. Beneath the weight of a gravity assisted face, a cracking. The outer shell of the object shatters; thin triangles bury themselves into Parker's bridge and forehead. Curds of pale violet protoplasm string from his nostrils and closed eyes.

The colour is wet against his face, but he makes no move to wipe it off, instead he breaths deep. Some of the curds slide along nasal passages and into his throat. The fork of two pipes passed, they slip towards the stomach. Parker believes the sloppy curds to taste of mother's milk. For him this object is reminiscent of the teat he received when he was a foal, something to wet his lips and fill his belly. With greedy and sensuous tongue flicks, pressed flat against the quivering earth, Parker laps up the remainder of the tangy albumin

Dedicated to cleaning the ground with the soft blade of his tongue, Parker is unaware of the shapes casting moon shadows over him. His buried face adds not to his limited perceptive ability.

Best Practices

Glowing but not entirely displeased by the presence of Leilani, Nadine decides to also find herself a robe. Although her hoodie has served her well thus far, it can't hurt to have an extra layer between her and the veridical world. Passing over the moaning form of fallen Parker, to the crates she sets. His undulating neck and head an uncomfortable reminder that she hasn't divorced herself from normative perception in quite some time. She hopes to escape shortly after finding a robe that is the best fit. Something utilitarian. Yet, she would also like a garment that refuses to be pinned neatly into the robe category. If there were to be a nifty half cape or a cloak, she would be fine wearing that instead of full-blown robes. The robe crate has been tossed, laundry jettisoned in textile diaspora. Parker pulled his from the bottom. Among the heaps hanging over the edge, only one garment connects with Nadine. Simple red and white in spiral patterns, thick diagonal stripes. It is a half cape, the clasp of which is a silver crest with an ursine figure rearing up and roaring in triumph. The roar appears as flames, but may also denote stink. For Nadine this doesn't matter, the wavy lines remind her

of the fumes and change in air she experiences while under the influence of not being under the influence of a naturalized perception. Besides the stripes, the half cape is of a black velveteen material that rubs against Nadine's fingers teasingly, not quite a tickle and not quite an itch, but a warm buzz.

It doesn't matter for her that the cape does not cover her entire back, most of the time she is numb from head to foot. She secures the cape around her neck and pirouettes, the white and red stripes dazzle none save her open eyes. This evokes the most innocent of highs. She spins faster, the world blurring before her, red white, white red, smudged pink across her vision, but this is not an unexpected transformation of ocular input. The world is a place of permeability through which Nadine swims. Currents may buffet her this way and that but her course is one of constant forward motion. At times, the undertow threatens her livelihood; she will gulp too much and fast sink towards the lightless depths. Before now she has always recovered, and it is, we hope, that she continues to recover and never yet be swallowed by the fate she tempts.

On the surface, where light is, the water is warm, yet further down where radiation diffuses, the temperature is less. Frigid grip hardens thought and slows the imagination into forced forms of compliance. Not a distinguishing of gradients but an all-encompassing acceptance that the world is, as it is. Nadine's resigned fate, for in every Smoker the brain erodes to become an organ of imperceptibility. This will not stall her engagements with her craft, it merely limits the term of her usefulness. Seeing beyond limits taxes the body

and the further you see the more the body is taxed. It is the same with trespassing.

Hearken to me now, as you may think that you can get away with crossing borders unfortified as Franklin does, but be warned. All attempts to break beyond boundaries have consequences. It is for that reason, among others, that we like to forewarn potential trespassers that they may sustain irreparable harm to their bodies or minds. Striving to be more than you are, or have been ordained to be, is essential if we're ever to overthrow the White People and exert mastery over this planet and its native inhabitants, but we must recognize the possibility of mind death and failure.

As we push the bounds of our limits so too does the backlash increase. Already Nadine's mind is slushy. She is spinning, round and round, whirling into blurs. Her body begins to careen, uncontrolled, among the debris of Larry Miller paraphernalia. One arm knocks against a portaged craft, its keel a soldered passion wrought from long dead steel golems. On this shore, it last parked itself among the excess of a former age and a former people. No longer does this civilization flourish for they too suffered the trespasser's fate. Exalting themselves into the sky only to be struck down by the cosmic winds that blow there.

Nevertheless, this boat, this once celestial craft, merely nudging it is enough for long inactive sensors to phosphoresce into being. Thrums and slow vibrations move the craft. Indiglo lights streak across the covering in a circuitry never seen, the interconnectivity of each node a brilliant metaphor for synaptic response as mapped by hunger, masturbatory

needs and complex economic exchange. The tactile surface of the craft a transport to more than just historical and physical locales but an arc to preserves of philosophy and thought long deceased. A pity then that the battery is so shortly lived once Nadine begins to enchant the vessel. It is a withdrawal and a sapping that Nadine begins to exercise upon the craft, a draining of its reality to create such an illusion on surfaces she has not yet encountered, to extract as a masterful key that opens the doors to post-cognition. The aim of which most everyone has been trying to achieve. What has happened here? What was all this stuff for? What is important? Why should the White People care what happened to a long dead race (well, dead for all intents and purposes)? No longer capable of coherent speech and thought, beyond the need to flee, the human race has fallen far if we are to believe any of these historical records. Although we venerate the past Ancestors of present humans, it is unwise to think that those that live currently will ever achieve such heights again. For once they flew and so too did they fall.

This then, their creation remains behind. Inorganic non-soluble materials heap the world, suffocating the architecture and land with diverse shapes. The steel and circuitry react, but ultimately the silicon processers have suffered too much of time and static charges desert. We dasn't revisit the dreams of the past. Only new dreams hold any promise of a future.

Nadine ceases spinning, her world whirls still an indistinct wave of unfocused objects. They sing into the harmonies of one another, accompaniment and complementary stokes that suggest, define, and

mingle to distort representative reality. Nadine holds her hands over her heart and breathes deeply in, then out. Then takes multiple short breaths before the void envelops her. When eyes are shut, residual color, splotches of chemical process stain the lids even after light has faded. Nadine passes through the darkest empty hole in these splotches, the most magnified of openings. Her eyes pierce through what we might see as green, red, or black. It is then that she leaves.

No longer a briefly lit candle guttering in the greater winds around her, struggling for air to burn, but a transcendent consciousness with no anchor. When we speak of death, for us there is no such thing. Memories, experiences, all melt back into the Dream to seed the next generation. On quantum motes our personalities dissolve. While we wake, there is no such Dream, unless we've been touched by magic, then blessed audience, do we have such flights as may never be lived. Nadine, her mind, its realizations, memories & delusions, float beyond existence in a featureless expanse of nothing, free to examine nothing but the detachment of thought and biological process. Bathtubs, and the grating sound of heavy fans once brought me to the void, but now I'm seldom able to let go, so anchored I'll never be adept at more imaginative magic.

Not like her. She who was most capable of discarding the rules of this earth and casting aside prescribed limits. A mind so open to change yet burned at both ends, her being in the fire and blazing torch in an alienable night, stark contrast to the rigid fixtures of the White People.

INTERLUDE

Sorry. I must take this moment to apologize. I'm getting away from The Beacon at this point and keep falling into digressive paths. They're important don't get me wrong, but I know you're here for plot. You want to know how the trio begin their battle against the White People. You want to know if they ever use magic to kill, or if Nadine ever makes out with the boys on cold nights. Or Leilani, perhaps you've a fascination with those that have no souls? These are all valid desires and I'm working my way towards resolving these issues but you must understand the struggle we've been through has only been possible because of this initial discovery. If they had simply blazed through the objects and not taken their time, perhaps things would be different for the catastrophic. Instead, we have careful notes, lesson plans, detailed journals and accounts, all of which I'm duly familiar with and have taken into consideration when retelling this story. If you would like, now would be the perfect

opportunity to use the facilities, or get a drink, shuffle your butt or otherwise prepare yourself for the remainder of our new legend.

Please, I won't be insulted if you clear your throat or step outside for a smoke. We've been through dense territory together and we will continue through such verdant landscape until the conclusion of The Beacon. And hopefully you will be full by the time we conclude the telling here. If anyone has got something to drink I sure could use a some moisture in my throat. Thank you. I'll be right back.

PART II

Mark

Franklin sits at the feet of Leilani. She looms, like an enormous responsibility that he believes he will have to feed and teach. He dares not meet her eyes for although he feels deeply for her, he is less than sure of the reciprocity between them. Perhaps her words are all empty and she only needed him to bring her into the world, and now that he's done that she can leave him. He needs her though, a savage yearning that overrides reason and sense roots him to her. When she stares off vacantly into space, he is jealous of that space, why doesn't she stare vacantly at him? What is the emptiness of space compared to the present-ness of his corporeality? How can she mean so much to him but he so little to her? His mind reels. He knows he can be there for her, save her, provide for her, yet she, soulless will not submit, nor can she. The ability to empathize and give herself to anyone is never part of her; always she is a vacancy that cannot be filled. Unnatural creation, a statue at best brought to life. Not a dream made flesh but a wish represented by another illusion, albeit one that can talk.

Yet still he holds out hope. He sits on his hands at her feet, although he itches to paw and tear at her robes, feel her flesh warmed by him, wetted by him, he believes patience to be the key to unlocking her secret heart. Poor Franklin, she has none, as she was been created by his own belief. This is not as she is, but as he imagines her to be. She is an idea, and as such her being and emotional capacities were determined at the instant of her creation: from her nonexistence as two-dimensional personage into her creation as a four-dimensional wife. Sure, they are married, but when one cannot feel emotion, wives become goods.

Does Franklin then perish upon realizing the futility of this dream, this idea, this hope this desperate promise? No more so than he ceased to exist when faced with the dwindling chance to work magic in the first place. As long as he is able to think, he can dream and all dreams are worth working towards. Sometimes that work is heavy lifting, sometimes that work is being patient. He can wait, he waited this long for the world to change. He will wait before it is ready for him. Although the wait be agonizing and self-destructive he believes that the fulfilment of this wait will be a satisfaction beyond all experience.

Leilani is a soulless mute. She stands as previously stated, vacant. Franklin rises to his feet, the effort of maintaining this position with zero feedback as to whether she desires his presence or not wounds him to the core. He pounces upon the closest volume of *Larry Miller and the Witch's Gallstone* and begins reading it line by line, using his wand to keep place. He strains to cast light. Why not? When he has already created an entire person, should light be more

difficult? As the wand moves under the words describing with zero detail the great concentration and force of will necessary to cast light, Franklin remembers his first lessons as a burgeoning Reader.

Those of you in the audience who can already read may readily identify with Franklin's struggle, although I'm sure more reading is learned in the Dream than had been true during Franklin's gestation.

Regardless, for those unfamiliar with the struggle of making sense from nonsense I'll try to be both informative and brief:

Walls of words, large print, colored letters of dissimilar depth stack upon one another like hedonistic accordions pile up for a funeral pyre of some highly exalted Drinker, coated of, nay — are the entire substance of the First Reader's partitions. The divide between he and the outside world is a depth of words not easily pierced. The First Reader shoves Franklin to the Floor; naked, his ass claps against glossy magazine covers. "Just look at everything around you. Memorize the shapes, figures, background. Use your eyes and the world will not fail to provide you the answers you seek. Once you can discern surface reality using your peepers, we will move on to advanced techniques of deeper reading and interpretation. The primary objective for our trade is the interpretation of recovered records from the Builders. Learning to read the words is helpful, yes, but interpreting the words and discovering the actions and systems in place behind them is more important and where we move beyond simple education and into higher realms of logic."

The lessons progressed more or less, as you might think, with Franklin growing increasingly frustrated with the seemingly arbitrary and obtuse deeper readings and interpretations. For him a thing is as it appears, there are no layers of hidden meaning or deeper understanding beyond the clinical definitions of words. As far as Franklin is concerned, the world is as it appears to be. This greatly frustrated the First Reader. “Perhaps, I am explaining things poorly, or you’re just too dense and anchored to think of the implications of writing. The world beyond words.”

“No. I get that there is a story behind the words, but how do you know what that story is?”

“Well, we might never truly know, Franklin, but that’s when we rely on context clues and our memories of the Dream.” Franklin has his suspicions about the story behind the words of the First Reader. Secret doubt that he dare not confront. Is it then that he should make up what he believes things to be? When context has rapidly disintegrated and the world that gives words birth has long decayed what is a Reader to do but supply an idiosyncratic interpretation of all things witnessed? He bites his tongue kid, curiosity strains at his vocal chords, although he has applied no filter between his jelly brain and the utterances he wishes to exhale, sheer will and the foreknowledge of his sudden expulsion hold him in check. With things like this, it is better to sometimes just smile and nod. Franklin smiles and nods.

“I understand.”

“Good, now hand me that stack of brochures and we’ll practice interpretations.” Franklin hands him a stack of brochures, hotel adverts, local attractions, coupons of mesh-ware bars, maps, anomalous spots, and sundry other heavily illustrated works that survive from Before. “These are some of our most valuable tracts.” One of the First Reader’s page worn fingers hovers over an illustration of a man wearing glasses, a purple scarf, eye makeup and adorned by a variety of metal hoops and studs. “People like to see things they never have before, and any story you can sell them makes their lives easier. But you really have to sell it.” He shakes his finger violently, stabs at the pierced man. “It’s all about the story, since, well since they can’t read you’ve got freedom to tell whatever story you wish.” He pauses to spit onto the floor, his eyes roam over Franklin’s naked body. Franklin crouches to take the glob of spit between his thumb and index finger. He rubs them together and feels the slippery grit. Curious, he sucks the glop from his fingers and tongues it in his mouth. The First Reader scratches at his crotch, “Well, what story do you have about this one eh?”

He wants to cast light. He wants to be there when in the presence of space, things become. Not that they would never outer space but in the extreme heat of failure Franklin yearns. No more. For wants are escapes. The problem only to be stared at in deepness. Traditional sounding reveals a pit thrown upwards amongst the piles of the Builders. And here they cannot articulate. He reaches out a hand. His own hand, or so he thinks. There is a masterful parody at work and though he cannot sense it directly through the means of his imagination, a wonder recently

alarmed. Juries recess, irreality is the thing now. The thing, the thing, the thing. Thing the thing. Locked in the hyperbolic time chamber of queer dreams barely seems like a pass. Just the total younger self a prime. Best time to be withheld amidst emergency. Jotun tribunes convene to assuage the feeling of failure. A sonic foreigner gifted with the power of arbitration, this foreigner is xenophobic and therefore wise. Streets are clean after the foreigner's departure and filthy after the departure from the streets. Until such time as may reveal itself there has been no way to know, to perceive that which reality has become. If it is A, as I say it is. Then you will say it is no longer that because of these recent additions into the canopy of our crumbling realm. There is a time and a place for this forced setup but the powers of magic at work are incompatible to vision. This altering hasn't happened without consent, of jotuns, trolls, politics and beings. An abscess filled with a censoring white, which paints and scrapes away our nonpoint. Shaved cars peeling in a dead sun. The squelch of flowers to lawn mowers an abstract of brains fiddles. Ignore.

The man's shoes are empty. He presses on them but there is no foot inside. The man must be the angel of her husband come to rescue her. They are in a field, it is dewy and a small scrub tree is the source of limited shade, just enough to hide from the midmorning sun if one should choose. The sun. A distant glowing white against a blue sky. The sky, it's blue in the Dream, not thick grey. The sun glints off dewdrops, as if some butterfly's tears, a refracting sparkle that pierces the heart of Franklin. He rests his head against the Angel

man's knees and watches the glints beckon to him, they smell sweet and as the sun rises, the field begins to steam with and misty rainbows ring shadowy tendrils. The landscape has transformed from mundane field to an impossible creature undulating under the warmth of the sun and the cool ghostly touch of fallen clouds.

He grips his wand and jabs it into the darkness shouting, "*Morning fields!*" From the end of Franklin's knotted wand, a single thin ray extends. Half the distance to the wall, it splits as if hitting a blade. The ray flattens and bends, spreading into a lustrous multicolour fan that warbles through space until it hits the wall. There it pools on the rim of natural shadows, the forms flicker against each other and illumine the pantry with a rheumy halo.

He is ecstatic. He closes his eyes and his head tilts down and to the right as he swoons at the idea that such a beauty could both exist, and be at once illusive. The perfect complement of shadow and light is a form he hadn't anticipated. The glowing wall warms the valves that pump his blood, he cannot help but love it. Love?

It's there, here in this room the object of his love. Magic. The creation of every story he ever imagines now has more than the ability to be true. Through magic, he makes dream reality. It is no simple task. The reward, however, is richer than he anticipates. He rolls his wand between his hands like a savory smoke. He decides then, to name his wand. "I'm not quite sure what to call you."

“My name is Leilani.” Franklin looks up to see her eyes narrowed at him. Her lips pursed.

“Right.” Franklin turns his back to her. “I name this wand Kasortar. I know not from whence that name comes and I know not from whence this wand does either. Both are dreams of the past now revived.” He stares at the wand, and why not? It is a thing of singular construction, the wood long hardened, even the knots seem to coil inwards, a fine ebony sheen, solid. But lo! As if an unseen hand were penning with a silver ink, the name of Kasortar begins to write itself along the shaft of the wand. The letters are crooked, but not crabbed and unreadable. Elegant script and the ink a pleasing light against the black wand.

Leilani eyes Kasortar, her face an impassive mask. Franklin exhales and grunts happily, he adores the wand. He opens his robe and finds a nice long inside pocket. “Hah! Of course they would.” The simple utility of such a pocket amuses Franklin, not because there is a pocket, but because the existence of such a pocket is further proof, further contextual evidence, that lets him know that Larry Miller was real and that now, magic is real and that everything is real.

Although he could have sworn his dreams were real before he was popped and assigned the role of Reader. Is it then those dreams are not actually real but manufactured chemical and neurological simulacra of actual events so precise as to embed knowledge? If that is true, what about the dreams experienced once we’re free of the construct and magic opens our minds to the possibility of things that may not be? Where do

they come from and what are they teaching, or is it simply a realization, in our sleeping selves that the world is much more than we perceive? Franklin struggles with these questions, where as we have a better idea of what dreams portend.

Sonatas of fordone lives croon from the atmos of the pantry. The three newly minted wizards convene at council to discuss their future. Although their humble roof is cracked and leaky, the edgy silence jags against the distant howls of ghouls and the whimpers of half-faced humans. Despite their fire burning low, the plastic inferno nearly exhausted, the wizards stand crisp amongst the detritus with heavy leaden brows mulling over what-if scenarios and thinking steps ahead. Discretely they navigate the same bleak labyrinth, the center of which is a departure from the norm and an unshackling of learned and assigned roles. Leilani is outside their triumvirate soulless and immobile, fleshy automaton that knows not its own schema.

“I would like to say that we should find a base, someplace that we can practice magic.” Franklin’s manner is off-putting to the others and they shuffle uncomfortably. “Ahh. But first, I need to clear my debts.” The other two close their eyes in somber recognition. Franklin’s debts have long pursued them across many frontiers; the whispering spectre gnawing at their profits. For it is the debts that have allowed them to maintain an autonomous relation and vague separation from the rest of the inhabitants of the known world.

Bad Debt

“I would like to withdraw.” Franklin sits, his knees bent underneath and head bowed atop a leathery quilt of flayed human skin. An amorphous blob of combined substances, the Litigators, churns. Eyes surface in the glop for winking moments before sinking. A mouth bobs to the surface.

“My complication had a little complication.” Franklin keeps his eyes on the floor, yet the Litigators looop on, “Withdrawals are strictly prohibited unless the second party is prepared to bring before the Litigators an equitable item of exchange. The equanimity of which shall be solely determined by the shifting moods and whims of the Litigators.” Cruel, these words strike at the heart of Franklin; he wishes to bring light to the Stygian depths of the world, so bleak and without hope. He wants to save the future, the dream of what can possibly be. He wants to reach outside the bounds enforced by The White People, devote his brief flicker to a greater.

“It is not in ignorance that I bring my request before the Litigators. My record of dissemination, although

partially thwarted, reflects positively as seen by my credit score.” Each word weighs with obligatory mass, a stifling commitment to perform. The Litigators squirm beneath their translucent sac. Franklin’s eyes close, blinding himself to the present supplication and its implied realities. Terrifying doubt chills Franklin, and his breath, could he see it, clouds out into the air betwixt him and the shapeless Litigators. Behind shut lids, imagined consequence reveals an evolution of initial promise into untenable pressure, performance, and results demanded by the Litigators. Profit to be parsed. Deviating from ones’ predestined course as a Reader, Maker, Drinker, Smoker, or Feeder is not a tax levied without magnitude, but a promise, debt, to make up one’s contribution with an in-kind payment.

The Litigators scrub backwards in a circular motion around the bowl, collective pseudopodia gyrating with ambivalence. “There will need to be a great recompense for your withdrawal. A debt incurred is repaid, plus interest.” Franklin looks up, his lips pressed together in consternation. “An offering, one share of total profits equal to the autonomy we grant thee.” A hefty price in abstract terms.

“I find your terms to be acceptable and will comply.” Franklin nods solemnly. “I humbly thank the Litigators for their time.” Ripples run through the opaque mass. Franklin stands and walks backwards, gaze firmly fixed on the Litigators for any sign of renegotiation. Slow step after slow step he careens from the precipice of debt into the unending abyss of repayment. Now must he transform his errand into a profiteering run. He maintains a hope that he will come out on top, but what sacrifice is he to deem

sufficient to fulfil the promises of finance to the Litigators? Dubious promise is a cloud that has enveloped Franklin. No longer a direct interpreter for the White People, but a being with license to separate himself from community. Commensurate with his promises he retreats to his collaborators, Nadine and Parker.

“Think I know what will satisfy the Litigators.” Nadine flourishes her wand experimentally, a lackadaisical wave through the air, the tip directed at a soft button of dirt on the ground. Barely visible, smaller than a pebble, the bud blooms and elongates into a prescient object of desire. White cylindrical shaft merges realities with the bud; horizontal outgrowth that ends in mottled brown. She lifts the cigarette with tremulous fingers. Her tongue licks bleached lips as the cigarette floats majestically towards her oral cavity. The cherry crackles in the silence of a less than respondent Franklin, smoke as a thin betrothal rises on soundless arias into the stratos.

“Whart?”

Franklin shrinks the circle, moving degrees closer to Parker and Nadine, the stench of rotting flesh pours from his mouth. He aches, to confirm with voice an irrevocable acknowledgement of the truth. Like strained veins constricting, refusing air to his dream he barely manages a soulful whisper, “Leilani, my wife.” His throat clenches, eyes once again shut, the visibility of the world all too oppressive. Franklin knows this sacrifice of her, unloving though she is, to

be the one thing to settle debts for sure. Being beyond creation her life for freedom seems a deal unfairly weighted, but he must pay interest upon his debt. The sacrifice of soul-bereft companionship a small ullage toward the negative owed. Leilani, lovely vision that she is, stands. Her irresolute eyes fixed on an undecorated wall; it changes not before her, but remains the steadfast vision of cracked facade and weakening supports. The wall has been weeping for centuries, clamouring for some engineer to notice its faults and apply a restorative or anti-ageing mechanism. A streak of mold grown dense with eons has etched a jagged forked line through the composite materials of the wall's creation. Shrunken remains of bacterial corpses since fill this deep groove.

“Good, she’s fuckin’ stoopid.” Franklin winces at Nadine’s accurate assessment of his love object. “It’s good ta know ya have a plan though Cuz.” Franklin looks expectantly to Parker, whose shoulders droop.

“I thought, that sh-sh-she was goin’ to take us to mother. Why?”

“An equitable trade for what we’ve been allowed to do. C’mon Parker, stop being such a shit.” Parker is unwilling to reconcile the fact that this homunculus, this soulless form of a womyn is going to be traded against Franklin’s debts when she could, as she is, provide clear direction for him. All he wants is a way to his mother upon whom he will ride into blissful woodlands where he need not feel so alone or confused. This is a decision out of his hands though. He makes one last play.

“B-bu-tt. Jes lissen Frankie. We could find mother first and then trade her in right?” Franklin’s mind coagulates; the blue substance responsible for neuronal feedback thickens in response to such an absurd request. Delay the repayment? Even without interest, Leilani might barely make a dent in, oh but he understands a way to perhaps come out with the Litigators owing him.

“Yeah. Okay. Right Parker, we’ll follow Leilani to your mother.” Parker is overjoyed. His smile a beaming brown-toothed crack that splits his lower face in twain. “And afterwards we’ll see the Litigators about settling my, I mean, our debt- Since like, you’ve all been enjoying its benefits.”

“Fine.”

“YES!”

The wizard’s council concludes their arcane business with the contemplation and absolution of the debt and Leilani problem. Ceremoniously, with much waving of hands and speaking in dim whispers, they break apart in a measured three step. They smooth the wrinkles from their sleeves and divest themselves of magical ash with brushing hands. Collectively their gaze shifts to Leilani’s uncomprehending form. She beams in the no-light, a platinum goddess of flesh and eyes unblinking. Her hips the seductive movement of financial gains against inconsequential civilian casualties. Her program never designed to help persons merely to serve as another notch in the

commodification of daily life. Here sex monetized, a fibrous cover of essential salts filed with nought but eldritch energy. Franklin slinks toward her and she acknowledges his presence as a motion detecting light recognizes motion, automatically and with a sudden explosion of brightness. “Where do you need me?”

Franklin yearns to cast *Underneath Me*, but instead intones, “We need you to escort us to the forest where Parker’s mother lives.” This request is strange to Franklin as it is not he who needs, but all the wizards. They are again one, a triumvirate seeking mutual satisfaction, no longer discreet goals striving for diverse remedies to their aches. They are now of one kind, Wizards, above their trades as Makers, Readers, and Smokers. Their unity allows them to overcome such close-minded routes as those inscribed by the White People. As one, they make their choice to pursue Parker’s mother, the matriarchal nemophilous centaur who resides in the wooded realm. They know not, individually, or collectively if they will find the aforementioned half human, half horse, but their faith in Leilani’s supernatural ability encourages them to move forward. “We’ve no idea of the route, yet we must pass through to reach Parker’s mother. She is key.” Leilani, although bereft of soul, is not devoid of self-preservative desire.

She replies to Franklin, “I will of course deliver you unto Parker’s mother save, you let me leave your service afterward.” What? How can this artificial form, now, demand such tithes from the wizards? What has brought Leilani to such realization of her situation? Perhaps she realizes not that she is a being of artificial manufacture, something created to serve a

purpose. It could be that Leilani has only self-preservation in mind. What being wouldn't want to conserve its essence? A woeful entity indeed to forgo the depths and peaks of existence. Leilani begins a forward march, stepping upon the rubble as it occurs in her path, threatening to overtake should she acknowledge its challenge. The earth, like a phasic kaleidoscope, attaches itself at triangulars to Leilani's perspective, striving to assert a normative pressure upon reality as a one-dimensional representation of what currently is and not yet a striving forward to what could be. This completed, the walls of the pantry crumble in absurd piles, heaps of re-antiquated materials gallop into the air trying to blot out light. Their crisp plummets screech through the air of midmorning, but their garbage truck landings more than make up for their initial low decibel read. As the pantry begins to disintegrate, girders, rebar, and other reinforcements malfunction after the passage of Leilani.

The trio wastes no time with silly wand waving and incantations striving to pull with them what equipment they deem essential to their journey. A cart of a jumbled metallic caponata swerves through the wake of Parker, tethered to his waist by gossamer strings. Medical bag, replete with unknown dosages of unknown medicines and sundry other homeopathic remedies affixes its binding limbs to Nadine's back as she hurries after Leilani. Franklin groans. How will he save all that he found? He grabs *Larry Miller and the Witch's Gallstone*, tears off the cover and conducts the other volumes to align themselves chronologically. Great shuffling pages flurry about Franklin, a spinning wheel of paper that spirals down into the

defaced book. Pages adhere, bond and stitch themselves into the book. It grows in size, the covers compensate, and as the *Larry Miller Complete Omnibus* begins to take shape, more rubble falls. Pyroclastic venting of dark flame engulfs the grimoire and shields it from falling rock. Franklin quickly pushes the cover back onto the collection and grabs the heavy tome to his chest; the eldritch spray from this grand spectacle forms a wreath of brilliant orange and green flame around Franklin, his silhouette lost.

They exit the collapsed pantry, rolling over cascading rubble and craggy boxes of strange marked betrayal. Out into the howling morning, a chorus on the prowl, slavering and gibbering, the three are relieved to not be smashed but dawn comes slowly as they realize the imminent danger they are in. "MOVE MOVE MOVE!" Whose voice? We know not. In panicked moments, we might all bray a similar litany of momentum. The stench of sodden robes soaks the crazed three. Leilani pulls them up out of the rubble one by one. They are still stunned. A Twisted arrangement of twice born rebels heave dust and clay out of wounded lung. Leilani bends to offer her hand to Nadine first.

"Back way the fuck up bitch. I'm womyn I'n get up just foine mah ow dam self." Leilani moves to Franklin. He rises to his knees and clutches his chest, hands clasping for his queerly crafted allogamic grimoire. It is there, he feels it, slick. He whips his head; blood there is also. The book in its hasty construction drew material from Franklin's own body

to power the spell. Although they did not know it then, this is the first enchanted object. He stands the rest of the way coughing and spluttering, all bodily fluids weep into the sucking haustorium of *Larry Miller's Lost Grimoire*. The subtle hungry slurping polyp consumes the leaky free-essence of Franklin, as he vomits and bleeds, sweats and cries.

Parker dislodges himself from their tangle and stands outside, tall and firm, wasted silhouette of a slovenly dog. Barely glimpsed strings tether his floating cart close by.

“We’re out Leilani, but it won’t be long before those ghouls descend on us and in this dim light and in our new finery we may even be mistaken for a loathsome human.” Leilani slowly nods. “Now, take us to the forest, we’ve no time to spare.” A toothsome grin is the visual cue left before she departs at a deliberate speed. The others untangle themselves and fall instep behind their silent guide.

They march through dilapidated airstreams and through derelict vessels overturned, capsized from the time when oceans foamed the sky and altered-dolphin pods chirped alongside their bows. Sunk, no mechanical flippers of those porpoises flap in the hard swelter of the dry earth. Leilani exudes a dangerous aura, a breaking force that she uses to bore her way through. Worming through the corpses of these fossilized buildings, their bones long calcified and bleached only to slowly rot again. Give life to the fungal hierarchy. Branches of orange threads and pulpy webbing clot the exit Leilani struggles to make with her weak undirected arms. Parker steps next to

her. “I-I might.” Leilani ceases her fruitless thrashes. Parker takes a brutal edge from his cart, a tribal blade belonging to the caste of height-sensitive manicurists; the damask blade has no handle so Parker affixes it to his stump socket. He touches the blade with his wand and whispers sweetly, pleadingly, until his eyes sting. He wipes his eyes and manages to catch a single blue tear on the tip of his wand. He taps the blade, once, twice. The blade glows with polished brilliance, no unearthly light, but it is new again. He takes a step forward, nudging Leilani to the side. “Wa-wa-watch ur hands.” An innocuous tangle feathers on a sticky string of dim green. Parker lunges, blade sweeps high and across, a fierce slash across the pulpy fibrous entity blocking their passage. As the blade touches the spongy matter, a light scream escapes like steam out of a broken sprocket from some malevolent coal driven droid. The fungus recoils, draws its tendrils back up, and withdraws in all directions from the blade’s keen edge.

After the sound of retreating spaghetti the trio motion to Leilani to resume the walk. The tunnel ends abruptly; two stories bellow the ground is a pulsing mound of fibrous sinew. Milky white eyes stare up at the breathing sound of the three people. Other than the occasional fleshy tremor, the pudding is still. “You first Leilani.” Franklin grins. She takes a step off the edge and plummets into the mass. Her feet break the membranous surface of the pudding and fibres spill out in a multicolored fleshy geyse. Leilani steps off the punctured mass, a thin fleshy vine entangles her foot but she yanks it free. She turns to look up at the others. Though strained by all that he has seen and thought this morning, Franklin holds his wand in both

hands and raves behind clenched teeth. “I’m sorry for letting you down. Deep and humble apologies.” A jolt reverberates through Franklin, his back kinks awkwardly then his chin collapses into his face, his nose shrinks and his face squirms as black hair sprouts in tufts. His hands and feet tear through socks shoes and gloves, the paws of an oversized cat bursting out. His cat suit dissolves in pitch hued fur, matted and snarled. His eyes twist into yellow slits, long feeling whiskers spring from his wet nose. On all fours, he leaps sylphlike down to Leilani’s level. He rubs against her leg and purrs.

“What does that sound like?” Parker looks to Nadine.

“A mother fucking cat.”

“Wh-whoa Nadine, calm your tits.” Nadine flashes her knife teeth at Parker before scrambling over the edge in a less dramatic fashion than her predecessor’s. She shimmy and wriggles through the fecund leavings of the pudding. She takes care to scrape chunks from the wall and into her hoodie’s fraying pocket. From above, Parker weeps. A solemn lament that he’s not courageous enough to fall the two stories to his future. He’d rather the ground come up to meet him, but that is not reality. He cringes. His good hand polishes his stub, over and over. Buff, polish, shine. His weepy eyes blur the world before him, but he has to do something. Somewhere down there are his dreams and his mother with them. Leilani has not led them astray as of yet and he believes her to be the one to help him. He blubbers atop the precipice, doubts swarm his vision and fear takes hold, not a paralytic fear but one that moves him to impulse. Fear of losing

his mother while he's so close. Fear of never being held under her neck or in her arms, her hooves close to his legs. This frantic quivering sends Parker over the edge. A curious explosion behind his eyes lights each speck of dust kicked up by his spazzing legs. His feet come into view; he looks at them curiously before windmilling his arms about like a careening wagon wheel. Spokes akimbo, he flutters for mere moments. Exhales loudly some blessing or curse opposing the pull of the earth against the back of his head. A flurry of particles gust off the ground and the wall above. They surround him; they are glinty pixies blowing on his every surface. Their snarky faces defiant and sneering, full of mischief these needle-eyed pixies dare him to try and fall. As he does so, he is tipped. No longer does he see his feet but below his feet the forms of a beautiful womyn, a gross womyn, and a rather large black cat. Feet draw nearer, neurons fire and gravity reasserts itself, he drops the remaining paltry distance and collapses to the ground covered in dust and sweat.

Nadine's blood leaks from her nostrils like the trail of a slug, it dries around her lips in crusts of dark blue. She is flat on the floor, her face titled towards to ceiling of Old Merv's abode. Panel roofing breaks free and falls onto Nadine's legs. It isn't heavy, and with her body numbed the panel causes little disturbance. The panel writhes across her legs, back and forth a reticulating rectangle that pains Nadine's vision. She turns away from it to watch Old Merv hard at work.

The twisted root of a man drags fingers, like branching mangroves, through the walls. The

resulting punctures widen with steady pressure from Old Merv's deciduous phalanges tearing apart the walls in a slow reverse growth, wilting the tops as they accordion into the ground with soggy cardboard crescendos. "Hyep, eye haim too be reloculatin' in the ways. They Smokers say better dark dampth for fungus down there. Sooerhmbe not the least be sterile but others been doors not pepepemd om undred of times, sealed afore the end of thr Buildawrs." Nadine returns to her leg vigil, the cardboard caresses the top of her knees and cilia taste the grip of her bare skin.

"I have an I dea for pants Merv. Like couldn't we, ahhh. You no like taking some pants so the floor panel doesn't tickle me no more." Merv jettisons a great algae blob onto the floor next to Nadine.

"Tharts pant. Glid 'em ohn. Gud an warm." He hikes up his aluminum skirt to reveal desiccated limbs slavered with a dark green abscess. A tree finger taps a surly glob of the shifting fluid. Old Merv then tastes it on the finger. His limbs smack and his tongue lolls around the bit, sucking, grinding. "Yeahaw I dit knew thar were tubby whart I was, it's strong and health." He stands and jerks over to Nadine. Leans down, the abscess dangles in Nadine's face. Green, pearly with flecks of Merv's flesh swirling around. "That is exactly thre goo thart can be made frohim to stoip bleedin' or small cuts and lost fingers." A gnarled hand grips the abscess, it bulges in arpeggio. Merv twists it and pulls, white streamers cling to Old Merv. "This on' ar potent, see the little roots tring to turn me into plant. Feeding off me!"

"Y can nbarwely see them move out of the light so I

can see them.”

“They’re right here and there is nothing that you should have to worry about. But liiek we going to do wif dem is to repair cuts and bloods.” Nadine looks up at Old Merv, “No. Nadine you little nose is a bardge of honor a distingusing medal for your mouth. As you use those teeth you find that they work as before just as well, but jst liosstsn. I’m moving out of hewr and goin down the ways. It’ll be the best land to bury myself in and collect such orgo things as I can and then find the black smoke.”

“Whatchu mean Black Smoke Merv?” Nadine stands and kicks the unmoving panel from her legs, it clatters against one of the remaining walls and does not move, nor reticulate.

“What I mean by black smoke, I should say that what I knoe wabout black soke is that it comes from those who used the land before. It is their purest product: thick globs that have been gestating as it were since before we landed and anyone of us dummies sent down here to epslore. Theyre old powerfull, no ones knows shit about them, but Old Merv, oh I can some ideas of finding out. Coming with me aren’t ya?” He rotates on sweeps, “I can give you a sta’ting spores, to help uou get your colony growin’; Heal’n’ they do.” A generous offer indeed!

Nadine peers at the uprooted squelchy abscess, takes it in both hands. Its slippery yet, graspable, like a chewed bubblegum coating. No doubt she could stick these anywhere, maybe even her crotch to reduce the risk of a visit with Qall, or maybe invite it inside, a

way to trap it? To trap and defeat that foetus stealing goblin? “Shore Merv, let’s get the fuck out this shit hole.”

“Glally Glally Neghdene. Help me to topple this death trap then we’ll peddle and move.” The deconstruction of the spore house recommences after their agreement. It isn’t long before the four walls are spread out in the common yard, stained with unbreakable shelf fungi, corrosive mold spots, spores thick on every surface. The hole in the corner, which they had been using as a latrine, now contains enough fertilizer, fertilizer for plants, people, sex, amulets, poultices, all human byproducts made from the raw materials of fungus and specialized pharmaceuticals. A draft of this bowl grog has many uses from fertility of ideas to fertility of the genitals, fertility of strength and courage. The bowl grog is one reason that Smokers are tolerated so well. They ate the uneatable and in so doing created a solvent to cure and restore most other problems that the other trades could not themselves do. Apart, no trade is self-sustaining but through exchange with the community, there is no foreseeable reason why this situation could not persist into the far future.

Nadine lodges the green abscess pod atop her bellybutton and then puts both hands far out to the side before bringing them back with a loud slap. The abscess gushes down her abdomen, trickles down her legs, and as it does so, a green fibrous slime adheres to her body. It is mere cells thick, like an extra layer of iridescent skin. The roots dig into her belly button and a steady drip of green additive flows down to complete the iridescent tights.

A moment.

A sticky green web clutches her vulva, weaving itself into Nadine's womynly folds until there is a complete coverage of the exterior portion of her genitals.

So clad, she helps Old Merv pack up for the movement to a dark tunnel beneath The Ways. "Ares my training done Merv?" Old Merv, shuffles about the open sandwich of his home, gnarly toes scraping the adhesive floor coverings in an effort to leave no trace. He hopes to use these bits to concoct truly heinous fungal deviations.

"Eh? Nawr. We're got mhiles yert afore you-er done. Jes fallow me Mildew Flower." Midday they start the long walk towards The Ways.

Forest walk-to

“B-bu-buut where is she leading us?”

“To the forrest.”

“Yeah but, but where that?”

“If any of us new that we wouldn’t need her to lead us there.”

“The way to the forest is not a simple line drawn over hills, and through valleys. The forest will come to you as you struggle to find it. No static grouping of foliage, the forest comes to those who desire to find it. As long as you maintain the course, and bear the forest in mind, we cannot fail to arrive.”

Parker clomps over to Franklin who pads along, toe heel with long cautious legs. He is still a cat. “It’s sort of like the song of The Beacon, y’know Frankie?” The cat growls and flicks its tail angrily. “You know the one that goes:

The loss

distant beacon

*Halos of regret
scald desolate fields*

*Something terrible
and forgotten*

*The brilliance
distant beacon*

*Simple phosphorescence
of deeds undone*

*Siren of woe
to turn all alone*

*The hope
distant beacon*

*Futures light
from beyond a horizon*

*Stretch back through
a blind realm*

*The dream
distant beacon*

*Whose beauty
only matches*

*pain of gazing overlong
into source-less origin*

Franklin mewls during the recitation of The Song of The Beacon. This tune haunts Franklin. It stirs in him foundation shattering despair and the eternal striving for a thing beyond reach, but not perception. Franklin would rather not remember the torment of The Beacon's reality and distance. However, Parker who knows not the minds of those around him, nor is he particularly adept at reading the emotive acts of felines, sees no wrong committed, nor does he shut up. "Hah, I don't even believe in The Beacon, I think it's just out there, the song, as a trick for Drinkers so that they have at least one song that everyone knows the words to. It doesn't exist. Maybe it used to in the Dream, but I never sawr it. What about you Nadine? Seen it?"

As the machine gun cuts the heads from the field, smoke billows from the barrel and the water-cooling tanks belch forth steam. The combined dingy clouds obscure the field and the headless wilt. Nadine stands to dust powder burn from her fingers. The haze is thick upon the land, yet rising up through the fog is a screen-tearing white obelisk. High above the tree line, the shape ascends. Rooted, as gaze lifts, the structure grows always past Nadine's shifting horizon. Up and up it goes. Light bleaches the war smokes, turning their negative a brilliance that although painful to behold, the veil of the Dream numbs its candescent reality. Nadine's dream eyes sear not but the image burns deep within her. "I seen part 'fit. Not uh whole thang." She spits out a bullet. "Jes the bottom."

They walk on, the fungal ruins of the Builders give way to a pockmarked sandscape. Craters form molten bruises, impacts of premature rocket explosions, the

mass blasted lands of artillery fire. Although carbon scoring has blackened much of the surrounds shimmering obsidian pools of tepid liquid glare like blind cloudy eyes from unseeing sockets.

“What’s that ahead?” Franklin squints into the distance, radiation waves obscure detail but upright shambling figures vagulate on an intercept course towards the trio and Leilani, the vacant husk. “It’s a group of people.” The group ceases their march. “But they look pretty far off.” He scans the immediate vicinity for a place to stealth away: craters and holes. Nought else available, but scattered depth and no height.

“Let’s dodge ‘em an’ wait fer ‘em to pass.”

“O-o-okay. My shirt hurts.” Franklin springs from the flat ground into the nearest crater, the scored sand a match for his black fur. He hunkers down, paws under chin, and his tail curls around his back legs. They coil tight for a quick escape. Parker flops next to him, curls into the foetal position, sucks vigorously on Winky, and shuts his puffy eyes. Nadine climbs in but peers out over the rim at the approaching figures.

Franklin meows angrily. “Wife! Get over here!” Leilani looks over her shoulder before joining the rest in the crater. Moments pass. Franklin’s mouth opens slightly and his lip curls. He sniffs the air with his tongue, and rubs his tongue along the ridged roof of his little pink mouth. A bewildering perception blooms like a fatigued note, at once hard edged, crust like, but this measly border is a permeable velamen surrounding a gradient of blue, which shivers against

the confines of crust. The frequency of the vibration reminds Franklin of the first text he found.

Franklin wanders into 2nd Avenue, awestruck by the sights and clamor of all the living moving persons. Whereas First Town seems a solemn funerary watchman, 2nd Avenue is a jumble of wretched lives, probes test every material and input data. All report to the White People the facticity of this stagnant and algid world. Drinkers belt out favorite tune, and the occasional Song of The Beacon; their voices are rich with the sanitized stank of alcohol. Feeders try to out-yell each other at their stalls, each claiming to have more exotic and fresher goods than the other, sweeter meats, bloody meats, tender juicy or things that have kept and will continue to keep. Some offer cooking accessories but so here the Makers will not be outdone. Conveniences for any inconvenience, solutions to all problems, new, just arrived, and prototypes of every configuration are on display. As well as mirrored flashlights, sprays to fix the holes in your clothes, walking sticks, wards, and alarms against Qall. Gaseous and dense green fogs delineate between the rigid constructs of reality and the perception-altering medicines of the Smokers. Bottles of lost names, salves of impotence, near powdered pills for the enhancement or dulling of every sense and of course the requisite bandages, and antibacterial cream that you need to prevent becoming “infected.” Pah!

Anyhow, Readers there are also, hawking texts of every description: pamphlets, brochures, handbills, ticket stubs, receipts, signage, labels, stone tablets, clothes, phones, books, chunks of concrete, neons,

license plates, bumpers, plaques, directions, and wrappers. Each sit behind stacks of their chosen fetish glaring at the others. Franklin paces their aisle with his head whirling about in distracted glee. So many words. They press in on his eyes from every angle, he pants, back and forth amid the shouts he only sees, his hearing drowned by silent reading. There were to be a limited number of texts implied the First Reader, but obviously there was an entire world waiting. The excess overwhelms Franklin and he begins to sag, he weaves like a haywire marionette, dislodging packages from other walkers, causing minor socially acceptable ruckuses. After one, "SO SORRY!" he careens into the nearest stall where a short, bald person has a display of encyclopedias.

There, before him, the World Book Volume O spreads its pages like a nubile dancer, inchoate and gyrating with an unrealized seductive thrum. Its hips pulse against groping fingers. Franklin's digits tremble over the words on the open page. Images, in color, alongside words, create a vast seductive blanket of unplumbed meaning. The person barks at him. "You look with your eyes not with your hands; get your meat hooks off her." Startled Franklin steps back. "You want it? You're going to have to pay." Franklin looks to the person with squinty unrecognizing eyes. "Or trade." Franklin looks at the ground forlorn. What has he to trade? The newly acquired cat suit is too precious and trading would leave him naked, a mark of low class. He has no pamphlets, but he desires this encyclopedia.

"I haven't got any." The person strokes a non-existent beard in a contemplative manner. They snatch up

Volume O and licks a sorting thumb.

“This volume here,” lick flip, “is well balanced. Full of gorgeous pictures of the world as it was Before. I could maybe be convinced to part with it, providing the price was right.” The person peers over the cover at Franklin, licks a thumb and turns another page.

“I have nothing to trade.”

“Well then-”

“But I can offer my services and ahh, watch your stall as payment for this run of the mill encyclopedia.” Franklin holds his hands out to the side and shrugs.

“I dunno. Have you references?” The person licks their lips and winks with both eyes while simultaneously kissing the air in front. Colloquially this gesture is known as the “tri-wink” despite the fact that only two eyes are winking. It is meant to challenge and unnerve those on the receiving end. Coming from the person, Franklin is a little bewildered at the gesture. On the one hand, they may be coming on to him, on the other this might purely be the action of someone wanting to deny nonverbally.

“I suppose you could talk to the First Reader. He could tell you about me.”

The person looks from the Volume O to Franklin, from Franklin to the Volume O. The person wants to cook a delicious lasagna, baked noodles with sauce and cheese. Comforting layers that’ll keep. The person’s tongue flicks over page stained teeth,

“Nehhh. I don’t need any other opinions. I’ve got my own and that’s the one that matters. You might think I would heed the advice of others, but my perspective is unique.” They clear their throat and scratch theirself. “Tell you what: stand here and if you can manage to sell a volume, I’ll give you Volume O as payment. Deal?”

You might suppose Franklin to leap on such an opportunity, to agree whole-heartedly with such a sweet deal. Alas but no, friend. “Oh? You think, that just because I have no fare I’ll gladly hawk your ware? Person please, stay behind your stall. I’ll return if I wish to buy it at a high price.” Franklin tri-winks back, both eyes and mouth opening wide then shutting with a quick motion. The person staggers back, catches theirself on the stall and mops a sopping brow before busying itself with the reorganization of its stall. Franklin moves past this distracting element, out of the market entirely, and deeper into the surrounding ruins. Day passes, and as the light dissolves Franklin seeks shelter among the mortar of abandon facades.

Distant shadows pierce the obscuring veil of heat. Their forms barely legible across the pock-fretten battlefield. Leilani joins the others in the crater. Nadine, eyes forward, counts the figures. “I seen three of dem. dey movin’ slow with dey hands at dey side. Oh.” They are ceaseless and fixed in their movements, almost. Though they move ever onward, sometimes the figures falter in their steps or lurch suddenly forward as their feet knock into irregularities along the planet’s surface. The figures, through the heat, remain irredeemable in their onward motion. The advancing

spectres are a tense removed from explicit identification. She sees them, stalking forward, shambling step after shambling step.

Miserable vacancies, creep forward through the dust. These failing organics neither mutter nor wail. Their mouths gasp in rhythmic heaves and their feet motor onward. Their senses are blind to all around them. We are free to speculate that they do perceive, but only in fits. They march in a fugue towards the crater where Franklin and company hide. Arms hang like overlong sleeves, flagging with each footfall. Their faces are scorched and burned things, features melted by exposure into similar masks of shaved horror. Puffy lips, squinting eyes, their heads and faces spotted with tufts of wiry whiskers. Even gender has been robbed from the once dominant species. They crunch forward, fearless of unperceived surroundings.

Nadine watches the three humans with a worrisome pity. Will they suddenly recognize that they march towards a more advanced species, a genetic manufacture that resembles their lost appearance? Will this realization culminate in violent rejection, humble worship, or will a grim shadow of fear cause them to shuffle right back into the irradiated fog? “Humans.” Franklin’s fur bristles in alarm.

“Do you see any ghouls? Is something chasing them? Do they see us?”

“On all accounts, no.” At this moment, Nadine connects the reduced life forms to Leilani. Her abject horror suppressed by the more powerful urge to smoke. Leilani could just as easily shuffle wordlessly

among the approaching flesh, no emotion, no outward sign of seeing or experiencing the world. Perhaps Leilani is not as Nadine, Parker and Franklin, but a less ruined human. The homunculus in platinum tresses a perfect skill for these wandering monsters. What befell them, the Builders, to ruin them so great? It is this history the Readers try to construct, to make from found text.

“W-w-what are they Frankie?” Parker and Franklin sit on cramped haunches, watching a group of humans lose their limbs to a pack of ghouls. The ghouls tear unremittingly at the joints and throats of the walking meat.

“They’re the Builders. They built this, all of it, Before. Before it was ruins. Before even the Dream, before the White People came here - it was all Builders.” They who shaped earth and dredged water, conscripted fire and tore through the sky. The Builders’ mastery over this place was absolute; no beast dared turn against them for retribution was bloody and swift. We know this from words, pictures and remains.

“Y-ye-yeah, I know.” Parker turns from the threshing. “But how did they get this way?” What we’ve been able to glean, for some of you this might be old news, but nonetheless the encounter with the humans in the cratered land necessitates this tale’s retelling, is limited. The Builders apparently built until they tore through the sky. Much the same way as the Construct reaches beyond us, but instead of going higher as they most likely planned on doing, their world collapsed.

Tipped over, the accumulation of so much height was a foulsmoke burden on corrupt foundations. Neglected timbers upheld the excess of the Builders as they soared ever higher, reaching ever towards an ineffable vindication of self-worth. Making, shaping, and controlling became the occupation of the Builders and the accumulation of their glories now lie in ruin all around us. Our archaeological errand on this planet concerns the cataloguing of these glories and a complete reconstruction of their history. That, the White People would have you believe is the sole reason for your existence.

The clumsy mob that nears the crater shows no sign of slowing nor of any recognition of those hidden within it. Air around the bodies ripples with sickening heat, traces of burning, their edges of crisped skin, cracked and sorely needing of lubricant. Franklin's stomach growls. All movement ceases. The shamblers rock on unbalanced heels, Parker uncurls himself and tries to switch his wand for his hook. Nadine watches, her craving anchors her to the edge and she's unwilling to let go should she succumb to a loss of total control of her urges. Withdrawal is a terrible disease, the demise of all Smokers. She needs a fix. Her body burns and her veins plead. Her throat is dry.

Parker gives his hook a final screw and taps Franklin on his furry hip. The swelling halo of the humans swallows Franklin. He pounces as Parker stumbles to knees. Black fur swarms the nearest human and it falls with an entire cat clawing and scraping its face with venomous teeth. Parker bowls into another human, raises and lowers his hook with thwacks that sever muscle from sinew. Guttural cries leak from the

startled humans, the unengaged third mewls through dribbling foamy lips. Franklin springs off face. Claws lathe a layer of screaming dermis.

He flies in again, hiss, and snarl at cloudy eyes. He rips and a precious delicacy hangs from face, red streamer, and white bobber. Parker shifts his weight and hammers at the chest. Hook crushes ribs malleable beneath any force. Hook shatters living pump and the corpse is. Nadine moves, yearning drives her mouth towards the spouting font of sanguine fluid. Deep sucking and fumbling hands as she nurses from the chest wound. Parker grunts and whips the last human across the back. His hook catches on brittle scapula, he pulls, tears and the right side falls from the torso, syrupy dissection. Stained paws bat at the dangling orb. It flops curiously left and right as more juice pools beneath ruined face.

Fur shrinks to slick lycra as Franklin resumes humanoid form. He stretches legs and arms, yawns and licks lips. Nadine sucks, still bent over the fallen with the crushed chest. "We've no time. We have to move on." Parker tears forearm and hand, he holds it aloft like a snack for travelling. Nadine cradles the oozing and her starved tongue laps. Her senses dive into the body, surrender of neural activity to the fulfillment of an osmotic high. Red nourishment rushes through a muscular tunnel to a roiling acidic sea. Unceasing flood of saccharine delight fills the sea, dilutes the acid and crashes against breakers. Acid logged buoys lilt on the eroding tides, the sudden dilution by blushing tides gives the transceivers a moment more to blink out course corrections to low flying seaplanes delivering the rush to Nadine's

nerves. Incorrect headings could possibly result in the fulfillment of false needs. Hunger, the gaping port, need not be stocked. A single buoy glints, a slow timed strobe in the abyss. The pilot of the seaplane adjusts for windage and the spray off blushing waves. It cruises low, propellers catch a few flying fish as they jettison themselves, an attempt at dismemberment or escape from the skyrocketing iron content. The pH of Nadine's stomach reaches toxic levels and the gills of water dwelling creatures fill with metal filings. As the plasma level rises the seaplane courses higher. The overhanging fundus caps the craft's altitude. A sudden lurch in the motion of the acidic seas sends the plane veering up, toward low mucus slicked ceiling. Too late the pilot recognizes the error and over corrects sending the plane into a tailspin. Death fills the open mouth of the pilot and fills wanting lungs with blood.

Nadine writhes, her hands slide down the length of her suggestively billowing robes. Parker cringes, mouth stuffed with ulna. Franklin mutters under his breath, a great catastrophe for him to be seen acting in such a way that would call attention to what they are doing here and why they might be needing to hurry on their way. It is not for nothing. Time waits for nothing, and though the world turns and though we age not, financial quarters are exacting and their toll can be steep. Already has he flaunted the contract signed before the Litigators to disastrous levels. He has one chance to restore his credit rating and this jackpot idea must be a success. He but requires haste to execute it perfectly. Lips pursed in frustration, he levels Kasortar at Nadine. The knobby wand juts like imposing force as Franklin conjures and forms memory and will.

Space constricts into infinitesimal instances of rapid expansion and contraction. Franklin's mind blurs words and meaning. The text reads:

BROWNIE WITH VANILLA ICE
CREAM AND TOPPED YOUR CHOICE
OF HOT FUDGE OR CARAMEL SAUCE
& WHIPPED CREAM.

Franklin understands Brownies to be a mischievous faerie race most associated with farms and the souring or disappearance of cows' milk. However, vanilla ice cream, a byproduct of cows' milk, accompanies this singular Brownie. Topped, as in, put atop the Brownie and accompanying cream; hot fudge is a molten chocolate. This is a choice, an unexpected hinge whereupon fate will be forever altered and the one to make the choice forever doomed by this one action or inaction. What will become of the chooser who sides with the fudge rather than the caramel? What possibilities are rejected, what moments lost never to be realized or recovered due to this one seemingly small or arbitrary exercise of free will? To say nothing of the blazing combinations of the whipped cream that completes the bovine trifecta. Franklin's encounter with the Brownie Sundae text spins his rational mind into a dizzying loop of chaotic and quick thought. Each decision leads to untold woes.

"Brownie Sundae!" A sludge coats Nadine, splashes from Kasortar onto her gyrating body. At once, her motion ceases. She blinks, the rapturous feeling of the blood diminishes, and her nerves sizzle no more. "Are you ready to go?" Franklin slides Kasortar back into

its sheath in the folds of his robes.

The abrupt cessation of pleasure robs Nadine of objection; she is doomed to Franklin's choice. "Yee-ah, I guesso."

"Splendid. Leilani, lead on." The journey resumes. The marching order is thus: Leilani passing with nought a concern, Franklin walking upright toe to heel, Nadine hiding hands inside her grubby hoodie, and Parker gnawing dumbly on the stump of an arm. Blessed be the three following in the wake of the homunculus.

Bear and Beacon at the Crease

Streamers exhaled through deep rents in the worlds' crust, shaved metal foliage, rusty trunks; the forest appears to the travelers as a firm separation from the cratered land. Yowling reverberates from within the woods, shakes timbers, and rustles forged leafwork. The travelers halt before the crease, a sterile delineation between the cratered lands and the forest, a row of blistered concrete tiles that stretches past sight. Yet across, the forest adheres to the planet, its fearsome growths pour grinding whistles into the ears of the interlocutors as they convene for the second wizard's council.

Parker urinates.

Franklin scowls.

Nadine smells her fingers.

“Wands at the ready.”

Nadine and Franklin draw their wands; Parker screws his wand into his stump socket.

“We’re nearly at the end. My Wife says the forest is full of danger, but I don’t trust anything she says. Be on the lookout from her and the forest.”

“B-bu-but, aren't y-y-ou-you married?”

“Yes Parker, but she is emptiness.”

“Plants. I'm ready to burn the place down.” Nadine wishes to plumb the organic secrets of the forest, perchance to smoke. Although her clairvoyance is wishy-washy at best concerning events connected to Leilani, she believes an ultimate fulfilment of her programming will be found inside the forest. Although her words belie caution, she summons the keen edge of all her senses. She focuses her pharmacognostic sense on the wilderness beyond the crease. Pupils swell as a light robbed blindness wedges into her receptors. Visceral and real, she feels it: the summit of all achievement thought out of reach and forbidden, the destructive fulfilment of desire and longing, logic's bane. The Beacon. She clenches her eyes shut and grinds her glass teeth. Upon reopening, her pupils revert to their previously slit norm. Denial, denial, denial. She floods herself with thoughts of disbelief and courageous rejection of reality. In the vacancy of these thoughts, Nadine fills her mind with a proposed alternative. Failure. Devastation of the unfulfilled, stymied ambition. The Beacon does not exist; there is no achieving of dreams. Her drugs are not there, whatever Franklin seeks is not there, and Parker's mother is not holding court in the forest. What they find instead is a bland reassertion of reality, nullifying fields of anti-magic, a proof that Larry Miller is fiction. This is the truth; she holds this final stake of self-protection against the nullification of dreams. For a dream fulfilled ceases to be a dream and the striving gives way to directionless remorse. What need have they to continue in a world with all dreams achieved?

“Okay, stick together and we may yet relieve our debts. We may yet be free.” The wizards' council ends. Robes flutter as they stride boldly over the crease. Leilani follows last, a small luminous aura emanates from the tip of her simple

wand.

Leilani, what can I say about this thing that isn't implied by my previous narration? A moment and she was not, another and she is. Franklin is married to her. By the bonds of matrimony, she is obligated to stay with him for all times, until death they do part- but what does this mean to us? We know that death is no great feat. We've all died, even me, even the First Reader, ancient as we might regard him. Died and our bodies recycled. Remains ensilaged for the construct to produce more geneforged probes. Bodies stacked beneath, their gross materials drawn up and fabricated as fresh probes. The data from our experiences uploaded into the Dream for our future generations. Neural logs dissected and analyzed. The information therein is the White People's prize. Leilani, though, she will be eaten when she dies, if not being eaten the cause of her death. Those at the site will simply devour her non-mind; otherwise, it will left to scavenging ghouls. Franklin, then, is married to her body only, a marriage of mind impossible outside the species. She has brought them here, to the forest, as directed to do, but what does fulfilment of such a directive mean? Is it a goal for her, a desire? Or is it simply something she does because she is told to do it, utterly mechanical like a watering can tipped to pour?

The watering can follows behind the direction givers. The light from the rear casts shadows ahead of the group; the wall of trees is not so solid as first appeared from beyond the crease. Tessellation of plant and dirt, the forest looms. Vacillitory shadows grow up trunks and pass between branches as the party moves forward. The threshold of trees is yet to be crossed.

All tense, rigid in the moth shade night. Silent flapping descends on Leilani, flutters in her hair, soft clacks of dusty wing against her ear as a grist of celestial navigators bat at her wand and tresses. A confused blotch of silvery wings spiral madly at the artificial womyn in possession of an artificial sun.

She frets not, having neither desire nor inclination that the grist is a bother. Nadine slaps reflexively, and is surprised as a winged form crunches between her hand and head. She looks at the powdery stain amidst the clear oozing of the hard-shelled thing. She pets the dead wings and her finger comes away stained with sparkling bleached ashes. She tests the substance. Finger delves into her nose and paints the walls, scrapes the ashes into the moist flesh. She rubs it in. She pinches nostrils together and massages them, working the ashes deeper into pores. The blind world, a haze of lines and bifurcated halos, coils along starry ley lines glowing red with the attraction of heat. Nadine feels the pull of these coils but also their burn as she nears. She spins, roughly and ungainly, unable escape the gravity. In the height of her struggle, she sees another coil, opposite and aglow. She twirls in its direction, too late she realizes that she is again in an inescapable well. Tortured between two burning coils she casts her gaze upwards, a gulf. She strains, whimpers. This is not a way to see things; she is having a bad trip. The front of her face hot, all senses have exploded into this furnace. The coils burn with intense heat and her skin begins to brown and blister, her pores fire larger as she ascends toward the open grate.

She pops up, crisp, the passage into night air a

burning cool that soothes her calid dermis. There is a wand in her mouth. It is Leilani's wand. The glowing end shines red through Nadine's skin. She has no gag reflex, having lost it long ago in her days as a novice Smoker under Old Merv. She pulls the wand from her mouth, the lit end drips brown saliva. Nadine licks chapped lips. Leilani stares, just as emotive as ever, she ceased moving forward after Nadine's hunger for light attacked. Nadine waves a hand in front of Leilani's face. No reaction. "Fuck this shit." Nadine storms to the front of the line. Parker and Franklin look back to Leilani.

"Keep moving Wife."

"Yes Husband."

The forest swallows the travellers, taking them into itself, an uneasy caging that raises the hackles of all but one. Trees moan. There are no leaves nor are there branches underfoot. Strange realization to Parker, who, in dreams, could have sworn a healthy layer of detritus and a shrub layer would be at least minimal obstacles. For the forest to be completely bereft of even fallen silver defoliate unsettles him. No growing ferns, nor gnome hiding toadstools. The trees are strong, but the dirt they cling to is dusty and dry. Perhaps his mother has been here a long time; perhaps this forest is unceremoniously geriatric.

Their first job. After Hanging Day, Franklin propositions Parker to join his school, for that he might teach Parker to read. Parker may also make things in the service of Franklin, a quid pro quo of elusive quantitative and qualitative odds. Parker agrees without ceremony and so it is that they stride out of 2nd Avenue towards what Franklin

hypes as, “Antediluvian. From Before.” Is not everything from some before? Their total supplies amount to zero, but the clothes on their back. Neither tools nor reading material have they with them. Franklin squandered his pamphlets on a quantity of meat that they ate. They sally forth, through the ends and turns of 2nd Avenue, following trails of feet underneath until dust obscures the more common paths and only one pair of footprints remains. This they follow to a fork and then jog opposite.

They pass submerged cranes, dilapidated elevators, long spiral forms that cringe in shadow. Dormant proximal lighting activates at their passage. The ground begins to slope, all buildings spiral towards the same end, a hole that is yet unseen. They talk not. Parker huffs. He pauses at every exposed wound in the earth and obviously exotic mammoth that his beady eyes spy. He gathers the random materials into his pockets. He knows not their labelling nor manufacturing marks, but his recent deal with Franklin gives him hope that these treasures may be identified later once they set up camp or have a moment.

Franklin slinks along steps in time with his animal spirit. He notices the downhill slope of their progress and takes reassurance from their decent. Down, down, deeper and down, going down, down, deeper and down. Towards an ultimate end, that to him is antediluvian preceding even his own desires, a core part of life that was stripped from him before he even knew of life.

Vertical lines of metal, steel cages, tossed fence rails and poured boulders wall-in what Parker surmises is their destination. Franklin stands before an ornate hole in the border, the sagging arch gapes. “W-wh-what is this place?”

Franklin throws his hand out, raised blasphemously to the sky, finger points towards the sagging arch. “It’s called a ‘Zoo’.”

“What is?”

Franklin stamps his foot. “This place is called a Zoo, these walls, these,” his hands flap, “constrictive bars. It was a place the Builders held animals, exotic species on display for appreciation and mockery.” The ground slopes yet, the terminus or nucleus of the pit somewhere in the zoo.

Franklin and Parker pass under the arch. Sonic disturbance flays at their eardrums, a bass grumble shakes their lungs. Wads of paper and dust shimmy on the ground, a back and forth vibration that subsides with the diminishing echo of the unseen beast.

“L-l-let’s go bahck.” Franklin walks on, re-aims towards the sound. Parker would rather not be left alone at the entrance to such an unfathomable menagerie and scuttles after Franklin, his snivelling at an end. Abandoned pens line a wide alley. Here occasional carts overturn and materials gather. Wind displaces text into corner stacks. Parker’s ever-watchful eyes rabbit from left to right. He binks towards an open steel door and the contents within set his jaws to flapping. Mops, sponge ended staves, liting sign with a black dancer, miles of tube, cloths, pumps, and bottles, all putty in the mitts of an experienced Maker.

Parker knows not what to do. He grabs a coil of hose from the wall and throws it around his neck like a rubber boa. Next, he wrangles the mop and brandishes it like a long-haired coat rack. These items in hand he careens around the closet bashing things off shelves in a disturbingly orderly fashion. First, the items on the tallest shelf, a bottle breaks and a rancid gas fills the space. With no time to waste he bats at the bottom row of rags, scraping them off and onto the floor on top of the gas. They begin to smoke. The resulting haze has Parker gagging in mere nothings. Phlegm shouts from his slack mouth, and with each clench he knocks plastic containers from their perch. A jumbling bounce and ringing call Franklin’s attention from outside. He yanks Parker from the steamy mess just as the pile of

rags ignites in fury at having been chemically compromised and their unending respite as relics ruined by the philistine Maker.

“Noooo!” Parker struggles against Franklin, drawn towards the burgeoning pyrotechnic display. Franklin maintains his hold on the hose and forces Parker to watch with stinging eyes as the closet gushes fourth fire and hissing vapor. Parker weeps at the loss of so many, perhaps useful possibilities. Their utility forever surrendered to light.

A borborygmus shout brings his attention to the present. Franklin swivels in the direction of the sound, lungs and bones quake as the sonorous assault continues. “Come on.” He hauls Parker to his feet and pushes him forward. Once convinced by Parker’s lackadaisical steps that he will not retreat to the closet, he takes the lead. Froward, the song of the beast compels him.

“There! Look!” Parker turns puffy eyes in the direction of the mammal, if mammal it is and not a reptilian doppelganger. Grey wrinkled flesh hangs from a bulbous frame. Stocky and ponderous, the creature barks from a maned and wretched physiognomy. Redundant rows of teeth overflow the mouth, each needle like and glistening. They drip eclegme that wiggles dangerously with each loud growl. Eyes, cloudy and large, focus on the oncoming pair like sinkholes of emotionless murder. The creature rears upright on massive hind claws; the ground seems to shrink as it does so, but a gradual change that barely registers amongst the companions for all their fear in the presence of such hoary majesty. Parker stands mute. Hollowed inside, he allows the growl to pierce through, to fill him with remorseless vengeance. He will make Franklin pay for tearing him free of the closet. Cold fires stoke with each reverberation from the creature’s diaphragm. Seeing the futility of its bellows, it paces its cement depression; predatory eyes synchronized to Parker’s occasional attempts at movement out of its dark aura.

Walpurgisnacht

They settle down for the evening. Collect themselves before a conjured fire. Each has their own thoughts of their journey thus far. Although their reality has recently become malleable and translucent, there is the future to think of and discuss.

Nadine begins, “She’ll prolly be beautiful Parker. Can’t wait to meat her.”

“Y-ye-yeah I can’t wait either. Y’know I dreamet of her forever. My mother. I knowe that I have one but to meet here will be differnt. Y’know, not in the Dream, but here forreal in the werld.”

“What if she is hideous and not at all like you have dreamt?” Franklin designs a mystery to others, poses this question in order to conceal his goals and aims.

“Then I’ll love her just the same as she loves me, for she be my mother an, y’know like, no bond is stronger than blood. I’ll love her for shore.” Blessed be the heart of Parker for believing so strongly in a future with a mother. However, I know, you as well as me,

that we have no mothers, that we are simply manufactured to explore and catalogue the world.

“Hah. Whad iff ya don’t have a mother? Whad if yur just like us?” Nadine is cruel, yet her question fair.

Parker’s reply is a yell, “I do have a mother!”

The surrounding trees are wordless on the subject, yet Leilani, displaying an inordinate amount of autonomy posits, “What if she does not acknowledge you as her son?”

Parker splutters, spilling words like an overturned carafe, “B-b-but I I I. She loves me and I love her and sh-sh-she is real. I f-feel it. Down deep.” He points to his crotch.

“What if your mother, is un lovable, like my wife?” Franklin narrows his eyes as he asks, future actions hinge on Parker’s response.

“Th-then I’ll, I dunno, I’ll still be with her and live and be, and and. Y’know I’ll make her be lovable.” To make her lovable, can Franklin do such a thing with his wife, his shackle? Can Franklin in good conscious suppress his disdain for the unmovable object that haunts his every step, the being he once thought to be the epitome of wonder, can he make himself love her, actually?

He frowns and mumbles, “We might have pretend.” Pretend. The word is bane to any ideas of reality one may hold sacred. Pretend: to imagine the not as real, an engagement of fancy and the fictitious. His relation

to his wife is based solely on her physical reality and not on the contents of her mind. He knows she will eventually evaporate due to either natural causes or a premature demise from his own insatiable hunger for human flesh. Is she human? Yes, to him she is, and this is an untenable obstacle he must work around if he wants her to persist. But, if he does not want her to persist, the simple act of using one of the four unforgivable curses will assure the ending of their current relationship. "Pretend."

Nadine, ever practical, despite her mystical view asks, "What's your mom like?"

"She has long brown hair, in braids," Parker closes his eyes and summons a recent image of his mother before him. Wholly from dreams, the image is incomplete. "And she has like, like, like, a body of a whore. Y'know, clippty clop an' stuff."

"What the fuck." Nadine is dubious. How could a possibly four-legged equestrian, give birth, even baring the intervention of Qall, to a two-legged man-baby like Parker? This is also the first Franklin has heard of Parker's mother being anything other than humanoid. He blinks.

"Y-y-yeah, I will ride on her back and she will love me and we will be together and we will both be happy." Parker is anxious to communicate the well-being he and his mother will experience upon the reunification.

"Alrighty Parker, if you say so." Franklin scratches his own ears and mentally checks his plan. "To

Parker's mother." Franklin lifts his wand and the others follow suit.

"To Parker's mother."

"To my mother."

"To Parker's mother." Leilani is the last to raise her wand, and in convivial spirit, none of the others regards this as strange.

Four wands raised in salute, the scene freezes. We see them here: at this point, all are on equitable terms, perhaps for the first time and also for the last. I do not wish to undermine their moment of happiness, but it is long past and their struggle well known if not explicitly detailed. Effervescent glow blossoms from the gathering and the singular salute to such a womyn. United they bless the night and the coming days to the finding of the odd femyle.

Undiscovered Mother

A space opens there in the best of times it would have been labelled maleficarum. In that particular present, pronounced already to be past, there will be some other mapmaker. A singular entity whose plurality frees dreaming from the shackles of imagination. Only hot beds and wet sheets, wet sleeps a far more tantalizing antidote for comprehension than a notepad. But there is no way to know for sure, and as Franklin sits he thinks of this: How many do I do? For the limit seems to be beyond what I may not even be able to understand. A potential strings threads where no string ought. An auger of memory and isolation. You're on fire. A rage from inside slips him. Kills them the people.

Beneath him a swelling trumpeter. A gaseous bloat balloon whistles from the mouthpiece as spit tones out. A peacock there is also, white. Across the street now a gangly human flops against vacant bricks. A thudding, more bass, the ream of the goal is untenable in its present lock. For with go-go-go a time expired as the man shat. His dogs on the lawn refusing a plastic bag, the green a grey. The bag a silent cube.

Barely thinking across. Across. Opened to the shivers and blinding spells of his fellow wizards a cat suit hero complains of his inability.

Franklin awakens in a cold sweat to find Parker up and alert, ready for the final stretch. "Today Leilani will lead us to mother. It is an irreconcilable fact." Franklin wonders at Parker's sudden coherence and grasp of language but lets the wonder subside into a mere noting, something for the margins. This brain blistered motherfucker leads them all to a penultimate horizon, one from which beyond they will be condemned to consume the fruits of their malnourished day labours. The tenuous grasp on reality maintained by the principle actors a devolution into sterile thought and consumption. Will they, won't they? The illogic of the situation demands recompense at our expense. Why do we entertain these prehistoric thoughts when we could just as naturally be achieving something of our own greatness? I do not simply philosophize for the sake of philosophizing but it is paramount that I push you towards a conclusion, else nought for have I spoke these past hours.

They came to a clearing, and there, clad in horse hooves and a cable knit sweater, is Parker's progenitor. She stamps, unaware of their presence, head bowed as she clips leaves from a tree, her mouth moving with leisurely mastication. A silver leaf pulls from tree; fat lips drag it over the cliff of teeth. Pulling inexorably inward, the leaf is helpless. Grinding chompers split and pulp the leaf, silver sheen stains dentin. Fat tongue throws slick fibres

down throat.

Parker, once mummified, starts forward exercising horse sense in a gesture of forward hand, placating and demonstrative of no harm. Winky quivers, gyrating like a fly on the face of decomposing fruit. “I’m here mother. It’s your son, Parker.” The centaur’s head rises, the beast’s hooves clatter on the bare earth as it turns to regard this unexpected interloper. “Please, I’ve come from such a long way to be with you again.” The centaur crosses its arms. Parker bows slightly, “I’m your son, you gave birth to me though you might’n’t not remember it.” The centaur stamps its four hooves.

“Indeed I do recollect birthing thee.” Parker’s mother is dappled grey and brown. “’Twas years ago you dropped from my womb and took thine first steps as a young mare.” Parker falls to his knees, humbled by his mother’s recollection. “Arise mine own son, and come to your mother.” The centaur opens its arms wide in welcoming. Parker rushes towards his mother, heart thumping and bumping. A ring of dust faeries produce themselves and proceed to encircle the reunited couple. Parker hears their hallowed dirge as unknown possibility erodes into known implausibility.

Franklin pats his wife on the shoulder as a show of favor and approval, but her vision merely bounces at his touch. Franklin smiles at the cloudy reunion. This beast has surpassed all expectations of what an animal or person ought to be. The equine femyle and her mutated son are an odd pairing to say the least, but seeing them, watching them, leering from behind the trees at them, Franklin hatches plans. He whispers low

to Leilani, “Be ready to act, I’ll need you at your best dear Wife.” Leilani nods. Lo! What grandiloquence from the frigid being.

Nadine rides an edge of misery. The mothdust snort-rocketed out, she is now able to bring her faculties to bear on the situation before her. Parker has found his mother. What will he do now? She fears this precipice, at least for Parker. His dream fulfilled what will motivate him to move? He remains in her arms, Winky and his less disturbing phalangelical counterparts comb through the course braids of Parker’s mother. How can it be this simple? Her need for highs is an ending of yearning, even amidst throws of indulgence, the end of the trip looms. Then there is coming down. Sometimes harder than others but the manifest lack of pleasure or subsiding from that height is the terrible woe that follows any experience. Pits and Peaks. Is now, this moment of mother and son, a peak that overlooks such a treacherous pit?

“Mother. I-I-I knew you had to be, I just know’d that it couldn’t be that you didn’t exist everyone kept telling ‘em that I had no mother but now I know I did, I did know that. Even everyone said. An’ my friends Frankie and Nadine, they helped. Even though maybe I don’t know but they’re here come meet them mother I-I-I-I jest knoe you’d like ‘em.” Parker grasps his mother’s strange hand in his but she reverses the grip, takes his hand and examines it. She lifts it to her nose and sniffs at it.

“What, my only son, is this?”

Parker squirms, not wanting his mother to scrutinize

him so; he has forgotten her exacting cruelty.
“Mhmmmp. Mmhmpph.” He whimpers. She squeezes his hand.

“I have asked you a question, I expect an answer.”
She places her other hand on her son’s shoulder. “It’s completely alright Parker Tor.” Jubilation inundates Parker upon hearing his surname. Long has he thought a part of him missing, even before the loss of his hand to flame. Tor, a strong and sturdy name to build himself on.

Moved to confession: “Th-tha-that’s Winky.”

“I see, and how long have you had ‘Winky?’”

“He’s been with me since the last time.”

Mother Tor strokes the beguiling digit with a course hand and sniffs it again. She brushes it with her weathered lips and it twitches, pulling away as Parker tries again to free his hand. A prismatic crystal of pain blooms from the back of Parker’s hand as his mother strips Winky with a devastating bite. Teeth chisel out the root of the defect. Parker screams and tries to free his hand, but Mother Tor grips it hard, boring her teeth into bone and flesh ripping out all traces of this desecration. Her son is a perfect being and shall bear no trace of deformity. She crunches cartilage and bone and releases the streaming hand to Parker. “Wrap that in something.”

Kismet Metempsychosis

Mother Tor canters past her wounded son towards the three. Her approach is as the breaking of codes and sundering of regulations. A familiar boundary suddenly undone leaves all within the enclosure unsure of proximal relations. Are they within or are they without? Franklin tenses and beneath his robes, his hand wraps around Kasortar.

“That’s far enough.” Mother Tor stamps and crosses her arms. The therianthropic womyn nonplusses Franklin. His ritual devotion to the texts of Larry Miller has prepared his mind for such sights and abnormalities. He has an idea on how to conduct himself before a non-wizardly creature. “My name is Franklin.” He bows. “With me, is my sister Nadine.” He lifts his head and holds an arm out towards Nadine. She stares dumbly a moment before bowing similarly. Her synapses misfire in the beast’s presence. Or is it in Leilani’s presence?

“And that, Wizard? What is that one called?”

“Pay that one no heed. What have you done to

Parker? Are you truly his mother?" In his rush for knowledge, Franklin has forsaken the rules of hospitality. Stacking questions is a surefire way to sink all chances of learning what he would like to know.

Nadine's butt has gone numb. Old Merv leans branches and crooked wired tads against one another in a corner of the old underground bathroom. They've been living under 2nd Avenue in the Ways for three days and Old Merv is finally setting up an acceptable place to put his head. Nadine has been sitting there watching him. She shifts and a tingle rises through her cheeks and she smiles uncomfortably at the sensation. This is a lesson in patience, "Nawt al yoor eyes cums foam instarners. Somatymes ya golla weights." She's been watching Old Merv snuff and stuff himself with edibles, poppers, flasks, bleeding into dermal patches, migrating from one existential height to another. All the while, she waits for something else. Old Merv tests his lean-to with a puff of rancid breath.

"Up! Up! Gert urp!" Old Merv thrusts his root like limbs upwards. Nadine is still bored out of her skull and moves not. Old Merv entangles her hands and rips her off the floor. The sudden verticality blisters her inner gyroscope and vessels burst at the change in altitude. Her vision blurs and her head rocks, sudden inebriation of restored circulation. The patient high. Her brain rushes down rocks as thunder crashes. Falls, ever downward, even as she stands. Watercraft of a deceased hero rushes over the falls, armaments and

trophies surrendered. Weightless in death upon the overflow, an insignificance to the eternal majesty of nature's power. The persistence of material, matter conserved eternally. When they dredge the reservoir, they will find leached bones and tatters, not the soul of a demon who once roamed searching out hosts to bend.

“I am as you name me, Mother of Parker Tor, your erstwhile companion. I've rechristened him, reclaiming for our tribe my lost son.” She squints black amygdaliform eyes. Behind her, in the clearing, Parker is on bent knees holding his hand up and conducting faeries with his wand. They are weeping; soot rolls down their faces, even the arachnoid faeries seem dour as they work in concert to weave a stoppage. Silver patch stitches over Winky's former sprouting place. Parker continues to gaze at the faeries, tears streak down his own cheeks. Such greatness he achieved, finding his mother, loving his mother and her loving him. His heart is lost and its absence, though spread over with glitter is no healing salve, but a fallen star, a reminder of previous joys.

Kasortar slithers through the air with nonchalance, an apparently benign motion. Leilani shutters into a motion of stone procession. Blue eyes glint in the balsamaceous night, quarry identified the weeping man. Entropy halted, the platinum homunculus disgorges halidom upon Parker's organic structure. Ecstasy begins to wrack Parker. Feelings of loss subside as physical thrill blasts into every unit of his makeup. His throat clenches as an emerald beam lasers. He feels the tingling as a summons to orgasm, burning soft against strained lungs. Bewilderment

amongst all the good feeling, tightness, an enveloping dark combats the electric sizzle of hedonic glee. Senses deaden. Life is ring, which tells time by its width. Shrinking and expanding to encompass memory, the watch ticks down entropy, stellar magnitudes dwarfed by the rate of fun. Parker's fun breaches the limits of his body; such acceleration demands an adjournment that culminates in non-feeling, nonbeing, organic death. Yet still he clings, these last motes, froze in his orbs. Still-forms of fae impressed, engraved in the history of others. Clocking out despite the relief of mourning, a last stuttered monosyllable erupts from his gas-starved shell, "S-s-schtroumpf." After that he dies.

Galloping towards her auto erotically asphyxiated son Mother Tor neighs, trees drown in the outpouring of her anguish. Her knees fold, buckle under the guilt of forced loss upon her only son. She'd known, of course she'd known, having read burning gas and waiting patiently in this spot. Her display of grief is unmoving, hands classically slapped to face amid horse tears. Leilani stands beside the crumpled empty remains of Parker, wand in hand, stagnant. Her task complete, on to the next.

One might wonder at the White People's reclamation at this point. Did the data from Parker's banks radio back? Is there, as we speak, another Parker brewing in the construct?

Penultimate Transaction

Does she weep for a lost son or does she weep for the loss of control that one surrenders to fate, the inexorable threads that draw us towards a certain end despite our desires to the contrary? Her gestures emote grief, but what is the source? Sobs wrack her body; she clutches the remains of her son to her chest. Sopping horse tears drench his remains. Leilani and Franklin move to flank the crying beast. Her moans almost drown the low hum of Franklin and Leilani as they lift wands skywards. Multicoloured streams bloom from the tips and a net cascades down and around the centaur. As it settles on its skin, crisscrossing net lines dissolve, leaving faint lines like faded scars across the entirety of her. Nadine steps forward, unsure of the current spell they cast. She examines the gestures and the angle of the wands. Franklin and Leilani begin to circle the centaur. The net draws tighter. As they complete one circle, in one last eldritch flash the net lines draw taught and disappear from view completely. In that instant, Parker's mother notices Franklin unmoved by the death of his friend. Franklin grins, white teeth and curled lips. Parker's body clunks from her bosom. She

attempts to stand, muscles strain, to no end.

“There is no point in your resistance. You are caught. You will not stand.” The centaur strains against this command, muscles bulge and froth but she remains rooted. “You will not speak, you will not attempt escape, and you will never be free.” Her eyes narrow. “Wife, with me.” Leilani takes post behind Franklin. “My Wife and I have bound you. There is no resistance; you simply cannot do anything unless permission is given. Oh, and you will not follow any directions given by my wife.” Nadine balks at this, trouble in paradise? “Stand.” The centaur springs to its feet with minimal effort but suddenly its body contorts as it struggles to take a step. “I told you.” The lips of the beast would speak, but guttural cries of injustice have been ordered not. “Nadine. Come here sister.”

Nadine’s Lepidopteron haze vanishes as Franklin speaks her name. She approaches. “Would you care to ride her?” Who wouldn’t want to ride her? To take complete advantage of this once magnificent beast brought low through arcane means. Although Nadine’s highs are many, she has never rode anything, much less a living being. She mimics Leilani and Franklin’s earlier gestures and similar net streams from her wand. Half a shade lighter the net settles quickly on the beast.

“You can talk.” The utterance awakens Nadine to the possibility of complete compulsion and ownership. The pleasure of complete control and mastery over a life is nothing she has heretofore experienced. It is not a physical high, no chemicals have been introduced to

her body, but she writhes as if her whole being were tickled with decadent pleasure. Undulating in the air, she licks nicotine stained lips and flashes her knives at the centaur. The subtlety of this command is the sensual knowledge that it is within her to own a being. Refusal to speak is even an acknowledgement of the order, “can” is not “should,” and the beast recognizes this.

“I have no words.”

“Nope, ya don’t.” What a thrill for Nadine. So used to introducing and subjecting her body to chemical compositions, biological or those made by the Builders, this new high seems like the first time: a complete undoing of perceived boundaries. “Kneel.” Like a sledge, the beast drops to knees and Nadine climbs its face. She straddles the beast, tangles her mittens in the black mane. “Let’s see what this pony can do.” She kicks it into motion and jolts as unshod hooves clatter against the packed dirt. Over branches and silvered stumps, it wends a way through the forest. Clearing the crease, air moves with such rapidity as to chill Nadine. She feels refreshed and energized. The thrill of moving both at incredible speed and controlling the mechanisms of another organism is just something she hasn’t built a tolerance for. The centaur froths at the mouth as it thunders over the irradiated cratered terrain. Nadine clenches with her thighs and urges the mount faster. Hoof-beats dash the leftovers of the previous blood glut, human remains pulped. That past thrill, imbibing of vitae, not so near a complete and unreasonably good feeling binge. The Beacon looms, approaches not with the speed of the ride, nor the rate of pounding feet but

with Nadine's shifting perspective.

"Leilani, wait here." Franklin stands before a high arched red door. He opens it and enters an amphitheatre. Nadine is there with a bowed and ruined centaur. They approach the stage, rimmed with gas foot lights. Up through a trap door seeps the coagulate being known colloquially as the Litigators. "We come before you Litigators to settle our debts, plus interest. We offer the being you see before you, tamed and fertile." Dewey sprouts mess out of the central mass, the ends swell into ballooning eyes. Each slit focuses on the four-legged monster before them. "This centaur is capable of reproduction and seemingly free of the curse of Qall."

The Litigators spurge. "This is an undocumented entity. We've no financial data to support a clearing of the price owed." Swelling, the Litigators continue, the growing jelly overflows the stage and extinguishes several of the lamps. Grotesque shadows obfuscate curtains. "However, the singular claims you make on its behalf, once verified will be enough to balance your accounts. Are you certain of your information?"

"Yes, though we bought it at a great pain, Parker, the Maker, has been destroyed." Nadine hears this contradiction, but her newly acquired status as owner erases all trace of doubt. This is the right way. Destroyed? Good.

"Very well. Consider yourselves unburdened financially." The Litigators begin to slide off the

stage, rolling towards the centaur. Franklin and Nadine exit the amphitheater and join Leilani in the lobby.

And they lived happily ever
after

Now friends, I do hope you see and understand what I have been telling you. I have tried to communicate the facts as they are, but to also tell a story. Like any good tippler, I have exaggerated where appropriate while striving to maintain the integrity of the tale. You see, for us, for the Disciples of Larry Miller, we have been unburdened. Unburdened through magic and our biological destiny freed via the subjugation of the centaurs. What Franklin claimed is true, they are free of the taint of Qall, and they are able to give live birth. It is possible for us to propagate a news species free of the genetic manipulations of the White People. I am not going to tell you what you should do. Or to follow the tenants of Larry Miller as put down by Franklin the Wizard. No threats here, but you should realize the choice you give up.

Up until now, you have lived only as the White People have decreed: Smoking, Drinking, Reading, Feeding, and Making. These are not your only options; these are not the limit of your being. Each person who practices magic finds themselves

cognizant of a greater glory. Worthy of an end that is not plugged back into the White People's Construct and regurgitated cycles later into the same dead world. Rather, for practitioners of the arcane arts, there is a more personal objective: The Beacon. It draws each of us towards it, caring not a whit for moral compunctions or our reticence to change. It consumes, wholly our being, however, it is our choice. The Beacon can just as easily be anything to the same person. It is as we choose. Moreover, we, the Disciples, choose to dedicate our lives towards a worthy end. You might resist following The Beacon, but those that do quickly lose their minds and wander directionless as so many humans.

This tale is heavy with information and though I promised to answer your questions earlier, I will not have enough time to say what I need to and still achieve what I ought. I encourage you to speak to one another, to voice your concerns and discuss. Make up your own minds, free of the influence of the manufactured Dream of the White People. Magic lifts us from those boundaries and reveals them to us as they are, an act of subjugation that cares only for our bodies as tools to catalogue, collect, and produce, towards aims we're never participant in choosing.

Magic is the power to change the world, as you perceive it. I'll say it again, Magic is the power to change the world as you perceive it. You make reality. Paradoxically our perceptions shape our perception. I, myself, prefer to live in a world of my own making rather than slave to a world imposed through genetic and neural manipulation.

Nadine no longer has to ingest chemicals or subject her body to ravages in the pursuit of getting high. Her course follows The Beacon.

Franklin is no longer committed to interpreting the history of the fallen earth, instead he works to shape the future and follow The Beacon.

Absentee architects have laid the roads we take, condemned are those who choose a mundane existence; this is not doom saying, but irrefutable fact. In order to be all that we were meant to be and salvage probability for the new species of centaur hybrids we must commit ourselves to the practice of magic. Our spirits are no longer to be reclaimed by the grinding of the White People but put towards pure ends, self-serving ends. For the self is all that matters, ever has and ever will. How you serve yourself is a quest only you can complete, but magic opens that door. Belief in possibility beyond prescriptions. The path of the Disciples of Larry Miller is arduous and not without complication but the rewards are our rewards, worked and paid for by us and us alone. And while the current world is dead and ruined, our future spawn, un-shaped by remote entities, will do unimaginably terrible and great things. We know of the Builders, their fate, though tragic, is not without its lessons for us. Perhaps the White People have perpetrated that one good, making the mistakes of the past inhabitants of this planet readable.

Do with this information as you will. I have told you this tale so that you may come to understand that life is a series of choices, those made and those given. I implore you to make your own decision but without

acknowledging magic, you will only be given choice, that of the White People. The Beacon awaits you, a gravity you cannot hope to escape, nor will you want to. It is not a loss of self but a realization of self.

Please, bear with me a moment longer, this last part is important. When the world around you seems to be built of ruins and heaps of corpses, there is nothing to blame but your own inaction, your self-imposed paralysis. Bring magic into your life! Believe in its power to change and you will be rewarded. The difference of life before and after, there is no life before just a road, deep grooves where Sumerian smiths' carved wheels trundle along. Channelled people and controlled ideas shape the world, imposing structure on a formless wilderness of possibility. The wheels turn still friends. Until you decide to leave the confines of this vehicle, you will never be free but a passenger that pushes pedals and thinks this is a motor. Our limitations are self-imposed and magic is the power to obliterate those limitations and realize the boundaries from without instead of within given structures.

It is my hope that each of you will leave having heard this tale and be forever altered, that my own spell has worked on you to wedge a doubt, a doubt in the solidity of your world and the futility of dreams. For they are all it ever was and at their source a beacon. Source of hope, loss, and beauty.