

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: A WORLDWIDE HISTORY SPANNING GENOCIDE FOR THE
 SAKE OF CORPORATE PROFIT

Jacob Eckstein, Master of Fine Arts, 2016

Thesis Directed by: Professor Emily Mitchell
 Department of English

A Worldwide History Spanning Genocide for the Sake of Corporate Profit is the title of a thesis consisting of four stories. Naming Crosky's Knife is presented first for the sake of allowing potential readers to embrace a sense of amiable audience engagement and is based on a true story of a veteran of one of the many global conflicts currently raged on behalf of freedom. The three pieces following this feint are reworked versions of stories written from the heart and delivered to machines. As it presents numerous aspects of reality that the average person may not wish to consider, doing so with shockingly casual acceptance of such horror and/or banality, the conscious reception of the duty of engagement and possible appreciation of the text is not advised. Knives, rabid dogs, severed tongues, and a downpour of malnourished Iraqi babies are components intrinsic to the direction of this thesis.

A WORLDWIDE HISTORY SPANNING GENOCIDE FOR THE SAKE OF
CORPORATE PROFIT

By

Jacob Eckstein

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Mitchell, Chair
Professor Maud Casey
Professor Howard Norman

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Naming Crosky's Knife

The worst thing about Iraq was Seargent Crosky's knife.

People tend to ask. The standard response is usually weather related.

What was it like over there if you don't mind me asking...

Hot.

Oh.

Yeah. It was really hot.

And then they laugh politely and indicate that they appreciate the sacrifices of duty.

What am I doing now?

I tell them the worst part is teaching my students about active and passive voices.

Sounds nice.

There were movies being made about the war for the audience back home before it was even optimistically declared to be over. Helped everyone feel included. So much support from friends and family and even more from strangers with heart-felt thank-yous. But in bars, after a few rounds tossed down, they almost always asked.

How was it? Common sense directs that everyone has their own worst thing whether they like it or not. Worst thing about the woman you love. Worst thing about church services. Worst thing about war.

Mine was Crosky's knife. I hated it. What he did with it. How he always talked about it. The name he gave it. How he voiced its thoughts like some do with spoiled pets. Every last thing about it.

Military Police and the local boys were all over the area the night I took it from the scene. The taking itself was against a few laws. Technically. Evidence from a crime scene and all that. But considering the circumstance, I did not then and have not since felt the slightest guilt.

Putting it in a plastic evidence bag and filing it away would have changed nothing. If I had let it be collected, I would have felt some kind of idiotic loss. Kindof like a child who loses their favorite stuffed animal. At a certain age, they come to understand that the teddy bear or doll or whatever isn't really real. It doesn't have feelings. It's not a person. But the kid still experiences genuine sadness or at least some kind of wound when they meet with separation. Left behind at a restaurant or forgotten in some park amidst the rush to race a sibling to departing cars. Something meaningless to anyone but them and only in that moment.

It's the time spent with it. The emotions projected onto or into it. The way that any thing can become something to hold on to instead of letting go and admitting that we all go just like we came. Naked and dead as shit and without any real answers. Please insert appropriate literary quote or paraphrase.

I'm not saying Crosky's knife was my teddy bear. Kindof the opposite actually. But when I knelt down next to the body to pull it out and slid it into my pocket, I had a thought about children leaving behind stuffed animals at rest stops along highways during

family vacations. I'm not making a direct comparison. Different objects, differing types of personal investment. I'm really just admitting that these different things, thoughts and experiences, were all factors.

He used to use it for everything. And I mean everything. Opening beer bottles. Fixing the old school tv back at base. Trimming the straps of the new guys just in from the world while they stood there in their nervous armor saying nothing. Opening up a thick swelling on the face of a private after close quarters engagement got too close and a private got sloppy. Crosky cut a slow line around the wounded eye and it drained out in a quick gush of red. Like quick-fix boxer surgery during a prizefight. After checking to make sure he could see clearly, Crosky made him thank the knife before ordering us up the block to continue the day's labor.

He used it to cut his fingernails and toenails. To pick his teeth. To shave off the thick yellowing callouses born of too many foot patrols in firmly laced boots. To stab things and change the way things looked. To check his reflection in the mirror of its surface.

It had a reputation. Regulars would mention it in conversation like it was a person. After all, it had a name, which I refused to say even now. Fresh deployments would show up and become part of the joke. You would catch them speaking with reverence of the most badass dude on base. The fearless one. The calm, thoughtless killer. They'd say its name and everyone in the know would hide smiles. And Crosky did nothing to discourage this. He never expressly ordered that the secret be kept. It wasn't

much of a secret. He gave the knife its own locker. Eventually, some new guy would see him retrieving it from the locker and he'd just tell them its name.

I once watched him cut a trip wire strung across a doorway in Fallujah when we were sweeping house to house. Whispering to it the entire time. His free hand shaking like alcoholic fathers early morning. But the other was holding the blade and stayed steady, working without the slightest tremble. Like it heard his words and didn't mind the task at hand. A soft tripwire. The kind you have to drag out of the connection to the charge. Cobwebs drooping loose for clumsy insects. Not the kind waiting for you to break the strain to allow trigger release.

When we caught up with the local boys holed up in that compound, he did other things with the knife. Some guys from intel were on site and didn't make any complaints. Or reports. Apparently the knife procured some pretty valuable intel which led to the next mission which led to everybody receiving medals of various sorts. I erred on the side of a sick day and didn't mind the action I missed or the decorations awarded to everyone but me. Crosky would always tease me about my absence. Was it my period? Was I homesick? Did I miss my mother?

I always told him the truth. I just didn't feel like going.

Even after that, he was always kind to me. As though we were old friends. My first week in camp he kept his distance, until one day in the mess some brass was attending and they all got to discussing favorite weapons. They asked Crosky and he politely told them about his favorite. They laughed and asked what year it was. It wasn't feudal Japan. That thing won't scratch kevlar. Shit like that. He stared down at his food,

dead silent. Then one of the brass sees me down at the far end of the table, trying to be invisible.

How 'bout you, kid? When's the last time you solved a problem with a knife?

And I had to say it. A sort of literary quote I thought they'd appreciate.

Well, sir... And Crosky takes me in out of the corner of his eye... A man I've always admired said that fighting an insurgency is like trying to eat soup with a knife.

And then just silence.

So... I guess you could use it for anything. As long as it gets the job done.

Then they all just sat there, solemn in their rank. Then the highest on the totem starts giggling. Like some stoned teenager. It's contagious. It ended with them all laughing. Crosky seemed like a boiling pot until the brass made it clear that they now approved and he was included. They asked about his knife. They watched in respectful silence as he played the classic game of stabbing between his fingers with increasing speed. They asked him what he'd done with it and he let them know it had uses to which it had been put.

One asked in polite jest what he called her.

And that was the first time I heard its name.

After that, he was always kind to me. As though he and I alone were in on the greatest joke. I had helped him in a way that mattered to him and he would always cut me a little extra slack to let me know he hadn't forgotten.

Turns out a little later the same higher ups made a ritual to initiate the newest arrivals in the counter intel unit in field. They would sit them down for a meal after a long day of lunchless details. Everyone dying to eat, stomachs growling, thinking they're about to get a special treat.

Instead, they were served large bowls of steaming hot soup. Using hands to lift and drink was explained to be an offense punishable by assignment to the shit list. The only thing they were allowed to touch was a knife. No spoons, no forks. Just a single, simple knife.

And everyone was required to finish.

When word of this ritual got back to Crosky, he almost cried. So great was his pride. Immense was his silent joy. He'd secured a place, however removed, among the ranks of the utmost. Counter intel in the sandbox is no joke. Those boys are very serious customers.

I heard it took them hours to finish their special meal. Drop by drop. Seeing themselves on its surface as they consumed every small sip. Careful of the sharp side, trying to hold as much across the breadth of the blade as their balance would allow. Slurping like children without manners.

And this honor did not make Crosky any kinder to anyone but me. After that, he began to carry the knife everywhere. In the shower, the shitter, to bed with him at night. Still kept the locker reserved. A new guy of slightly lesser rank cleared it out one day. Poor guy had been assigned the locker and the office grunts hadn't heard of the unspoken rule.

Crosky left the kid's belongings scattered all over the floor. Pictures of family torn up, laptop wrecked, uniforms and casual wear shredded, letters from home crumpled and even half eaten. And all of it covered in spit, piss, and shit.

Crosky was just sitting in the middle of it all, calmly sharpening his blade. Stayed there for hours while people came and went.

Finally, when it could no longer be avoided, the kid returned to his bunk and we all waited. Crosky got up and made his way over.

He didn't seem angry or unhappy. Just calmly sitting there looking at the poor kid like he was something curious but boring. He raised his knife up to consider it beneath the empty light of the fluorescents. Like an expert jeweler analyzing the flaws in a nearly perfect diamond. Without even looking at the kid he whispered something.

The next day he took the kid out on some unspecified op and didn't return for three days. He treated the kid like a little brother ever after. Always smiled at him with genuine affection. Got him the sweetest details and excused him from all the shit jobs.

The empty look on that kid's face every time Crosky was around was all I needed to see to know that I didn't want to know.

Eventually, they pressured the kid after a night of heavy drinking. What the hell had Crosky said to him that day? They needed to know what had been whispered. They needed to fill in the dialogue in the movie we were all watching and appreciate the gravity of what took place off screen.

When he finally caved, the words weren't satisfying or anticlimactic and we all just walked away. I remember how simple and honest they were. And I can insert them into my memory of Crosky sitting across from him after destroying all of the things some poor kid had brought to war with him from home.

'Do you know what I can do with this?'

And after no response-

'It's okay. I'll show you.'

A few days before the knife became mine, we were on a simple daytime patrol in an area of the city that was supposed to be clear. Next thing you know, a pile of trash gets ambitious and takes out our lead Humvee. Shooters on second and third floors on either side of the street. One RPG blast launched from a shoulder and our third vehicle becomes a pile of twisted burning steel. Two more guys bought it in our collective migration to the closest safe spot on the first floor of the nearest eastern building. The rest of us just kneeled or stood, panting heavily and wondering what to do next. In about thirty seconds, we'd lost our medic and the top two officers in our chain of command.

This left Crosky in charge.

I remember the small smile edging out the corner of his lips when he realized his inheritance.

'Anybody hurt?' he asked softly. Besides a few scratches and sore throats from smoke, everyone who wasn't dead was good to go.

‘Then man the fuck up, ladies. Time to earn our paychecks.’

We cleared the entire first floor to make our way to the next street over, cut through a series of alleys and entered a four story building about four or five blocks from the scene of the ambush. Our boots thundered as we ran up the concrete stairwell to the roof to see the smoke rising from our ruined patrol. Crosky scanned the horizon and turned to us, soft smile louder than a scream.

‘Perfect,’ he said, as if trying to calm or reassure us before pulling Peccans aside to give a specific set of hushed orders. Peccans hunched down at a far corner of the roof and exchanged chatter with control.

Crosky called everyone over to the edge of the roof and the others peaked over cautiously. Nothing but the low rattle of automatics in the distance. A minute or so passes before a spotting round drops and the blocks surrounding our ruined patrol are transformed into a mountain of fire. I sat back from the others, not standing to see the carnage, but unable to avoid the upper portion of the blasts reaching far above the waist-high wall along the edge of the roof.

I watched them watch the explosions and finally just watched Crosky. He was facing me, back against the wall, but lifting his knife to observe the air strike through its reflection. Like some prisoner using a shaving mirror to check for approaching guards.

Never taking his eyes off the knife, he issued commands to Peccans, who crouched down around his radio and never bothered to look over the roof’s edge with the others. Using only the knife’s reflection to guide a series of adjustments to fire, Crosky kept the mission open for a stretch of thirty or so minutes. Seemed like hours.

The ambush had come from about eight windows on either side of the street. Maybe a dozen at the most. Afterwards, a four block target zone of apartments, small shops, hookah bars, or what the hell ever had been destroyed. In the debriefing, the details of the ambush took on a life of their own. We were attacked by phantom battalions, IEDs every three feet. A monstrous assault that was definitely more impressive than a dozen AKs, an IED, and one RPG.

I was awarded but declined a purple heart for a cut on my left thigh that barely needed stitches. The same medal awarded to soldiers who lose both their hands or have their faces burned off.

Later I saw Crosky sitting alone in the rec room, staring at a wall, his expression completely blank. I coughed to announce my presence and he turned to consider me with apologetic eyes. He made a stuttered and simple confession before turning back to his wall.

‘You don’t have to say it... I know... The whole thing would have looked better if we had done it at night...’

It happened after we lost Peccans to a sniper during yet another call to prayer. Probably not the soundtrack he’d imagined would be playing during his final scene. Democracy lost four more freedom fighters before command declared the area unclean and deployed all necessary forces.

Known hotspots and an estimated center of activity were targeted and we all went house to house well past sundown. When we'd pressed through to what seemed like the bottom of the business, Crosky went ahead with two admirers from counter intel. They were at it for hours before we finally caught up to them along a wide trail of kicked down doors and bloody living rooms.

The boys needed a break and took it without approval from command. I decided to move forward based on a feeling and that was how I came across the final scene of Crosky's violence and the expression of his edge.

Entering the twelve story housing complex, I saw a young woman, hand clutched to chest, running and stumbling out the opposite exit. I moved carefully, rifle raised mid-range like home invasion, up the stairs she just descended. Small drops and short streaks of blood like a trail all the way. On the seventh floor, four doors into the hallway, I found him. Crosky's last stand.

Two were slouching in a corner, visible to all who entered and dead beyond question. Eyes open and bowels voided. What he'd taken from them was piled like appetizers on a cheap folding table like the kind used for church picnics or the kiddy table at holiday reunions. A cheap shaggy rug below drenched to blackness. You could smell it in the air before you even walked into the room. A thick, rich mineral smell. Iron like rusty water out of a bad tap. The scent of it heavy enough to make you roll the flavor over on your tongue before you realized what you were savoring.

Another had made it out, but a quick count of the corpses' digits and a little easy math made it clear that the one who got away had left a few pieces of himself behind.

The plastic zip ties on the local boy must have snapped. Maybe adrenaline or a factory defect. Either way, fate had taken the situation out of Crosky's hand. I saw clumps of long black hair stuck to the blood on the folding chair beside the table.

When my eyes finally adjusted the darkness, I noticed the fingers were in three separate piles. The third and smallest pile looked to be warm to the touch. The pieces were smoother and delicate, suited for working a piano or some stringed instrument.

He just said 'Where is she?'

I watched myself pull it out and just stand there. Looked at myself just looking down at him. He made a few noises and passed with a flash of mild confusion flickering through glassy eyes. He voided himself and I wiped the blade off against his nametag and walked away without wondering even once about the answer to the last question he ever asked.

I took the worst thing about Iraq home with me to Nebraska. I keep it in the shed out back. In the creaky old toolbox my dad left me.

Sometimes I use it to clean fish.

THE THIRD ESTATE

The noontime yard was silent.

Old Mr. Hadley stopped by the Roberts-Peters place with a truckbed full of feed as usual. He knew that the Mr. and Mrs. were away for the summer and had entrusted the care of their animals to the son from her first marriage. Unloading the bags slowly, he felt the dull ache of years pulling well-worked muscles tight across an aging frame. He absently wiped the back of a dusty hand across his forehead, squinting against the sting of his sweat and the brightness of the noontime sun. Shading his eyes and coughing out some dust drawn from the feed sacks, he silently surveyed the small farmyard.

Not a true farm as far as farms go. Just a nice couple from the university who, passing their middle years, had wanted a place outside the city. Three horses in a pasture spread across a few acres out into the trees. Rescue horses taken for the sake of Mrs.' sympathetic heart and memories of riding in state fairs during her northern youth. Twelve she-goats and a billy-boy to keep them pregnant, their milk and meat to be sold in the city to immigrant groceries that specialized in such exotics. And of course there were the chickens. A few cocks and more hens than you could count all stuffed into a large, rickety shack with multiple expansions. Chicken wire fence surrounding a white, paint-peeling structure that leaned to its side like it was trying to hold its own against an unwelcome wind.

He watched the horses wander through the tall grass toward the untended far side of the pasture. He whistled and clicked and the three aging mares turned their heads and considered him across the distance. He usually brought carrots, but he had a few bruised

apples in the pockets of his coveralls which would have to do for this visit. He held the apples out and called to them, but their heads remained frozen, as though they were searching for something beyond him. They stood rigid, ears turning slowly, searching tensely for what he did not know.

A long stretch of silence was broken as a murder of crows rose shrieking from the branches of the treeline beyond the pasture. The mares held a moment longer as the birds screamed across the sky, passing low along the neighboring fields of fallow, barren earth. A lingering gust of wind moaned across the property. The sudden and total silence which followed seemed more piercing than the clamor of the flock and sent the three horses galloping frantically towards the furthest edge of their keep, away from the old man and his apples.

As he lowered his hand, a slight frown of disappointment touched the corners of his mouth. Watching them increase their distance, he turned back towards the drive and wondered at the source of their hesitation. Then, as he moved across the gravel to his truck, the silence hit him like a cold wind. The typical background murmur that served as the soundtrack to any farmyard, even a farm as humble as this, was absent. He stopped in his tracks and turned his head to give the property the benefit of his better ear, to no avail. No soft murmur of goats patrolling their pen, gruffing and grumbling over the choicest brambles. No endless conversation of chickens in the background, dependable to provide any country property with the gaggle and murmur reminiscent of a muted cocktail party. No sign of activity and no sound whatsoever. He whistled sharply and tried to remember the name of that damn fool dog.

“Leopold!” he hollered. No proper name for a farming dog, but it wasn't his and would have to do. “Leopold!” he called again, stretching the vowels out like search parties did in movies he'd seen. Circling around the driveway, he passed the house, seeing nobody through the bay windows, and stood on the freshly mowed lawn to scan the property. Feeling it a slight trespass, or a rude presumption at the very least, he sighed heavily and committed himself to an investigation of the leaning chicken house. Stepping up to the half-door, open on top to let the summer breeze push gently through the structure, he looked in and found what he expected. A house full of chickens make noise and that's all there was to it. No noise meant no chickens. The straw-bed shelves were vacant, a few eggs peaking through the straw like children in hiding.

“Flown the coop...” he murmured, mystified. He reached over the half-door to find the latch, leaning his gut against the creaking wood. The latch was given over to years of rust and screamed when he succeeded in yanking it free. The door gave inward and he stumbled forward, falling hard to one arthritic knee, surprising himself with the vehemence of profanity that came pouring forth. He hadn't used those words since before he was married and felt foolish to have let a door get the better of an old man's temper. Embarrassed before the eyes of no one, he laughed, exhilarated by the excitement of the fall.

And then he saw the blood.

For a moment he feared it was his own, staring wide-eyed at the warm redness covering a palm scraped raw by the concrete roughness of the straw-strewn floor. But then he pulled his eyes across the ground and saw that the sunlight reaching the floor

revealed a glowing redness on the brightest tips of the scattered straw. Maybe that damn dog had been at the hens yet again.

Movement caught his attention from the farthest corner of the coop. He stood slowly and squinted into the depths untouched by sunlight. A white rectangle almost glowed in contrast to the shadows by which it was surrounded. Cautiously favoring his unbruised knee, he stepped closer to the floating object. It was a crisp, bright envelope nailed to the coop's wooden wall, its thickness indicating that it contained a letter. As he moved forward to retrieve the oddly out-of-place piece of stationary, his eyes suddenly adjusted to take in the details of the darkened corner. Shapes came into focus and he nearly startled like the mares when he realized what he was viewing.

A large, black rooster stood like a statue before a small mountain of the bloody heads of its former lovers. The heads of hundreds of hens. All sliced cleanly at the neck, tongues lolling, eyes empty, stacked neatly in rows that betrayed a methodical placement, reaching upward like a miniature, glistening mountain. Faces in the lower rows were painted red by gravity and the blood of their neighbors placed in upper tiers of the pyramid, the thick fluid dripping slowly across open, empty eyes in a top-down fashion.

He stood there for a few long moments, caught in a staring contest with the black feathered figure. It considered him with a single eye, presenting its profile as a challenge. Almost as disturbing as the bloody backdrop to this rooster's hostile, frozen posture was the fact of its empty, motionless gaze.

More threat than invitation, still as a statue, its posture announced 'I stand ready, sir. And you?'

The elderly man left without retrieving the letter.

Maxwell Roberts-Peters was Max to his mother, Maxwell to his stepdad, and Peters to the few associates with whom he shared classes. The double last name was a source of considerable annoyance. His mother was Roberts from her marriage to his real father and added the Peters when Gregory stepped into the picture. Too young to protest at the time, he was stuck with it, driver's license, student ID card and all.

Gregory Peters was Greggie to Maxwell's mother, Professor Peters to his students, and Gregory to Max. His stepdad had initially invited Max to call him 'dad,' to which the preteen Max had always responded “Why?” and the Maxwell of college freshman age had countered “You're not my father.”

Gregory was a professor of history at a nearby private Christian university, specializing in European history in general and French history specifically. The fact of his profession had led to countless arguments between the good professor and Maxwell during long, stifling 'family' vacation car rides defined by the latter's assertion of the hypocrisy of a history teacher plying his trade at an institution that formally required belief in a six-thousand year old universe.

“There are different views on that now, Maxwell. Things are changing.”

“Yeah, what else is new?”

And always with his mother leaning her head against the window, clenching her teeth as the air conditioning poured over her face, suffering through the enactment of the same old argument.

His conversation with his mother had been brief.

“You're coming home to help out this summer, right?”

“Probably. Some of the guys are thinking of going to Arrowhead,” he lied, having no friendships strong enough to justify the commitment of a summer-long companionship.

“It's just a few weeks. We've been dying for a chance to get away ever since last summer fell through.”

“I remember. Gregory's last-minute conference, right? The man has priorities.”

“Max, he chaired the whole damn conference-”

“Cause some other dude died the week before.”

“Which was terrible, but still a blessing. That opened up so many doors for-”

“Life and death. Lemons and lemonade, right?”

“Don't be rude, Max,” she sighed.

“I'll think about it.”

“It's only a few weeks.”

“I'll let you know.”

In the end, he had relented. He made grand claims to missed opportunities. Camping and hiking retreats with his amazing new friends. Epic social events to which he'd been invited. Guest of honor. Most popular freshman on campus. But, out of respect for the fact that they were putting him through school, he had grudgingly agreed. The reality of his social isolation amidst the teeming throngs of students at a state university was a fact kept in the strictest confidence. Walking between classes, he often felt like the only turkey in an industrial poultry plant capable of retaining an individualized self-conception. Smiling darkly, he often imagined himself throwing arms wide to cry out to the surrounding gaggle of fellow undergraduates: This is one big Thanksgiving dinner waiting to happen!

“It's a dirty job, Maxwell. You sure you're up for it?”

“Easy, Gregory. Dad taught me.”

“Really?”

“Yep. At the yellow house before you came around. Remember?”

“How could I?”

“Exactly.”

“But you would have been... How old?”

“Five or so. Summer before first grade.”

“I didn't know.”

“What else is new?”

“So you'll do it?”

“Just said I would.”

“It's not like feeding the horses, Maxwell.”

“If you think about it, it's kind of the opposite of feeding, Gregory.”

“We're counting on you.”

“Consider it done.”

“And the dog?”

“Leo?”

“Keep him tied up. Never let him out of your sight.”

“Weird way to treat your best friend. A dog chained to a tree surrounded by open countryside. ”

“A dog that kills chickens as soon as he's alone.”

“Isn't that what you're asking me to do?”

And so his mother and Gregory left and his summer began. Settling quickly into a routine of chores followed by long afternoons of aching, uneventful tedium, the boredom

began to set in. Always in the back of his mind was the looming task he'd promised to carry out. His last conversation with Gregory before a stunted hug and awkward handshake goodbye had been condescending to say the least, his lack of confidence in Maxwell's capabilities written across his face as melodramatic concern.

“Start with ten. Maybe fifteen at the most. Any more than that won't fit in the freezer,” Gregory had repeated at least four times, maintaining eye contact to ensure that the seriousness of the matter was appreciated.

“Ten or fifteen. Got it.”

“And you have to clean them right away. They can't sit overnight. The best way is to start with two or three. And don't leave them out in the sunlight. Do it in the machine shed and put the tarp down.”

“Machine shed. On the tarp. Would hate to get blood on all those lovely oil stains.”

“And not the younger ones. Just the old hens in the separate coop.”

“Not the young ones.”

“And don't forget about Leopold. I'm not kidding, Maxwell. He does it every single time.”

“Can you blame him? He was here first.”

“Maxwell?”

“Chain to a tree in the summer heat. Unchain and pet thoroughly if PETA shows up. Got it.”

“This is serious, Maxwell. And if the green grocer stops by before you've finished, let her know when she can come back to pick them up.”

“Does she know you call her the green grocer?”

“She's buying free range chickens, Maxwell. Green like organic. Like healthy and humane.”

“Healthy and humane like decapitation. Got it. But is she green?”

“Don't be a smartass, Maxwell.”

“If she's green I can be her captain Kirk.”

“What're you talking about?”

“Obscure cultural reference. Forget it.”

“And the dog?”

“Chained.”

The first thing he did after they pulled out of the drive and headed towards the metropolitan airport was to unchain the dog. Leo, known to himself as a recognizable noise and known to Maxwell as Leopold, was a mixed breed. He had the look of a wolf about him. A long, thin body designed for loping and a gaunt belly that looked empty no

matter how much he ate. He seemed like an athlete a few meals short of starvation. His coat was brown and black and grayish white, a perfect match to the midwestern winter and an exhausting confinement in the dead heat of summer. Whenever he visited, he found Leopold to be the only dependable source of comfort, knowing he could always find honest responses written upon the face of a friend incapable of false expression.

Together they walked the grounds of his mother's land. When they neared the horses, the dog took off in a dead sprint to circle wide around the towering animals, almost as if instinctively herding and almost as if stalking. When he passed too near, they stamped their feet and snorted, sending him retreating to a safer distance, eyes gleaming from the rush of a challenge rebuffed. He checked their water and the tightness of mesh masks guarding their eyes from summer swarms of flies, leaving them with more green than they could possibly eat and promises of future feedbags.

After checking on the goats, they made their way to the chicken coop. Leaving Leopold outside and closing the lower door behind him, he moved through the straw and excrement to the furthest addition to the ever expanding coop. He had grumpily helped his mother build this latest expansion the previous summer during a week-long visit cut short to a weekend after a dinner table argument had ended with a broken plate and Gregory fuming with barely controlled fury.

The groundwork for the argument was laid in the kitchen immediately prior to the ill-fated meal. Gregory was rinsing and chopping vegetables at the sink when Max had made his entrance, yawning and wiping sleep from his late afternoon naptime eyes.

“What's for dinner?” Max had asked, pulling a carton of milk from the fridge.

“Please don't drink from the jug.”

“Chicken? Nice. I'm starving.”

“Thought you were a vegetarian.”

“Is that what you thought?”

“Converted by... What's her name again?”

“This tastes expired.”

“Ah, the things we do for love...”

“Whatever.”

“You were so serious about it. Why the sudden change?”

“People change.”

“Oh. I see. Are you two still-”

“She got accepted out east. Not doing the long distance thing. Better to just stay friends. We both agreed.”

“That's admirable. Very mature.”

“No use crying over spoiled milk,” Max muttered, bumping into Gregory as he leaned over to pour the contents of the carton out across the freshly cut vegetables and down the drain.

“Maxwell!”

“Yes, professor?”

“I just bought that yesterday,” Gregory muttered through gritted teeth.

“Just told you not to cry.”

Happy to have her son eating meat again, his mother had managed to make it halfway through the meal before failing to contain her curiosity and concern, her nervous approach hesitant and nearly whispered.

“So, Max... How are things going with you and... Um... I mean-”

“Perfect,” Max interjected around a mouthful of steaming meat.

“Oh, good. So... You're still-”

“Never better.”

“Oh, good. Because I know she's going to school out east and I just-”

“Gee whiz, mom. Where'd you hear that?” he asked with false enthusiasm, refraining from meeting Gregory's darkening stare, instead turning accusatory eyes upon his mother, flashing a vulgar smile as he carelessly picked a chunk of chicken from between his teeth.

“Save it, Maxwell,” Gregory said in a low tone. “I assumed you already talked-”

“I didn't.”

“Max,” his mother said soothingly, “you know I'm here if you want to-”

“I don't.”

“You seem like you-” she began before he cut in, his voice nearly a shout as he replied with a tone more appropriate to teachers lecturing grade schoolers.

“Had to call it quits. Cut my losses.”

“I thought it was a mutual decision,” said Gregory, his expressionless face providing an eerie contrast to the anger in his eyes.

“I made a tough decision,” Maxwell said to his mother, his every mannerism a denial of Gregory's presence at the table.

“Ah, the glories of historical revision!” Gregory laughed, his face suddenly coming alive with an open display of leering contempt. It was Maxwell's turn to freeze, the clenching of his jaw muscles the only visible response to Gregory's sudden challenge. Making direct eye contact with Gregory for the first time since sitting down, his reply was nearly a whisper, his jaw muscles working and teeth grinding audibly.

“*I left her,*” he hissed. An awkward silence stretched across the table until Max turned to his mother and spoke casually through a cold, smug smile. “*I left her.* It's a family tradition.”

His mother looked as though he had slapped her across the face. She began to sputter a response but instead stared down at her plate, biting a trembling lower lip as her eyes became oceans. Her shoulders hunched and began to shake and Max heaved a tired sigh of boredom. Gregory stood suddenly, sending his chair clattering to the ground as he walked around the table to stand over Max like an executioner.

“Maxwell...” Gregory rumbled threateningly from the pit of his stomach. Max looked up at him blankly, gave a final dismissive sigh and resumed eating his chicken. His fork remained hovering over the empty space before him as Gregory snatched the plate and raised it in a grip shaking with rage. Max flinched involuntarily as the thick porcelain shattered on the table before him. His mother jumped from her chair and rushed between them, pleading for a calm retreat with her eyes as Gregory slowly allowed her to lead him to their bedroom.

Since he didn't make the mess, he felt no obligation to clean it up. Instead, Maxwell returned to his room and slammed the door three times in quick succession. Through the walls, he heard shouts and tearful petitions, but the only sound that registered in his mind until sleep finally arrived was the echo of Gregory's mocking laughter.

The next morning his mother had driven him to the airport without speaking, her eyes weighted with the thick redness of a sleepless night.

“He started it,” he had muttered before hugging her gently on the walkway outside his terminal.

“I love you,” she had said, and nothing more.

Now he looked down over the fencing at the chosen ones. They clucked and bobbed their heads about, investigating the dirt and grass beneath them with furtive darts

of beaked faces. Occasionally, one would turn to consider him with an alarmed squawk, holding a frozen sideways gaze for a moment before a limited attention span demanded further inquiries into gravel and loam.

“I have no quarrel with you,” he declared, solemn and dramatic, before growing bored and returning to the conditioned air of his mother's house.

As a rule, he was not allowed into Gregory's den. In his younger years it had made a certain amount of sense. Surely the dens of adult men were filled with all sorts of dangerous and mysterious items that a child should not encounter until he was of proper age. On principle, Maxwell had begun sneaking into the den on a regular basis in hopes of finding something worth declaring off limits. “Greggie just needs his own space,” his mother had explained. Visions of vintage pornography and muskets and alcohol cabinets had flooded his hopeful adolescent mind. Disappointingly, his den raids had failed to unearth anything more exciting than a few R-rated movies that didn't even have any nudity. Just bookshelves filled with history and forgettable certificates of academic achievement. After this anticlimactic discovery, Maxwell had begun to consider his restriction from the room to be a childish matter of selfish withholding.

The walls of the den were bookshelves from floor to ceiling. An enormous oak desk dominated the room, orderly piles of various papers and files stacked atop its polished surface forming a wall along the edges of the workspace. A yellow legal pad sheet crowned each column. Gregory's handwriting was carefully scrawled across each

sheet with permanent marker. One stack was labeled EUROPE, the next one THE AMERICAS, followed by AFRICA, ASIA, and finally THE MIDDLE EAST.

A smaller stack of papers was placed in the center of the desk, as though it were being protected by the surrounding wall of files and notes. Max plucked the first three pages from this guarded stack and read it idly, skipping around, skimming, sipping from his sweating glass of lemonade after every few lines.

TITLE:

Rhetorical Hypocrisy and Genocidal Democracy

[An Examination of the Correspondence of the Rhetoric of Democratic Movements to the Increase of Atrocities in the Post-Colonial World]

INTRODUCTION:

This treatise is intended to serve as a companion piece to the previous work published by the author. The former work [“Polemics and Propaganda in Revolutionary France”] was an examination of the unique aspects of French political dialogue centering on the concept of 'democracy' during the period known as The Terror. This new work is intended to compensate for various crucial oversights in the former project. More specifically, this latest work will incorporate oral histories produced by the numerous cultures influenced by the expansion of French Imperialism.

SUMMARY:

This project is an analysis of French democratic movements juxtaposed with an exhaustive treatment of French Imperialism. The rhetoric of 'democracy' employed by agents of colonial expansion will be analyzed against the historical record of exploitation and genocide. Words will be compared to actions.

Setting a glass of lemonade on the enormous oak desk, carefully avoiding stacks of papers but also refraining from utilizing a nearby coaster, Maxwell put his feet up and sighed contentedly. Leaning over to rifle through the nearest drawers, he found an unopened pack of cheap cigars and a small black box with a combination lock. All three of the lock's numbers read 7. He began to ease the heavy lid but was ripped away by the sound of something dying. Not a nervous, agitated squawking typical to chickens, but an actual appeal for salvation from certain death.

“Goddamit, Leopold!” he shouted, forgetting the box and rushing outside to stop what was already drawing to a close.

The dog sat unchained and casual beside his tree, panting merrily as his thick tongue rolled out to perspire. His front paws and mouth were covered in dirt and blood, the former from the act of tunneling under the chicken wire, the latter from the act which immediately followed. The chicken was behind him, body cast limply over the chain, neck bare of feathers where it had been shaken like a rat. The dog stood to greet him with

an excited bark, turning back to nose the chicken around on the ground, half-heartedly lifting it in a gentle mouth as an offering.

“Goddamit, Leopold,” he sighed, shaking his head at the questioning confusion and lingering pride worn openly across his companion’s face. The dog whimpered as he grabbed the chicken by a foot and hauled it back to the compost bin just inside the machine shed, the animal tagging along behind, licking hopefully at his fingertips in an act of reconciliation spoiled by the blood it left on the young man's hand.

A garden hose bath and back to the chain.

When he opened the box, its contents struck him with an unexplainable sense of familiarity. The dull shine calling out even in the darkness of the nighttime den, catching every semblance of light. The click of the hammer and turn of the wheel. The comfort of the trigger when gently brushed with a fingertip. The very weight itself was calming, as though the act of carrying it was a passport to a world beyond. The simplicity of the mechanism seemed romantic in a way he could not explain. The same story of steel told in the same way throughout the ages, the same protagonist, the same narrative communicated through the truest and most universal of all languages.

He sat with his feet on Gregory's desk, sipping lemonade while considering his recent find. Opening the pack of cigars, he smelled the cheap tobacco, running the length of soft brown wrapping under his nose as though he were an expert on quality. He began rolling the plastic mouthpiece of the cigar across his teeth, sucking in as though it were lit.

Bored with the secrets of the den, he returned to the kitchen for a refill, slowly stirring more sugar into the pitcher as he stared out the window and thought of the old photographs of his father misplaced in the transitions from one rental to another. With eyes upon the unseeded fields stretching against the horizon, he stood struggling through attempts to recall memories, doubting the accuracy of the images brought to mind by fading family photos now lost. He still had a dark brown flannel that had belonged to his father. He'd kept it for years after his father was gone, never washing it, retrieving it from the bottom of his childhood toy chest during lonely moments, burying his face in the thick fabric, drawing in deep breaths through his nose, savoring the fading scent of aftershave worn by a man lost to him forever.

When he was ten or eleven he had fallen asleep in his bedroom with the flannel clutched against his face, drifting off in hopes of inspiring dream memories of the absent man. He woke later to find the flannel gone. In a panic, he searched his room, running out to the living room, calling for his mother in an empty house. There, on the dining room table was his laundry, neatly folded, smelling like the harsh mint of detergent. The flannel was placed apart from his stacks of shirts and underwear, as though its presence was a curiosity that the folder of clothing could not explain. He picked it up cautiously, as if it might startle and bolt, held it to his face, and cried silently at his loss.

Wearing the flannel like armor, he had waited for hours for his mother to return, practicing his accusations, building up a quiet reserve of righteous indignation desperate to be released. When her car lights crawled across the living room wall of family pictures, he ran to his room, grabbed the glass fishbowl from his shelf of model cars, and carried it to the front door, carelessly splashing water over the rim throughout his

determined march. Standing in the doorway, he stared at his mother walking up the drive, arms full of brown bags from the local grocer.

“Could you help me, Max? There's more in the backseat.”

He answered her question by slowly pouring the water onto the stone steps of their rented home, the slick bodies of two goldfish slapping against the stairs with an unsatisfactorily muted thud. He looked down at the suffocating fish and noticed that he'd spilled water down the front of his father's shirt. His cheeks burned as his mother considered him with eyes that were equal parts confusion and concern.

“Oh, Max... You know that doesn't fit you.”

His first endeavor to fulfill his obligations did not go as planned. Leopold spent the afternoon at the end of a taut chain, his face a pendulum swinging between extremes of elation and frustration while barking encouragement as Maxwell attempted to capture his first chicken. It was harder than he expected, and in the end he was only successful due to a moment of utter frustration in which he flung his shoe at the zigzagging bird. The footwear caught the hen across the head and neck and a boy and his dog shared an excited moment of silence. The bird lay stunned, twitching every few seconds, its clarion call of alarmed clucking silenced.

“There's gotta be an easier way to do this...”

He hadn't been lying to Gregory when speaking of his father's early instruction in the art of killing chickens. Technically, it was more of an accidental revelation to an unexpected spectator than a formal session of father teaching son. He remembered helping his father feed the chickens. Just blurred images of his father's large hand pulling feed from large cloth bags. The memory of his father's dirty work boots and looking up to see a face of indistinct shadow surrounded by the blinding rays of a summer sun. Summer at the yellow house and he was going to help his father. His mother had said "He's with the chickens," but couldn't possibly have known.

He walked out of the house, nervous about feeding, always suspecting the larger chickens of plotting to peck. And then he heard the birds screaming. Approaching the small coop behind their yellow home, he hid himself against a tilting oak that supported a cracked, balding tire swing.

Peeking around the tree hesitantly, he saw his father cradling a hen in his arms, gently stroking soft feathers while whispering in low tones. Eventually the bird calmed and was placed upon a raised wooden board on a makeshift worktable held up by cinder blocks. The bird kicked wildly but the bulk of its body did not move. His father raised his right hand high above his head, the sunlight flashing across a small expanse of sharpened steel. A dull thud followed and the chicken's body rolled off the side of the table, legs still kicking, head removed with metal, and a thick gurgle of blood pouring out of its neck in staggered spouts.

He must have cried out because his father had turned in his direction, walking over calmly, removing his bloody work gloves and casually tossing them to the ground.

He remembered asking a question hesitantly, suddenly seeing his father as someone capable of unexpected things.

“What're you doing, dad?”

“Don't worry, little guy. If you do it the right way, they don't feel it or even see it coming.”

And there it was before him. A wooden plank on a metal workbench in the machine shed. A sharpened hatchet in his right hand and the body of a stunned chicken in the other. Suddenly the task seemed more difficult than he had anticipated. Where on the neck to strike? Was he supposed to hold the body or the head? How had his father held them?

In the end, he decided on holding the body and aiming for the general midpoint on the neck. He raised his arm and held his breath, but just as he was bringing down the hatchet the hen's eyes flew open and she took in a deep, ragged gasp, staring up at Maxwell and the hatchet in horror. He faltered and his aim was slightly off. Desperate to live, the hen shrieked as the blade left a shallow wound on her throat. There was much kicking and screaming before he managed to hold her down by the head, trying to be angry as he punched her body with a hatchet-clenching fist until she finally gave over. He looked down at her twitching form and felt a belated wave of frustrated anxiety erupt in his stomach, beginning as a sensation of sadness and shame which thickened and closed off his throat for a moment, forcing him to breathe slowly and deeply.

Spittle flew through clenched teeth as he held her body by its head and brought down a reckless, unwieldy blow. But she was recalcitrant and stringy muscled pieces of her refused to give. By the time he was finished, a mess had been made. The body was useless. He blinked as though suddenly stunned by the sunlight, taking in his surroundings as if wondering how he'd come to be covered in blood on a beautiful, cloudless summer afternoon. The air smelled of iron and feathers and, of all things, soap. Blood everywhere as a matter of course.

Looking around the shed helplessly, his eyes came to rest upon a pile of twisted, rusting metal tools and spare parts left behind by the property's previous owners. He saw shadows and thick rust eating away at sharp, cruel edges of disassembled machinery. It occurred to him that he should probably wash his hands. And it was only then, looking down at his shaking fingers, that he noticed that much of the blood was his own.

He was still wrapping a bandage around the wound as he wandered into the den, eyes wandering across the nearest stack of manuscript material, its yellow cover page announced AFRICA, and finally came to rest on one of the manila file folders towards the bottom of the stack. Its protruding tab read LEOPOLD. His curiosity aroused, he carefully slid the file out of the stack and sat back in the thickly padded desk chair.

He glanced through the first few pages dismissively but froze when he came upon a sheet of outdated printer paper, perforated strips of holes along its sides and all. Memories of long forgotten years came to him in a rush as he read and reread the words he'd written so long ago. Even in those early days of their association, Gregory had made

a habit of calling his reliability into question. A local farmer had been giving away unwanted puppies and Max had set his heart on the possibility. Gregory, however, had insisted that he prove his dependability by writing a report on a topic of Gregory's choice. Though he couldn't have been older than eleven or twelve at the time, Max had been given a stack of academic history journals and told to get to work. An article with a picture of a sad looking tribal man standing behind a giant basket of human hands had caught his eye. He brought it to Gregory and the other had simply replied “Ah, yes. Good King Leopold. Show me what you got, Maxwell.” He had written the essay and named his new friend Leopold. After all these years, he still recognized the childish bitterness of his sentences and laughed as he read the last paragraphs aloud.

Leopold the Second was king of Belgium. He started a colony in Africa to use its resources. His colony made many things, but especially rubber for bike tires and car tires, which had just been invented. If workers didn't make enough rubber, their wives and mothers could be held for rubber ransom.

Lots of people thought King Leopold was a bad ruler. Joseph Conrad wrote a book about it and then somebody made a Vietnam movie about the book, but I'm not allowed to watch it because it's rated R. My mom says I can see it when I'm old enough to understand, but I probably won't even bother. I mean, what does Vietnam have to do with Africa?

Gregory had circled and underlined this last sentence and written a note in the margin: “Important question!”

That night, after re-cleaning and re-bandaging his hand, he swallowed two sleeping pills before hurriedly eating, anxious to be asleep rather than thinking of the day's misgivings. He lay awake as the moonlight poured in across his fidgeting form. Shifting around with frustrated grunts, he tried to find a place for his wounded hand to rest without pressure or pain. Eventually he drifted off into a restless sleep.

He woke to the sound of something in pain, something tortured and dying. A throat being choked yet screaming. A frenzied mess of gargling whimpers. Lunging from his bed, he ran barefoot through the house, cursing as he banged his shoulder against a wall in the unfamiliar darkness. Crashing out the back door, he hurried to the coop. Halfway there, he stopped abruptly. The screams were sounding from the way he'd come, distant but still sharp and clear in their vehemence. He doubled back and rounded the side of the house, coming to a sudden and confused stop at the sight of Leopold's tree. The chain, barely visible in the moonlight, was stretched to its limit in the direction of the overgrown pasture beyond the yard. The collar was still attached and Leopold was gone.

The bestial rage of the cries faded to a strangled whimper. There was the sharp sound of something being torn and then silence. He took in a deep breath, preparing to call out, hesitated, and then felt shame for his hesitation. He whistled once, a pathetic attempt that died on his lips.

Feeling somehow defeated, he slowly trudged back into the house. He looked into the gilded mirror hanging across from the door in the entryway and felt very alone. Still

feeling the weight of the sleeping pills, he stepped forward wearily. “Bad dream,” he confessed to his reflection, only then realizing that his chest and face were covered in blood freshly pouring from the hand that had held her down.

In the morning, he found bloodstains covering his pillowcase and sheets, the red fading to brown with dryness. Walking with the gun for comfort, he made a large circle of his mother's property. Expecting to find the corpse of a fox or stray dog or at least a raccoon, he found no signs of

the previous night's violence. In sunlight, he had the strength to call out and whistle, but there was no response. He walked to the horses and they seemed more annoyed than nervous. He pulled long stretches of grass from the surrounding underbrush and leaned over the fence to feed the mares. After a considerable period of reluctance, they took his offerings with initial interest, hoping for carrots or apples, but eventually grew bored, slowly chewing as they walked away with a casual indifference that seemed to say 'We have that over here too. We have that everywhere.'

Bored, worried, and anxious, he considered making another attempt at fulfilling his obligations. Instead, he fed grain to the goats and checked on the condition of his mother's riding mower, all the while averting his eyes from the hen house and the chain around the tree.

In the evening, as the orange sun was saying its goodbyes and playing tricks on the eyes, he thought he caught a glimpse of a loping figure moving in gentle bounds throughout the treeline. A doe or maybe a dog. He whistled once bitterly. A horse neighed in the distant pasture and the treeline produced no further movement.

Days passed and his wound was healing, but the collar on the chain remained empty, unmoved since it had been cast off. The general cacophony of the hen house began to press upon his mind and he found himself growling under his breath without realizing the source of his annoyance. He spent many hours in Gregory's study, randomly pulling books from the shelves, paging through the manuscripts neatly stacked upon the oak desk. Fragments caught his eye while skimming the journals and photocopied pages that made up a large portion of the neatly stacked columns. Oral histories and eye-witness accounts. These fragments stayed with him throughout the day as he moved through the motions of his daily chores.

...and then they took us to the field. My daughter was first. Then my wife. Many men upon each of them. And I did not stop begging them to kill me and be done with it. Instead, they cut off my nose and lips. This my family watched, but they did not make a sound and I have since learned to read and write the letters...

Max made a long circuit of the property, an eye ever upon the horizon in search of absent friends and his mind upon the transcribed memories of a man he would never meet. He set a leaning fencepost to rights and made his way over to the chicken coop. The chosen ones were there and waiting. He ignored them, squinting into the darkness of the coop in hopes of finding shining canine eyes. Nothing there to be found. He cursed his fortune,

remembered recent readings, thought better of his circumstance and saw to feeding the goats.

...later, after much bloody prayer, I found the ditch of mothers and daughters, their bodies so black and charred I had to check the teeth to make sure they were mine and not some other farmer's... I prayed for their souls but could not make the words without lips....I now say silent prayers that my silent prayers will be heard and understood...Do you see how I have learned to read and write my letters?

The horses were a ways out in the pasture and he decided they'd come back when they wanted their feed. The sun was streaming steadily over the rolling green of midwestern landscape and he found himself lost in a moment worthy of a painting.

...I remember the flags were blue and white and red and the language spoken by the soldiers was a mix of a tribal speak I do not know and French, which I cannot speak but have come to understand....her skirt was blue and her shirt was white and after they cut off her breasts she had the appearance of their flags, but soon there was no more whiteness for redness spreading...

He shivered in the sudden chill as darkness seemed to swallow him. He waited a moment for this to pass and smiled as the warmth returned with the sunshine. As a young child, his father used to pretend this occurrence was due to whales swimming through the skies. But whenever he looked up, his father would laugh and say 'you just missed it.' He'd ask 'where'd they go?' and his father would smile and always respond 'They're just above the clouds. Just beyond your vision.'

...I remember wondering at the machines and weapons when first they came. That day, we did not run, thinking that their colors proved this to be a parade. The village children ran to meet them because we did not know....

The clouds between the sun and earth sang their shadows slowly across the gentle rise and fall of fallow land divided by vast squares of lush green that waved in the wind. Miles of dancing grassland, spotted by the occasional clutch of forest, moving in collective ripples that reached out unto the curve of the earth. Entire continents of clouds between the closest star and the turning earth.

...after shooting all the village dogs, they grouped us by families to ensure that the fathers and brothers would see the new way of things. A white man with papers observed us as we waited for what would come. I did not see him leave but did not see him again...

He whistled and called for his friend until his throat felt raw, unused to such exertions throughout the silent summer. He tried to soak in the beauty of his surroundings to silence the testimonies transcribed in the manuscript. Gregory had a way of ruining the best of days, even when absent.

....then the soldiers started casting lots for families. Every soldier wanted mine, for my wife was a rare beauty and my daughter took after her mother. Long after this, at the clinic, they had doctors explain why I have no lips and no nose. It was just sending a message...

Making his slow, meandering way back to the house, he found himself wandering along the treeline at the farthest edge of the property. Rounding a bend in the wall of green, he nearly stumbled as the ground gave way to a severe and hidden decline. He found himself in the middle of what seemed to be the remains of a house abandoned after its foundation was laid. Three large concrete walls still stood, half buried in the ground after decades of weathering erosion, hidden from view by the surrounding forestry. As he stood in the middle of the unfinished basement, a wall on either side and facing the third, he realized

that his back was to the house. Turning and stretching, he could see the tops of the buildings of his mother's property. Returning to face the wall, he stepped closer and ran a hand along its worn surface. A large crack ran the vertical length of the wall, green shoots sprouting from the crumbling crevice.

...after binding my hands, they patted me on the shoulder and gave me a cigarette.

...and then they took us to the field...

After a long period of fruitless consideration, the whales stole the sunlight and he made his way back, casting worried glances at the surrounding acres, some seeded, most fallow, and wondered what stories might be told by a world of wordless fields if they had the lips to speak.

...do you see how I have learned to read and write my letters?

...good things born of bad things always.

A long day ended with his head upon the oaken desk, memories and entire lives and genocides reduced to paper stacked in five orderly columns all around him. He sighed and read a few more paragraphs about death squads and narco-trafficking in French Indochina, his head nodding slowly as the heat and slowness of the day lulled him ever nearer to sleep, his eyes passing from left to right with an automatic rhythm.

The ringing doorbell knocked him from his trance so suddenly that he stood halfway out of the chair, banging his legs against the desk and yelping. Wincing and flustered, he approached the front door determined to give the visitor a piece of his mind. He opened the door to find a gray haired woman leaning against a beat up blue station

wagon, idly kicking around the gravel of the drive. She smiled at him pleasantly and he decided that, despite her age, she was beautiful.

“Can I help you?” he called through the screen door, his voice much shakier than he would have liked.

“Depends. Are you Max?”

“That's me.”

“Got some chickens for me?”

“Uh... Yeah. Actually... No. Not yet.”

“Ah, I see. Having trouble?”

“Something like that,” he said, walking out onto the drive with his bandaged hand held out as if to explain.

“I take it you're doing things the old fashioned way.”

“How many ways are there?”

“They used to swing 'em around by the neck. There was an art to it. Very humane.”

“Sounds like it.”

“Or you could use *that*,” she said with a cautious smile, pointing to indicate the butt of Gregory's gun sticking out of the pocket of his blood stained jeans. He blushed

and laughed sheepishly and she continued in a reassuring tone. “But nobody's gonna wanna eat a chicken that's been shot to death.”

“What if it's just in the head?”

“You ever tried to shoot a chicken in the head?”

“No, but I've been giving it a lot of thought lately.”

“Whatever you say, kid. Just be careful with that. It's not a toy.”

“Thanks, mom.”

“I'm sure she'd say the same thing.”

“She hates guns. Probably doesn't know he has it.”

“I'm sure he has his reasons.”

“One would hope.”

“Where's the mutt?” she asked, eyeing the chain and looking genuinely disappointed.

“Gone.”

“Gone?”

“Gone.”

“Since when?”

“A few days ago.”

“Any ideas?”

“Thought I heard an animal that night. Couldn’t find anything.”

“Too bad,” she sighed, shielding her eyes and looking hopeful as she scanned the horizon.

“I’m sure I’ll find him,” he offered, trying to seem optimistic. She shook her head and sighed once more with heavy finality before leaving.

“You won’t find him unless he decides to come home.”

The following afternoon, Gregory called.

“I thought we had a deal, Maxwell.”

“I’m going to-”

“Did you think she wouldn’t call? She already paid us. An agreement, Maxwell. You’re making me look bad.”

“I said I was going to-”

“And what’s this about the dog?”

“He took off.”

“What did I say, Maxwell?”

“It’s not my-”

“I said not to let him out of your sight.”

“At night? You want me to sleep outside?”

“I want you to take responsibility for once in your life.”

“How can I help it if he-”

“No excuses. You have responsibilities. Time to grow up.”

No formal goodbyes. Just a sudden click and the open silence of the empty line. The call itself was brief, but he spent the remainder of the day replaying the exchange in his mind, rethinking and altering his responses, letting it play a hundred different ways. In each of the hundred he was the victor.

He accused himself of cowardice. He should have asked about the gun, about the genocide files. He should have stayed on the offensive. He cursed under his breath throughout his ritual of chores and muttered throughout a cold shower. In the warmth of the fading day, he stood bear chested and barefoot on the gravel, passing his gaze back and forth between the chain and the horizon, clenching his fists as the echo of the morning's call continued to hound his frustrated conscience. He looked down to find that his clenching had awakened his wound, blood trickling out between the fingers of a fist. He laughed and returned to the house with a determined look on his face, triumphantly smiling as he reemerged with his bloody, bandaged hand holding something that caught the sunlight.

He walked to the coop and retrieved a handful of feed from a dusty red bucket near the entrance, then circled around to the expansion housing the chosen ones.

Reaching over to pour the feed into a tidy pile on the other side of the wire, he sat cross-legged, waiting, and did not wait in vain.

The gray haired woman had been right. It hadn't been easy. Or successful for that matter. None of the wasted corpses was in any condition to be sold or eaten. Their deaths were awkward and anticlimactic. Of the three he killed, two had required multiple shots and the third was taken through the breast. All useless now to green grocers.

Three more corpses in the compost bin. The machine shed's rusted door gave a screech of protest as he slammed it with a sense of accomplishment. As he walked back towards the house, wiping his good hand down the front of his jeans, a commotion in the goat pens brought him running. The animals were yelping and braying and panicking in general. He searched the interior of the pens, the animals scattering before him, anxiously searching in all directions for whatever had spooked them. Finding nothing inside, he walked slowly around the perimeter, again finding nothing. Cursing goats for fools and turning back to the house, he froze midstep as the unmistakable sound of an animal crashing through underbrush sounded from beyond the pens.

Across the summer breeze, he thought he heard a faint growl decline into an anxious whine. Something angry and then suddenly desperate. He stood for a time with an ear to the wind, wondering what had called his friend out into the darkness.

The next morning seemed somehow broken and he found himself sitting at the desk in the den. Fueled by a general sense of unexplainable apprehension, he had spent the entire night reading the pages of Gregory's manuscript, carefully pouring over depictions of historical atrocities line by line into the early morning. He had awoken at the desk to a sore neck and the sound of a chanticler siren, a proud debased challenge to the rising sun. He ignored the growing murmur of rousing animals and made himself a cup of coffee before returning to his reading. He was making real progress on the manuscript and the accompanying wall of notes, files, and secondary sources. He had read through countless pages of annotations in Gregory's precise hand, each neatly clipped to photocopied chapters from obscure academic journals.

Max suspected the other's habit of reducing horrific events to incomplete phrases was indicative of underlying impulses of which his mother should be made aware.

Reign of Terror - enemies of the state – men and women, girls and boys – loaded aboard enormous river barges – barges were then sunk – drowned – barge emptied of bodies – loaded with next group of prisoners – repeated.

Finishing the final pages of the EUROPE stack with a sense of disappointment, he began searching through drawers and shelves for something of equal significance. He moved along the rows of books, brushing the spines gently and occasionally pulling out the countless file folders placed between books of related subject matter. Between two large books on French art history he found an old battered folder with hooks on the edges for proper hanging in filing cabinets. The tab was folded over with age, and when Max flipped it up he was surprised to read 'MAX.R.P' in handwriting that unmistakably

belonged to his younger self. He opened it to find a few pages of notebook paper covered in the characters of his clumsy adolescent hand. Beneath these he found another aged piece of printer paper, holes along the sides and all.

He sat at the oak desk and read the essay, anger arriving with his memory of the assignment's origin. A younger Max, twelve or thirteen years old at most, had asked his mother to take him camping. Gregory had vetoed this decision. Max had protested. Gregory had assigned an essay. He'd made Max spend countless valuable days of summertime freedom sitting in the living room, reading whatever Gregory had deemed appropriate. The French Revolution. The subject of Gregory's first research project. It was only later that Max learned Gregory was simply dumping unusable research journals on him to 'keep him busy.'

Max had written an essay and Gregory had promised a camping trip. A few days before it could be realized, the outdoors venture was canceled due to the good professor's presence being required at a last-minute colloquium. The essay was filed away and the camping trip was forgotten by everyone but Max.

In the late 1700's there were problems in France. Everyone was poor except royalty and the clergy. The royalty was called The First Estate and taxed people unfairly. The clergy was called The Second Estate and they didn't have to pay taxes and did whatever the royalty told them to. The poor people were called The Third Estate and had no power.

French people became so poor that they decided they shouldn't listen to the clergy or royalty. They rebelled and demanded their rights. Maximilien Robespierre was a

leader of the poor people. He was a great speaker but had to kill many people who agreed with the royalty and clergy. Eventually the poor people won but disagreed about how to fix France.

Maximilien Robespierre sentenced many people to death and shot himself in the face. Then his friends cut his head off. This was the birth of democracy in France.

He read the essay a few times, smiling at first, then growling to himself as he thought of broken promises, finally finding his mind flooded with the sound of Gregory's condescending, mocking laughter. He tossed the essay and laughed forcefully to drown out and defeat his nagging awareness of Gregory's dinner table victory. He'd laugh louder and never flinch.

Making his rounds in a surprisingly optimistic mood, he found himself considering the methods of the men in whose company he had spent the previous evening. Perhaps history could afford him the means to take responsibility and fulfill his obligations. As he carried buckets of feed and water from one animal house to the next, his daydreams entailed bizarre fantasies of hundreds of chickens locked in the belly of a sinking barge. But would green grocers be interested in drowned chickens? He'd have to gut them regardless, and if all inner organs were to be removed, what cause for concern for the water content of the lungs? There was an old watering trough at the edge of the untended pasture which was, like most things around the property, rusted beyond usefulness. Perhaps he could run a hose out, filling it to suit his purposes. Also, he

thought in a moment of clever inspiration, there were thin-wire rabbit cages stacked at the back of the machine shed which might provide an expedient substitute for wooden barges.

When he came to the goat pens, he noticed a mood of repressed agitation floating through the air, as though the extended presence of a lingering predator had dulled the animals' sensitivity to any threat whatsoever, leaving them in a comatose state of indefinite surrender. They huddled in unusual silence as far as the pens would allow from the outermost fencing of their confinement. Maxwell walked along the fence, testing the integrity of the wiring and supporting posts. At the far side, the place from which the goats seemed to be shying, he bent to the earth and squinted thoughtfully, running fingers through the disturbed soil. Telltale signs of tunneling were clearly visible but seemed uneven, as if the intruding animal had been using a single paw to frantically make passage to an easy meal. A thick tuft of bloody fur, whitish and brown, clung to the wire arching over the unfinished tunnel, confirming his suspicions. A friend had passed this way.

Small pools of blood had dried in the summer heat, seeming no more than clots of dirt scattered across the failed excavation. A nearby patch of tall grass was depressed in a tight circle just beyond the fence, as though a long nap had been taken halfway through the tunneling. More blood was visible on the grass depression, dried but still red in the daylight against the green.

Exiting the pens to examine the scene more closely, he smiled to himself as he refilled the failed tunnel with dragging kicks of his work boots, finally bending low to

pull long sweeps of summer loam into the open ground with his good hand. Wiping his palm across his shirt, he turned to the goats still huddling at the far end of the pen's interior.

“Don't suppose he told you which way he was headed?”

A quick circuit of the property proved fruitless. He had never been much of a hunter and the path of tracks and blood he was able to detect seemed chaotic and confused. He narrowly avoided stepping into a pile of rancid feces that was more liquid than solid waste. It could just as easily have been vomit given its consistency, but it was steaming, which meant his friend was close and apparently eating poorly.

Though he still felt an underlying sense of anger at his friend's nighttime flight, his relief was more than enough to compensate for any unresolved resentment. Passing the machine shed to his right on his way to search one of the property's many dilapidated pastures, he was already considering what special dinners might be appropriate for a homecoming meal when a loud metallic crash brought his attention to the shed's entrance. The door had swung completely open, clanging against the outside wall as the rusted hinges issued vocal protest. Another crash from within the shed announced that the swinging door was not the source of the racket. He cautiously approached the entrance and peered around the edge of the door frame.

He smiled and stepped into the shed, pleased to see his friend stretched over the edge of the compost bin, his head buried in his bounty as his pillaging efforts caused the metal container to crash against the shed's aluminum wall.

“Leopold, you bastard!” he exclaimed invitingly. The dog's lean, muscled body went rigid as if electrocuted. A low growl rumbled from the depths of the bin, echoing off the tin walls of the shed. Only then did Maxwell notice the oozing lacerations that ran the length of the animal's side. The growl faded to a whimper and the dog's body suddenly relaxed. Leopold slowly withdrew from the bin, an enormous mass of rotting flesh gripped fiercely in his frothing jaw. Flies buzzed about his yellowed eyes and his right forepaw was crushed and bleeding, held limply against his heaving chest, twitching and trembling.

Maggots swam in the froth about his teeth and sores were visible on a discolored tongue as he dropped the remains of Maxwell's first failed attempt to meet his obligations, looking around the darkened shed as though suddenly realizing where he was. But the recognition was momentary and his eyes abruptly glossed over with a film of utter confusion before flashing into a rolling panic that revealed bloodshot whiteness surrounding empty irises.

Maxwell began to slowly back away, but in his anxiety forgot to account for the lip of the doorway, catching his foot and falling backward, arms flailing in a panic. Raising himself up on single shaking arm, he saw Leopold tense and lunge forward in a flurry of maddened eyes and foaming fangs. Scrambling to his knees, he slammed the metal door shut with a deafening clang that was immediately followed by the sound of the dog's impact and a continuous stream of ravenous growls, frantic clawing, and shrill yelping, which eventually tapered off into desperate cat-like mewing. Back against the door, eyes clenched shut, Maxwell struggled to catch his breath.

He instinctively called his mother and, to his horror, found himself speaking with Gregory.

“Can't we call the vet?”

“It's too late, Maxwell. You should've told me about this sooner.”

“How the hell could I have-”

“You should've called.”

“But I didn't know he-”

“He's your responsibility now. You'll be doing him a favor.”

“How am I supposed to-”

“Can I trust you to be responsible, Maxwell?”

“You don't understand. He's out in the-”

“It's the humane thing to do.”

“Isn't there any other-”

“Go to the desk in my study. In the left drawer there's a black box...”

After the phone call, he sat down in the den with the gun. Much later, he sat in the grass outside the machine shed for hours, the means of living up to recently acquired

responsibilities gathering heat in the sunlight on the ground beside him. A low, exhausted moaning began to issue from within the aluminum walls, vibrating the thin separation between a boy and his dog.

A tightness wracked his entire body and he inexplicably experienced a lucid recollection of offering horses handfuls of grass as they returned to their sea of green. He thought of the flies that swarmed beneath protective masks to cling viciously to the moisture of the eyes of the mare who could not reach to rid herself of such affliction.

He thought of mares and wept.

After his greatest moment of cruelty and mercy, Maxwell returned to his mother's house and began to furiously wash his hands, continuing to do so for roughly an hour before collapsing in tears on the bathroom floor. Blood ran from his wounded hand to follow the grid of rivets between spotless white tiles. He dreamed deeply but did not remember.

When he woke from this, he felt a sense of absolute rebirth and a striking desire to call a man named Gregory. Their conversation was brief, but satisfactory.

“Hello, Gregory.”

“Maxwell?”

“Who else would I be?”

“What time is it there? Is everything alright? Have you been drinking?”

“Actually, no. I've been reading your files and smoking your cigars.”

“Very funny, Maxwell.”

“I'm serious. Shitty cigars but interesting reading. That's for sure.”

“Oh, is that so? Pray tell, hotshot, what's your favorite part so far?”

“When Leopold dies happy of old age after ruling his own kingdom.”

“He was king of Belgium, smartass. His rule destroyed central Africa.”

“So the man liked to travel...”

“Are we done here?”

“Without fail.”

“Wait a second... Listen, Maxwell... I appreciate what you had to do. You went above and beyond.”

“Above and beyond.”

“Keep it up and finish the job.”

“Above and beyond.”

“I'm holding you to that, Maxwell.”

“Oh, I promise I'm not crossing my fingers, Gregory.”

The closing chapter of Max's summer spent working on his mother's farm was a pleasant blur of creative productivity. Through faith in the purity of his motivations and unflinching perseverance, he succeeded in transforming the site of a recent and troubling loss into an industrious home of progressive invention.

The design of his creation was simple. Two solid pieces of wood secured in an upright position to support the blade of a large, razor-sharp ax salvaged from the recesses of the machine shed's abandoned trove of outdated spare parts stacked haphazardly against the back wall. A dusty brick secured to the top of the blade afforded the weight necessary to ensure the successful completion of its newly assigned function. A simple clamp operated from the side would guarantee the immobility of the subject throughout the proceedings. A small bowl of feed would be placed at the end of the plank. They would be denied any form of nourishment besides water for a specified period, guaranteeing that when the subjects were placed into position, natural inclinations would encourage them to stretch out necks to secure the desired food. The clamp would then be tightened with a simple application of pressure and the process could then be brought to an efficient conclusion at the operator's leisure.

The fulfillment of the device's purpose was accompanied by the composition of a letter, which was presented to the attention of the parties assigned the duty of delegating responsibility and read as follows:

Sir Gregory Peters,

As so eloquently articulated by Abbe Sieyes in the pamphlet *Qu 'est-ce le tiers etat* in January of 1789, we humble members of the Third Estate have been heretofore subjected to grievous inequalities at the hands of the First and Second Estates, clergy and nobility respectively, receiving unjust burdens of responsibility without the benefit of official representation.

In his words:

What is the Third Estate?

Everything.

What has it been until now in the political order?

Nothing.

What does it want to be?

Something.

**Beyond if not Above,
Maxwell Roberts-Peters**

THE TONGUES OF TUNGUSKA

At around 7:14am on June 30th, 1908, an enormous explosion occurred near the Podkamennaya Tunguska River in Siberian Russia. It was around 1,000 times more powerful than the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima. It leveled over 80 million trees in an 830 sq. mile radius. Though many theories abound, the official scientific consensus is that it was a comet or a meteor that exploded before impact roughly three to six miles above the earth.

The effects were global. Daytime brightness at night in Europe and worldwide tremors. It is the largest recorded impact witnessed in modern history.

JUNE 28th, 1908

In the days of raids entire peoples were displaced, pressed beyond the reach of rails laid down by royalty to settle in the wilderness. On this side of exodus, he had not been afforded the luxury of a memory of his mother's face or the knowledge of his father's love.

He was of the stranniki and the beguny, of the wanderers and runaways. Called 'kastor' by the dikar, who knew him from his trapping trade along the river, and greeted as 'nemoy' by his fellow believers, he traded pelts with the former, passing on parcels and postage to the latter throughout his seasonal returns from supply journeys made to the southern city. In this way, he had come to know the varied peoples of the land, welcome and greeted by fair skinned and bronzed alike.

Over the years he had carried the same bulging burden, mended when torn to carry the changing weight of trinkets and medicines, candy and cloth, bibles unrevised by apostate tsars, and books containing tales of wonders of the modern world. His weathered bundle changed in shape and size depending on its current contents, but was always almost full to bursting and never nearly empty. He knew the dangers of the wilderness and braved the threat of false believers and hostile tribes to share his wares with all who were in need across this land some called Tunguska.

And that is how he came to be standing outside the home of the Tesaks, a family similar in suffering to the one he never knew. Over the years, he had come to know nothing more of them than the fact that they had fled troubles in a distant city. He believed them to be faithful and had always found sympathy in the Tesak father's eyes when they passed over the smoothness of his scars, politely ignoring the nervous flurry of the remainders of his missing fingers. As an unspoken rule, he had only seen and met the father, but had heard the softness of the mother's singing voice and the laughter of their child through the open windows of the homestead.

The mother's name was Lyun, the child's name was Fyodor, and their blood had been used to paint the walls of the homestead. The Tesak father's name was Vard and his tongue had been hung from a thick knitting needle hammered into the front door of their home.

Adjusting the well-worn fur hat that covered his smooth, hairless scalp, he coughed and wiped vomit from his chin, shaking the sour scented remains of his last meal from his hand before wiping away what had dribbled down and over the thick, pink and

white scar which had collared his neck since long before his first memory of being surprised by his own reflection.

The Tesak's yard stretched far enough to fit a clothesline and a firepit before abruptly ending at the edge of the rocky cliffs common to the area. The fence protecting the ledge had been broken and splintered, as though someone had been thrown upon and through it against their will. Leaning over warily, stomach still turning, he tried to follow the trail of blood which splashed from the homestead's back door, through the firepit, and over the edge of the cliff's jagged face. A short distance down the sharp decline, a large shelf of rock protruded and he saw a tangled mess of two bloodied bodies obscured by the furniture and household objects which had been thrown upon the stone outcropping. Having guiltily spied through an open window after determining the homestead abandoned, he knew the mother and child were not inside and must have been tossed over to join the gathering below upon the bloody stones of the ledge. He continued leaning perilously to confirm, certain the mess of appendages held three bodies at the very least.

Limbs bent at unnatural angles, protruding from the meager, fly-swarmed mound of body parts and random household goods. The sun caught the polished face of a demolished clock. A bale of knots to hang the wash. A silent open music box. Tools and cloth and fishing tackle. Books and chairs and kitchen wares. A sprinkling of old newspapers trailed down the ledge to the platform below, the pages yellow where the age had taken, dark brown where the trailing blood had stained. A family's entire life together represented by a chaotic mess of possessions all now lost and useless, cast back to the earth and the agendas of insects.

Moving slowly from the stony edge, he made his way across the yard, pausing at the backdoor to summon courage, touching forehead, chest, and both of his shoulders to drive out the demons before crossing the threshold. A small stand that could hold more candles than most had been twisted and warped and tossed into the fireplace amidst the ashes and surviving fragments of a large scroll with foreign characters he guessed were oriental. Other than these oddities, almost all of the Tesak's belongings and amenities had been cast over the cliff. The humble table upon which the family ate their meals was on its side against a wall glimmering sickly with its new coat of paint. He ignored the rapidly gathering flies and set the table to rights in the place he estimated it to have formerly belonged. He then made a slow circuit of the home's interior, placing everything he could find at the center of the table. An unused spool of thread, two simple wooden spoons, and a cracked but functional mixing bowl. A small tin dikar warrior and a matching soldier of the type common to children and their games of war. The soldier was hopelessly bent, but with some gentle reshaping, the native would survive.

Under a blood soaked blanket which had been tossed into a corner, he found a large circle drawn upon the floor's rough wooden surface with a crude, reddish chalk. Odd symbols he could not decipher had been hastily scrawled around its periphery and in the center was placed a burnt photograph of the unfortunate family. Beneath the picture was another severed tongue secured to the floorboards by an array of clothespins, thumb tacks, and sewing needles, all forced through to the floorboards with an abandon betrayed by the chips and scratches surrounding the tongue where someone had frantically pounded and missed. Fire had claimed the top half of the picture, beheading the smiles of a young couple holding their infant son in a shared embrace. The child had been circled

with ink and crossed with a careful precision revealed by the nearly perfect circle and the crux of the cross drawn to rest precisely centered on the baby fat of his throat. On the back, with a different ink fading with age, a light and practiced hand had penned a note.

'mama papa and little bobra Tomsk 1904.'

He removed the burnt fragment from its frame and picked up the little tin dikar, securing both within the folds of his layered pelts. He placed the other items in the cracked mixing bowl, crossed himself with what fingers he had, and fled to trade the buzzing of flies for the warmth of the sun.

Outside in daylight and far from the hard mineral scent of human blood, he knelt to loosen the thick cords securing the mouth of his enormous leather bag, pouring the bowl's contents into the mix of random modern novelties which made up the majority of his bulbous burden. He was lifting the mixing bowl in both hands, considering whether its strength would hold, when an angry storm of blackness erupted over the lip of the nearby cliffs, thousands of frantic wings scratching at the sky in a mad torrent of chaotic flight. When he looked down at the bowl in his hands, he found two separate pieces.

His mind raced as he traveled, attempting to determine what to make of the scene that he was leaving. What new sort of sinner had been loosed upon the land? Perhaps a new wave of apostates from the heathen cities? He knew they burned and plundered, but they didn't discard possessions of worth. More likely a random band of roaming dikars who made their shoulders a lifelong residence for demons. Wild and young and taken with drink, such types would band together sporadically and terrorize the countryside until put to rest by the nearest settlement guard or rifled men from their own tribe.

Regardless of which men had carried it out, he knew who had whispered in their ears to inspire such sin. And so he prayed at a rate to match pace with the long stride of his practiced gate.

Reaching the river, he continued walking north with a steady stride perfected over years of endless travel, occasionally stopping to relieve his back from the awkward weight of his shifting cargo. The sun pulled itself across the sky and finally began to ease into the horizon. As he considered potential campsites for the night, his eyes picked out a pair of footprints amidst the long shadows of the thickening darkness. They were small, but not a child's. He guessed a woman, barefoot and walking with long, even strides. Following the track through the thick trees of evening, he came upon a pile of clothing. A thick, oiled fearnought and a sarafan were heaped atop a large leather satchel. The heavy jacket seemed fairly new, but the dress was frayed and soiled with earth and the blouse and slip were torn and bloody.

After settling his burden a ways off in the trees, he followed the tracks further to the river's edge and immediately felt a thick blush pass over his entire body. A young woman was naked and bathing in the frigid water, her face empty and eyes distant as she ran a tattered rag along the contours her form. For a few a long, trembling moments he was unable to look away, transfixed by shock rather than lustful fascination, but crossed himself to ensure that his shoulder did not become a perch for a demon. Along her sides and back he saw the proof of brutal abuse, thick welts and the yellowing darkness of deep bruises. Blood was pouring out into the passing waters from countless cuts and deep abrasions. She spit a full mouth of thick, dark blood soundlessly into the current. Around her throat, a thick collar of purple stood stark and clear against the fairness of her

youthful flesh, as though she'd just now secured the river after a fast escape from a hangman's gallows. And as she presented him with the length of her naked profile, he felt a boulder pass down his gulping throat to rest in the pit of a sickened stomach. A prominent bulge beneath her breasts announced that she was with child. He crossed himself and said a prayer for the two souls within a body wandering lost between innocence and age.

Moving back to the clearing and her discarded clothing, he stood numb and worried until he realized with a sudden joy that this must be the Tesak mother. Without thinking, he picked up the pieces of her sarafan and folded them as best he could, carefully arranging the fearnought next to the satchel. When he turned to the bag that the clothing had covered he froze, eyes wide as they took in the satchel's sharp, metal contents, confusion and alarm once again riding across the smoothly scarred plain of his face. But before he could make sense of the fact that a young believer with child was carrying such tools of violence, the rustle of movement through the trees signaled her return from the river.

Darting away from the clothing, he hid behind a tree at the edge of the clearing, averting his eyes until the sound of her dressing had ceased. He peered around the trunk, checking with his peripheral vision until he was sure she was in a modest state. He found her fully clothed, her bag about her and tensed for flight as she eyed the trees surrounding the clearing in search of whoever had repositioned her possessions. When he shuffled noisily and coughed softly to announce his presence, the young woman spun in a blur of motion, landing tense and ready, one hand deep inside her leather satchel and face aflame with a murderous rage.

He sensed no fear in her, only an aggressive heat that could be felt heavily despite its distance. He raised his hands and took two steps back, shaking his head slowly to deny the accusations of her eyes. She did not respond for a long, uncertain moment, but when he began to slowly reach into the folds of his pelted coat, she tensed further and a deep growl crawled from her throat to release itself through gritted teeth. When he pulled free a piece of tattered paper, reinforced by yellowing wax, she showed no signs of softening. Setting the paper gently on the floor of the clearing, he stepped backward until there was an equal distance between them and the paper. Flashing hurried looks around the clearing as though she thought this was a trap, she finally inched closer to the paper, only closing the last few feet when he backed yet further away. One hand securely inside her bag, she bent to snatch the paper before nearly running backwards to the safety of her original distance.

She glanced at the paper quickly and then locked her eyes on him with renewed determination, jumping back as he suddenly plopped down to sit cross-legged, leaning back on his elbows and waiting for her to proceed. Her golden eyes volleyed anxiously between the waxed parchment and his patiently relaxing frame. Though never so anxious or intense, he had been through this routine countless times. He squinted to follow her lips and determine what words she was reading in the story of his life.

I AM MUTE.

I AM A CHRISTIAN.

I SIGN THE CROSS WITH TWO FINGERS.

She stopped, looking up to appraise him, her mask of anger unmoved. He smiled warmly and made the sign of the cross, his first finger straight and the middle slightly bent as he passed his mutilated hand from forehead to chest then across his shoulders with a fluid grace born of endless repetition. When she did not respond, he settled back on his elbows again and waited for her to finish.

I DO NOT KNEEL WHEN I PRAY.

I REJECT MARRIAGE.

I DO NOT PRAY TO ICONS.

He cleared his throat and her eyes darted to confirm his position before continuing.

I DO NOT USE MONEY.

I DO NOT EAT WITH NONBELIEVERS.

I BELIEVE IN BAPTISM.

THREE FULL IMMERSIONS.

ARE YOU A CHRISTIAN?

Watching her read the final lines, he smiled and waited. After a full minute of silence broken only by the evening song of insects, he slowly pulled two more pieces of aged paper, large and small, from the beaver pelts layered across his chest. He placed the larger piece on the ground, stood slowly, and backed away in intervals as they repeated their previous ritual. He lay back in the grass of the summertime taiga and idly chewed a

stem of golden weed as she continued reading, guarding him with peripheral vision as she read through the entirety of the larger page.

I AM A DOCTOR.

I HAVE MEDICINE.

I AM A TRADER.

I HAVE MANY FINE THINGS.

I WILL GIVE YOU A FREE BIBLE.

I AM A DENTIST.

I TRADE FOR TEETH.

I HAVE CANDY.

I HAVE BOOKS.

During the few minutes spent reading through the list of his many skills and items for trade, her anger and alertness were unchanging. When she had finished with the larger sheet, she slowly set it on the ground and started on the smaller piece.

I AM NOT A DEMON.

I AM AN ORPHAN.

I WAS NOT BORN THIS WAY.

I DO NOT REMEMBER BEING BURNED.

She looked up and squinted in the growing darkness as he removed his fur hat and pulled up his sleeves to show that the smooth twisting scars that covered his face ran the course of his entire body. Seeing this, her rigid posture relaxed slightly and her determined grimace softened imperceptibly. She swallowed slowly and continued.

I DO NOT REMEMBER THIS SCAR.

He tilted his head to take in the stars and she watched as he traced the thumb of his wounded hand along the river of discolored skin which traveled the length of his arching neck. She exhaled a breath she had been holding.

NONBELIEVERS CUT OFF MY FINGERS

BECAUSE I MAKE THE CROSS.

He did not have a page which explained how a dikar tribe had found him. Or how he had been brought to a settlement of believers and raised by many different mothers sympathetic to such a small child so horribly scarred. How he had run away and wandered, almost starving until seeing a light in the nighttime distance. How he had approached the light to find it was fire, an entire village raised and burning. How the men with blades and torches had approached and told him to make the sign of the cross. How he had touched his thumb to the tips of his third and fourth fingers with his first standing straight and his second half-raised, instead of the way the apostates deemed proper. How they had used knives to ensure it was the last time he was able to make this mistake before abandoning a boy, freezing and bleeding, to the mercy of a deep siberian winter. How a native had saved him, bringing him from one community to the next in hopes of finding his family.

He rose slowly and matched her retreat as he made his advance. Bending to the pages with a smile, he replaced them with the picture he had claimed from the Tesak's bloodied home. The ritual continued until he was once again seated and eagerly waiting, certain she would recognize herself or at least her child in the damaged photo. But as she picked up the photograph and narrowed her eyes against the dying light, her anger returned tenfold and she crossed the distance between them with alarming speed. She dropped to one knee before him, right hand holding the picture inches from his face while her left remained buried in leather, trembling with the intensity of her grip.

She said 'I knew them' and then said nothing, searching his face as though she might find an answer to the question of her rage. He was forced to lean further back as she leaned ever forward. She breathed deeply, probing his expression for what he did not know. At this distance, despite the onset of darkness, he could see the detailed extent of damage sustained by her youthful face. A blackened eye and purpled jaw, a lip swollen to the point of splitting, the snake of a bruise writhing around her neck in time with her breathing, and ravaged blood vessels darkening the white of eyes lined with a threshold tide of unshed tears.

She took in a deep breath as if to scream and he braced himself for the assault. Instead, she exhaled with a forcefulness that made him flinch as she dropped to both knees as heathens do in prayer. One hand still placed in her bag but limply, she held the picture in her lap, shoulders sagging and occasionally shuddering. She didn't make a sound while weeping, hardening her face against the impulse, twisting muscles into a mask that stretched her shredded lips past the point of recent healing. Her tears and blood

converged in a river that dripped freely from her chin onto the picture which, being voiceless, he could not explain.

After darkness had claimed the taiga, they made camp by the river. He built the fire carefully, placing river rocks around a shallow declension in the moist, sandy earth. A firebox from his burden served its purpose and he fed out dry tinder until the snapping and sizzling meal of a cony was wafting across their simple campsite. They sat with the rising heat shimmering between them, her eyes following the rise and fall of the flames as they danced and searched for the fuel to free them from the circle of stones.

He offered her medicine and she quietly refused, ignoring him as though she were alone. When the food was ready she refused to eat and he was almost deterred by the ferocity still lingering behind the blank panes of her eyes. Her face seemed accustomed to hunger, the traces of past famines still lingering about the valley between cheekbone and jaw. It was his knowledge of what she carried within her that gave him the courage to pester her further. Finally, she relented, wincing and swallowing down cries of pain with every bit of meat, but eating every last bit of food he presented before moving away to be alone beside the cold current. Despite the distance from the water and the brush and trees between, he drifted into sleep quite certain that he heard the sound of the young woman once again allow herself to break and flow freely with the river.

JUNE 29th, 1908

He did not speak in dreams, unmoving save for the trembles that wracked his sleeping body as his mind traveled throughout the night, his throat crying out in wordless

shrieks as he attempted to reach the source of an endless summons that slid ceaselessly between a whistle and a scream.

He woke from this agony with his body sore and his chest weighted by a sad conviction, certain that she was gone even before he searched the surrounding grounds and found signs of her sleep in the barefoot tracks circling a depression of summer loam sprinkled with dark clumps of earth and blood.

Frantically clearing the camp and taking up the weight of what he always carried, he set out to retrieve her, scanning the open country as he jogged, his mind moving faster than his feet to find a way to explain to her that pain could not be cured with rage. He had seen the anger in her eyes and felt the fury of her hidden hand. He prayed that the demons who had taken her family would not succeed in drawing her to meet them. Her love was dead and her boy was lost and neither could be saved by acts which might endanger the fate of an unborn babe.

He reached her as mid-day was breaking and the sun poured its crushing warmth from a cloudless sky. She heard his approach and turned, waiting with obvious impatience as he closed the distance with weary and uneven strides. He let his pack fall to the earth and fell to one knee beside it, panting and coughing and entreating her with eyes reddened by the sting of sweat. He pulled the photograph from his sweat-soaked coat, pointed a shaking finger at the infant before crudely scratching the word LOST across the ground between them. His eyes asked if she had seen the second tongue, if she knew that her child was certainly lying dead beneath the rubble of their lives. When she gave no response, he pointed his dirty finger at the swell of her belly hidden by the fearnought

draped across her frame. Her anger abated for a moment and she arched a single brow as he returned his finger to the earth and slowly spelled out FOUND.

She considered him for a moment before slowly shaking her head. 'I'm not the Tesak woman. I'm from the one who cut their tongues.' Then she turned to continue on despite his protests of gasps and grunts. Hefting his misshapen bag back upon his burning shoulders, he followed her throughout the day.

JUNE 30th, 1908

He prayed and walked without thinking like a horse will until the early morning sun called him back to his mission and he made his way to the riverside camp. Arriving, he was greeted by a scene of quiet chaos. The fire was burning through the visitor's blankets, the edges of which had been pushed into the shallow pit. Long thin splashes of blood lined the earth at random and the visiting Christian was nowhere to be seen. Where the woman had rested, blood soaked into the earth a large pool from which footprints trailed towards the nearby river. He frantically followed the trail until it entered the rushing waters, searching up and down the riverbank before rushing back to the campsite. Gathering his things, he said a brief prayer before taking off in a dead sprint. Passing from the wooded land, he came to an open sea of hilled grassland stretching for miles.

Passing over the hilltop, he saw a humble homestead. Two horses on long tethers grazing beside a simple storage shed across from a typical house of rough wood, bricks, and mortar. He ran recklessly, holding his fur hat against his head as the shifting weight of his awkward pack nearly toppled him with every third step. He reached the shed and

stopped to catch his breath, pack falling to his side as he doubled over gasping. As he drew in deep gasps, his throat and lungs were stung by thick fumes of kerosene wafting through the air in waves. He turned to peer inside the shed and throughout his slow survey of the interior he prayed to not believe in the things that he was seeing.

A woman's brown skirts were blackened and clinging to her splayed thighs still crusted with the dried results of violence. Her eyes were open and empty, her mouth gaping, ringed with dried blood and stuffed with wads of burnt paper. Beside her lay a naked man with a large gaping hole in the side of his ribcage, through which small swarms of flies made entrance and exit. The man's mouth matched the woman's, husband and wife. A cracked and flaking ring of blood around the rim, stuffed with paper and ashes and pain. Both bodies resting as though carefully placed atop two neatly spread squares of donkey hide.

He ran from the scene, eyes blinded by tears and his burden clumsily clutched to his chest for protection. Reaching the house, he warily turned the corner and cried out wordlessly in relief when he saw the young woman standing in the doorway. When she turned to him, the force of her anger hit his chest like a brick and he stumbled and fell. Picking himself up slowly, he approached her with caution, seeing her hand in her trembling bag. She stared straight ahead at the closed door of the home, upon which was carefully chalked a red circle, surrounded by symbols that framed the horror secured at its center. Two human tongues had been nailed into the wood, a single page from God's sacred word hanging from each small spike of metal.

At her feet he saw another family photograph. The parents now tongueless in the shed and the circled, crossed faces of their two young daughters. Remaining frozen in a stance of rapt attention, she began to cough and spit up blood and he noticed a thick river of redness streaming down her leg to pool around lacerated feet. Not knowing what to do, he grabbed his message so recently written and offered her the first page with a shaking hand.

Her eyes remaining fixed on the sacred texts and tongues, she snatched it from his hand without turning. Slowly bringing his words to the level of her eyes, she read his message carefully.

EVERYTHING WILL BE WELL.

I KNOW WHY YOU ARE IN PAIN.

Letting the paper and her fearnought fall to the earth with a sudden shrug, she drew herself up to her full posture, shoulders back and eyes suddenly stabbing at his as she bitterly spat a mouthful of blood that left a thinning string of scarlet dripping from her chin. One hand held hope hidden within the leather at her side, the other resting upon unwanted growth, and with both she held her rage as the only shape to which she'd pray.

Captive and conqueror, as plea and decree, she spoke the word strongly but softly.

' Pain. '

And then the heavens were divided. Light consumed the earth, which wailed and shook in protest. The bleeding woman and the burnt man were thrown against the side of the desecrated home, broken glass showering down around them as the world continued

to rock and sway with a succession of distant eruptions that reached them in the form of scalding waves of searing wind. Screams erupted from the earth and darkness came before light returned with seas of fire, skin blistering beneath the rising heat of a poisoned, boiling sky. Salvation came with the welcome coolness of unconsciousness.

...he dreamed he saw her riding off into the hell of the horizon...

Upon waking he saw heavens decayed and failing, enormous clouds of smoke and ash rising up in the distance to challenge the sun. The air burned against his skin and he shed his pelts to stand upright. She was gone, along with one of the horses. He did not think, but simply moved one foot after the other, forgetting to cross himself while slowly walking into the cursed home to carefully place his burden upon the dinner table where a family would never again share their meals. Having accomplished this, he untethered the remaining animal and rode against his better judgment, certain that the world was ending.

A low bank of smoke grew heavy and rolled past like dry, sharp fog to blind the eyes. Though he rode bareback on an unfamiliar animal, his knees alone were sufficient to guide the catatonic beast. Its sightless eyes were fixed ahead, its mechanical gallop instinctive, mind startled into stillness. Swarms of animals poured towards him over the hills, fleeing from what he was rushing to meet. Birds flew in wobbling circles before falling to the earth, a storm of feathered hail to compliment the burning earth. Flames few and far between but spreading, and he could feel the heat increasing as the thoughtless beast beneath him pressed deeper into the blasted landscape.

As he neared the top of the hill before him, he was surprised by the site of two dikar dancing awkwardly upon the grassy crown. The natives raised their hands and clapped and pranced and fell laughing as he passed. Rushing down the other side, he felt a cool breeze brush his cheeks and felt a surge of hope and faith in a world unbroken waiting on the other side. Coming to the summit, his heart fell fast as his already stinging eyes were hit with a blast of rancid fumes. Turning his face away from the oven of the open land, he saw an entire herd of reindeer aflame, trampling themselves, rolling on the earth and screaming as the machine he rode maintained its pace. By the time he returned his eyes to the north, the scenery had changed. Trees were bent back by nothing, as if pointing to the place to which he should be retreating. He came upon the enflamed remains of a dikar encampment, natives in various states of disarray swarming across his path, their heads wobbling weakly on uncertain shoulders. He passed a crowd of weeping women who held their infants high above their heads, the mothers and the babies shrieking. Whether held up for assistance or as an offering to placate their heathen fire god, he could not and did not want to know.

The fires roared and the air shimmered and he felt the beast beneath him begin to falter. He leapt from the twitching form of his mount as it collapsed to shaking knees and ran the final stretch, nearly tripping as he passed the corpse of the horse the young woman had taken. The sight of the freshly dead animal's open eyes filling with the ashes that fell from the blackness above filled him with hope amidst this horror. His hope for her and the soul growing within her drove him forward, running and crawling until he found himself collapsing. He breathed in ragged gasps of sour ashen air for what seemed like an eternity before summoning the strength to bring himself back to his feet. What his

witnessed left him shaking, crying like an infant as he dropped back to his knees. Tears flowed as panic seized him, loosening his inner strength and voiding what he had contained through a flow along his trembling thighs to soil the ground surrounding.

All was void and dead, aflame.

What roared out beyond him made that which had come before seem like some soft heaven. A pillar of flame and empty blackness twisted against itself, a mountain of writhing sickness consuming the sky, stretching across and unto the edge of the visible earth, endless in all forward directions. The grace of God absent and Satan loose upon the earth. What mind could wish for something worse? What prayer could save this dying world?

The sound of gentle, rippling laughter startled him, but he lacked the energy to do anything but slowly turn his head to find the source of misplaced merriment. The young woman stood in her bloodied slip, satchel strapped across a shoulder, dress and apron long since discarded, nothing but a wasted expanse of cotton to cover the battlefield that was her body. What blood she had left poured forth freely, leaving her more red than fair, the patches of unstained skin seeming to be wounds by contrast, bright islands in her sea of bleeding. She laughed like a child and then like a challenge, hefting burnt leather high above her head. Holding this pose for a moment, skin golden with the glow of distant firestorms approaching, she stood statue-strong and regal, belly swollen for the altar and tablets lifted high and listing all the sins of sinai.

Casting out from herself an unwelcome possession, she watched the kingdoms all fall down and allowed herself a small unmoving smile. Salt of tears and sweat streamed

down a frozen face as, willing herself a pillar amidst the searing ceaseless wind, she held strength and spirit steady to press back against the wretched breath of someone else's god.

She bled upon the edge of the burning earth and spoke again to make an end.

'My father called me harlot.'

A BRIGHT COMEDY

ONE.

IN WHICH THE READER IS AFFORDED THE FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE WORLD SOON TO UNFOLD THROUGHOUT THE COMING NARRATIVE BY WAY OF AN ANCILLARY TEXTUAL ARTIFACT – HERE FIND AN OFFICIAL DOCUMENT CONTAINING A FEW HELPFUL DETAILS CONCERNING THE EVENTS WHICH SET THE STAGE FOR OUR HEART-WARMING TALE OF YOUNG LOVE AND THE JOYS THAT IT BRINGS TO ALL THOSE PURE OF HEART AND POSSESSED OF SOUND REASON.

SUBJECT PROFILE:

Name: William Donally [alias Ditchweed]

Occupation: Independent Journalist, Program Coordinator – Washington Peace Center

Location: Fort Totten, District of Columbia

Format: Transcript - Recorded Interview

File Type/Designation: AHT.3CC.477.a5

BEGIN ENTRY

We defended the city like it wasn't just a city trying to be a district trying to be a state. We were in Dupont Circle getting drunk on open containers and white male privilege when the first suicide bombers dove through the windows of Starbucks screaming something about U.S. starvation sanctions wiping out an entire generation of Iraqi babies.

I saw the look on the nearest thirty-something's face as it looked up from its mac book to greet the shrieking exploding man with an heir of inconvenienced disapproval. Kramer Books was next and the general response to the bloodshed and explosions was a pervading air of nonplussed disinterest. It was later reported that when the first kill-squad

of disgruntled caliphate representatives grabbed the nearest customer with a fistful of hair and held a blood-crusted scimitar to her throat she seemed almost puzzled before sighing and asking 'Do you have the new Safran Foer? I've been *all* over town and I *shant* stoop to Amazon.'

The reported response was a rehearsed indictment of The Great Satan for leading a bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria which initially led to the deaths of uncounted countless innocent civilians and later led to an even greater number of uncounted countless deaths when the systematically destroyed semi-industrial infrastructure collapsed because it needed offices and factories and hospitals and agricultural processing plants and restaurants and movie theaters and goats and people and hookah pipes, all of which were destroyed by explosions that investigators later attributed to the bombs themselves.

But all this was expected. Welcome, even... After all the hype, ya know? But then, after the cells were rounded up and the usual laws were passed for our...safety...shit got weird. It was like God got pissed off or bored or something...

Babies, man... From over there... Fuckin babies just started showing up everywhere. In pantries, cupboards, bathrooms- Fuckin everywhere, man.

Like... Karma, ya know? Like God's own unknown plot twist mystery. But with...like...no exposition. But you're the guys in charge, so why the hell do I even need to- Fuck it. No need to explain... We all know what this is...

TWO.

IN WHICH PRESCOTT JONES CARRIES ON STALWART AND EVER TRUE THROUGHOUT THE PERILS PRESENTED BY A WOMAN UNABLE TO READJUST TO HER TRADITIONAL HOUSEWIFE ROUTINE AFTER THE SUDDEN DEATH OF SOMETHING SHE LOVED – AN EMPTY CRIB IS DISMANTLED AND THE DEBT INCURRED BY THE FRAILTIES OF THE HEROIN ARE PAID IN FULL BY THE STRENGTHS OF THE MAN WHOSE NAME SHE WAS GLAD TO TAKE

Every morning she slides silently from their bed and makes the short walk down the hall. If he wakes and asks she always says 'oh just making coffee.'

He knows which room she enters because the hinges creak and the doorknob clicks each time she shuts herself in. She knows enough to close it to avoid unwanted questions. He knows she knows he checks each night to make sure it is closed in the morning. She knows she is forgiven when he thanks her for the coffee.

On Saturday she's with her sister and he finds himself compelled. He doesn't pull down yellow tape warning of restricted access. He opens and closes the door behind with the same creak and click she makes every morning, the familiar sounds strange from this new position.

He stands above the empty crib. There's an urge to make a phone call but he doesn't know who to call or why. He clears his throat and turns away, checking the bottoms of his shoes before stepping back into the hallway.

He doesn't ask before he does it. No conversation. It takes one screwdriver, a small wrench, and twenty minutes while she is reading in the bathtub. After finishing, he closes the door and returns the tools to the garage. Later, she climbs into bed next to him, hair still damp, clinging to him for warmth. He runs a hand along her back in a slow circle and she sighs. The circle widens and she's calm. His circuit drifts below her lower back and she pauses. He squeezes gently and she's tense.

'I'm not... good right now.'

'That's not for another week.'

'No. I just-'

'Forget it.'

'I'm sorry.'

Morning. Slipping silently away. Creak and click. A heavy pause before a cry so soft it may have been imagined and a thud as knees hit carpet. He pictures her kneeling where the crib used to be. Arms around herself as she slowly rocks forward and back. Or maybe hands clasped before her like a prayer. He waits until he's certain she's had time to embrace the empty space where it once was each morning. He doesn't look when walking by, but the corner of his eye catches her outline against the morning light through pink lace curtains. Too quick to determine if she is staring out the window or down at the empty center of the room. He wonders if this even matters as he makes himself some coffee.

THREE.

IN WHICH WE FIND THE NOBLE RACHEL JONES HAZARDING THE TRAVAILS OF AN UPPERCLASS SUBURBAN EXISTENCE WITH DIGNITY AND HONOR – PRESCOTT JONES ADMINISTERS HIS HOUSEHOLD WITH A FAIR AND COMPASSIONATE HAND – FELINES AND FAMILIAL RELATIONS ARE BRIEFLY ADDRESSED BEFORE AN AMIABLE CONCLUSION TO THE AFFAIRS OF THE DAY

The next morning, following a day and night without a single shared word, he wakes in bed alone. He waits to hear the click and creak but they never come. Instead he hears the telltale signals of her movement throughout the house. First floor, cupboards opening. Basement door, basement steps. The distant slam of the basement freezer. Back porch door, garage door banging. Eventually she glides past the bedroom and the expression of her passing profile is blank. He hears her open his office door. Then the office closet. Then back down the hall to the bathroom. Every single cabinet creaking. Then the swish and clack of the shower curtain being swept aside. He turns to face away as she enters. He feigns sleep as she stands over the bed. Closet door opening. Closet door closing. The weight of her gaze across his body as a discomforting breeze. He rolls over and yawns throughout a question.

‘What are you looking for?’

Her eyes are fixed on his but absent, head cocked slightly as if listening for something distant.

Rachel says ‘we're out of coffee.’

Returning from the store with coffee beans and a few other necessities, he overhears her speaking in the living room.

'They say it's happening more often now. Could happen to anyone. Just like that. No warning.'

He moves forward quietly to try to listen but the floorboards sound an alarm and by the time he enters she's hung up.

'Who was that?'

'Nobody. Did you get everything on the list?'

'Your sister?'

'Why do you call her that? You only ever-'

'Isn't she?'

'She has a *name*.'

'What's the difference?'

'It's *how* you say it.'

'Sister sister sister...'

'See?'

'I *really* don't.'

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Does it even matter?’

‘It does to her. To me.’

‘She's not here.’

‘*I'm* here. And when I'm there I don't just say *my husband*.’

‘She's not *here*.’

‘It's just *one* word.’

‘My point exactly.’

‘So why can't you just-‘

‘Sister sister sister sister.’

‘You're a child.’

He says 'no comment' as he walks away. She clenches her jaw and keeps it clenched throughout the day until she's finished making dinner.

They had started with a simple monitor set. Just two walkie-talkies and a charger. But she had worried that the signal was weak and she always forgot to charge them. She worried aloud until he relented and installed an intercom with a port in every room. With channels left open she could move throughout the house without worry, assured by silence that all was well. Friends from work had visited and whistled their admiration.

‘Must have spent a pretty penny...’

He'd sipped his long island before offering a casual reply.

‘We think the price is worth it.’

After the sudden death of their infant, he disconnected the system's power base to shut off the taunting red standby lights in the corner of every port. Now the speakers in every room are silent. Glaring in their uselessness. No need for any more assurance. No more cause for any worry. Even more so in the room with the colors she had picked. The only pink wallpaper in the house. The square of silver and a row of buttons beneath the black mesh speaker-face seem out of place amidst the warm brightness of the walls. He used to find her anywhere but in that room.

‘Everything okay?’ he'd ask in the kitchen, the living room, or the basement.

‘Hear that?’

‘I don't hear anything.’

‘See?’

‘Honey...’

‘So everything's fine.’

After her next morning ritual, he confronts her in the kitchen, quietly blowing on his coffee to cool it while she busies herself preparing his lunch.

‘What were you looking for?’

‘You know.’

‘And yesterday morning?’

‘Maybe every morning until she finally-‘

‘That cat isn't going to-‘

‘*That* cat, *your* cat, *the* cat...’

He sighs loud enough for her to hear.

‘She has a name.’

‘Had,’ he says before sipping noisily.

‘What? No...’

‘*Had* a name.’

‘Don't. *Please?*’

‘Don't dwell.’

‘I'm not dwelling. Just hoping. No harm in-‘

‘She's not coming back.’

After this she adapts to sell him her excuses. She calls out the cat's name as she makes her rounds. The stretched out vowels seem a challenge. She has also reconnected the intercom's power base in the basement, leaving all channels open as she searches and

calls. Every port in every room catches echoes from the others. He covers his head with a pillow and plugs his ears and waits until he smells the coffee.

FOUR.

**IN WHICH WE FIND PRESCOTT JONES OVERWHELMED WITH THE
EXCITEMENT OF THE CONTEMPORARY CORPORATE OFFICE
ENVIRONMENT – RECENTLY DECEASED PROGENY ARE CASUALLY
MENTIONED AND GREAT DETAIL IS PROVIDED CONCERNING THE
BEHAVIORAL MANIFESTATIONS OF HIS UNRESOLVED EMOTIONAL
ANXIETIES – ULTIMATELY, WIVES ARE ENGAGED IN POLITE
CONVERSATION AND THE DAY ENDS WITH A DECIDEDLY
SATISFACTORY RESOLUTION OF FEMININE HYSTERIA**

He isn't listening to what they are saying as he steps into the copy room. The other men turn and stand frozen wearing guilty, sheepish expressions. The younger of the two coworkers steps aside to afford him the use of the copy machine, muttering an apology before exiting.

'Sorry, man. We weren't talking about... you know... *yours*.'

He sits with elbows on his desk, both hands holding the sandwich she makes him every Thursday. It's at eye level like binoculars and he examines it closely before beginning to eat with robotic precision. Seven bites and ten heavy swallows.

He slowly folds the brown paper lunch bag and tucks it into the side-pocket of his briefcase. Then pulls a pencil from a drawer and begins to scrawl across a pad of paper. After covering and crumpling five separate sheets in an attempt to get it right, he snaps the pencil in two with an index finger atop either end and two thumbs touching along the

center beneath. He uses a fine-tipped fountain pen to carefully write out the final draft. A simple request that, despite the understandable temptation to converse concerning recent events, fellow employees refrain from making jokes about dead babies.

His steps on the way to the employee lounge are casual and even. Eighty-six steps exactly. He shortens his final two strides to ensure he enters the lounge on an even number. The ‘comments and suggestions’ box is next to the industrial coffee maker. He folds the piece of paper once at the center. Then once more with a shaky hand. Then again. And again, until what he slips into the box is a tiny, easily missed square no larger than a quarter. He’s counting carefully as he returns to his office. Ninety-two steps exactly. Throughout all of this, he does not think about the fact that the ‘comments and suggestions’ box is always empty except for the occasional soiled napkin.

Making a pretense of an early dinner meeting, he beats traffic and gets home before her, waiting quietly in the kitchen. He thinks about the best way to use the space which will remain after the removal of all the intercom ports. He takes a phone call which lasts two minutes and by the time he hangs up, his breathing has changed. He waits.

She walks in and he does not call out a greeting. He coughs sharply as she passes and she reels and gasps and curses. He apologizes softly and watches as she collects herself. Sighing and looking everywhere but at him, she rummages for a loaf of bread and pulls a jar out from the nearest cupboard, trying to open it with shaky hands.

‘How's your sister?’

‘Fine. Great actually. She just got a new-‘

‘She called.’

‘Just now?’

‘Just now. While you were with her.’

‘Oh? Must have been in the bathroom...’ She turns away, still struggling with the jar.

‘We talked.’

‘Oh. Good. About?’

‘Your new hobby.’

‘What?’

‘You know... The daycare thing.’ At this, she pauses.

‘Oh... That. That was just once. The Reynolds send their kids there...’

‘You don't say?’

‘...and so I went there with Trish. Once. She was right. It's nice.’

‘I'm sure it's great.’

‘They even have in-door swings. You know, for winter.’

‘So I called.’

‘Sorry?’

‘The daycare. I called.’

‘I don't really-‘

‘Every day this week they said.’

She turns and doesn't realize she's still twisting at the lid.

‘No. That isn't-‘

‘Every day,’ he says, approaching her calmly.

‘Oh.... it's just a little extra money. For the renovation...’

‘They said volunteering.’

‘You're being mean,’ she says, her efforts with the lid passing into a simple spinning of the jar.

‘They said they've had complaints.’

‘They didn't.’

‘About your... state.’ He punctuates this last remark by swiping the jar from her fidgeting grip.

‘You're lying. They wouldn't-‘

‘The kids don't like it.’

‘The kids...’

‘All the crying.’

He effortlessly opens the jar with a single, noiseless twist. Slow, not sudden, but she startles as if he'd dropped and smashed it.

'Still looking for that cat?'

'Why do you care?'

'In the cupboards above the stove? In the locked pantry?'

'Stop.'

'In the bathtub? The bedroom closet?'

'Please.'

'The freezer in the basement?'

'I hate you.'

'I know what you've been looking for.'

'I hate you. I hate-'

'You hate me you hate me you hate me.'

'Please.'

'I *know* what you're looking for.'

'I just-'

'Never gonna happen.'

'You don't know-'

‘Oh, I know. And it's sad.’

‘I'm not-‘

‘And *about* that cat...’

‘*That cat that cat that cat* I hate you!’

‘She's dead.’

‘No...’

‘And guess who did it.’

‘I hate you.’

‘I scraped her off the driveway with a rake. The funeral was held at Tim's compost heap.’

‘I hate you.’

‘A lovely service. Beautiful arrangement. Everyone cried.’

‘I hate you.’

‘Would you rather I told you? *Hey, Honey. Guess who you neglected to death in your rush to your sister's?*’

‘I hate you I hate you I hate you!’

She's still screaming as he walks away. Eventually her voice gives out and she stands trembling as a thought for which she has no words compresses to a pinpoint of light and tries to dig a tunnel through her temple to embrace the outside world.

Later he'll apologize from behind a challenge of direct eye contact. When she accepts with hers averted, he'll suggest they get another cat. The indoor kind this time.

FIVE.

IN WHICH THE READER IS PRESENTED WITH A BONUS TEXTUAL ARTIFACT FOR THE SAKE OF INCREASING THE DEPTH AND DETAIL OF THE WORLD ADDRESSED BY THE GENERAL NARRATIVE – ANDREW BRANSBUCK, THOUGH A MINOR CHARACTER WHO SHALL NOT APPEAR AGAIN, HONORABLY FULLFILLS HIS ASSIGNED DUTY OF INTRODUCING THE CHARACTER OF TOM REYNOLDS IN A MANNER ALL WILL AGREE TO BE AS EQUALLY CASUAL AS IT IS CONVINCINGLY AUTHENTIC.

SUBJECT PROFILE:

Name: Andrew Bransbuck

Occupation: Financial Advisor - Reddington Solutions

Location: Tacoma Park – Montgomery, Maryland

Format: Written Report-Public Record

File Type/Designation: AHT.4FC.147.c3

Public Source: “*Getting Back On The Righteous Path: The Power of Prayer at Home and in the Office*”- Bransbuck, A. Carlyle Publishing. Washington, D.C.]

Archival Note: The following is an excerpt from the subject’s public recounting of the incidents and has been heavily redacted. Editorial interference with the final publication required the reclassification of all material initially produced by the subject. (Complete record of subject’s autobiographical publication surrounding the incident has been filed under the above classification)

BEGIN ENTRY

And then we began to find the babies. Just the occasional little thing, brown eyes big like puppy dogs, dirty and screaming, crawling if they had the strength. Our first was in the backyard, wailing at the foot of the wooden steps of our enclosed porch. My wife made a show of wanting to keep it but we both knew it was a show. So she tried to coax it into lapping up some warm skim milk from the cat's dish before we brought it to the local dispensary.

Our neighbors found twins outside of their garden hut and the Reynolds down the street found a dead one in their basement next to a stack of cobwebbed lawn chairs. Tom argued that it wasn't one of them. Skin was too light, he'd said. 'It's *dead*, Tom' was all Janice had replied. They'd been out of town for the week or they might have found it in time to help. They were showing up randomly everywhere. Adams Morgan. Pentagon City. You name it. But when the rumors began to circulate about the POTUS finding one under his desk in the oval office, Janice decided to arrange a council concerning the wave of misplaced babies.

We all sat around a table at a converted townhouse-now-cafe in Columbia Heights fretting about the unfortunate advents.

'I just don't understand how they're getting *here* from all the way over...'

'There?'

'If it keeps on like this we may have to-'

'What? Have to what? There's nothing to be done.'

'Really, Tom? Didn't you say that about the co-op closing? And look how that turned out.'

'She's right. A few concerned citizens speaking up and now we all still have quinoa at whole sale prices without having to find parking at Whole Foods.'

'And that's a complete protein. Makes rice look like dirt.'

'Quinoa... You're absolutely right.'

'I guess... But who do we speak up to? What do we say?'

'I'll tell you what we say-'

But then the server arrived with our meal and by the time we'd sorted out which plate belonged to which person the conversation had shifted to a discussion of the fairness of trade facilitating the creation of our after-brunch lah-tays.

Tom grumbled about splitting the squash dip as he hadn't had any and then we all tipped over twenty percent and carpoled home.

SIX.

IN WHICH PRESCOTT JONES ENTERTAINS THE DELIGHTFUL REYNOLDS COUPLE IN A GRAND DISPLAY OF WARM HUMOR AND ADMIRABLE HOSPITALITY – DEAD BABIES ARE REFERENCED IN PASSING, BUT ONLY THOSE OF THE UNINVITED AND FOREIGN VARIETY – A LOUD NOISE IS HEARD AND MEN AND WOMEN DISCUSS MATTERS PERTINENT TO THEIR GENDERS, EACH KEEPING TO THE RESPECTIVE GROUPINGS ASSIGNED TO THEM AT BIRTH ACCORDING TO OBSERVABLE GENITALIA-BASED ATTRIBUTES

As he waits for the neighbors to arrive, he hopes for many things. That they'll think to leave the kids with a sitter. That the wife will think to wear something loose enough to hide what they're expecting. That their conversation won't drift to what everyone else is talking about. What Tim found in their basement. What everyone's been finding.

They arrive with no toddlers in tow, Tim's wife wearing a fashionably baggy sweater against the growing cold. His final hope holds through their light lunch but gives out during the after-dinner game of gin rummy. His wife speaks as though discussing the weather.

'Have you been keeping up with the news? It's unreal.'

Mrs. Reynolds takes this as permission to unleash a torrent of commentary. His attention fades in and out as the women chatter. He's making a mental tally of every time his wife's eyes dart to and from the stomach of their expecting guest. Nobody's paying attention to whose turn it is and he's organized his hand as though he's playing poker.

'It's wild. Simply wild. Had to tell the kids that the stork just got confused.'

'And they bought that?' his wife asks. She's wearing a mask of eager interest he hasn't seen in months.

'What else could I say? It's just storks and simple mistakes. Brought on by cell phone towers and global warming. Right, Tim?'

'You get that new siding on the shed yet?' the other man asks, passing over his wife's question smoothly. He responds with a nod to the kitchen and the men rise together. The volume of the women's conversation carries into the other room.

'We wouldn't have told them anything, but *they're* the ones who found it.'

'Were they... Did they...'

'They were fine. Told them we were watching it for the neighbors.'

‘Oh, that was very-‘

‘And without skipping a beat, do you know what Tim Jr. said?’

‘What?’

‘Our neighbors don’t look like that.’

‘I guess he’s right. They don’t. None of them do. Not really.’

‘Maybe the Martinez family. Moved in end of July, but I’ve only seen them once.’

‘But they’re Mexican or Brazilian or whatever. Aren’t they all supposed to be from-‘

‘But at *that* age? Brown is brown. How can you tell the difference?’ Mrs. Reynolds asks with a laugh.

‘Wait till they either start mowing your lawn or exploding,’ her husband answers and all three laugh. He ignores them, crushing bagged ice in the sink, his back turned, lifting and smashing with increasing force. The other man moves closer and lowers his voice.

‘Buddy in the State Department swings the irons with me every other Saturday. Says it’s official. Scientifically certified. Genome Project. The whole nine yards. God knows *how* they’re doing it, but they’re all from *there*.’

He continues lifting and slamming the bag until the other wanders back to the women. Eventually he joins them with three long islands and a sweet tea. He sits and

takes up his abandoned hand, shuffling cards for a few moments before noticing that no one's speaking. The two women are leaning with heads together, each holding one side of a polaroid. Tim Reynolds is wearing an amused smile, sipping his drink and watching the women.

'Her eyes,' his wife whispers.

'That's what *I* said. Tim *had* to grab his old camera. You usually don't see green with *them*.'

'Newborns never have green. That comes later,' his wife says with reverence.

'It wasn't *born*,' he says, sighing into his drink.

'For posterity. Guys at the office would never believe me. *Had* to snap a shot.'

'Why didn't you use your phone?' he asks, focused more on his wife's expression than the words he's speaking.

'A sudden impulse. Nostalgia.'

'Tim's always been romantic like that.'

A tremendous roar explodes through the room. Everyone jumps or yelps or curses. Drinks are spilled and the picture is dropped.

'Just the furnace. It's just the furnace kicking back on. For *some reason* the intercom's cranked and the basement port is on,' he explains.

‘I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry,’ she sputters, on hands and knees with a napkin, pant legs soaking up long islands and sweet tea.

‘It’s fine. We’re fine,’ Mrs. Reynolds says.

‘I’m sorry. So stupid...’ she offers, wiping off then holding out the polaroid. She stares at it until it’s taken back and follows it as it’s placed in the other woman’s purse.

‘So... *thin*... You can see her ribs.’

‘The sanctions. Remember?’

‘Oh please. *Stop*, Tim. Really?’ The expectant laughs, dismissing her husband on their way to the back porch. The women comment on the changing season. Tim Reynolds carries on with speculation about the tool shed’s siding while his wife holds court on the surrounding neighbors and their respective gardens. Nobody mentions the picture and eventually the visitors begin the short walk home.

SEVEN.

IN WHICH THE LOVELY AND CONTENTED JONES COUPLE EXCHANGE PLEASANTRIES WITH A VIGOR AND WARMTH MORE COMMONLY OBSERVED IN THE HOPEFUL INTERACTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEARTS – LOVE IS SEEN TO REACH AND SURPASS ITS POTENTIAL FOR PROVIDING ABSOLUTE AND PURE JOY – A PICTORAL MAGAZINE IS MENTIONED AND THE PREVIOUS ERA OF COLD WAR RELATIONS BETWEEN WORLD SUPER POWERS IS VAGUELY ADDRESSED – THIS EXCITING CHAPTER IS PUNCTUATED WITH AN INTERROGATORY OF AN EXCEPTIONAL AESTHETIC QUALITY AS DEFINED BY FORTHRIGHT BREVITY

The next day they're driving somewhere to get something that they need for the house. She's staring blankly out the passenger window and he's hoping she doesn't start again. She hasn't let up since seeing the picture.

'Do you think it's just here?'

'Only here. Other countries haven't reported-'

'No. I mean like forests. Like the middle of nowhere. Like the mountains.'

'If a tree falls in the woods and nobody's there...'

'Don't make jokes. Your tone is so-'

'Hell... Who knows... In cars. They say in lots of cars...'

'Where do you think it was from?' Her voice is soft and she isn't crying. 'Which country, I mean... They're all so... *bad* right now.'

'Please... Can we just-'

'Do you even wonder? Just a little?'

'Nowhere. They're not *from* anywhere.'

'She had eyes like that girl in... National Geographic... so green... green like... I don't-'

'Afghanistan.'

'What?'

‘That was when the Russians were there. She was famous. Used to collect them, remember?’

‘So?’

‘So that’s not even in the Middle East.’

‘So?’

EIGHT.

IN WHICH PRESCOTT JONES DOES RIGHT BY GOD, COUNTRY, AND FAMILY AFTER FINDING A SUBDIVISION OF THE RECENT PLAGUE OF ARAB BABIES EMMITING MUCH NOISE AND FLUID ON THE FLOOR OF THE LOWEST ROOM IN HIS HAPPY HOME – PROPER ACTION IS TAKEN – AN UNNAMED AUTHORITY FIGURE PROVIDES AMPLE APPROVAL OF HIS PROMPT ADHERENCE TO CIVIL MANDATES AND COMMON SENSE – MEN DRESSED IN A NECESSARILY ODD MANNER MAKE A BRIEF APPEARANCE – DISASTER AND UNNECESSARY UPHEAVAL OF EMOTION-INFLUENCING WOMB-RELATED ORGANS IS NARROWLY AVOIDED

When the sound of high pitched screaming reaches his ears through the intercom, he freezes. The moment of horror is replaced with relief when he realizes that she’s visiting her sister. Too far away to find and name it before he can make the necessary phone call. Checking each room and shutting off each port before moving on, he narrows his search down to the basement. He finds what he is looking for behind a box full of tangled Christmas lights. There’s no blood, but urine and feces and vomit are pooling. He grimaces and turns eyes and nose away.

After he's made the call, he sits in the kitchen, watching the clock and tapping his fingertips lightly across the counter top to the beat of the radio. The ringing doorbell barely breaks through the blaring music. Taking and holding a deep breath, he jogs to the front door. Click and creak and he is saved.

'Thank god. My wife will be home any-'

'Are you the legal resident?' an older woman asks, scanning him from toe to head.

'Of course. I'm-'

'Please check the information to ensure our records are accurate.'

He scans the sheet and hands back the clipboard.

'It's fine. Looks good. We've never-'

'Your first report. I understand. A difficult situation for everyone. But I assure you there's zero liability entailed with prompt reporting.'

'Good. That's good. First thing I did when...uh... anyway... Can I ask what happens to the-'

'We have an entire department dedicated to securing proper placement.'

'So... it's like adoption?'

'Somewhat. The volume of intake requires...a more expansive processing infrastructure...'

‘Will you be sending anything to the house? I’d prefer it if my wife didn’t-‘

‘Discretion is of the utmost, sir.’ she says, stepping to the side and motioning for him to do likewise as two men in coveralls and goggled face masks shuffle by without pausing at the threshold. One of them has his arm awkwardly wrapped around what looks like the kind of travel case made for cats, but stainless steel and seamless. He lets them pass without comment and makes small talk with the woman.

‘I hear they find them in cars mostly. Is that true?’

‘A considerable percentage, certainly.’

‘Is anyone keeping track?’

‘Officially? Current and lowest DHS estimates are in the tens of thousands. *Officially.*’

‘I meant keeping track of *where.*’

His direct questions are met with paperwork to read and initial while they work. He signs here and there and it’s finished. After they’re gone, he holds his breath while descending the basement steps. He sees no signs of disturbance. He checks behind the box of Christmas lights and finally exhales. It’s like it never happened. The floor is cleaner than it was this morning.

NINE.

**WHEREIN THE LOYAL READER WILL FIND ANOTHER BONUS
ANCILLARY TEXTUAL ARTIFACT FROM THE WORLD HERE
CONSTRUCTED – THE EXCERPT FROM OFFICIAL SOURCES IS CRUCIAL
TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NORMALITY AND SYSTEMIC NATURE
OF THE PLAGUE OF UNWANTED BROWN-SKINNED BABIES APPEARING
WITHOUT WARNING OR RATIONAL EXPLANATION IN THE HOMES OF
WHAT IS SURE TO PROVE ITSELF AS THIS GREATEST OF ALL NATION’S
LATEST ‘GREATEST GENERATION’ – OUR BELOVED HEROIN DOES NOT
MAKE AN APPEARANCE IN THIS ADDITION TO OUR THRILLING TALE,
BUT READERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO APPRECIATE THE SUBTEXTUAL
VALUE AFFORDED BY THIS RARE GLIMPSE INTO THE GOINGS-ON OF A
GAL SET UPON BY THE VERY SAME VEXATIONS FOR WHICH THE
NOBLE RACHEL JONES SO LOVINGLY LONGS**

SUBJECT PROFILE:

Name: Sharon Brookings

Occupation: Accounts Manager – Pierce & Row Consulting

Location: Columbia – Howard County, Maryland

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BEGIN ENTRY

What did you do when you found it?

I called right away. Of course.

No. I mean... Before reporting.

No. Really. The first thing I did was call the-

I'm sorry. I mean to say- to ask- ...how did you feel?

What does that matter?

It doesn't. At least not in terms of official-

Fine. I felt fine. And sad for the- you know...

It's a difficult situation, to be sure.

I felt sad for- I mean... You have to wonder, right?

Of course.

...where they all keep coming from.

It's a difficult-

I mean, we know *where* they're from, right? Technically, I mean.

Technically. The DHS public statement didn't sandbag. Genetic sampling. Regional similarities. But they obviously aren't actually *from*... over there.

Why are you even asking me? I'm not some PTSD basketcase-

Of course you're not. You're handling this whole process very... calmly. Admirably.

Thank you.

And that's why the details of your experience are of greater interest to the department.

A show pony?

Best practices.

Do most of the others cry? Like... they find them and have some kind of breakdown?

In some cases. Usually the trauma stays under the surface for quite some time. We're just trying to make sure we're able to do everything we can for the...victims of this...circumstance.

Fine. I felt fine.

And your husband?

He was upset.

Specifically?

He was upset that I touched it.

You held it?

I didn't actually pick it up. But I...

Yes?

I reached out. At first. Before I realized... It was like a reflex.

Did you tell the response team?

They sanitized me. Thoroughly. But they tested on site for anything it might have had...

Post-retrieval testing says there was no... issue. But, if you don't mind me asking...

Feel free.

Where did you-

I didn't, really... It touched *me*. I just reached to pull its head up when I first-

Understandable. The most commonly recorded response. Perfectly natural.

..because when they're that young their necks can't- they can't hold up their own-

Three daughters at home, ma'am. I understand.

So I just reached out... And *it* touched *me*.

A prehensile gesture. Obviously reflexive.

And then I pulled away.

And immediately made the call.

Immediately. Had the number ready on the fridge, like the commercials said to.

And did the noise disturb you?

What?

Almost all of them are found...crying. Screaming really...

Oh... No. That didn't bother me. That's what they do, you know?

Of course.

I'm actually grateful for it.

For what?

The screaming.

Ma'am?

That's the only way I would ever have found it.

TEN.

IN WHICH WE FIND THE LOVELY RACHEL JONES ENJOYING THE JOYOUS LUXURY OF IDLE CONSIDERATIONS OF THE AESTHETIC VALUE OF THE VAST RECTANGULAR FIELDS OF ASPHALT AND CONCRETE COMMONLY PLACED ADJACENT THE INSURPASSABLE BAZARS OF THE WESTERN WORLD – MUCH MENTION IS MADE OF THE DETAILS DEFINING HER PRIVATE SAMADHI – A WAGE SLAVE IS MENTIONED AS A CURSORY MEANS OF TRANSITIONING TO THE NEXT PORTION OF OUR EXCITING TALE

Her coffee is on the hood of the car. Her right hand is holding the keys still hanging from the ignition. Her left hand is clenched beyond trembling and held in place between the press of her thighs, knees touching and shaking. The wipers are screeching a steady rhythm across a dry expanse of windshield. Hazard lights blink and click, falling in and out of time with the wipers. The momentary union and eventual separation of the differing rhythms matches something in her mind. She lifts her head away from the wheel as far as she can manage. An inch or two each time before returning to rest on the leather

grip that makes it easier to steer. An inch or two then back down in time with the constantly unraveling rhythm. Sometimes she matches the screeches. Sometimes the clicks. But she never seems to come to rest in time with their convergence.

Eventually, a parking attendant knocks gently on her window.

She's safe at home within the hour. Presentable and preparing dinner.

Come morning she'll be searching.

ELEVEN.

AN UNNECESSARY BUT EDITORIALY ADVISED SUMMATION OF THE COLLECTIVE EVENTS WHICH HAVE SHAPED THE DAILY LIVES OF OUR INDIVIDUAL HEROES – THANKFULLY BRIEF- WE HAVE MANAGED TO LIMIT THIS EXPOSITIONAL INCLUSION TO A MERE FIFTY WORDS THRICE – YOUR PATIENCE IS APPRECIATED.

Those who found them were upset. Disturbed and unsettled. Some compared the feeling to coming home to the aftermath of a burglary. Many used words like *violated*. Some said *unsafe*. Others, *invaded*. It was something to discuss at social gatherings. In doctor's office waiting rooms and academic faculty lounges. Water cooler conversations and casual party banter. There was pride in many voices, as if they were describing car crashes survived or sports-related injuries sustained.

And though it almost always went unspoken, a secret envy was felt by many. Some wondered why it had passed over their homes. Why some and not others were chosen. Many lied to join the selected. Said they'd found one too but hadn't. Some said they'd found three or four and did so with convincing tones. Practiced performances of

frustration and exasperation. Some eventually forgot that they were lying and kept their lies as treasured memories.

TWELVE.

IN WHICH ANOTHER BABY OF AN ORIGIN SOMEHOW RELATED TO WESTERN ATTEMPTS TO BRING FREEDOM AND PEACE TO VARIOUS NATIONS WITH WHICH THE WORDS OIL, ARAB, AND MUSLIM WOULD NOT NECESSARILY BE ABSOLUTELY SYNONYMOUS – GLAD TEARS ARE SHED BY ALL – HAPPINESS IS RESTORED TO A FORMERLY TROUBLED BUT HOPEFUL HOME – ALL IS PUT TO RIGHTS AND A JOYFUL NOISE IS HEARD RESOUNDING

Neither had paid much attention to the details of the first war. Or the second. Or those still continuing to bloom. They have heard the words ‘depleted’ and ‘uranium,’ but a recognition of the existence of something for which these words serve as a name is the extent of their familiarity. Given this, they have no way of explaining the appearance of what she is holding. Beyond malnourished. Head lopsided and compressed. Arms like claws, bent with tendons useless, twitching suddenly when not writhing uncontrollably. Throat clicking and rasping throughout toneless wails. A yellow-skinned deflated mess.

He grimaces, near retching. She’s beaming.

‘What’s wrong with its head?’

‘She’s beautiful.’

‘Oh *god*... This is wrong.’

‘She’s perfect.’

‘I’m calling right now.’

‘Please.’

‘Right. Now.’

‘She’s absolutely...’

‘Please’ he hisses, shuddering before screaming ‘Stop!’

‘Can we?’

THIRTEEN.

**IN WHICH WE FIND THE LOVELY RACHEL JONES AT PEACE, RESTING
IN THE CONTENTMENT THAT ONLY MOTHERS CAN EVER TRULY KNOW
– PEACE IS UPON HER AND SPREADS ACROSS THE WORLD THROUGH
THE SACRED CHANNEL OF A MOTHER’S HEART – THE PEACE IS
LASTING AND PASSES UNDERSTANDING DOWN IN OUR HEARTS –
WHERE? – DOWN IN OUR HEARTS**

The next day, he's at work and she is not at home. She walks until she finds the nearest place to sit and think. She looks to her left and sees one. Bouncing on a knee and laughing on a bench across the way. Turns to her right to see two more. They're spinning on a tire, hands gripping chains and shrieking as a man spins them faster and faster. Looks forward and sees another just standing. A jump-rope tangled and limp around shifting feet. This one looks back at her.

There's a moment of acknowledgment. A cold wind passes around and through the space between them.

Then something else.

Then she looks away.