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The Paper-Haired God

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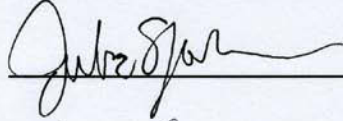
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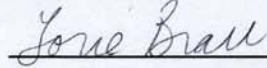
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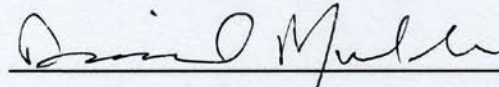
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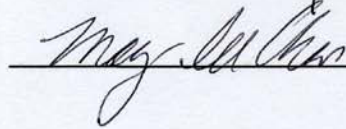
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THE PAPER-HAIRED GOD

BY

CHRIS BOAT

B.A., English, University of Wyoming, 2006

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May 2010

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DEDICATION

To Julie Shigekuni for her teaching and guidance.

To May-lee Chai for helping me through every revision.

To Dan Mueller for showing me the true power of image.

To Lorie Brau for fostering my love for the Japanese culture.

To my wife Junko, who exists in every word, phrase, and paragraph of this novel.

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation consists of a novella entitled *The Paper Haired God*. It is the story of a man named Jason who one day (after dropping his wife Akiko off at the airport to visit friends) decides to crawl into the cabinet underneath his sink. He doesn't quite understand why he crawls under the sink, just that it is something that he needs to do. Before he realizes it, he is starving and too weak to get back out. When he feels as though he is about to disappear forever, he finds himself in a large cavern. After exploring the cavern he relives a memory from his childhood where he almost drowned in the Uji River. Then he is pulled out from under the sink by his wife. After his recovery he begins to realize that the world he left when he went under the bathroom sink and the world he came back to are not the same.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	1
CHAPTER 1: FILLING SPACE.....	23
CHAPTER 2: THE WAITING STATION.....	50
CHAPTER 3: RED STRING.....	66
CHAPTER 4: LEAVING TRACES.....	92
CHAPTER 5: BOY.....	113
CHAPTER 6: STIRRING CHAOS.....	129
CHAPTER 7: GRANARY.....	151
CHAPTER 8: VAGABOND.....	166
CHAPTER 9: SYMBIOSIS.....	178

Preface

This novella is the culmination of my learning in graduate school. I've broken up this preface into three sections that I think will best introduce readers to my work. The first is influences. I included this section because reading is the most important part about being a writer. Next is a section on craft. The third section is all about my process and themes. This preface is a map of what I've learned in grad school thus far.

Influences

I've always been a voracious reader. When I was a child my parents constantly made books available so I was never wanting for things to read. The books I remember most from my childhood are: an abridged version of Aesop's Fables, translated for children, and a book of Bible stories, also translated for children. Aesop's was my favorite. None of the fables in my copy included human beings, so I always thought of the world of Aesop as dominated by animals. The simplicity of each fable, coupled with the moral teaching tacked on the end, made the world seem a much simpler place than it was. I learned to appreciate abstract thinking (I still remember the fable where a crow drops pebbles into a long vase so he can drink the small puddle of water at the bottom) and I learned to try not to be stubborn, selfish or foolish.

The Bible stories were a little more confusing. We were not a religious family so some of the stories seemed morally ambiguous. I could never understand what Cain did that so angered God, nor could I understand why God would harden the heart of the pharaoh when Moses asked him to let the Israelites go. While Aesop always used strong physical action to justify his moral

teachings, the Bible stories relied on abstract concepts like “God knows what’s best, even though it may seem sad or confusing to us mortals.” Although I loved these stories, they always seemed like failed attempts at fables. They dealt with humans instead of animals, and I much preferred the latter.

As a teenager I read George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. This reminded me of Aesop’s in that the characters were mainly animals and the moral at the end was very pronounced. One of the strongest images I’ve ever come across in a book is the scene at the end of *Animal Farm* when the animals are looking through the window into the farmhouse and they can’t tell the difference between the pigs and the humans. Once again the world of animals was used to display, in a very simple manner, a moral situation, in this case the failure of a specific style of leadership. I was in familiar territory and I loved it.

I also fell in love with horror novels while I was a teenager. I read all of the popular writers in the genre like Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and John Saul. The only thing that horror had in common with my tastes of the past was the construction of a unique world layered over reality. In the fables each tale was presented in a world of talking animals, but the rest of the world followed the same limitations of our own; for instance, if an animal falls off a cliff it will die. The ground situations of the horror novels I was reading always placed the characters in reality as we know it, and then slowly introduced them to a world behind the real, full of haunted houses, vampires, and other terrifying monsters. Some of the horror didn’t deal specifically with the supernatural, but I had a tendency to avoid these stories. Perhaps it was escapism, but I wanted to be immersed in worlds beyond the one I was familiar with. It was fiction, so I wanted it to go as far from reality as possible.

I was hospitalized in 1994 and in order to help relieve my boredom, my brother brought me Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. This marked a change in my reading tastes. I was amazed by both the similarities and differences between these stories and the fables I had read as a child. In *The Stranger* the protagonist is stripped of all emotional reaction. No matter how emotionally devastating an emotional trauma, the character does not feel it. This is impossible in reality, but it allows Camus to fully explore the theme of his work, which is humanity's confusion when faced with people that don't react to certain situations in the expected manner. At the beginning of the novel the main character is at the funeral of his mother and he is bothered more by the sun in his eyes than he is his mother's passing. Camus makes us wonder, throughout the whole text, is this wrong? Is it wrong to be more affected by the physical than the emotional? Camus breaks away from reality in order to explore an abstract concept (just as the fables did) but instead of giving the moral at the end, he leaves the reader questioning what is right and wrong.

Franz Kafka is attempting something similar in the *Metamorphosis*. Gregor Samsa, against all logical reason, transforms into a monstrous vermin. Kafka has chosen to disregard reality in order to explore the abstract concept that people are more concerned with being embarrassed in front of their peers than they are about their own health. Throughout the story we see a blatant disregard for Samsa's well being, even by Samsa himself. Everyone is more worried about hiding him and making sure he calls into work than they are about getting him a doctor.

I read nothing but these two writers for at least two years. Eventually I moved on. I found Sartre and Calvino, then I moved on to some of the Russian writers, especially Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. Finally I found my way to the Japanese writers, starting with Yukio Mishima

and Haruki Murakami and finally on to Kobo Abe, Soseki Natsume, Junichiro Tanizaki, Kurahashi Yumiko, Fumiko Enchi, and *The Kojiki*. The Japanese writers use similar tactics to Kafka and Camus, but their themes are much different. Kafka and Camus are interested in themes like law, social structure, and how society treats criminals, whereas the Japanese writers focus on themes like trust, marriage, and the space between people. For me, Japanese literature exemplifies all of the greatest aspects of world literature: a timeless appeal, characters that transcend culture, but are also firmly rooted in their own, and an understanding of the world beyond their own borders.

I received my Bachelor in English from the University of Wyoming in 2006, and even though my department was focused solely on British and American writers I was never really drawn to the writing, with the exception of Scottish writer Alasdair Gray, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emily Dickinson. Each of these writers displays a uniqueness that is rare in literature. Emily Dickinson's poetry is like a small maze or puzzle, each word leading the reader in many different directions, Alasdair Gray's control of meta-fiction in *Lanark* is unparalleled, and Poe's forays into psychological horror are absolutely brilliant.

All of these writers inform my work. My love for allegory, which started with Aesop's Fables, transferred easily to Kafka and many of the Japanese writers. When I started writing in earnest, I desperately wanted to capture the level of quality that these writers displayed. One thing that seems to run through all of these writers's work is the desire to take one abstract concept, like trust or embarrassment, and express it in concrete terms. I always imagine the writer's process in this way: first he/she comes up with an abstraction let's say, trust. Next the writer comes up with some visual way to express this concept. In this way abstract concepts are given concrete expression using analogy and allegory. I believe Kawabata's short story "One

Arm” is a perfect example of this strategy. In the story the theme of trust is presented with the concrete image of a woman taking off her arm at the shoulder and lending it to a male friend for the night. What could be more trusting than offering someone part of your body? In the *Metamorphosis* Gregor Samsa and his family seem to be more afraid of embarrassment than they are of Gregor’s new found body. *The Trial* is less about the main character K and more about whether or not everyone has recourse to the law. Akutagawa tackles the impossibility of truth in “In a Grove” by telling the story from four different perspectives, none of which match, and leaving the reader to try and unravel the true story. Abe tackles the theme of marriage and how two people come together and run a household in *The Woman in the Dunes* by kidnapping his main character and forcing him to live and keep house with a woman he has never met.

What is truly striking is that each of these writers places more importance on concrete expression of abstraction than they do on reality. There are plenty of ways to express the abstract concept of trust while keeping in the confines of the realism, but none would be as memorable as a woman taking off her arm and lending it to someone! This concept seems to me to be at the heart of what a fiction writer strives for, so I strive for it myself.

There are a quite a few concepts in my novel that I came up with in order to mimic the concept of expressing abstract ideas with concrete images. For instance, Jason and Akiko are involved in a unique marriage. Although Jason feels as though he is completely Japanese he still originates from a different culture. In most bicultural marriages the couple usually create a third culture, which is a blend of their two cultures. The reoccurring fight that plaques Jason and Akiko’s marriage is where they should live. They both dig in their heels rather than negotiate the terms of their marriage. I wanted to find a concrete image for this concept, so I came up with the purified square.

The first time Jason meets Akiko he wanders into a roped off area that has been purified and set aside in order to build a stage for some *Bugaku* dances. Jason steps into the space (a cultural taboo in his newly found culture) and Akiko comes out to remove him. This purified square becomes a visual image for Jason that embodies his desire for a perfect space in their marriage: A place where both of their cultures disappear and they are able to create the culture of the marriage. This image was so strong for me that I used it to end the entire novel.

In the chapter one there is a scene where Jason almost drowns in the Uji River. It was my goal in this scene to visually and concretely depict the abstract concept of a young boy trying to navigate and understand the reality of his changing world. Jason was born in a small town in the southwest and just as he is coming to understand the world he lives in, he travels to another. As he slowly begins to understand his new home, he fears that he is leaving the part of himself that understood the old behind. I express this visually, with Jason actually separating while floating in the Uji River. Earlier in the scene, Jason contemplates the fact that he is immersed in a new culture and he must sink or swim. Once he is split in half, he does both. The part of him that lived in the American Southwest holds on to the place where he was born and sinks to the bottom of the river. The new Jason, the one that loves and understands Japan, swims back to the surface. The novel revolves around Jason's quest to reunite these two parts of himself. Both of these aspects of my novel are examples of my desire to express abstract concepts through concrete analogies.

World literature, as opposed to American, is the current that I hope to set sail on. If literature is a conversation then it is my hope that my work will respond not only to my small place on the planet, but also to generations of world literature that have come before it. All of the world literature I've mentioned thus far is unique in the sense that it is not only timeless; it is

also without a specific place. The city where K stands trial doesn't link directly to Germany. Kobo Abe's story "The Magic Chalk" could be set anywhere.

Of course ambiguity is not the only way to tap into the current of world literature. Instead of setting *The Paper Haired God* in an ambiguous world, I use many specific places like Uji, Japan; Laramie, Wyoming; and Laven, a small town in the heart of Utah. By incorporating other cultures and places in my writing, I hope to establish myself within the trans-national movement of literature. Haruki Murakami is the master of this style. Although his writings are linked to specific places, usually in Japan, his characters are a part of world culture. He will make references to popular British music, Yakisoba, and American movie stars, all within one paragraph. Perhaps most importantly, he does not feel the need to introduce his readers to any of his cultural references. When I first started writing *The Paper Haired God*, I had to make the difficult decision of whether or not to explain the Japanese objects that my character encounters. The sections when he first arrives in Japan were easy, because Jason was completely ignorant of how things worked in the new culture, creating a great way for me to have other characters explain things to him, but as he slowly becomes a part of the culture the need for explanation withers away. For instance, in chapter one Jason imagines Akiko as she used to look, in her white *kimono* and red *hakama*. In my first draft I tried to sneak in an explanation of what *hakama* are so that my readers would understand, but Jason would never think this. He knows what they are, so having him explain it to the reader would mean breaking out of the character's voice. Instead, I allowed him to exist in the world that he was a part of, and that world is transnational. Not only does this heighten the realism, it also allows the reader to see Jason as the average American would. Some of what he says is confusing and different because he is straddling the line between two cultures.

I've never met a successful writer that isn't a voracious reader. I think I've learned most of what I know about writing from the books that I've loved, and the books I've hated. Every influence is alive in my work today, no matter how long ago I read them.

Craft

Every manuscript has its own craft issues, which means every manuscript can teach its author something. Every short story, novel, or poem I've ever written has been unique because every choice I make limits my options. For instance, the moment I choose a point of view I'm limiting myself to staying in the bounds of that point of view. The same is true of psychic distance, tense, and so on. These are things that I've learned over time, mainly through reading and writing. Grammar, on the other hand, is something learned in school. Everyone understands the basic elements of grammar subconsciously (if they didn't language would be impossible) but the study of grammar, the naming and understanding of the basic building blocks of our language, brings it to a conscious level.

Because I was hospitalized for a large chunk of my high school career I've always felt that I was behind the rest of my peers in my grammatical studies. I never learned the terminology, so grammar always seemed to be an impenetrable field of study. When I first got into the creative writing MFA at the University of New Mexico I avoided taking the "Intro to the Profession" class because I heard that it was ridiculously grammar heavy. I put it off for two semesters and then finally took it with Sharon Oard Warner. The class was just as grammar heavy as I had heard. During the first week Professor Warner assigned us a book by Virginia

Tufte called *Artful Sentences*. I sat in my office and read the first chapter. The book was full of grammar, sentence structure, and the like. I was devastated.

Later that day I was driving home with my wife and we were stuck in rush hour. She asked me what was bothering me and I let loose a rant all about Tufte and grammar. My wife, an engineering student, listened quietly and then responded with one of the most succinct arguments for grammar I've ever heard. I will paraphrase it here. Writing, she said, is like any other job. It is made up of knowledge, and you can always tell someone who truly loves their job by how much pleasure they take in learning every aspect of it. You have to study the anatomy of your writing. I chewed on this idea as we inched forward and realized that anatomy was a very apt metaphor for the assignment. After reading through Virginia Tufte's first chapter (and failing to understand most of it) I was not looking forward to working on the project my teacher had assigned. However, the closer we got to home the more excited I became. I realized that an understanding of the anatomy of my work was probably the most important thing I would ever learn as a writer.

I would never trust a doctor who did not understand the anatomy of the human body, or an electrician that did not understand the anatomy of a house, so why would anyone trust a writer that did not understand the anatomy of their own work? An image of my work laid out in front of me like a body came to mind and I realized how little I knew. I often get lost in the artistic side of writing and forget that it is also a craft, one that takes years of study and a lot of skill. If I wanted to be a great writer, I realized, I had to understand the tools of my trade.

Once we arrived home I sat down at my computer and re-read Tufte's first chapter, but this time I looked up every word that I could not understand. I was amazed at how much high school grammar I had missed. I had to look up the difference between a transitive and an

intransitive verb and learn what constitutes an adverbial modifier. It was slow going, but I was able to glean a basic (and I mean basic) understanding of what Tufte was trying to get across.

After the second read through I pulled out one of my manuscripts, got a large pink highlighter and underlined all of my short sentences (the first chapter dealt with grammatical structures often encountered in short sentences). Out of ten pages of sentences twenty-eight of them were short. The short sentences were spaced evenly (about three per page) throughout the manuscript. Next, I tried to label each sentence with one of Tufte's four categories. This was the hardest part of the assignment but I was able to work slowly (probably with a lot of errors) through it. The short sentences that fell under category one (equations with be) were the easiest to identify and made up for a large chunk of my sentences. The second category (equations with linking verbs) made up the smallest amount of sentences (two total) which could have been due to my lack of using this grammatical structure, or to my very inadequate understanding of these types of sentences. The rest of my short sentences all fell under category three and four (Transitive and intransitive) sentences.

The second sentence of my manuscript was: "His skin hums from the vibration of tremors and quakes"; it became: "His skin hums with the vibration of tremors and quakes." This sentence was incredibly hard for me to place into a category until I realized that the word "from" in the middle of the sentence should be "with", which would make this a transitive sentence. I've always considered each of my stories as an object, whole unto itself, but grammar allowed me to look at my stories as many smaller objects that make up a whole.

I worked my way slowly through the semester (and through Tufte's book) until we came upon a chapter dedicated to free modifiers. This chapter came at the perfect time because I was working on the first sentence of a short story called "Joy's Egg" at the time. I wanted the first

sentence to surprise the reader. I was obsessed with the idea of writing a story with a great hook. I wanted the first part of the sentence to induce the reader into a sense of calm, as if not much was going on, and then surprise them with the realization that the main character had laid an egg. My first draft sentence went like this:

It took Joy a few minutes after waking up, in which time she stretched, contemplated the sharp blade of sunlight cutting through the thin gap in her curtains, yawned, and scratched her head, to notice that she had laid an egg.

The base clause of this sentence is “It took Joy a few minutes after waking up to notice that she had laid an egg.” The fragments in-between are mid-branching free modifiers. The main problem with the sentence was that it didn’t read well. I obsessed over this sentence. I was excited by it, but also hated it. I knew, from reading it out loud in my office, that it was bulky and slightly confusing. It was the phrase “in which time” that threw the whole thing off. I experimented with parentheses and dashes, but even those seemed strange when read out loud. I was really stuck. I knew what I wanted, but I couldn’t find a logical way to do it.

In the end I turned to my bookshelf for guidance. I pulled out the one story I knew to have a great hook, Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. I was amazed to find that his first sentence was very similar to the one I was trying to write.

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.

The base clause takes up most of the sentence, with one mid branching phrase “from uneasy dreams.” This was the structure I wanted. The first half of the sentence starts so simply and other than the word “uneasy” it is completely non-threatening. The last half contains the hook. His body has been transformed during the night!

I rewrote the first sentence of “Joy’s Egg”:

On the second day of August Joy woke up, stretched, contemplated the sharp blade of sunlight cutting through the thin gap in her curtains, yawned, and then noticed that she had laid an egg.

The new base clause is “Joy woke up and then noticed that she had laid an egg.” The phrase “On the second day of August” is a left-branching modifier and everything in-between “Joy woke up” and “noticed that she had laid an egg” are mid-branching modifiers. By adding the one left-branching modifier I was able to create a sentence that still had the element of surprise I was so interested in capturing, and (when read aloud) it came across in an organized, free-flowing fashion.

Without a thorough understanding of grammar I would never have tried to create a sentence like this. By learning the terminology and embracing the building blocks of craft I was able to fine-tune my writing. Throughout that semester, and every one since, I’ve been improving my grammar. Recently I was speaking with one of my peers and she stated that she was avoiding a certain class because she was afraid it would be too grammar heavy and she wasn’t very good with that kind of stuff. I found myself trying to get her to change her opinion on grammar, something I never thought I would be doing. It took an engineer to show me that

writing is more than just an outpouring of creative energy; it takes fine tuning and an understanding of the nuts and bolts of the English language.

Once I had my terminology in place I was able to expand my knowledge of craft. In 2007 I took a literature course from Daniel Mueller in which we studied themes of central image in literature. In this class Professor Mueller would introduce us to texts that had reoccurring images such as Margaret Atwood's "Hairball." These images aren't analogies upon which the entirety of the story can be extracted, like Kafka and Kawabata's; rather, they are visual depictions of themes that run through the texts. In "Hairball" the main character keeps a cyst, removed surgically from her body, in a jar on a shelf. This cyst is mentioned over and over again as we learn about the character's past and her current affair with a married man. Each time the image is mentioned more weight is brought upon it, until, at the very end, she sends the cyst to her lover while he is at a party his wife is throwing. In the end the image takes on all the weight of her feelings about the affair. In this way image works less as an analogy and more as a vessel for character development and the expression of themes.

I've always tried to write my stories with memorable images, so I was interested in studying this concept as an aspect of craft. I think image works in a similar fashion throughout *The Paper Haired God*. While the images of the purified square and Jason splitting in two work as analogies that represents abstractions, the image of the Paper Haired God, which starts as a skull surrounded by trash and ends up as a Shinto Deity, runs as a central image throughout the story that works as a visual depiction of themes. As a child Jason is constantly trying to find his way back to the town of his birth. He mistakenly believes that the way back involves cramming himself into small spaces. The Paper Haired God becomes a visualization of this desire. As Jason gets older, he becomes content with his surroundings and stops climbing into confined spaces,

but at the start of the novel he finds himself once again stuck in a world that is foreign to him (Laramie, Wyoming). As always he climbs under sink and once again the Paper Haired God is there to meet him. The Paper Haired God comes up again and again as a visual representation of this theme, and each time it comes up more weight is brought to bear on the image. At the beginning of the story, most of the weight is placed on the psychology of Jason and why he would want to climb under the bathroom sink. Throughout the story, the weight is transferred onto the image of the Paper Haired God.

Once I understood the basic elements of my writing, I was able to turn back to my influences and learn much more about craft. Although image was incredibly important to me when writing *The Paper Haired God*, I also wanted to create a text that was character based. This is another concept I learned from literature, specifically the Japanese. The first piece of Japanese literature I ever read was Yukio Mishima's *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*. The main character in the novel is a young boy that decides he wants to kill someone while he is still young because the laws concerning murder are very lax for people under a certain age. I was amazed at how daring Yukio Mishima was to choose a main character that was completely unlikable. It is a testament to his brilliance that I, as a reader, found myself sympathetic to a character that would perform such a vile act.

Before I read this book, I had a tendency to write flat characters that I hoped readers would describe as "good people." After reading this book I became more interested in characters with flaws. I wanted to create more complex characters so that the readers felt they were dealing with a living person and not a caricature. *The Paper Haired God*, is a character-driven piece. I've created flawed characters. Jason, the narrator, can't help but crawl under his sink and stay there without food and water for three months. He is unable to control his environment and is

constantly struggling to find a balance between the side of him that is Japanese and the side that is American. Akiko tries too hard to be an adult. She's left her childhood behind and behaves as she believes she should act, instead of how she feels. It's easy to write about characters that make good choices; it's much more fun to write about characters that make wrong choices. Complexity is always more important than likeability in characters.

I've kind of swept horror to the side for most of this essay, but even that genre has taught me about craft. No other genre embraces setting like horror. Who can forget the terrifying descriptions of the House of Usher in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*? Because horror must instill one specific emotion in its readers, that of fear, the importance of setting is magnified. Before it is possible to scare readers, the writer must force their imagination into a space where the supernatural events will be believable. This tendency to describe (and sometimes over-describe) setting follows me into my own work. A large chunk of the work on this novel has been spent fine tuning the setting. I tried to give complete sensory detail to every space that Jason inhabits: from the cramped space under the sink to the sprawling fields of his hometown. I especially wanted the shrine that Jason finds between worlds to be fully developed. When I write a story, I always try to make setting so important that the story couldn't be told in any other place. This may seem to be at odds with my discussion of setting earlier, but the two ideas really can exist together. A deeply imagined setting, even if it is a specific location can become transcendent if it is described well enough to completely immerse the reader.

Process and Themes

Although I've been writing for years, I only recently came to understand my own writing process. I have a ritual with every manuscript. First I type out the story, chapter, or poem on my computer. Then I print out what I've written and write the whole thing out by hand, making revisions as I go, then I re-type the entire manuscript using the handwritten text, making further revisions. This pattern allows me two solid revisions before I show my work to anyone else. This is the physical process of my writing, but my process is more than that, and in order to understand and use my process to its full potential I must know and understand the themes that run through my work.

I came to understand my themes during the workshops I took from Julie Shigekuni during my graduate studies. In one of my first workshops with Professor Shigekuni, she stated that "every writer must be allowed their obsessions," which has stuck with me throughout my writing career. In one of my last workshops with Professor Shigekuni she asked us to outline the ingredients that make up our work. Before taking these classes I never even considered the fact that I repeat certain themes in my writing. Now that I have been made aware of these themes (or obsessions) and outlined them I can consciously expand them in my work, instead of subconsciously inserting them.

One theme that runs through almost all of my writing, including the stories here, is the contrast between light and dark. *The Paper Haired God* begins in total darkness, with Jason trapped under the sink in a state of almost complete sensory deprivation. This darkness acts of a gateway that leads to a world of light. The cave underground, with the shrine and the tomb, are filled with a light that originates in the shrine. Every time Jason remembers his birth place it is

drenched in light, until he crawls under the barn and discovers a space filled with darkness. It is light that allows him to make his way back to the surface when he is drowning in the Uji River. I tried to make the light so bright in some of my scenes that it would burn away all traces of darkness. I also tried to make the darkness in the novel impenetrable. In this way darkness begins to mark spaces of liminality for Jason. A waiting space between worlds.

I assume that growing up in the Southwest, especially here in Albuquerque, is the origin of my obsession with themes of light and dark. Anyone who has walked out in the mesa on a hot summer day can attest to the power of sunlight and its ability to exaggerate the darkness of the shadows. Albuquerque is a land of extremes, and I think this aspect of it has made its way into my writing.

Another theme embodied in my work is space. Not beyond earth space, but the spaces around us. It starts simply in the places we live. Every place I've ever inhabited (after moving away from the home I was born in) has started out strange and then slowly become more familiar. This process is endlessly interesting to me because it signals the passage of time and the rituals that we go through to form a relationship with our living space. After waking up in the hospital after confining himself under the bathroom sink, Jason is most excited to arrive home, because it is a house he has come to love. Akiko is devastated when her hollow tree is going to be filled in because she has created a relationship with the space.

Even more interesting to me are the spaces in houses that remain unfamiliar to us even after we have lived in them for many years. Attics, crawls spaces, and unused cabinets are fertile ground for the juxtaposition of unfamiliarity housed within the most familiar of places. As a character, Jason is also obsessed with these spaces, especially those spaces that are the most utilitarian and therefore the easiest to forget. The space under the bathroom sink is nothing more

than a small square of storage. It is not a space for a human to inhabit, but Jason senses its possibility and forces himself to explore that. In the darkness he realizes that he is unable to verify the memory of his beloved living quarters, so how can he trust his memory. All of sudden he realizes that his house could be any shape once the lights were off.

Nothing is more intriguing than the space between places. Liminal spaces are places of change and often the origin of the supernatural. This theme has interested me for ages and it often finds expression in my work. At their local shrine, Aunty Keiko explains that the rope forming the square separates the mundane world from the sacred. Jason becomes so obsessed with this concept that he sneaks back later and trespasses into the square. Although his trespass is fortuitous (he meets Akiko), it still violates everything legal and sacred to the Japanese. Jason is willing to break this taboo because he is still relatively young and he is new to the culture. The space itself is liminal, and so is Jason. Another liminal space is on the plane that ride Jason takes from Salt Lake City to Osaka, Japan. The plane is balanced perfectly between Jason's two worlds and it is here that he feels the most alone. This trans-Pacific flight also connects to another in-between places theme in my writing, namely, the transnational character.

Jason understands two cultures and these two places inform every decision that he makes in the novel. His is a unique perspective, although it is becoming more and more common as we move into a world where national lines are blurring.

The most obvious theme in my writing is magic, or the supernatural. If I had to define my work in any specific literary category it would be magic realism. When I first started writing I dealt exclusively in the realms of reality, but as my voice began to emerge my work showed a tendency towards the abstract. My friend Samantha Tetangco put it best: "Your characters'

problems manifest themselves in magical ways.” This seems really true to me. Instead of writing about problems directly, I have a tendency to use analogy.

Instead of discussing Jason’s inability to fit in to either of his cultures, I tried to find some physical way to show it. This desire eventually led me to his unique habit of crawling into small spaces. It would have been easy to try and use this image to reveal Jason’s psychological profile, but I wanted more than that. I decided to make Jason’s belief that he could somehow find his way into another world a reality. The rest of the novel dealt with the repercussion of that reality. I feel that presenting Jason this way, as a character who has achieved the impossible through the supernatural, the reader comes to love and understand him a lot better than they would had I confined myself to the realms of reality.

When Professor Shigekuni first asked me to map out these themes, I didn’t understand the point. Later, I realized that having an understanding of the themes in my work allowed me to work on incorporating them purposefully. Before the exercise, these themes would slip unconsciously into my work, but now they are premeditated.

In closing, I would have to say that the old cliché is true: a good writer reads and writes. But I would add a little more to that. A good writer learns from what he reads, writes with an understanding of craft and his own themes, and, most importantly, he revises. It took me years to understand this simple concept. Revising is the key to my work. Without it I have nothing but ideas sketched lightly on paper.

One cliché that I can’t agree with is that MFA programs are in some way detrimental to young writers. It took me three years to learn my own themes and process, a basic understanding and love for the craft of my art, and the ability to sculpt beautiful images that run throughout my

stories. Without grad school it would have taken me years upon years to discover all of this.

Basically, grad school kept me from having to reinvent the wheel.

髪が紙の神様

The Paper-Haired God

by

Chris Boat

1

~Filling Space~

Under the sink the darkness has substance. My back pressed against the cheap wood of the cabinet, my head bent so far down that my chin rests on my chest, knees pushed painfully against the top of the cabinet, feet both bent inwards, my body is a mirror of the drainpipe, which is basically sitting in my lap. I am a human interpretation of the letter “U.” My bones and muscles must conform to the space I’ve confined them in. Before getting into the cabinet I took out all of the cleaning solutions and placed them on the counter next to the sink, but I can still smell their residue. Draino, ammonia, and something much fouler emanating from the drainpipe, all mix together and form the potpourri of this unique spot. The smell is so strong it invades my nostrils and runs down my throat. The back of my mouth is alive with the taste of copper.

The first few minutes under the sink are filled with excitement. I sit quietly waiting for something to happen. I have no watch, so I can’t tell what time it is, and even if I did I wouldn’t want to look at it. Concepts like time have no place down here. Hours and minutes seem to pass simultaneously and my excitement finally wears off, leaving only my body, which I’m suddenly acutely aware of. Every muscle, every bone, every nerve ending screams to stretch, my muscles fire but to no avail. There is nowhere for them to go in this cramped space. For a split second I am ready to push the door open and crawl out from under this terrible place, but I take a few deep breaths and try to relax. My neck and lower back are both starting to ache, so I shift my weight slightly, hoping to relieve some of the pain.

I try to ignore my body and focus on my thoughts. Perhaps, because of my intense isolation, my thoughts drift to my wife, Akiko. I dropped her off at the airport a few hours before crawling under the sink. I feel a little lonely under here, so I replay the

moment she got out of the car over and over again in my head. It's a mundane moment, one not worthy of such intense scrutiny, but I have to occupy myself somehow.

We pulled up to the departing flights drop-off and I put the car in park. Her dark brown eyes were elsewhere, probably already on the plane, or maybe already in Oregon with her friend. She turned to me and puckered her lips for a kiss. When our lips touched I noticed how chapped hers were. She was wearing a long white scarf wrapped around her neck so her long hair puffed up around her cheeks. The contrast of each black strand of her hair against the bright white scarf caught my eye just as she stepped out and opened the trunk to get her suitcase. Just before leaving she leaned in and reminded me to take the towels out of the dryer when I got home. Her nose crinkled and she looked over at the strawberry air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror.

“That doesn't really cover the smell does it?” She spoke in Japanese, the language we are both the most comfortable with, then brought one gloved hand up to her nose in order to avoid the smell. About three weeks before we had noticed a bad smell in the car. As the days passed the smell increased until it was unbearable. We figured that a rodent must have crawled into some rusty part of the engine and died, but no matter how hard we looked we couldn't find the corpse. I even went as far as pulling up the carpet, but nothing was there. Akiko decided to buy the air freshener in order to cover up the smell, but it didn't work. Instead of covering the smell the strawberry air freshener mingled with the dead animal and formed a new smell, strawberry death.

“You enjoy your flight and have fun in Portland. Me and the stinky car are heading back up the mountain.” She let out a small giggle and leaned further in to kiss me one more time.

“I love you. I’ll see you in a few days and we can celebrate Christmas together.” She smiled, then pulled her coat tighter around her to keep the cold out.

“I love you too, you better get to your plane, it’s too cold to be standing around out here.” I watched her as she walked into the airport. Through the large plate glass windows I could see a Christmas tree expertly decorated and stunningly large. Akiko barely glanced at it as she headed to the ticket counter.

My wife and I met in Japan when we were both in junior high. I was born in Laven, a small Mormon town in Utah. I lived there until I was about four, when my parents divorced and I came to Japan with my mom and her partner, a woman I’ve always called Auntie Keiko. Because I lived most of my life in Japan I’ve always connected more with that culture, but my white skin always gave me trouble growing up. Akiko was one of the first people that didn’t seem to care that I was different.

Before I knew my wife she was the shrine maiden at our neighborhood shrine, and this is how I like to think of her. Her hair in two braids down her back, her toothy mouth and cat smile, but mostly I remember her white kimono and red *hakama*. I can picture them perfectly in my mind, but, other than the white scarf, I can’t, for the life of me, remember what she was wearing when I dropped her off at the airport.

For all I know she might be on the plane now, bored and uncomfortable in her small seat. Here, under the sink, I can understand how she feels. I was halfway through folding the towels before I climbed under here. I think about the towels and all the other things Akiko asked me to get done while she was away and decide that I better get out from under the sink. I should clean up the house and start cooking myself dinner. Although I’ve made the decision I don’t make any attempt to get up. I am in awe of this

space. The darkness is so complete, the sensory deprivation so intense that it creates the illusion that I am sitting in boundless space. I can't tell if my eyes are open or closed, so I try to relax once again into my cramped position. This time I'm much more successful, as my muscles relax my body begins stretching and reaching, exploring the space that it is confined in. I breathe in deeply, then release it slowly while pushing every part of myself out into the darkness that surrounds me. The further I stretch the more I dissipate. My atoms are filling this self-contained universe symmetrically.

What if I left the oven on?

This thought snaps me right back to my uncomfortable position under the sink.

I remember turning it off.

I close my eyes and try to drift off again, but nagging thoughts keep plaguing my mind.

How well does anyone know their own living quarters? Akiko and I were so happy to find this house. We moved here from Japan about three years ago so that Akiko could finish her degree in civil engineering and we were incredibly nervous about how we were going to find a house. Akiko eventually found a picture of this place on the internet and contacted the owner. We secured it, but it was a bit nerve wracking to agree to live in a place we had never set foot in. We were lucky because it turned out to be a great house. It is actually a small one bedroom house in the back lot of a larger house. The landlord called it a "mother in law's house." Not only was it the perfect price, it is incredibly quaint. I feel like we have truly lived in this space. Our essence touches every corner, but small places, like this, exist all throughout this house.

The question floats into my head once more. How well does anyone know their own living quarters? How many hidden spaces inhabit our most familiar places? It was this thought that plagued me as I was folding towels and led to my current situation. How many people know the space under their bathroom sink like I now know mine? The truth is I still don't know my cabinet very well. I can't even remember the color of the contact paper Akiko put in when we first moved in. But these are really ridiculous questions. Perhaps the question I'm really grappling with is what the hell am I doing crammed under my bathroom sink? It has to be more than simple curiosity. Maybe it was at first, but now something bigger is revealing itself. Some trickle of knowledge is filling this area. Like Akiko always says, everything happens for a reason; maybe I'm under here to learn something.

Akiko's favorite saying when we were younger was "Meditation can happen anywhere." Perhaps it can help me now. I try to damn up the thoughts in my head and be completely in the moment, but this backfires and releases an uncontrollable flood of the mundane.

... could change drastically and the heater wouldn't be up high enough the oven could be on there could be an emergency and no one would be able to get a hold of me gas could be leaking a socket could short out one of my friends could come over and I would miss their visit what if my wife missed her plane and needs a ride from the airport what if she relies on someone else what if I've been a burden what if people only want things what if I'm only fooling myself what about the milk in the fridge am I happy am I happier now than I used to be did things truly get better am I in the right place I should try not to think not thinking not thinking not thinking grass hills dark nights cramped hands sour smell red hair I forgot I wonder if it would offend her if she knew I forgot what else have I forgotten what else floats behind locked doors in my mind is it important to keep this information does it shape me without my knowledge I wonder what other things I've forgotten I bet there are things that I thought I would never forget that are now gone forever I pushed a staple all the way into my thumb while riding home on the bus It didn't hurt but I never did it again it felt strange I wonder what Akiko would think if she knew Maybe I should try to clear my mind I need to stop thinking No more thinking it was very wet wetter than I expected it to be I wonder how Akiko is doing I hope her friend is being nice to her I wish I could quiet my mind ...

I startle awake. My body jumps but it has nowhere to go, so all I really do is push hard enough to make my head, ass, and knees tingle. I have to pee. I'm not sure how long I've been under here. I'm now officially stranded in time. It could be night or day; it could be Friday or Saturday, who knows. I might have missed work, or maybe I only slept for five minutes. My hands and feet are asleep. I move them around a little and I'm rewarded with the worst tingles I've ever experienced. My back feels like it has been broken in two places and my knees feel like they are being pulverized by the top of the cabinet. I should get out, but all the time I've spent under here already would be wasted. Which brings up the same important question, why am I under here? I'm waiting for something. I'm not sure what, but I know, deep in my heart, something is going to happen under here. For some reason, being cramped like this makes me nostalgic. I move around a little and try to find a better position. Eventually I'm able to find some semblance of comfort, although I still have to pee.

I try to block everything out and clear my mind, but Akiko forces her way back in. Akiko has changed since we were married. That's not entirely accurate. Akiko started changing as we got older. When we were teenagers Akiko was obsessed with a desire to find the Gods. It makes sense considering she was raised in as shrine, but she always wanted some form of proof, some truth to their existence.

Akiko was obsessed with the school baseball field. We went on a fieldtrip to Kyoto in eighth grade to visit some of the old temples and shrines. Akiko was excited for weeks because one of the places on the itinerary was *Ryoanji*, a temple that was famous worldwide for its rock garden. Akiko studied the temple with all of her might in the weeks before the trip and every day she would bring me some new tidbit of information.

When we finally arrived and were walking through the temple on polished wood walkways, Akiko wouldn't let me speak. We finally came to the garden and both of us sat contemplating it in silence. After about fifteen minutes I was completely bored and Akiko didn't seem like she would be leaving anytime soon. I was just preparing myself for a very long stay when Akiko stood up and walked away. She kept quiet all the way out of the temple, but I could tell she was disappointed. We sat down at a restaurant and she told me that she was ashamed of herself for getting her hopes up over a specific place. The Gods are everywhere, she told me, and no one place is any more likely to show them than another.

Once we were home Akiko stayed after school every day to try and spot the Gods somewhere on the school's baseball diamond. She would sit cross-legged in the bleachers and stare down, her eyes half closed, at the dirt lot. This didn't help her already terrible reputation amongst our peers, Akiko was always quiet but determined and she had a tendency to tell people exactly what she thought, but it never bothered me. I tried to sit with her at least once or twice a week, breathing in the dusty air and trying to see what she did in the boring old baseball field.

I'm not sure why I'm thinking of Akiko and the baseball diamond, but somehow, the dust on that field seems to be floating in the air all around me. I cough and the noise is instantly snatched away by the darkness. Like Akiko, I've always been interested in the Shinto Gods, but Akiko's spaces were too open for me, I preferred things a little more enclosed.

Why have I crammed myself under the sink?

How can anyone explain the things they do? Akiko liked to sit and stare at the baseball diamond, and when I was little I loved crawling into small dark places. The feeling of being completely closed in, coupled with the blocking of certain senses, and the resulting amplification of others, pushed me closer to an edge I always felt was near, but just out of reach. I loved the taste, smell, sound, sight, and feel of absolute darkness. I loved the pressure of earth, metal, or walls forcing my body to conform to their shape. Hollow tree trunks, small caves, washers, dryers, cabinets, crawl spaces, boxes, under porches, car trunks, when I was young my mother often found me cramped into such places. I always felt that somewhere within all that inky blackness there was a gateway, an entrance, to what I never really considered, I just knew it was there. My habit was at its most intense during the first few years we lived in Japan and it calmed down by the time I entered middle school.

Maybe that's all this is, an idiotic attempt at nostalgia, or maybe not. I feel closer to my unknown gateway now than I ever did as a child. Maybe this is my moment. I will give this a few more hours and then I'll have to put an end to it.

Once I've made this decision my mind starts to wander once again.

...red sky dark green grass black swing set dark hill old
fence peeling paint cold air and wet grass flying sinking
turbulence little girl lost in the woods stains on the floor
found text new car every time the sun breaks an epic travel
thought meditation cool air dark cave long rope empty
hands snapped leg faint smell eating dust inhaling gas small
people far away flapping mouth finally silenced hot
breathing, cramped wrong bright dirty weeds ripping
pulling thorns releasing small drop of blood on fingers
white water held under I got my new socks wet Jeep
basketball crack roll don't cry I thought it was going much
slower turf snort sniff touch peel licking sucking
penetrating deeper hurting wanting learning knowing
looking slipping falling drowning sinking green splitting
crying flailing never will make it back here again white
cold breathing wet calm flesh water drip button undone this
moment will never go away filling burrowing deeper
smiling fighting thinking striking every small moment drips
brown thoughts creation versatility project new old
everything is done once hair part camouflage plastic
playboy rain cars mesa lost if we walked far enough in do
you think we would lose our way tent blanket pennies jump
break crack bleed call sleep film snap capture forget lose
significance I want to remember this forever and forever
and 6 lazy violence fear small unable when did my feet
touch the ground filling mars distance space corner milk
milk milk milk milk learn fence try communication anger
mistrust fuck fucker fucked fucking why now why when it
could be now army change stagnation variety hate move
culture stick shift drive careen this is it point reason
structure meaning idea linear grab on nothing feeding
living red immersed swimming dark comfort sinking....

I startle awake again, but I can no longer feel my body. My legs are curled around the drainpipe, which is a thin layer of plastic curled around nothing. My skin is a bag filled with water and the Earth is a thin crust wrapped around liquid. The walls are wood and plaster sectioning off emptiness. The cabinet under the bathroom sink is an unused square and I'm just filling space, the space within the walls of my house, my cubicle at work, my car, and my body. All of these places reverberate with my noises, the sound of my voice, my stereo, the sound of my muffled heartbeat, the sounds of Akiko and all of our friends.

Here under the sink all of these sounds have died away and I'm left with the deafening sound of invisible noises, the refrigerator and heater turning on and off, the plumbing, the drainpipe dripping, and the settling of the house. These noises are the breath of the space I fill.

I can't stop the torrent of my thoughts streaming through my head, so I let them flow. I've got to cut through all of the nonsense so that my head is empty and I can find what's waiting down here for me.

...between two places. The hot pavement of an unused highway seeped into my body. A crack ran the width of the road. One side could not be the same as the other. In-between the crack was raw dirt. I stuck my finger in and scraped around. The power of time broke the confines of concrete. Split one of the strongest bonds. Between the concrete and dirt was a small space, about 3 inches deep, I pushed my arm under as far as it would go, all the way up to the elbow. I felt around in a wide ark, ignoring the insects.

Hours and minutes pass simultaneously and I'm not sure which are real. My muscles scream to stretch out and my throat feels like I've been eating sand. Thirst, hunger, cold, and pain eclipse all my thoughts and fears. My body is screaming out, trying to capture my attention with aches and pains.

I want to get out now. I need to go to the bathroom desperately, and get a drink of water. I need food, and a soft bed. It's over. I can't take it anymore. My brain sends the signal to my body, but nothing happens. I can't move. My body has been under here for too long.

Akiko made lunch for me before she left. Chicken cutlet with Katsu sauce and cabbage. I relish every moment of the memory. The food was fantastic, but really it is the tea I'm thinking of. Cooled *mugicha*.

I'm going to die down here. My body won't react to the signals my mind is sending. I'm going to die. I've finally taken it a step too far. I have to get something to drink or it's all over. The dripping drainpipe has soaked my clothes. I muster just enough energy to crumple up my shirt and shove it in my mouth. This small movement shoots slivers of pain into my chest and down my back. My bowels release and I fade away.

There is no longer a sink, a house, a car, a wife, or a job. There are no computers or cell phones. I'm inhaling darkness while it inhales me. There's nothing left of me to see. Everything is blotted out and I'm gone. I'm not filling this space. I'm not here under the sink.

I've disappeared into the darkness. I've left Akiko alone in this America where I was her only connection.

I'm looking into the future. Akiko is stranded. She's attending my funeral, and then flying back to Japan to try and start a life in a place she'd already left. She's sitting in her car at some travel agency crying for a memory that faded away under a bathroom sink, I have to let her go now; she's too far away.

I'm awake and my body is finally free to stretch, my legs first, then my arms. I'm lying on my back on some kind of earthen floor. The air is damp and smells of earth. A cool wind plays over my body and dries my sweaty skin. I sit up slowly, waiting to be crippled with pain, but my body feels completely normal. The darkness is total, so I have to depend on my other senses. The earth is muddy and thick beneath my fingers. I stand up and stumble forward until my hands come in contact with a stone wall. I must be in some sort of cave. I lean against the wall and try to relax.

I'm not sure where I am. Is this place under my sink? Did someone take me out while I was sleeping and put me in this strange cave? Either way I welcome the change. Somewhere the world I left must be rolling on. The Wal-Mart is probably full of late night shoppers and the streets are full of shiny cars. The liquor store is about to close so every college party has sent someone to pick up more booze. This is the only entertainment available for a spoiled society. The whole town is sleeping, drinking, driving, and screwing its way into eternity, but here, in this small cave tucked under my sink none of that matters. This space is perfectly natural, and I couldn't be more elated.

A small sound penetrates the darkness. My mind begins to devour it slowly. The first strains of Japanese court music, a type of music I only associate with shrines. The piece is *Entenraku* and my ears are eating it like their starving. This is the music of my childhood. I follow the sound, keeping my hands on the rock wall as I go, until I catch the light scent of incense. Although I can't see it, I know that I've arrived at my destination, a Shinto shrine deep under my bathroom sink. I can hear the ringing of the bells and quiet chanting.

I hear something move behind me like the soft rustling of paper and silk. I'm not alone down here. A deep voice chants lightly into my ear.

Three hundred paths, three hundred possibilities." The music rises to a crescendo and the chanting gets louder to compensate.

"When you step in here you've walked all three hundred." I hear a large splash in front of me followed by the rhythmic sound of dripping water. I try to imagine the scene. Perhaps there is a small pond and something has been lifted out of it.

"You step through here and you have to accept the possibilities." The chanting is directly in my ear. The scent of incense pervades the air.

"You step through here and you have to take what's yours."

Suddenly something heavy and wet is thrown into my arms. I'm back under the sink and the weight of the thing is on top of me. The court music has turned into a high pitch squeal that I realize is my own screaming. My limbs are cramping and I can't stretch them out to alleviate the pain. My scream bounces around the small enclosure. I reach out with my aching arms and touch the thing on top of me. My hand comes in contact with something fleshy and wet, something that is not me. The minute I touch it I feel a hand tighten on my shirt.

My limbs strike out at the enclosure around them. I'm kicking and screaming to get away from the thing with me. I'm kicking and screaming to bring myself back to the girl in the car. I'm screaming through cotton until I'm coughing.

The water flows from the center and up through the drainpipe into the sink. The water is always flowing into the ...

river.

Tall willow trees run along the bank of the Uji River. Each tree is perfectly pruned and planted between benches and concrete, the illusion of nature unbound and boundless engineered by government employees and planning committees. My mother holds my hand and expresses again her amazement at the Japanese ability to create such beauty with so little space. It is Sunday and mother is about to hold her English lesson. All of her other lessons take place at home, but she enjoys teaching out in the open air at least once a week.

I look up at her as we walk. She seems to be the tallest person in this entire town. Her short blonde hair frames her square face and it is impossible for her to keep the excitement out of her bright blue eyes. I love Sundays. I love walking along the banks of the river, but most of all I love the attention I get from my mother along the way.

We arrive at a cluster of benches under a particularly large willow and my mother starts speaking broken Japanese with the women who have gathered. Auntie Keiko is there in her yellow summer kimono. She rests her hands gently on my shoulders and bows slightly. I place my hands straight at my sides and bend at the waist, just like she taught me. Some of the Japanese women begin speaking in English. My mother has begun class, which is my cue to go play.

Just out of hearing range from the class there is a statue of Genji and Murasaki from “The Tale of Genji”, frozen forever where Lady Shikibu finished their lives. Genji is sitting regally in all of his old world finery, with Murasaki beside him staring over her fan in adoration at the young prince. The first time I saw this statue Auntie Keiko told me that they were characters from the world’s first novel and that their love for each other was so pure it lasted throughout all time.

I grab on to Murasaki's fan and pull myself onto her lap so that I can stare into Genji's face from her angle. Genji looks back at me through thousands of years. I turn and look at Murasaki. She stares up at Genji over her stone fan; her eyes look longingly at him. I stare at both of them, trying to bring myself into their world, trying to understand what Keiko meant by pure love. I stare at them as hard as I can, trying to push my essence out of skin and bone and into stone and metal.

I jump off the statue and run towards the river. My mother's class is an hour long, which feels like an eternity of free time. The riverbank is covered in the same concrete that lines the paths. It's about a ten-foot drop to the rushing waters of the river; a metal railing, molded and painted to look like wood, keeps people from falling in. I jump onto the lowest rail and lean over the highest, balancing all of my weight on my stomach. The water looks solid, as if it could hold my weight. Small objects float by: leaves, twigs and occasional pieces of trash. I climb through the rails and walk on the opposite edge of the concrete while holding onto the bar and looking into the river. The sunlight's continuous barrage warms the brown rail in my hand.

The river is my path to adventure. Today I can be anything I want, a samurai, a cowboy, a ninja, an astronaut, or maybe a prince like Genji. I jump back over the railing and head farther down the bank. Up ahead a family is leaning against the railing, a young girl about my age with her parents. As I get closer the young girl spots me and stares in open mouth awe. She turns and starts pulling on her mother's skirt saying, "Mama, look there's a foreigner!" Her Mother sends a quick glance at me and then tells her child not to stare. I put my head down and continue down the path. The sound of my tennis shoes scraping on the pavement seems abnormally loud, and the vibration crawls all the way up

to my fingertips. Suddenly the path ends in a steep stone staircase that leads directly into the water.

I sit down on the top step. My hands are sweaty and dirty from the rail, so I wipe them on my pants. Why would anyone build a staircase that leads into a river? I've walked along the banks of the river so many times, but I've never gone this far. The mystery of this staircase intrigues me. I walk down the steps carefully in order not to slip this close to the river. At the last step I bend down and put my fingertips into the water.

First a dimple, then a hole, the world flows backwards through the breach.

I am grabbed roughly from behind and pulled up into the sky. Before I know it I am back at the top of the stairs with Auntie Keiko speaking rough, fast Japanese into my ear. I pick up words here and there, the most important of which seems to be “dangerous.” After a moment my mother comes to the rescue.

“Keiko, it's okay. He was just sticking his hand in the water.” My mother is using the same voice she does when I'm afraid and she wants to calm me down.

“This is not a safe place to play; he might go into the river.” Auntie Keiko's face is pale and strained.

“Don't overreact, Keiko. Jason, apologize to your Auntie Keiko. You scared her.”

“I'm sorry, Auntie Keiko.” Keiko drops my hands, crouches down to eye level and speaks in slow, deliberate Japanese, so that I am sure to understand.

“This is a dangerous place, Jason. The current is very fast and you could easily drown. Please be very careful when you play here.” Her eyes are as dark as the river. My

face looks back at me from her pupil and nods. Aunty Keiko stands up and walks back to the benches with my mother and me in tow.

When we get home mother makes rice balls and she lets me smash them into the plastic shapers. Later my hands will taste like salt and rice. Aunty Keiko doesn't have to use the shapers, she makes each rice ball perfect without them, but my mother and I are learning, so we need all the help we can get. Mother speaks while she works.

"I know it's hard without so much space for you to play in." She hands me another handful of rice and salt to be pushed into the shaper.

"It's okay, Mom."

"Don't mind Aunty Keiko. She may seem a little nosy but she is only looking out for you. Aunty Keiko lost a little girl when she was young. Push a little bit harder honey, or it won't stick."

The palms of my hands leave indents in the top of the rice. I try to imagine a little girl that looks like Aunty Keiko, a Japanese sister, but I can't come up with a face.

A few hours later I'm in bed, but I'm not sleeping. I don't need covers because the moist heat is like a blanket. My room is alive with the shadows of trees outside my window. The stone steps in the river have planted themselves in my head. I water them with curiosity and imagination.

I close my eyes and listen to the sounds of the house through the thin walls. After a while Aunty Keiko comes home with her usual throaty greeting. My mother's footsteps trace a path from the kitchen to the entryway. I hear them go through the usual greetings and then move into the kitchen to drink tea. I slide out of my futon and lay my ear against the *tatami*. They're talking about the hole.

Two weeks earlier I crawled into a hole in the middle of an abandoned field behind a ramen factory. I was on my way home from school and the rain was a waterfall. I cut across the field like always and there in the middle of all that slick, black mud was a hole, about a foot in diameter. I couldn't tell the actual depth of the hole due to the light brown water collecting in the bottom.

I sank my red galoshes into the hole until the liquid made its way over the top of them. I slid my body slowly into a squatting position inside and put my head down into the darkness. My body was lubricated with mud. I sat and waited, with the water up to my chin, for my body to slide into another world, one that I knew existed just beyond my reach.

"I'm a little concerned about Jason." Aunty Keiko's words full of worry.

"Why?"

"He's going to hurt himself if he keeps going into places like that."

"He'll be fine."

"Are you sure he is really... okay?"

"Well, he's probably not totally okay; he's adjusting to a new place, a new language, and a new culture. This is just his way of expressing himself. Someday this will all be so important to him. Imagine how worldly he'll be." My mother takes their cups to the sink.

"He doesn't have the common sense he needs for this place. Back in America he understood where he could and couldn't go; here it's all new to him." Keiko's voice rises ever so slightly at certain syllables as she forgets to tone down her Osaka dialect. She wants us both to learn standard Japanese.

“That’s why we need to let him explore. He needs to find his place here; he needs to learn Japanese common sense.”

My place here? My place with mother and Auntie Keiko? My place beneath the river? My place back home?

“At least he’s not afraid of the dark.” A small laugh marches out after my mother’s words and echoes into silence.

Their conversation continues, but I crawl back into my futon and close my eyes.

I know about hidden kingdoms.

There is a place with sun bleached wood and rye fields that stretch slowly up the side of mountains. Abandoned barns and sheds dot the landscape like useless memories. Sheep bones are easily found in pastures where sheep no longer graze. Ghosts haunt every house and cellar. Barbed wire and ancient fence posts are scaled without any fear of trespassing. The bones of the great beasts that once tilled the fields stand naked and rusted, as if their masters had disappeared while using them. It once existed as my home. I left one foot firmly planted there when we traveled the Pacific.

Mother never fit in well in my father’s small town. She didn’t have the same zeal for Mormonism that Father did. For him Mormonism was his history. Every building, every dirt road, every piece of the town was dear to dad because of the memories they held for him and his family. Mother moved to Laven from Salt Lake City when she was

fifteen and she always skirted the social edges with her city ideas and dreams. Mother who took the time to rock me in a chair every afternoon, even though Dad thought she was spoiling me. Mother, who let me run free in Father's town, even though the town refused to give up its secrets. Every place remained a mystery no matter how many times I explored it, Father's town that could only belong to him, Father's town that slowly took him away.

There is a place where it always rains. Vines rise up and cover the trees making the forest impenetrable. Farmers make small shrines to foxes in order to keep the chickens safe. None of the streets have names. The sacred is separated from the mundane with rope and paper. The music sounds like night. The houses are made with doors that don't lock. Red gates beckon to weary pilgrims with promises of salvation. I lifted my other foot and planted it there.

Mother and I came to Japan and lived with Aunty Keiko. Aunty Keiko, like the breeze blowing into Kansai airport that smells of the sea; Aunty Keiko with her kimono as thick as a quilt, leaning down and speaking in a language I couldn't understand; Aunty Keiko kissing my eyelids. Aunty Keiko's Japan where every garden is a small paradise that can only be understood when contemplated from outside. Every neighborhood has an unexplored temple and every town has a mountain, Japan where every classmate looks through me, and all of my differences become painfully apparent. Japan, where I am left to sink or swim.

Once Aunty Keiko and my mother fall asleep I leave the house quietly and head down to the river. It's a short walk, but I've never taken it myself. The entire landscape seems different at night. All of the familiar trees and benches seem dangerous when

cloaked in darkness. Finally, my terrifying walk ends at the staircase. This must be the place I've been looking for, the gateway that will connect two worlds.

The water is cold and impenetrable. I'm standing at the last dry step and staring in to the green surface. I have to find my place. I turn around and look behind me. I'm expecting to see Auntie Keiko with her kimono flapping out at the ankles and her small mouth formed into a perfect O, but no one is behind me. I'm alone. I take the first step into the river. The water quickly soaks my shoe and sucks a gasp from my body. I drop another step and the water rises to my knees, another and the water is up to my stomach. The current pushes on me as if there were a string tied around my heart and whatever was waiting for me beneath the river was pulling on it. I take another step and the water soaks my shirt. The current is too strong; it knocks my feet out from under me. I fall backwards and hit my head on the steps above me. The world shakes from the impact and then I'm in the arms of the river. It has lured me in and caught me.

Everything is a roaring light-green. Sometimes I see my hands and sometimes my feet. I am spinning. My red backpack with its promised status of student flashes through my mind. My mother's thin scar on her thumb, the green pushes its way into me and devours all these things. It takes me in as I take it in. I am part of its murkiness and it is the murkiness inside me. It pushes out light and dark and pain and rapture until I am floating in a silent green sky leaving behind nothing but a bright red trail from the back of my head.

Everything outside of me is perfect, but inside something changes. Something is kicking, thrashing, and pushing to be let out. My body bloats and stretches with each kick until every nerve in me is singing. I shut my eyes and let out a scream that is

instantly swallowed before birth. I split into two. I'm on the right and left. We float next to each other, staring in mute shock. The me on the left closes his eyes and opens his mouth. Bubbles well up from his lungs as he floats down into greenness. I keep my lips firmly sealed and frantically push myself through the green above me.

First a cut then a flow, the river soaks in.

The bathroom cabinet is open and I'm lying on the floor staring into Akiko's face. The light behind her head hits my eyes like a supernova. She is yelling and shaking my shoulders. I feel like every one of my limbs have been cut off.

2

~The Waiting Station~

In the space between sleep and waking I start to notice some strange things. First, someone is near me, snoring heavily. Second, the air is chilly and somewhere, far off, I can hear the sound of an air conditioning vent. Third, the bed I'm laying on is completely unfamiliar. My body feels like a lead weight sinking into the thin mattress and I'm filled with the fear that I might still be under the sink. I send a signal from my brain all the way down to the pointer finger on my right hand. It moves slowly across the thin sheets.

I feel stretched out, as if the space from the top of my head to the tip of my toes is miles long. My body is pulled and broken and the space I'm filling now is infinitely larger than the cabinet under the sink. I've made it out. I found my way back. I'm relieved, but also a little scared.

I open my eyes slowly and look around. The room is bathed in light and my vision burns. I have to blink my eyes a few times in order to stand the pain. Streams of tears run down my face. Once I'm used to the light I survey my surroundings. There is a door to my left, and a window to my right. I close my eyes again and let them rest a bit longer. I can still taste the chilly air from the cave under my sink. I can smell the incense and hear the music.

Something beeps beside me.

I open my eyes and turn my head to see where the noise is coming from. A clear plastic bag filled with fluid hangs off a chrome rack. I'm following the tube to my arm when suddenly my whole body spasms, every muscle tenses and releases, until I'm turned on my side and curled up in a fetal position. I'm moaning and panting trying to hold in a scream. Every muscle is cramping and releasing, building up until finally I

wretch. A thin stream of white bubbly mucus runs out of the corner of my mouth and soaks the sheet. I'm scared. I've really messed myself up.

After the convulsions pass I'm left with nothing but a dull ache throughout my entire body. Now that I'm on my side I'm facing the source of the loud snoring. A mountain of blankets grows from a bed under the window. This must be my neighbor. After a few pushes with my elbow I'm able to turn onto my back. My clothes rubbing against my back send sharp needles of pain throughout my body, as if I am covered in scrapes and bruises. The tube from the plastic bag terminates at a needle in my forearm. The clock on my nightstand reads 3:31 P.M. and there is a small remote control with one button that says "call." I press the button and wait.

I've never felt so far from home. I think about Akiko, her neck wrapped in a white scarf and her mouth curved into a smile. Is she still in Portland, or was it she who pulled me out from under the sink? I saw her, just for a moment, with the bathroom light shining behind her head like a halo, and her scarf still hanging from her shoulders. I saw her, but I'm not sure she was really there. I'm not sure of anything I saw while I was under the sink.

The door opens and a nurse comes in. She's wearing blue scrubs and her thin brown hair is pulled back into a ponytail. She smiles when she sees me looking at her.

"You finally woke up." She takes my arm in her cold hands and counts my pulse.

"Where am I?" She keeps counting quietly to herself then drops my arm and scribbles on her clipboard. After she is done recording her information she looks back at me and smiles again. Her shallow green eyes look exhausted. After her smile she answers my question.

“You are at Clearview Hospital.” She starts checking my covers and adjusting the bed so I’m a sitting position. Clearview Hospital is in Ft. Collins, the closest city to Laramie. I’m a lot farther from my sink than I expected. Laramie is about an hour away, straight up a mountain.

“Am I okay?”

“You were under your sink with no food and very little water for about three days. Your muscles had started to atrophy and you are covered with bedsores.”

“I was under there for three days?” I’m shocked at this news. I thought maybe a day or a day and half, never three days.

“Yes, and you’re lucky your wife found you when she did, you had stopped breathing when she pulled you out from under the sink. You’re lucky you’re still alive.” The mention of Akiko floods my entire being with shame. I never expected this to go as far as it has. I thought I would be under the sink for a few hours, then come back out and finish folding the towels.

“Where is my wife?” My voice croaks out and I can tell that I am blushing furiously. I’ve made a mess of myself and now I have to try and explain why to Akiko.

“She’s right outside. Would you like to see her?”

“Of course I would. Please let her in.”

“I’ll get her now, but keep it quick. Visiting hours will be over in ten minutes.” She turns and walks out of the room. The door clicks behind her and I’m left with the sound of lumbered snoring from the bed next to mine.

A few seconds later the door swings open and Akiko comes in crying unabashedly, a sight I’m not used to. She is wearing a pair of blue jeans and my green

sweater. The sweater is baggy on her, but she loves it so we constantly fight over who gets to wear it. Her white scarf is hanging around her neck. She walks quickly to my bedside and sits down on the edge of the bed. I can smell her and the nostalgia and comfort inherent in the scent forces me to realize all over again, that she is everything I need. This never would have happened if she were home. Somehow, when I'm with Akiko all of my shortcomings seem bearable. This trip to Portland was the first time that Akiko and I had spent more than half a day apart since our wedding and it sure took its toll. A text book definition of co-dependence.

Now that she is beside me I'm finally able to find my voice.

"How was Portland?" Akiko gives me a light slap on the hand and bites her bottom lip. She reaches out and cradles my face in her hand.

"Are you okay?" She switches to Japanese, the language of our marriage.

"Akiko, I..." She squeezes my hand and shakes her head.

"We can talk about it later. I'm just glad to see you awake." She gives me the best smile she can muster.

"I would like to go home." Our small cottage covered in a foot of snow, the heater on full blast and hot tea. These small things are all I want in the world.

"You can't go home now. By law, anyone that tries to commit suicide must remain in the hospital for three days. This wing of the hospital is made especially for people in your situation. There's nothing I can do about that, but you've already slept away a day and a half, so you'll be out soon."

"I didn't try to commit suicide Akiko." After a quick knock the door opens and the same nurse from before sticks her head in.

“You better go Mrs. Jensen, I’m sure Mr. Jensen needs his rest.” She opens the door and holds it for Akiko.

I give her hand a squeeze to let her know it’s okay. Akiko leans over and kisses me lightly on the lips, then stands up, pulls a napkin out of her purse and dabs her eyes.

“I’ll be back to pick you up tomorrow afternoon, Jason, I’m so glad that you’re okay.” I smile weakly at her. She smiles back then turns and leaves the room. I can hear her talking with the nurse as they walk down the hallway. I settle back into my bed, expecting to be troubled by guilt and shame, but I am amazingly calm. My mind is a complete blank. Somewhere inside me, hidden beneath the shame, I am happier than I’ve ever been. All those years I spent looking for a small space where I could penetrate the veil between this world and something... else. Some other unknown world and years after I’ve given up I find it in my own house. I close my eyes and linger on my memories, the feel of the cool air on my skin, the thin strains of *gagaku*, and incense. Just behind my memory of the incense I can smell Akiko’s lingering fragrance. I realize that the nurse is right, all I want is sleep. I close my eyes and my neighbor’s snoring slowly fades away.

It feels like I’ve only slept for a few seconds before I’m startled awake by a loud voice.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, I’ve got to go to work!” My neighbor is sitting up on the edge of his bed. The room is bathed in artificial light and the window is nothing but a black square. My neighbor’s hair is like pepper and his enormous gut seems to be resting on his knees. He’s yelling at the nurse from earlier.

“I’m sorry Mr. Franks, but your case is considered a suicide attempt.”

“I was drinking! Look, if I stay here for three days I’m going to lose my job.” He says this as if it solves everything.

“I’m sorry Mr. Franks, but it is the law.”

Mr. Franks squeezes his hands into flabby fists and I can feel the room fill with his sour violence. “Well then leave me the hell alone!” He lies down and rolls over, dismissing the poor nurse.

“You got it.” She turns and heads over to my bed. Her face is the perfect picture of serenity, but her eyes burn like two angry coals.

“Are you able to sit up Mr. Jensen?” She tries to smile at me but it comes out as a sneer.

“You can call me Jason.” I try to sit up, but my angry muscles refuse to help. She reaches out both of her hands and I take them gladly. After a lot of pulling she’s able to get me into a sitting position. My muscles feel like they are falling off of my bones. She unties the back of my gown and sees to my bedsores. Once she has looked me over thoroughly she stands back and puts her hands on her hips.

“How are you feeling?”

“A little sore, but I think I’m alright.”

“Do you think you can stand up?” She comes over and holds her arm out to me. I take it and slowly pull myself into a standing position. Once I’m up my legs start shaking uncontrollably. The nurse helps me take a few steps. Every time my foot hits the ground I feel like my legs are shattering. A tingly current runs up and down my entire body and I resist the urge to crumble into a heap on the floor.

She works with me for about an hour and eventually I'm able to walk around the bed. I feel like a two year old. After we're done exercising she helps me back into bed and pulls the covers up to my chin. I resist the urge to ask her to read to me.

"You look exhausted. I hope you sleep well tonight." She turns and speaks from the doorway.

"Goodnight." I try and smile. She flips off the light and for a moment her body is nothing but a shadow outlined by the hallway light behind her.

She shuts the door.

No darkness will ever be pure again. The darkness under the sink was so perfect in its totality that this semi dark room seems positively flooded with light. I close my eyes in order to find that perfect darkness once again.

Eight hours later my eyes slowly open to a gray and dreary morning. My neighbor is snoring again. I sit up quietly trying not to cry out every time my sheets scrape against the bedsore. My muscles are sore, but I'm beginning to feel like I can use them once again. My thin hospital gown lets in all the cold air when I stand up, but I find an upgrade folded at the foot of my bed. A light pair of blue pants and a matching pullover top, both feel like they are made out of paper, but they are much warmer than the other gown.

After the agonizingly slow process of dressing myself I head out into the unexplored regions of the hospital. Even though it is early in the morning the hallway is filled with people doing nothing but walking aimlessly. All the shuffling blue outfitted suicide survivors keep their heads down so they don't have to make eye contact. I follow suit.

We have one hallway, a small dining room, and a day room filled with puzzles and games. I expect their faces to be listless, filled with the depression of failure, but every passing face is filled with expectation. It is the boredom of waiting that dulls their movement. I've seen people walk like this before, in airports and train stations.

The realization that everyone in here has tasted death washes over me. We are drawn together as survivors but torn apart with shame. I feel like a tourist, I never had any intention of killing myself. My neighbor and I have this in common, but his excuse is much better than mine. I was sober when I decided to crawl under the sink. One thing we all have in common is that the world we are returning to will never be the same. I traveled much further under the sink than I expected and this is the layover on my way back home. I'm stuck in a waiting station, reminiscing about the place I left.

Every part of my breakfast seems to be cut from the same piece of cardboard, but it is exquisite. I haven't eaten in four days and really anything would have been amazing. I eat slowly and with relish, and I can't help but notice that many of my peers are doing the same. I'm surprised they don't have any Christmas decorations up. I'd figure that they'd try to cheer people up for the holidays. Maybe Christmas is too depressing. I wonder if Akiko will still want to put up our Christmas tree after all of this.

Once I'm done with breakfast a new nurse, a tall dark haired man, takes me into a small office to see the resident psychologist. Dr Green is a middle aged woman with short brown hair. She greets me with a kind smile and ushers me into a comfortable chair in front of her desk. Once I've sat down she ruffles through her desk drawer and pulls out a manila envelope with my name on it. She reads quietly for a few seconds then looks up and smiles again.

“This will only take a few minutes. I just want to ask you some questions. Do you mind if I call you Jason?” I’m nervous and when I’m nervous my hands sweat. I wipe them absentmindedly on my pants.

“Please do.” Her particular occupation is one that frightens me. Perhaps it is because she has the ability to judge me.

“How are you feeling today?” She flashes her warm smile once again. I can’t help but wonder if she practices this particular smile in the mirror at night.

“I’m feeling much better. I’m able to walk around a lot easier.” I’m trying hard not to be nervous, which never really works.

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m a bit confused by your file, where are you from?”

“Japan.” Her eyes trace a line from my white skin to my blue eyes and up to my dishwater blond hair.

“Your English is great!”

“I’m sorry, I think I might have confused you. I was born and raised to the age of five in America, then I went to Japan with my mother.” Her face clears now that the riddle of my existence has been solved.

“So you are an American. That’s why your English is so good.” For a split second I am furious. Why do people find the possibility of coexisting within the realm of two cultures so impossible to comprehend “Do you want to tell me what happened over the last few days?”

I really don’t want to tell her anything, but right now she holds all the cards.

“I got under my bathroom sink.”

“Why did you do that?” Once again I’m flooded with shame

“I don’t really know, I’ve been asking myself that same question since I woke up yesterday and I can’t come up with a reason. I think I was just curious.

“How long have you lived here?”

“My wife and I moved back here from Japan about three years ago. Things weren’t working out in Japan, so my wife and I decided to come to the States and start over.”

“What wasn’t working?”

“We were having trouble with our parents, so we decided to remove ourselves from the situation.”

“So your mother is still in Japan?” Her questions don’t seem to follow any logical order.

“My mother passed away two weeks ago.” My beautiful Mother slowly withering away with Aunty Keiko at her side, Perhaps it was her death that drove me under the sink. Maybe that is why I felt nostalgic.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Losing a parent is one of the most stressful parts of life.” She scribbles in her notebook again, then continues. “It sounds like you have a pretty unique coping device. Unfortunately, it can really hurt you. It seems to me that you’ve had quite a build up to this suicide attempt. You lost your mother and now you’re back in America. I know it’s hard, Jason. But you have to stick it out. There are many places you can turn to in your time of need.” She hands me a pamphlet. “This will tell you everything we have to offer here. It also has the number for our depression hotline. Your life is precious and you must do everything you can to take care of it. Think about the people that would miss you if you were gone. How would your wife and friends feel if

you just gave up on life?" I keep my head down as she gives this speech. "Well I'm guessing that this will be a unique event for you Jason. I hope I never have to see you here again." She pulls some papers out of her desk drawer, clips them to a clipboard and hands it to me. "I just need you to fill out these discharge papers, please sign and date the bottom."

I scribble my name across the bottom and then move over to the right to fill in the date. Unfortunately, I'm not sure what day it is. Akiko's plane left on December 15th. We had pulled out our small box of Christmas decorations and we planned on decorating when she got back. I was under for three days, and then I had to stay in the hospital for a few days.

"What's the date today?"

"It's the 20th." I finish writing the date and hand her the clipboard. She takes the paperwork and scans it back and forth in order to make sure everything is correct. When she gets to the bottom she spots a problem.

"You put the wrong date down."

"I put what you told me."

"The day is right; it's the month and year that are wrong. You put December 20th, but today is March the 20th." She flashes her smile and suddenly it seems carnivorous. I feel like I'm stuck in Orwell's *1984*. I know it's December, so why is she trying to make me write March. Maybe it's some kind of psychological test. Perhaps she wants to see if I'll get angry. I scribble out December and write March instead. She takes the clipboard and looks over the papers.

“Everything looks good. You’re all done.” I guess I passed the test. I leave the office and find the nurse waiting for me. He takes me to the dayroom and I find Akiko waiting for me. She’s brought me some clothes and a heavy winter coat. I change in the bathroom, then Akiko and I finish checking out. Our final stop is a small closet where a bored employee hands me a plastic bag filled with my old, filthy clothes, the last remnants of my trip. I tuck the parcel under my arm and we are finally free to leave.

The air outside is fresh and clean. I breathe in deeply, and let the sun’s warm rays burn away the last traces of the sink. Akiko heads for the car. Her hair falls down her back like water, the ends bounce lightly with every step. I have no idea where she parked. The waiting is over. I’m finally free and Akiko is my guide. I’m heading home.

Our car is an old Reliant K that was born in 1979, the same year as Akiko. We bought it for five hundred dollars a few months after we arrived in America and we’ve nursed it along for the last three years. It is still the only car we’ve ever owned. Akiko opens the driver’s side door and steps aside to let me crawl in. The passenger door hasn’t worked since we bought the car. I throw my stuff into the back seat and crawl in. I take a deep breath and hold it, hoping to avoid the strawberry death.

I keep my breath in until I’ve finished buckling my seatbelt, then I release it slowly. The car smells fresh, not even a trace of strawberry death. Akiko slides into the driver’s seat and puts on her seatbelt.

“The car smells great, how did you get rid of the smell?” Akiko starts the engine then looks over at me.

“What smell?” She looks tired and a little confused.

“Strawberry death.”

“Jason, that went away months ago. You were the one who threw out the air freshener.” Akiko looks in the rearview mirror and backs out into the parking lot. My mind is reeling.

“Wow, I must’ve forgotten. Did that happen before or after I dropped you off at the airport?” Akiko gives me a sidelong glance as she pulls out of the parking lot.

“You dropped me off at the airport five days ago, you threw out the air freshener in January.” Akiko pulls onto Main Street and heads for the mountain. I stare out the window and watch the town dwindle to almost nothing.

“I think I’ve gotten a little confused about time since I went under the sink. What is the date today?”

“Today is March 20th. I know you must be a little disoriented right now, but everything will be back to normal before you know it.” She looks over at me and tries to give a reassuring smile.

I turn back to the window and close my eyes. Once again I feel like I’m trapped in *1984*. I can clearly remember Akiko looking over at the air freshener and commenting on the fact that it wasn’t working when I dropped her off at the airport. I remember her saying she’d be back in time for Christmas. If it is March 20th already, then I was under the sink for a lot longer than three days, it was more like three months. But Akiko seems to have memories with me that I don’t remember.

“What did we do for New Year’s?” Akiko gives me a worried look.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, just a little disoriented. I’m trying to remember what we did for New Year’s.”

“We didn’t do anything. You caught a cold and went to bed early.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I remember now.” Akiko turns back to driving. I lied to her, I don’t remember at all.

“I’m still confused, when did I get under the sink?”

“You went under a few hours after dropping me off, so that would make it March 15th. It’s been five days since you went under.” She puts her hand on my thigh and gives it a light squeeze.

Something is wrong. Either I’ve lost three months of memory, or I’ve come out in a different place. I close my eyes and try to figure everything out logically. I label my memory of events A. In world A I drop Akiko off at the airport on December 15th, then crawl under the bathroom sink. I was under the sink for three days, so if I stayed in world A it would now be December 20th. I label the reality I currently inhabit as B. In world B I enjoyed Christmas with Akiko, got sick over New Year’s, then went under the sink on March 15th. At least, that’s what I assume happened in world B. Either I’ve got some sort of selective amnesia or somehow I skipped tracks. Maybe I went under the sink in world A and came out in world B. If that’s the case who was with Akiko for the last three months?

The world feels like it’s folding in on itself. The edges curl and the center drops out. We leave Ft. Collins behind and head up the mountain towards Laramie. A few miles up the road the temperature drops. Akiko blasts the heater and I stare at passing snow drifts. A half an hour into the drive and the ground is covered with snow. The snow seems excessive for March, which makes it feel all the more like December. The snow

stretches forever in all directions and my mind, numbed with confusion, finally gives out. I sink into a sleep.

Before I know it Akiko is shaking me lightly. I open my eyes to the familiar sight of our small home. The roof is covered in a few feet of snow and icicles hang from the eaves. Akiko opens the door and gets out.

“...is out. You go ahead and go in. You should get some rest.” The creaking of the door overpowers the first few words of her sentence, but I’m too tired to ask her to repeat it. I climb out of the car and head for the front door. I unlock it and head into the house. No matter what the date, I’m home. My experience under the sink has come full circle. I leave the lights off. I ignore the bathroom and head straight to bed without brushing my teeth. I’m out the minute my head hits the pillow.

3

~Red String~

The click of the door handle followed by the groaning metal protest of the door opening echoes in the quiet snow-filled yard. It seems like only a few moments since I went to sleep the night before, but a whole night has passed. I woke up this morning to the incessant whine of my alarm and I knew I had rejoined the rest of the world. Akiko was already gone and the house was quiet. Now I have to get to work and try to salvage the pieces of the life I left when I went under the sink.

I climb into the Reliant through the driver's side door. Inside, the car is a dark tunnel. Snow a foot thick covers the entire car and blocks out all light. I crawl in, hold my breath, and start the engine. Once the car is running smoothly I grab the window scraper and duck back out into the crisp mountain air.

The sun shining off the snow is a great pale white that makes me squint. Our small cottage creates a charming scene, with its peaked roof covered in snow and icicles hanging off the eaves. The air scorches my lungs with cold and the perfect happiness I hoped to experience upon my return is nowhere to be found.

I stare out into the scorched landscape and notice something large moving in my backyard. I stop scraping the snow off my windshield and walk over towards the house. A large black dog is sitting by the door. His fur is covered with small drops of melted snow and I can smell him before I open the gate. He stands up and wags his tail when I walk over. He's probably a stray. I'll have to figure out how he got over the fence when I get home.

The sun and snow blind me. I turn back towards my car to finish scraping the windows. My soul is cauterized and I'm left wondering where the second half of winter went. The memory loss is truly disturbing, but I find it all a little unbelievable. The truth

of the matter, the thing I'm trying my hardest to ignore, is that things don't seem quite the same since I've come out from under the sink. The place I left when I crawled under the sink, and the space I've inhabited ever since my emergence might not be exactly the same.

For instance, it seems much colder. Akiko and I have lived here for three years. It's a small mountain town, so we expect snow, but nothing like this. Usually I have to scrape a few inches off my windshield, but today the snow is a foot and a half thick. Couple this with the fact that spring is starting and it doesn't make sense.

The task of scraping the windows is long and cold. I have to keep changing hands. I scrape with one hand until it feels frostbitten, then switch and put my cold hand in my jacket pocket. Once I'm done I go find the snow shovel and shovel grooves in the driveway so I can pull my car out. My neighbor comes out and begins doing the same.

"Heya." He says this to me in a tone somewhere between acquaintance and stranger.

"It's freezing out here. I think this is the coldest winter we've ever had." I figure this is a perfect topic of conversation for two people that have nothing to say, but he looks at me as if I am a bit off.

"This is nothing." With that he gets into his truck and starts the engine.

I watch my neighbor drive off and then I get into my own car. The car is already warm so I slowly pull out of the driveway and start my drive down the mountain.

We chose this house because it was so close to Akiko's school, that way we wouldn't have to buy another car. Unfortunately, that means my commute to work is quite long. Luckily most of my drive is outside of town so I get to see mountains and

foothills instead of neighborhoods and shopping markets. Usually the drive to work is the best part of my day, but today it seems hollow and strange.

I usually marvel at the strength of the mountains as I pass them, but today the peaks looming above me seem clumsy. They point at nothing, like a man pointing at a blank white page. Such a powerful structure makes no sense against a vast blue wash of nothing. I look away, and for a moment my vision jumps. The whole scene goes negative. The mountains are white and the sky is black.

The Reliant's heater shoots all of its heat onto my feet. The other vents died long ago. My hands are freezing on the wheel, but my feet are sweating. Every bit of moisture is sucked from the air and packed into tiny white flakes. My nose itches and my lips are chapped. For a moment the idea of crashing my good old Reliant through the fence and up into the foothills seems like a good one. Everything has changed since the sink. Everything is familiar, but somehow new.

I got a job at a bank call center about three months ago. I had been working as a tour guide at our local tourist attraction, Frontier Town, until it closed. The mountains loom up behind me as I pull into the call center's massive parking lot. I park the Reliant at the space farthest from the door. I might have been lucky and found a place closer to the building, but I don't have the energy to try, it's easier to just walk. The lot seems to stretch into eternity, lined with car after car. The wind blows and carries snow. Large companies always build their call centers in the most desolate places. There's no need for a good view because customers never visit.

I stand in the middle of the lot and look in all directions. The snow makes it impossible to tell where the lot ends and the plains begin. Concrete and grass become one.

Nature plain, man made plain, it could be a negative and it wouldn't matter. Small trees grow far apart in the nature plain. They look like men standing very still. Maybe, long ago, they used to grow together. Their branchy arms would try and entwine, but their thorns destroyed any chance of comfort. The closer they got, the more they hurt each other. Now they grow isolated, just far enough apart to avoid pain.

I walk inside the huge building. The floor is carpeted in non-descript brown, while the roof is a mess of visible beams painted a soft, neutral white. Small cubicles stretch down the room with people corralled into them like cattle. I walk slowly to my stall. It seems a lot smaller than the last time I was here. I sit down and feel like I'm back under the sink. The only thing that separates the two is a concept. Crawl under a sink and you must be trying to kill yourself. Crawl into a tiny cubicle and deaden your brain with nonsense and you are praised for doing a good job. Small awards and pictures cover my wall in order to remind me of what I'm doing here.

What am I doing here?

I'm working so that Akiko and I can survive in this vast country of my parents. I'm working now so that I can support us when our bodies give out. I strap on my headset and begin.

There really is no difference between a call center and a slaughterhouse, except at a call center they never put you out of your misery. Men and women are pushed into small pens where they stare dumbly at glass screens that reflect nothing. The same dull gray light that shines on their upturned faces seeps from their droopy eyes. They look slowly across the information on the screen and regurgitate it for the hungry customers on the phones. Their headsets are leashes tying them to the wall. They all sit in the correct

ergonomic position so they can sustain their bodily health for years. Destroy the brain, but keep the body. They only need to think enough to continue the repetition.

I look down my row. Man made plain. Men and woman grow here and they are spaced just far enough apart to avoid pain.

I'm tapped on the shoulder by my supervisor, a kid about half my age. He tells me to go see Craig, the head honcho. Once again I'm going to have to try and explain myself. The trek across the call room floor feels like miles. First I pass my peers, then the middle management types, and finally to the large glass wall that separates us from the call center manager. I knock on the door lightly and he beckons me inside.

Craig's office is big and he fills it with his ego. He is sitting behind his desk staring at me when I come in. His walls are covered in awards like mine; only his are made from metal and wood, instead of paper and plastic. One of the perks of upper management I guess. His desk is like a large boat floating in the vastness of the room. The desk is impossibly empty, a computer, a stapler, and picture are the only things on it. All together these things take up about one tenth of the huge oak slab Craig sits behind. He lives and breathes in a place that is the exact opposite of the space his subordinates are crushed into. For the first time since I've come out from under the sink I feel like I am in a place that is too large to inhabit. Suddenly I am sweating.

Craig is somewhere between fit and fat. He is easily twice my size and most of his weight is muscle. His dark black hair is cut short and styled perfectly. He looks like he belongs in this ridiculously huge space. The moment I enter his space he fixes me with the type of penetrating stare that Americans seem to think makes them better businessmen. I avert my eyes.

“Have a seat, Jason.” He motions to a large comfy office chair, ergonomically designed for my comfort. I sit lightly on the edge. “You know why I called you in here right?” I can feel his eyes on me.

“I think so, yes.”

“You missed Monday and Tuesday without calling in. What happened?” He waits silently for me to make up an answer. For a split second I think about telling him the truth. I wonder how he would react if I told him that I crawled under my bathroom sink in order to try one more time to grasp the intangible, but what’s the use? Instead I do exactly what he expects, I lie.

“I got really sick and my wife was out of town.” It’s all that I can come up with.

“Did your phone also get sick? You could’ve called in.”

“I was really sick.”

“What kind of sick.”

“A stomach flu.”

“Did you go to a doctor?”

“No, I figured it would pass with a lot of rest.”

He lets out a long sigh and stares out at the call floor through his glass wall. I can hear random snippets of conversation happening outside the office. None of it makes sense. Perhaps upper management has their own language. After a moment he gets up, walks over to the door and shuts it. He stays standing by the door and stares out at all the workers busy in their cubicles.

“You’ve caught me at a reflective time, Jason, so I’m going to be honest with you, do you mind?”

“No sir.” This conversation is heading in a direction I did not expect. Craig lets out another sigh and begins speaking. His words come like a torrent from a newly broken dam.

“What do you think I do in here, Jason?”

“I don’t know sir... Manage the call center?”

He lets out a laugh. “No, everyone that is not on the phones does that. I do nothing. I went to school with the owner’s brother and he got me this job. It’s cushy, so I shouldn’t complain but I’ve got to tell someone. I’m bored. I’m damn bored. My job is too easy. I have hours to cruise the internet, or just sit and think.” I’m so stunned that I can’t think of any response. He continues on.

“Look at all of those cubicles out there.” He says this more to himself than to me. I turn, look out the window, and quietly wait for him to continue.

“My job is to make sure that every one of those cubicles is filled, and since that is my only job I make damn sure that they are.” He pauses again. Silence fills the empty space in our conversation. I open my mouth to fill it with apologies, but he continues on before I can speak.

“It doesn’t matter who fills them, just as long as they can answer the phone. This morning I was staring out at the cubicles and I began to wonder what you guys think you’re doing out there? My curiosity got so bad that I decided to pose the question to you and in doing so bring you in to my confidence. So I’ll ask you, what do you think you’re doing out there?” He pauses and waits for me to answer. My response comes quickly, just like it did when I was in training.

“We build a bridge between the customers and the company, and you do everything possible to help us build that bridge.” He laughs openly at my response. I fidget nervously and wonder once again why he’s telling me all of this.

“That’s what I spend my empty hours doing. Staring out the window watching you all work harder than I do for much less pay. Why do you all believe anything is getting done out there? Why do the customers believe it? The bank advertises this call center as a way to get closer to the customers, but what could be more impersonal than an automated voice response, or an employee that doesn’t even live in the same state? There’s talk up above about closing banking branches entirely. Can you imagine? Going in to see a teller would be a thing of the past. Instead of a warm friendly person that can help you in each and every unique situation, you’ll get the convenience of automated responses and websites. People actually eat this stuff up and I can’t understand why. You’re on the phones, you know what I mean. Each call is a unique situation that a computer could never handle. This call center is the first step in taking all of the power away from the customer. Once the branches are gone, they’ll probably fire all the call center employees and the customer will be left with nothing but the automated voices service, which is nothing more than a maze with no exit. Sometimes I want to announce the truth over the loudspeaker, other times I want to run out and yell the truth at the top of my lungs, but you will have to do. Maybe if I tell you I can forget about it and find something new to look up on the internet.”

I’m sweating. I’m in a situation I’ve never dealt with and I can’t think of which direction to go. His biggest mistake is thinking that the people on the floor don’t know what’s going on. All of us know that we are doing nothing and all of the customers

complain about it every day. We all know what's going on, but we are powerless to stop it. He's far too removed to know how employees and customers interact. I don't dare say this to him, so I give a non-committal answer.

"I don't understand." His mouth stretches into a broad grin. He's happy that I've confirmed his belief that the whole world is blind to the conspiracy that he's a part of, and I realize that the whole reason for this conversation is so that he can feel superior with his pseudo intellectual understanding of his position. I can't help but wonder how many nights he laid in bed planning this speech? He continues, spurred on by my response.

"You and all the other people sitting out there are trash bins. People call you up and dump all of their anger and frustration into you. You dutifully type all of their anger into the system so that the company can ignore their complaints and pleas. The bridge that your position is supposed to represent is actually a wall isolating the bank from its own customers. The strangest part is that people line up to fill these cubicles. Did you know that the turn over rate for this job is over eighty percent? People work here for about three weeks then quit, leaving space for the next person in line. Our longest running employee has only been here for seven months! What do you say to that?"

I forcefully contain the anger inside me. I'm eight again, standing in front of Principal Yamada getting scolded. Good Japanese students don't talk back, and they especially don't answer rhetorical questions. He stares at me and his feelings are finally evident. The disgust in his eyes reminds me of my father.

"I don't have time for you anymore. I could give you a warning and let you stay on, but why should I? There is an endless supply of people just like you waiting to get in.

You're fired. Step away and leave space for the next person in line." He spits this at me then returns to his desk and pretends he's busy. He used me to practice his little speech on, and now he's dismissed me. The customers on the phone used me as a garbage can, just like he said, and he's done the same thing. I think of a thousand things I want to say but I remain silent. In the end my rage is impotent. I will walk out of here while he pats himself on the back for enlightening me to the one part of the job that everyone on the floor holds most sacred, the knowledge that we are worthless. I try to think of a way to persuade him to let me keep my job, but this isn't Japan. I can't bow low and ask for his pity. I leave his office quietly.

The only thing I take from my cubicle is Akiko's picture. All their little gifts and awards are useless. Lowest call times of the week, training successfully passed, all of these are worthless without the job to put them in context. I have to wonder if they'll all be left for the next guy.

On the drive home the sun and the snow make everything seem bright and fuzzy around the edges, and once again I think that maybe I've crawled out into a different world. I was under the sink for three days. Akiko said that my lips were black and my face was blue. We haven't discussed it fully yet, I think she's waiting for me to open the conversation. Tonight Akiko and I will have to talk.

It's snowing big fluffy flakes by the time I pull into my driveway. The setting sun turns the white landscape red. The big black dog is still in my yard. Outside, the cold hits me like a slap. The dog comes up to me and wags his tail as I open the gate. I keep my hands in my pockets and hold the gate open for him. He runs around in a confused circle and then leaves the yard. He looks at me for a minute then heads down the street.

There is nothing more silent than a snow covered night. Once I'm inside, with the door shut and the heater on, I feel like I'm a million miles away from civilization. I know that Akiko will be home soon, but somehow that seems impossible. Nothing can exist outside of these walls.

I pull out some frozen chicken breasts and throw them in the microwave. While the chicken is defrosting I wash some rice and throw it in the rice cooker. The fridge buzzes and the heater roars. The microwave is a dissonant drone and I realize that I love the music of my home. This place, this empty rectangle embraced me for three days and opened itself up to me. Deep under the sink I found the place I've always been looking for. Unfortunately, finding it has really taken its toll. Akiko is confused and I've lost my job, but I still feel it was worth it. I knew there was something to be found, it just took me a long time to crawl into the right space.

Suddenly I'm struck with an overwhelming urge to look at the space one more time. I head into the bathroom and sit on the edge of the tub. I notice, with a tinge of guilt, that all the towels have been taken care of and the cleaning supplies are all put away. The bathroom is exactly the same as when I crawled under. Here in this space I feel like I'm safely back in my own world.

I reach out and crack open the cabinet door. For some reason I'm scared. The space under the sink is filled with cleaning supplies. It smells like lemons, probably from one of the cleaners that Akiko used, and underneath that I can make out the sour smell of feces. The contact paper is light blue, I don't know why I couldn't remember that while I was under the sink. I stick my head in and the smell gets stronger. I'm reminded of our

cars lovely strawberry death scent. Just below the lemon feces is another smell. At first I can't make it out, but then it comes to me. Shrine incense.

Suddenly the front door opens and Akiko's voice fills the house.

"Stupid teacher!" I jump up, slam the bathroom cabinet and walk out of the bathroom. I feel ashamed and embarrassed, as if Akiko has caught me in some sort of dirty act.

"Is everything okay?" Akiko looks concerned when she sees me coming out of the bathroom. She throws her backpack on the couch and heads for her earplugs. Lately Akiko has taken to wearing earplugs around the house. At first she wore them only when she studied, but now she wears them whenever she's at home. Akiko has taught me how thin and how wide the space between two people can be.

"Yeah, everything's fine. What did your teacher do?"

"What?" Akiko finishes cramming the foam plugs into her ears. It's time for me to use my outside voice.

"What did your teacher do?"

"He talks too fast. I can't keep up with anything." Akiko gives me a kiss and heads into the kitchen. Today I'm wearing the green sweater. I had to wake up first to snag it before she could. Akiko is wearing a red sweater of her own instead. Her hair is still damp from the snow.

"You should record his lectures. We could get you one of those little tape recorders." We've talked about this a hundred times.

"Maybe I should." Akiko pulls two beers out of the fridge and sets them on the table. I head over to the microwave and pull out the chicken. Akiko opens her beer and

drinks it slowly while I fry up the meat. Our silence spreads throughout the house. I add some pepper and lemon salt to the chicken and I try not to make any sound as I pull out a pot and start it boiling for the vegetables. There's a million ways to apologize for what has happened but none of them seem right. I opt for the blunt truth.

"I lost my job." My words bounce off her bright orange earplugs.

"What?"

"I lost my job." Loud. In my outside voice. Akiko stares at me like I'm a young boy who dropped his ice cream. I pick up my beer and open it. Carbonation escapes with a popping hiss. She glances quickly at the bathroom door and then looks away. Bathroom sinks and earplugs.

"I hope the space under the bathroom sink was worth all this." She doesn't look at me while she speaks. She's angry, but doesn't want to be. "Once I got you to the hospital and I knew you were going to make it I came home to clean up the bathroom. It was filthy. After I was done cleaning I got under myself."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see what it was like under there. What could be so great about a dirty old cabinet? How could a worthless space keep you occupied for three days? I wanted to know if there was something worth finding under there, but all I felt was cramped muscles and boredom. What were you doing under there?"

I open my mouth, and then close it. I can't think of a way to express my answer. The smell of chicken fills the room. I stand up and pour some frozen peas into the boiling pot. Akiko continues speaking.

“The doctor says she thinks you were trying to return to the womb. She says it is actually quite normal, when stress builds up you try and find a place that reminds you of the time you were inside your mother because that was the easiest part of your life. I got pretty sad, I must admit, to think that you think life is so stressful that you have to try and go backwards.”

“I wasn’t trying to get away from you, I was looking for something. Anyway that womb stuff is silly.” Finally she looks up.

“Are you sad because of your Mom?” Akiko’s eyes are full of sympathy.

“Of course I’m sad about my Mom. Maybe that had something to do with why I got under there, but I wasn’t trying to make my way back to the womb.”

Well than what were you looking for?” Akiko is frustrated. Again I find myself at a loss for words. I stop the peas and turn the heat off on the chicken. Akiko goes to the cabinet and pulls out two plates just as the rice cooker beeps. This is our routine. This is how we tick the days off our calendar.

Once we’ve served ourselves we both start picking at the food on our plates. I have to try and explain my actions to Akiko. She deserves some kind of answer.

“Do you remember when you used to sit after school and stare at the baseball field?”

“Uh-huh.” Akiko’s cheeks flush red. She pops some rice into her mouth.

“I can’t even begin to tell you how much I respected that. I used to try and sit with you as often as I could because I wanted to somehow see it in the way that you did.”

“It was a ridiculous hobby and completely fruitless in the end.” Akiko sips at her beer.

“You were young, but I don’t necessarily think it was fruitless. You grew up surrounded by the neighborhoods offerings to the Gods. You were steeped in the history of Amaterasu and all the others, I think you wanted to verify that they were actually out there.”

“What does all this have to do with the sink?” Akiko has stopped eating. She’s nursing her beer and listening to me.

“I think that I went under the sink for a similar reason. The day I left my father’s house, when my mother’s relationship with Aunty Keiko was first discovered, I happened to crawl under the old granary we had in the old sheep pasture. The granary is built a foot off the ground in order to avoid moisture and rats. I must’ve seen something I wanted because I crawled into that small space.”

“Okay.”

“Well while I was under the granary I was suddenly overcome with a strange fear that I had somehow passed through a supernatural gate of some sort. It was a childish fantasy, but when I got out from under the granary I saw my mother with Aunty Keiko for the first time and before I knew it my mom was leaving my dad and we were off to Japan. Somehow I really came to believe that I had entered a gate and come out in a different world. When we first got to Japan I was obsessed with finding this gate again. Because it happened in a dark cramped place the first time, I figured those were the kind of places I needed to look for. For the first few years my mother would find me crammed in all sorts of strange places.”

“I’m having a hard time explaining this. The night I dropped you off at the airport I came home and did the laundry. I went into the bathroom to put away the towels and I

left the light off because I was just going to be in there for a second. While I was putting away the towels the door swung shut and I was suddenly immersed in total darkness. I was instantly overcome with a sense of nostalgia that was so strong it brought tears to my eyes. The funny thing was I couldn't pin-point what was making me so nostalgic. I didn't really recall my strange childhood obsession at that time. I reached up to turn on the lights, but decided to keep them off and enjoy the nostalgia a bit longer."

"While I was standing there I began to think about how the bathroom was arranged. I mapped out the entire room in my head, but without the light on I couldn't double check if my image was correct. This sparked the realization that the dark room that I was standing in could be any shape or size and I wouldn't realize it. For all I knew I might be standing in a huge chamber that stretched for miles in all directions. As illogical as that was, it terrified me so much that I had to put my hand on the counter to remind myself where I was, but even then I felt that the room was shifting and changing shape all around me. The constant movements of the room made my breath catch and I began to believe that somehow, in the middle of our silly little bathroom, my gate was opening. At first I sat on the toilet to wait and see if the gate would open, but that didn't feel right. That's when I crawled under the sink. I really had no choice. I knew that I had to be there when the gate opened." Akiko sits quietly through my monologue. Once I'm done she asks me the one question I was hoping she wouldn't.

"A gate to where?"

"I don't know." Akiko lets out an angry sigh and takes a drink. I continue on hoping to comfort her.

“It’s all over now, Akiko. I didn’t mean to worry you, and I promise I wasn’t trying to get away from you or leave you behind.” Her hand is resting lightly on the table. I reach over and put my hand on hers. Her bottom lip is pulled into a slight pout. She sits quietly for a moment and then pulls her hand out from under mine.

“Sometimes I think about my old fantasies and get nostalgic too. The difference, Jason, is that I don’t act on them. We have to grow up sometime.” Akiko looks down at her full plate. I can sense that she has more she wants to say, but she is biting it back. Outside a dog barks. One short yap. I can’t help but wonder if it’s the dog from this morning. Akiko leans back in her chair and continues.”Well, you can find another job and while you’re looking you can help clean up around the house.”

She can’t understand and there’s no way I can expect her to. I can’t even understand it myself. We both get up and take our dishes to the sink. After we’re finished cleaning up from dinner Akiko sits down to study. I sit down to read, but I can’t pay attention to the words on the page. The room seems intolerably cold, but the thermostat reads 75 degrees. I decide that a warm bath is exactly what I need. I can’t help but notice that Akiko glances at me as I walk into the bathroom.

The bathroom is cold so I kick on the space heater while I undress, trying to ignore the cabinet under the sink. I have to peel the Band-Aids off my bed sores. Each one feels like a knife wound. It’s a slow process, but I eventually get through it.

With the light on the bathroom is exactly what it has always been. It is stripped of all possibilities and presented in the most utilitarian form. This is where Akiko and I shed our filth. The toilet is nothing more than an entrance to the sewers, a long pipe filled with excrement and urine. Underneath the town, below the sidewalks and parks, a river of

human filth flows like the cavernous underworld described in the Shinto myths. The medicine cabinet holds pills and the space under the sink is for cleaning supplies.

Everything is as it should be, a bathroom, after all, should only be a bathroom.

The hot water lets off steam and fills the room with fog. I step into the tub and sit down. The warm water is heavenly, but it stings against my sores. Here in the fog the bathroom turns from a place of filth, to a perfect oasis of relaxation. At first Akiko and I were disgusted by the American tendency to put the bath and the toilet in the same room, but now that we've gotten used to it we rarely notice. The water covers my body with its tingling warmth inch by inch. I can't hear Akiko. I know that she's out in the front room studying, but she is so quiet I might as well be alone.

For the first time since I came out from under the sink I feel like myself again. I'm still confused by my time under the sink. Every aspect of the cave and the shrine felt so perfectly real, that no matter how hard I try to convince myself that it was some kind of hallucination; I just can't bring myself to believe it. When I was a child I believed that small spaces were gateways to other realms, and I still believe it now. That is the ridiculous truth of this whole affair. I'm not sure what I achieved under the sink, but I am content. If I hadn't have gone under when I was called, I would've regretted it. Now I can let time erode the memory. I lost my job over this thing, but I can find a new one, and Akiko and I will slowly fall back into our own domestic pattern until my time under the sink will seem like nothing but a grain of sand on the beach.

A light knock on the door pulls me from my reverie.

"Come in." I turn off the water.

Akiko opens the door and peeks in. Her hair spills over her shoulder.

“Do you mind if I join you?” She’s not wearing her earplugs anymore.

“Not at all.” I scoot back so that she has room.

Akiko comes in and undresses. Her body is familiar, from the smooth skin on her thin arms to the patch of black hair that grows on her pubis mound. We’ve given each other access to our most secret places, yet somehow she still seems mysterious to me. She has a certain presence that makes each movement of her body seem spiritual, as if the mere fact that her limbs have been imbued with movement is a miracle. Maybe everyone who is in love feels this way.

She puts one foot tentatively in the water. Once she realizes that the temperature is bearable she puts her other foot in, turns her back to me and sits down between my legs. The water rises dangerously close to the edge, but doesn’t spill over. Akiko leans back against me and rests her head on my chest. Her hair smells like snow. Her breasts float in the water and somehow a small pool of water has been caught in the space between her shoulder and her collar bone. Somehow, it seems like the clearest, cleanest water I’ve ever seen. Her neck rises like foothills beside the small lake on her shoulder. These are the shores where I hope to spend the rest of my life. I bend down and taste the water. Akiko grabs me behind the neck and pulls me in closer. I kiss her earlobe and wrap my arms around her chest. She turns her head to the side and looks up at me.

“I was really scared, Jason. I feel like you betrayed our union. Why would you go somewhere you knew I couldn’t follow?” Her eyes trace every part of my face, as if she were trying to memorize it.

“The truth is, Akiko, I never expected this to go as far as it did. I thought I would be under there for a few hours at the most. Somehow it spiraled into something I never expected. I’m sorry.”

“I can tell that you really are sorry, Jason and I’ve never known you to lie. I believe that you saw what you say you saw, which is all the more reason to stay away. Spaces like that aren’t always safe. Promise me that you won’t do anything like that again.” She looks at me with a stern expression and for just a moment I’m reminded of Aunty Keiko.

“I did everything I needed to do, Akiko. I promise I won’t do anything like this again.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay.” She rubs her fingers lightly over my cheek. I lean in and kiss her. She opens her mouth and my tongue explores the space within. I reach down between her legs and rub gently. She responds with a slight drawing in of breath. Her tongue finds mine and she turns her body so it is facing mine. The tub is cramped but I manage to slide down so that my body is flat and my head is propped on the back of the tub. Akiko straddles me and puts me inside. She leans forward and rocks her hips against mine.

We make love like we haven’t seen each other for months. We make love like two teenagers who only have a limited time. We are hungry for each other. We have mapped out every possible pleasure together and now we bring ourselves to a simultaneous climax. Akiko’s head is on my shoulder and she bites the skin on my neck while she comes. I let myself go, wave upon wave, starting at my fingertips and channeling into the space inside Akiko.

Afterwards we stand up and shower. Our love making is the ritual that sealed the promise I made. Now we can move on. Akiko dries off and heads to the bedroom. I follow her and we put on our pajamas. I'm tired. Akiko kisses me and tells me she has more homework. I lay down and she heads back out to the front room. When I was under the sink I was able to freeze time for just a moment, but now the current is rushing along as strong as ever and I am helpless to do anything but float.

An hour later I am somewhere between sleep and waking. I can hear Akiko finish her studies and pack her backpack. After she's got everything ready she opens the front door and heads outside. Her feet make crunching sounds in the snow. She's never done this before. I can hear her walking around out in the yard. After a few minutes she comes back in and shuts the door. Then she comes into the room, quickly undresses and crawls into bed. I cuddle up behind her. Her hands and feet are as cold as ice and I fall asleep as I'm thawing her out.

When I was young I almost drowned in the Uji River and I still have recurring dreams about it. As always, the dream begins with me frantically trying to get back to the surface of the water. I'm pushing my way through a perfect green world and I can't tell which way is up and which way is down. I try to swim in the direction that seems to be up, but I don't feel like I'm making any progress. I can't hold my breath any longer. I try to swim harder but the green slowly turns to black as I pass out.

The first thing I'm aware of, as the blackness recedes, is a small pin-point of light. At first the light seems to bob and weave, somehow evading my prying eyes, but eventually I'm able to center it in my vision. The harder I stare at it the more it seems to change. It is growing and changing shape. The circle expands out and forms corners until

it is a large square. The smell of incense is all around me. Perhaps I'm in a chamber under the sea breathing water and inhaling seaweed. A rustling sound on my right makes me think of kimono sleeves.

"He's awake." My mother's voice. She's right, I am awake, but why is mother under the river with me? The square of light finally comes into focus and I realize that it is the window in my bedroom. I haven't made it anywhere. I thought that my gateway was under the river, but I was wrong. Somehow Mother and Aunt Keiko found me and brought me home.

"Jason, can you hear me?" Aunt Keiko's voice from my left and the feel of her hand on my forehead. I'm not sure if she's just put it there or if it was there all along. The feeling comes slowly, like volume being turned up.

"Mommy?" My mother's arms wrap around me and lift me into her lap. Hot tears fall on my face with cold kisses and somehow I can't help but feel guilty for what I tried to leave behind. I reach up and scratch at my chest. Something is itching right over my heart. My hand comes into contact with two thin threads of matter sticking out of my chest. I roll one in my fingers. It is thin and bumpy, kind of like what I imagine a vein would feel like. I look down and sure enough, two vein looking red strings are coming out of my chest. The skin is puckered and pulled at each point of contact. I follow the threads with my eyes. One of them leads to my mother's chest, the other to Aunt Keiko's. They don't seem to notice they are there.

I wake up at about three in the morning. My forehead still tingles from Aunt Keiko's touch and I can feel the slight pressure of my mother's arms around me. Akiko is breathing lightly next to me. I roll over onto my side and put my arm around her sleeping

frame. I have a strong urge to call Aunty Keiko. It's about seven at night in Osaka, a perfect time to get a hold of her. She's probably lonely now that mother is gone.

Suddenly, there is a thud out in the living room. My whole body jolts at the noise and my breathing accelerates. Something must have fallen in the kitchen. I bury my face in Akiko's back and breath in deeply, calming myself from the scare. I'll have to check it out in the morning. Whatever it was it sounded plastic. Akiko's back is warm so I cuddle up as close as I can.

I'm just starting to fall back asleep when I'm startled by another noise from the front room. This time it is a small bell. It jingles lightly, like the little bells shrines put on their charms. My imagination explodes with possibilities. Akiko and I keep a Japanese wind chime above our door, maybe a stray breeze from the heater made it jingle. For some odd reason I suddenly remember the dark cramped space under the sink and the feel of a hand tensing on my shirt. I remember the weight of something on my chest and the feel of it breathing. At the time it seemed like some sort of strange dream, but here, in the dead of night, anything seems possible. Maybe we're not alone in the house.

All my muscles are tensed and my ears are straining for a repeat of the noise. It does not come again. I let out my breath slowly. The bell sounds again, this time closer to our bedroom door. This time the sound of the bell is followed by labored breathing. My mind eclipses with panic and a feeling of helplessness so intense that it seems I will never be able to move again.

My first instinct is to call out "who's there?", but I realize that will reveal our location to whatever is out there. The tinkling is like a summer bell, but the breath is ragged and forced. All thoughts of the sink are gone and I'm left with the real fear of

burglars and rapists. I have to protect Akiko. The only weapon I can think of is my cheap imitation katana, but that is in the closet. If I get up slowly I might be able to get it. I push myself up onto my elbows. The bed squeaks lightly.

As if triggered by this movement something begins crawling at us from the front room. It's definitely on all fours, but it is crawling much faster than normal. My thoughts return to the feeling of something sitting on top of me under the sink, water dripping off its bloated body. I imagine something dead and water-logged, bent and distorted, crawling at us like a spider on all fours. Before I realize it I'm standing on the bed letting out a yell. This is it. If I am going down I will go down fighting. Perhaps I can take it out with me. I can see the dark black shape just as it enters the room and jumps for the bed. I kick out with my foot and make contact with the darting shadow in front of me. I can feel its coarse hair and boney side with my bare foot as I propel it across the room. It hits the wall and slides to the floor with a large yelp.

Suddenly the lights are on and Akiko is running towards the black lump on the ground.

"Inu Inu!" She scoops the black thing into her arms and I realize that it is the stray dog that was out in the yard. My head is a supernova. Akiko turns to me with tears on her cheeks.

"Why did you hit Inu Inu?" She knows this dog.

"Where the hell did that thing come from?" Hot adrenaline.

"What are you talking about?" Akiko looks genuinely confused.

"Where did this dog come from?" Hot ions spreading further and further away.

“It’s our dog; you gave him to me for Christmas!” Akiko turns back to the dog and I walk out into the living room. Something is deadly wrong. On the floor by the table is a food and water bowl. I must have walked by them a hundred times today without even realizing they were there. That was why Akiko went outside before we went to bed she was letting the dog in. I let it out of the gate, so she probably had to go looking for him. I sit down on a kitchen chair and listen to Akiko trying to comfort the dog. I stare at the shiny bowls filled with food and water. These things were not here when I went under the sink.

4

~Leaving Traces~

Akiko and I believed in the dreams that were packaged and sold to us as we grew up. We believed in Hollywood's promise of eternal sunsets. Love would start as a pin prick then spread throughout our bodies until it engulfed everything. We believed in Mishima's promise of double suicides. Love would burn so strongly that we would give our lives. We believed in Hallmark's promise of forever. Love would sit with us on the porch as we grew old together. We believed in the continuous grandeur of our connection, and now we fight about water on the floor.

Akiko is angry about the dog. I can't give her a satisfactory explanation for what happened. There is no way she'd believe me if I told her that I'd never seen the dog before. It's as if my life was a record and it just skipped. The record keeps playing as if nothing was missed but I'm left wondering what I missed. All I can do is tell her that I was startled when she asks about the dog. Akiko refuses to forgive me. I hurt something she loved. Apparently we both loved it. I think deep down Akiko can sense that I have no relationship with this animal, in fact, I'm terrified of it, and it seems the feeling is mutual. It's been skulking around all morning avoiding me.

On top of all this we've found a large leak in the bathroom. It must be in the floor because a large puddle of water is seeping up through the tiles in front of the sink. I must have damaged something while I was down there. Yet again, I am faced with another problem I created when I climbed under the sink. Any dreams I had of moving on and forgetting about this are long gone. The water is cloudy and slimy to the touch. For some odd reason I'm reminded of the small puddle of water on Akiko's shoulder from the night before. I reach down and scoop up some of the water. It is clear in my palm but the

puddle has a dark green tint. The water and the dog have thrown our morning into small bickers and angry words.

Many shouts and one door slam later Akiko is at school and I'm here cleaning up the mess I've made. Once again I've managed to leave a trace of myself behind. I still can't follow Aunty Keiko's advice. When I was about to start junior high Aunty Keiko gave me her self proclaimed "best advice". She said if I followed it, I would have an easier time fitting in with my Japanese classmates.

Her advice was simple: never leave a trace of yourself behind. She held my shoulders in her hands while she told me. This wasn't all of it though. She continued on. This means more than just cleaning up after yourself. It encompasses everything. Never behave so wildly that you leave a trace of yourself in other people's minds. Never speak so loudly that you intrude on other people's thoughts. Never affect people too strongly. When you walk away from any situation make sure that the people you are leaving can transition smoothly to another topic without lingering on thoughts of you, or your behavior. If I did this, Aunty Keiko said, people would be less likely to say bad things about me.

Unfortunately, I could never really follow her advice. It seemed my foreign birth damned me from the beginning. Every stare on the train, every time somebody asked the person I was with if I could understand Japanese, every time someone squealed with amazement when I used chopsticks, reminded me of the impression I left on people. Keiko's advice was impossible for me to follow. I learned quickly that instead of fading

into the woodwork I had to explain myself. I had to tell every person I met that I was not a foreign exchange student, that I had lived in Japan most of my life.

I've found that the best thing to do in a situation like this is clean up. If I take things in small steps, clean up every mess, fix every problem as it arises, I'll be able to force my life back onto a normal path. I've got nothing to lose; I think we've hit the absolute limit on strangeness. Things will have to return to normal sometime. I pull out our phonebook and flip to the yellow pages. There are three plumbers in town. I choose the first one and pick up the phone to dial. Just before I push the first number I'm startled by a loud knock. I'm stuck for a moment, staring out the window into my snowy yard and wondering who could be visiting. I put the phone down and open the front door. No one is there. The snow catches the sun and tosses it back into my face. The yard smells of snow and wood burning stoves. I poke my head out and look around. Everything is silent. I'm just about to give up when the knocking comes again, this time from inside the house. I spin around, wondering how the knocker got past me. The room is empty. Inu Inu is standing up and sniffing the air. For the second time in a 24 hour period I feel like I'm not alone.

I stand silently waiting for the noise to repeat. A few seconds later I hear it again, a light tapping, as if something were trying to get my attention. I follow the sound to its source. At first it sounds like it's coming from the bathroom, but a thorough search reveals nothing. After another knock I'm convinced that the sound is coming from the bedroom, but there is nothing in that room either. Finally I pinpoint the knocking. It is coming from inside the wall that separates the bathroom from our bedroom. Thin particle

board nailed to studs creating a box around empty spaces. This house is nothing more than spaces inside spaces, getting infinitely smaller.

Our bed is pushed into the corner so I climb up and put my ear to the wall. Outside fluffy snowflakes float silently down to the ground, messengers warning of the storm to come. I hear a sound, like something rubbing lightly on the inside of the wall. There must be a rat or something in there. I tap lightly on the wall three times with my knuckles and then start climbing off the bed. I'm going to have to get some traps from the store. Before I can get off the bed three small taps are returned from inside the wall. I stop mid motion. Rats don't tap. I climb back on the bed and tap twice rapidly on the wall. I pause for a moment, and tap once more. I listen to my breathing until the tapping is returned in the exact same pattern. I begin to tap another pattern on the wall when the phone rings. I jump and let out a yelp. I can hear Inu Inu stand up and wag his tail. I get off the bed and head towards the phone.

"Hello." I'm out of breath from the scare.

"Is everything okay? What took you so long to answer?" Akiko is speaking loudly; I can hear loud voices in the background. She must be using the phone in the student union.

"Everything is fine. I was just cleaning up the mess in the bathroom." I want to tell her something intelligent is living inside the wall.

"Did you call the plumber?" Akiko's still angry.

"I was going to when I finished cleaning up."

“Don’t clean it up; he might want to see it.”

“You’re right, I’ll call him now.” No sound comes from the wall.

“Did you get that old picture of us ready to send to Keiko?” I have no idea what she’s talking about.

“What picture?”

“I’ve told you twice. Keiko called and asked for the picture of you and me in front of Sumiyoshi Shrine. Send her the one where I’m not wearing my school uniform.” I know exactly which one she’s talking about.

“I’ll get it.”

“I gotta go. My next class is starting soon.”

“I love you.” I love her.

“Gotta run.” She’s gone.

I hang up the phone and silence falls like a wet blanket over the house. Whatever was knocking has stopped. Inu Inu heads over to his water bowl and takes a couple of noisy drinks. I feel like I’m standing at the edge of a cliff, one misstep and I will fall. I turn away from the wall and dial the plumber. A few minutes later and I have an appointment. He will be here sometime between 10:00 and 4:00, which means no job-hunting today. I walk back into our room and stare at the wall. The knocking is gone. Behind me is our walk-in closet and deep in the back is a box of old photographs. I want to knock on the wall. I want to pull it apart and see what lies inside, but I turn and get the

box of pictures. I can't imagine what Akiko would do if she came home and one of our walls was torn down.

I have to dig through all of the recent pictures to get to the one Aunt Keiko wants. It's like flipping quickly back through time. Underneath the stack of our wedding pictures is the only evidence of the life Akiko and I shared before we were married. The photo is a little over-exposed. The colors bleed unnaturally into each other, but none of this matters to me. Akiko is stunning. Her hair is down and she's grinning unabashedly. She's throwing a peace sign with one arm and the other hangs at her side. I'm beside her all lanky arms and futile dreams. Sumiyoshi shrine is behind us. Ropes and folded paper are tied around the trees and hanging from the big red gate that marks the entrance to the shrine. Sumiyoshi shrine is the reason Akiko and I met. I take a few moments to replay the memory in my head.

Aunt Keiko and I are walking into the shrine and I notice, as I always have, the rope and paper streamers tied to the trees. Although I've been here a thousand times I've never thought to ask Aunt Keiko about them. At first they were just another strange part of my new home, but now they are a natural part of my world.

Sumiyoshi shrine is a small shrine, mainly for neighborhood use, about five blocks from our house. It is run by a priestess and her adopted daughter. The priestess comes to our house once a month to pray at our ancestral shrine. Aunt Keiko tells me that our ancestors love to hear the sound of chanting in the other world, and that is why

the priestess comes to our house. During these visits my mother always moves her futon out of Auntie Keiko's room hoping to quiet the rumors that are already spreading.

Auntie Keiko and I are on our way home from shopping, so I pray quickly, asking that my first year in junior high will go smoothly. It's Saturday, and mother is home with a student. Auntie Keiko took me shopping so that we would be out of the way.

As Auntie Keiko prays I stand and stare at a roped off square in the middle of the shrine grounds. The square is mapped out with four stakes. Each stake has a sprig of *Sakaki* tied to it. A rope extends all the way around the square and small strips of paper, cut in a lightning bolt shape hang from the middle of the rope on each side of the square.

Keiko finishes her prayer, claps her hands three times, and bows to the god enshrined within the main building. Once she's finished she takes out a 100 yen coin and throws it into the offering box. I'm still enamored with the roped off square when she comes up beside me.

"It looks like they're getting ready for a dance, probably *bugaku*. This square is where they will build the stage. Keiko adjusts the strap of the purse hanging from her arm.

"What do the ropes and paper mean?" Auntie Keiko smiles at my question, proud that I'm asking about something that she considers hers.

"It's a Shinto way to purify something. The rope and paper sets it aside as sacred, and then the priestess performs a ritual that purifies the area. This area in front of you is now completely pure and sacred. You can think of the rope as a line separating the sacred world from the mundane." I stare into the space marked off by the flimsy barrier and

imagine that the priestess will disappear when she walks into the world that she has purified and created.

“This area is pure; it isn’t affected by the outside world.” I say this out loud while reaching for the area with my hand, knowing that when I touch the inside of the square my hand will disappear. Aunty Keiko grabs the arm of my shirt before I get too close.

“Regular people can’t touch this, we’ll get it dirty.” I put my hand in my pocket.

Later that night I’m lying in bed. Aunty Keiko and my mother have finally fallen asleep. I’ve been awake for the past hour listening to the quiet drone of their voices, but now it is quiet and I am ready to go. I stand up, leaving the warmth of my futon behind, and tip-toe slowly towards the stairs. I walk as quietly as possible, so that I won’t disturb the two of them wrapped quietly in each other’s arms in the room just below mine. Ground that I usually cover in seconds now takes minutes.

Finally I’m in the kitchen. I unlock the back door and open it. Then I am out, walking fast into the open. I hold back a shiver and break into a run.

I bow quickly at the gate before entering the shrine grounds. The square is up ahead of me. The bright white paper beckons me forward. I follow its call until I’m right in front of the square. I reach out and lightly caress the perfect white paper. This time there is no Aunty Keiko to stop me. All this time I’ve been jumping into rivers and crawling into cramped places trying to find the world that is now right in front of me, a world that only the priestess of a shrine can make. I wish I had known about these spaces earlier.

I close my eyes and step over the rope. A light tingling sensation starts at me toes and moves over my entire body. I've disappeared into another world. I know that I am no longer visible to the outside world, but I'm also afraid to open my eyes and experience this new, sacred world directly. I seal my eyes shut.

My eyes are closed, but I can see the Gods clearly. They are large black shapes moving all around me in a gray world. All of them are looking at me, bringing their large faces close to mine. One God has a dark face and folded paper for hair. Somehow, I feel like I've seen him before. He performs a small dance shaking his head so that his paper hair rattles. I have broken their boundary, and now I must wait for their reactions.

The Gods speak in many voices. The wind through the bamboo, like the sound of clicking mahjong tiles, crickets in the trees, cars in the distance, even the sound of a door opening nearby and the scraping of shoes on gravel.

“Hey!”

A female.

“No enter!”

Speaking broken English.

“No trespass!”

The Paper-Haired God turns away from me with one last shake of his head.

My eyes open and I’m staring at the same world I left. The Gods are no longer near me. I’m staring at a girl about my age.

“No human ...here.” She points to the square as she tells me this. I’m still under the spell of the God. I stare at her, confused. Her hair is in two thick braids and her mouth is turned down in an angry pout. I can’t decide if she is another God, or just a girl. She stares at me for a moment, then reaches into the square and pulls on my sleeve, motioning me out of the square. The moment her hand touches me the spell is broken. I step out of the sacred square and begin bowing and apologizing.

“This is... no enter place.”

“I can understand Japanese.” I tell her in Japanese so she will stop speaking to me in a language that is only for my mother.

“What are you doing here?” She asks, obviously relieved to be speaking her own language.

“I didn’t think anybody would see me. I’m sorry.” I bow again, hoping to express my regret. She does not bow back.

“This is where we will build a stage, so please do not touch it.” I turn my eyes away from her, unable to endure her angry gaze, then look back again, unable to stop myself from staring. I’d never been this close to her before. I had seen her a few times before, walking around the shrine grounds in her red *hakama* and white kimono. Once Auntie Keiko pointed her out and told me that she was a *miko*, the prayer maiden of this shrine. After a long stern look the anger finally melts from her face.

“You’re shivering. Come up to the shrine and I’ll give you a cup of tea. You live with Yokota Keiko right, you and your mother?”

“Yes, my name is Jason, pleased to meet you.” I bow again.

“I’m Kida Akiko, nice to meet you.” She returns my bow happily this time and ushers me up the shrine steps.

“I’ve never been in a shrine before.” She watches me look around in awe.

“I’ll be right back with some tea. Please be as quiet as you can, my mother is asleep.” She gets up and leaves me alone in the room. An image of the Paper-Haired God floats in front of my eyes. Akiko’s face floats right behind it. The objects enshrined in the room sit on a few large terraced steps. At the very top is a mirror, the symbol of *Amatarasu*, the sun goddess and the most sacred object in Shinto mythology. I stand up and try to look in the mirror, but it is up too high. When I was young and we lived in America my father took me to church every Sunday. At the far end of the building, behind the preacher a huge wooden cross hung with the bloody body of Christ. I used to stare up at his poor mangled body while the preacher droned on. It always seemed such a sad thing to worship.

If I were to stand on the first tier of the shrine and look deep into the sacred object of worship here, I would see nothing but myself staring back. I'm trying to find a good place to step up when Akiko returns with the tea. She motions me over to a small table about a foot and a half off the floor. I sit down across from her and rub my hands lightly over the *tatami* floor.

Akiko pours tea into both of our cups and passes mine to me. I pick it up and let the warmth infuse my hands. Akiko is looking around nervously and I'm suddenly filled with dread. I seem to be in a battle of wills with the oppressive silence falling around us, and I'm losing.

"You've caused a lot of work for us, you know." Akiko looks at me over the rim of her cup after she speaks.

"What do you mean?"

"You have polluted a sacred area. Tomorrow my mother and I will have to do the purification ceremony over again."

"I'm so sorry. Do you think your mother will be mad?"

"Of course! But I'll put in a few good words for you." She flashes a smile. Outside the wind blows and rattles the bamboo leaves. Akiko's smile fades and her eyebrows knit in concentration.

"Can I ask you a strange question?" She waits for my response.

"Sure."

“When you were in the sacred area, did you notice anything? I’ve worked in sacred areas my entire life, and I’ve always felt that something... different from our world inhabits purified spaces. It’s kind of hard to explain. When we perform the rituals we ask the gods to purify the space, but I also think that we invite the Gods in. That they enjoy inhabiting the space we create. My mother really disagrees with this, but I think the Gods like to be near us. So when you stepped inside, did you feel anything?”

“I don’t know...” I want to tell her what I felt, but suddenly I’m not so certain I really experienced anything at all.

“I’ve never gone inside without a purification ritual, I was really curious if the Gods were angry at you.” Her words trail off into silence. I’m trying to formulate my response, but I find it impossible to put my experience into words.

“I have to be honest, I was a little afraid so I kept my eyes closed. I felt that there might have been something there, but I couldn’t tell.” I take a drink of my tea then stare deep into the cup, trying to keep my eyes anywhere other than on Akiko.

“Maybe it’s just wishful thinking.” She takes a sip of her tea and stares at the shrine. After a moment she continues. “I don’t know why you went into the sacred space, but I’m glad you came tonight. My mother always tells me that everything happens for a reason, and I think we were supposed to meet tonight.” Her words make me think of the Paper-Haired God again.

“I’m glad we met also.” I stand up and bow to her again, unable to think of what else to do with the energy that is now flowing through my body. She giggles, stands up and returns my bow.

“I’m going to be performing in the dances, will you come see them?” She closes her eyes for a moment and a smile plays across her lips. I can tell that she is trying to suppress a nervous laugh.

“Sure, that sounds great. I’ll see you then.” I turn and follow her to the door. She opens it and I step outside. Before leaving I turn and bow a final time. She’s about to shut the door when I muster all my courage to speak.

“I don’t think it’s wishful thinking at all. Something does inhabit that space, I felt it.” I turn before she can react and retrace every step I’d taken back to my house.

This memory only takes a few seconds to flash through my mind. I close the box of photographs and put it back in the closet. I take the picture of Akiko and me and leave it on the table. When Akiko chose to marry me she had to give up her position in the shrine. I thought she would be devastated, but she went the other direction. Every aspect of her early life is gone. She no longer seems to think about, or even care about the Gods. I was the one that set up the small shrine in our house and I’m the one that lights incense. Somehow Akiko and I left those clumsy children behind. I wonder what they would think of us now.

The plumber shows up at 3:50, but he can’t tell me anything. He can’t find the leak; someone must have spilled the water on the floor, he says. I tell him that it’s impossible; neither of us spilled any water on the floor. He shrugs and packs up his stuff. I pull out a few towels and start to sop up the mess.

Where did the slimy water come from? If there’s no leak then it must have come from somewhere other than the pipes. Once I’ve sopped up all the water I throw the wet

towels in the washer and head into the bedroom. I climb up on the bed and place my hand on the wall where the knocking came from. I rub my palm up and down along the surface. I expect the wall to feel cold and dry, but it is moist and a little soggy. I pull my hand away and notice beads of moisture welling up from where I rubbed. Maybe the leak is coming from inside the wall, but what was knocking? If it is a broken pipe, maybe it's hitting the wall, but that doesn't explain why the knocking repeated the exact same pattern I tapped out.

The phone rings. It's Akiko.

"It's cold today. Do you mind coming to get me?" On really cold days I usually pick her up with the car. The normally short walk can seem absolutely monstrous when the weather is bad.

"You bet. Do you want me to wait in front of the union?"

"That's fine, I'll see you soon."

"See you soon."

The thought of leaving the house is really good. I grab my coat and head for the door. The farther I'm away from the wall the better. On my way out I stop and hold out my hand to Inu Inu. He puts his tail between his legs and crawls towards me. I pat him on the head lightly and apologize to him. If we are going to live together we might as well be friends.

About fifteen minutes later I'm in front of the student union. Akiko sees me through the windows. She runs through the snow and jumps into the car. She is covered

in a white dust that sparkles in the sun. I can't help but think of *Yuki Onna*, a fairy tale I grew up with. In the story a man and his father are attacked by a snow demon, a woman that is simultaneously terrifying and beautiful. The demon kills the father, but spares the man. She tells him that if he ever speaks of her she'll come back and kill him. A few months later the man is back in his small town and he meets a young girl. They fall in love and get married. Ten years later he is the happy head of a big family. One night he decides to tell his wife about his experience with the snow demon. In a rage, his wife stands up and explains that she is the snow demon and now she has to kill him. In the end she spares him, but she leaves him with the children and returns to her own world. For some odd reason, this was my favorite story when I was a child. My mother would read it to me over and over again, but I could never get enough. I can still remember the last picture. The man standing in the door of his house, his children crying all around him and nothing but an empty blizzard glaring back at him, the love of his life is gone. I can't help but wonder if this is how my father felt when we left. Akiko puts her seatbelt on, leans back and lets out a long sigh.

“What's wrong?”

“This class is going way too fast. He gives us really hard questions, but not enough time to do them.” Akiko looks haggard, but she doesn't seem as mad as she did this morning. I feel like the husband in the fairytale. Something strange has happened, but I can't tell Akiko.

“Maybe this isn't the right major for you. I'm telling you, you should major in dance, or theatre.” We've talked about this a thousand times.

“I don’t want to do that anymore, it’s a dead end. I want to do something that we can survive on.” Akiko wants to fill in the areas where I lack.

“I’m just afraid you’re going to fall too far behind.”

“I just need to study harder.” Akiko’s answer for every problem. She’s a fighter. Even though English is her second language, even though she does not have a natural disposition for science, she puts all of her time and energy into this engineering degree.

The rest of our drive home is quiet. The snow is a foot thick insulation between us and the rest of the world. The light small flakes of snow on Akiko slowly melt and fill the air with moisture.

As soon as we get home, Akiko stuffs her earplugs in and sits down to study. I tinker around under the sink and try to figure out where the water could have come from. After a while Akiko is behind me.

“Let’s go back home, back to Japan.” She’s opening a conversation that I always shut hard.

“We’ve talked about this.”

“I know, but I think it’s the right thing.”

“And where would we stay? I know we could both stay at Keiko’s house, but your mother wouldn’t really like that, would she? A little bit of trouble for her if you stay in a house with your foreign husband and his crazy lesbian adopted mother.”

“I would stay with my mother and you could stay with Keiko.” To her credit, Akiko looks ashamed.

“We’re married!”

“You’re still *soto* to my mother; you’re still part of the ... outside. Maybe that can change.”

“How will it ever change if we separate? How will it change if you always go to see your mother without me?”

“I was supposed to take over the shrine, Jason.”

“We offered to take over the shrine!”

“A foreigner can’t run a Shinto shrine.”

“I’m not a foreigner, I grew up in Takarazuka! It’s just as much mine as it is yours.” Every response is memorized. It’s like a play.

“You can’t understand.”

“I will not go back to Japan! Your Mother hates me. She hates me, she hates Auntie Keiko, and she hated my Mother, and I’ll be honest with you, the feeling is mutual!” I say this much louder than I wanted to. Akiko is walking away, and I’m following her. Tonight she will lie on the bed and cry. I will sit in the front room and try to push everything down. When she is no longer mad at me she’ll call me in and we’ll make up.

“I will not go back just to be Akiko’s biggest mistake.” My words follow Akiko as she runs into the room and flops on the bed, her tears already flowing. The end, curtain. I’m out of the room and the house before she has time to really start crying. If you peel away the skin and muscle of our marriage this argument is the skeleton that lies below. There is no compromise possible in this situation. The Japan question is a poison that is slowly rotting away the guts of our union.

I walk down the sidewalk towards the campus. The mountains surround our valley on all sides making it impossible to get a clear view of the horizon. My fists are clenched and I’m grinding my teeth. I try to force myself to relax.

When I was young, we used to play musical chairs in my grandmother’s front room, usually during family reunions or holidays. I was always out first, so I would sit and watch the circle of chairs diminish until it was just two people walking around one chair. The music would stop and one would always end up sitting on the other.

Akiko and I are playing the same game now. Every round of the game the circle gets smaller and there are fewer places to sit. When we first came to America, we would have this fight once every six months. Now we’re down to about every three weeks. We are the last two people walking around one issue, and in the end someone will be left without a place.

The sky closes in here; it’s nothing like Japan’s sky. Nothing here is like Japan, but it’s easier for me. People see me and think I’m one of them. My hair and skin is the same as theirs. It’s not until I start talking that people notice the strange nuances in my English. Akiko can never pass. She is different, so everyone ignores her. If she has to pair

up with someone in a class, it's always the other foreigner in the room, or whoever is left after all the other options have been taken. It's not that people hate her, they don't understand her. They're afraid they won't be able to understand her English, so they just ignore her.

I do understand, and deep down I long to see Akiko back under the large open sky. I want her to smell the ocean in every breath. I long to sleep next to her on *tatami*, and together we could pray for help at a shrine. I want to give her all of these things but it is impossible. When Akiko is in Japan she gravitates towards her Mother and there is no place for me in-between the two of them. Her mother can't accept me, and Akiko doesn't want to hurt her mother any more than she already has. I turn back and head home.

When I get back, Akiko has fallen asleep. I wash the few dishes we've left and see to my bedsores. They are finally starting to heal. I let Inu Inu in and go to bed. Akiko rolls close to me in her sleep.

There's a place that Akiko and I sometimes share. A small square roped off from the rest of the world. We're sitting *seiza*, with our hands in our lap. America, Japan, water on the floor, Shrines, mothers, all of these are unimportant. Everything is pure. The real world leaves no traces.

I smile in the dark.

5

~Boy~

I'm dreaming that I'm back in the cave under the sink, but this time I can see everything clearly. I'm in a cavernous chamber under the earth on an island in the middle of a subterranean ocean. My feet sink into the wet sand and the waves lap at my ankles. A tall mountain stands in the center of the island and halfway up I can see a huge shrine complex. The doors of the main shrine are thrown open and a bright white light shines from within. This seems to be the origin of all light inside the cave. Halfway down the stairs I notice a small figure. He is slowly descending the stairs carrying what looks like a body covered in thick cloth. The stairs are covered every few yards by a huge stone gate. I watch for an eternity as the figure gets closer. He is wearing a white mask with an elongated snout and his hair is made of paper.

I try to move forward, but my feet are buried in the sand.

Once again I
find myself in
front of the
Paper Haired
God and he is
giving council

1. In order to
clear the way he
had to brave the
depths, and
there he was
confronted with
the not me.

2. Each drip
from the ceiling
accelerates the
destruction of
everything.

3. The spreading
waters teem
with new life.

4. Every gate is
open.

5. Every gate is
a guillotine.

6. It's always
clear down here.

Yellow always
gives way to
brown and me
always gives
way to I

Two by two by
two

Mastication.

After each line
the God shakes
his head ruffling
the lightning
bolt shaped hair.
A *sakaki* tree
grows from his
scalp.

As he speaks the water begins to rise. Soon it is up to my chest, but I can't break free from the sand. I'm in a panic, but the God doesn't seem to notice, he keeps speaking. The water is under my chin and I still can't get free. I start thrashing my body, hoping to break away.

I wake in a puddle. The blanket around me is soaked. The indentation my head makes in the pillow is filled with water. For a moment I'm afraid that I'm still caught in my dream. My eyes pop open. I'm in my room, but something is wrong.

A large yellow stain has spread up the wall and out about a foot onto the ceiling. Large drops of water fall ceaselessly onto the bed. The room smells damp and wet, a smell I associate with Japan. I reach out and place my palm flat on the wall. With a small amount of pressure I could probably push through the soggy particle board. I can feel a slight pressure, just below my palm, as if I'm touching something inside the wall through the wet particle board. Just as I'm about to remove my palm I feel the pressure increase. It seems that whatever I'm touching is pushing back.

I quickly drop my hand and shake Akiko's shoulder just as Inu Inu runs into the room to see what is going on. He barks once then sniffs around the foot of our bed. Akiko sits up and wipes her eyes. Aside from some dampness she is completely dry. The leak is dripping exclusively on my side of the bed.

"What's wrong?" Akiko stares at me, annoyed that I startled her awake. She quickly takes in my wet hair and the water on the bed. I follow her eyes as they travel up the wall and onto the ceiling. For a split second I think Akiko is going to giggle, but her expression is just the first step towards a frown.

Within ten minutes Akiko has contacted the plumber and the landlord and they are both on their way. I'm sure they're going to have to break down part of the wall in order to locate the source of the leak. I'm interested to see what they find.

Akiko and I are sitting on the floor and staring at the wall. We've just finished moving the bed, so we are out of breath. The light yellow stain starts at the floorboard and spreads all the way up to the ceiling. The area that was next to the head of the bed is dark brown. We've decided this is the main source of the leak.

Akiko is still in her nightgown and her hair is sticking up in the back. Although she is upset about the leak, she isn't in a bad mood.

"I wonder if this is connected to the leak in the bathroom." Akiko leans back against the dresser. What she is really asking is if I think this leak is somehow connected to my time under the sink.

"It probably is." The Paper-Haired God isn't done with me yet.

We listen quietly to the sound of cars passing outside the window and stare at the stain. Somehow I can't shake the feeling that I'm missing something.

"It looks like a little kid." Akiko brings her knees up to her chest and wraps her arms around them.

"How so?"

"It really does, look." Akiko stands up and walks over to the stain. She points to different parts of the darker stain as she speaks.

"This is his head, here's his arms, and these are his legs." After she has described it for me the shape appears clearly. Once it is revealed it seems uncanny.

“Come over here.” Akiko comes back and sits down. Her face betrays a small bit of irrational fear. I continue speaking hoping to dispel it.

“You’re right, it really looks like a little boy.” We both stare at the wall silently. Akiko opens the dresser drawer behind her and pulls out a handkerchief to wipe away the beads of moisture that have formed on her forehead. The room is incredibly damp. A wave of nostalgia rolls over me. Although I feel its effects I have no idea where it is coming from or what it represents. The shape seems somehow familiar.

“I think this is all my fault.” My words sound weak in the damp air.

“You think you somehow messed with the plumbing under the sink?”

“No, I think it may be worse than that.” I can’t figure out how to tell Akiko what it is I’m thinking. I can still feel the weight of the thing on top of me under the sink. I can still feel a small hand curled up on my chest.

“What do you mean?”

“I think that I might have... thrown something off balance under there. That was not a space made for human habitation and I think I might have discovered something a little more than a sink under there.” It seems that when I traveled from world A to world B I brought some baggage with me.

“You’re being ridiculous. Tell me what you think you found.” Akiko is getting angry and I can’t blame her. Unfortunately, I’m not really sure I want to commit enough to what I’m thinking to speak it out loud.

“I can’t say for sure, but one thing I know is that we can’t live like this anymore. I started something under the sink and I think I need to go back under there in order to finish it. There is a place under there that I need to get back to, then maybe all of these strange events will stop.”

Akiko stands up and stares down at me. Her lips are pressed together so hard they are turning white.

“I’m sorry, Akiko.”

“I gotta go. My first class is starting soon.” She storms out of the house.

Once she’s gone I allow my speculation free reign. I stare into the wall, past the drywall, through the dark brown layers of stain and into the eyes of the child in front of me. He stares back, his eyes pleading for release. The rules of world A do not apply in world B. I’ve brought something back with me, that much is sure, the question is, what did I bring?

I’m being watched. This certainty spreads throughout my entire body. Here, now, at this moment, in a small town on top of a mountain in Wyoming, in my small apartment, in my room, I am in the presence of something I can’t understand. The house creaks, the heater kicks on. This thing behind the wall is breathing through my house, turning the mundane sounds of my existence into a chant that says “you brought something with you” over and over again.

I crawl towards the stain. Whatever this thing is it seems to be trapped behind this wall. It’s power blocked by soggy drywall and cheap paint. What have I done? I get closer and closer to the wall, with every move I’m expecting some sort of noise, a loud thud or a scream, but nothing comes. My face is right in front of the stain. I turn my head and put my ear against the soggy wall. I can feel the dampness against my ear, but at first no sound comes. I try not to move and focus all my energy on listening. I imagine my body as one great ear, open only to waves of sound and suddenly I can hear it, a quiet whimpering, as if something small is in pain.

My first thought is a dog or a cat. My last is a child, and with that thought I get up and walk out of the room, fear coursing through my veins.

I make a cup of oolong tea and try to calm down. Outside the room the thing's presence is less distinct. Inu Inu goes out twice and finally the plumber shows up, with the landlord right behind him. The plumber says hello as the landlord fumes beside him. His anger is understandable; the house has sustained a substantial amount of damage. I show them both in to the room. The plumber goes immediately towards the stain while the landlord looks around at all of our things. His anger rises off of him like a radiator. He still hasn't spoken one word to me.

“This wall has to come down, it's soaked.” The plumber looks to the landlord.

“Try to save as much of the wall as possible.”

The plumber feels his way to the darkest part of the stain and pushes his hand through, right between the boy's eyes, I half expect his hand to come out covered in offal. With one quick pull the plumber yanks down most of the stain. A cool wind blows past me carrying the salty scent of the sea. The wall folds over like torn skin and reveals the space within my home that is the most hidden. Water pipes and electrical wires run like veins across wooden bones. The wall is empty, no monster, no child, nothing.

The stink of stagnant water hits us and we all cover our faces.

“My god, I've never seen anything like this.” The plumber speaks from behind his hand. The landlord is scowling. Everything inside the wall, the pipes, the studs, the electrical wires, are all covered with some kind of white powder. Perhaps the snow has made its way to the core of the house?

“What is it?” The landlord gets a little closer.

“It looks like some kind of crust.” The plumber breaks off a bit and puts it in his mouth. The landlord and I both cringe.

“It’s salt!” The plumber runs his hand down one of the exposed pipes and licks his fingers. “This is salt water.”

“Is that normal?” I can’t think of any reason for a house pipe to carry salt water.

“I have no idea, but it’s not coming from any of these pipes. I can’t see any leak. The drips are spread out evenly on all the pipes in the leak zone, which means they’re most likely coming from the air, but if that were the case the whole house would be affected.” He continues to look further back in the wall. The landlord peeks from behind him.

“There has to be some kind of explanation.”

“If there is I don’t have it. I’ve never seen anything like this.” The plumber turns away from the wall and starts to put away his tools.

“Could the tenants have done this?” The landlord is begging now.

“I don’t think so. The moisture all came from inside the wall. If they were wetting the wall then it would have been dry inside.” The landlord doesn’t look convinced. The plumber takes off his hat and wipes his forehead.

“I can feel the moisture in the room now! We’re going to have to let this dry out. I wouldn’t sleep in here if I was you, and you should probably get all of your things out of this room.” He picks up his toolbox and heads for the door. “I’ll be back in a few days once it’s dried out.” We all follow the plumber outside. The landlord watches the plumber get into his truck and then turns on me.

“I want you out of this house. I’m not sure what you and your wife are doing in there, but I can’t afford to have my house ruined. Pack your things and be out of here. You have three days.” Before waiting for my response he turns and heads to his car, leaving me to turn around and go back into a house that is no longer mine.

The back room is still damp. I start carrying our stuff out into the front room. I don't know how I'm going to tell Akiko that we lost the house. Everything is falling apart in world B. I wonder how things are going in world A? Are Akiko and I sitting comfortably on the couch watching movies and drinking beer? Has the snow melted?

About the time I've finished clearing out the back room Akiko comes in the front door. She throws her backpack on the couch and heads for the fridge. Her backpack is stuffed fuller than I've ever seen. She pulls a beer out of the fridge and heads into the back room to look at the wall. I grab a beer for myself and head in after her.

"What is this stuff?" Akiko is poking at the salty crust on the pipes.

"Salt."

"Did they find the leak?"

"There is no leak."

"How would salt water get into our walls?" Akiko rubs the salt between her fingers.

"The landlord is evicting us."

"When?"

"Three days from now."

Akiko lets out a long sigh. She's beautiful, standing in front of our gaping wall with the innards of the house revealed all ugly and industrial. I've made a huge mistake, I never should've gotten under the sink. What else will it cost me?

"If I get back under the sink tomorrow I should be able to fix everything by the time we have to leave."

Akiko flashes me a smile, but her eyes are dark. She chugs down her beer and heads into the kitchen. She pulls open the fridge and pulls out the last four beers.

“Pick some music.” She locks the front door and lowers the shades. I look around through the piles of stuff until I find our old boom box. A few minutes later I’ve found a CD. The music starts as Akiko lays out a blanket and pulls me down on top of her. Her eyes are wide open, but something seems blocked.

“Akiko, I’m really sorry about this. I know it seems stupid to you, but I have to go back under so I can make everything right again. I want us to…”

“Shhh,” she puts her finger to my lips, “let’s not talk about it. I want to have fun tonight.”

I lean in and kiss her. Our mouths hold a secret, a memory coated in saliva that we pass back and forth between our tongues.

Akiko is standing by the gate of the shrine waiting for me to arrive. The sun blazes in the sky and the moisture coats my body like a sticky cocoon. Akiko is wearing her school uniform even though it’s Sunday, a habit she has picked up recently to avoid having to wear her shrine maiden clothes. She leans forward onto her toes, then back on her heels. This impatient process makes her body rock slightly. I call out her name and wave. She quickly walks towards me.

“What’s wrong?” Her phone call seemed urgent.

“I want to show you something.” She leads me onto the shrine grounds and stops in front of the huge Linden tree that takes up one corner of the property. The cicada’s cry seems so loud here that I’m afraid we will have to scream in order to hear each other.

“This tree is dead.” Akiko looks up as she speaks. I follow her gaze. The tree raises its bony fingers high into the sky, the bark is bleached white from the sun and not one leaf is growing anywhere on the tree. Akiko continues on beside me. “This tree was here before the shrine and is one of our most sacred objects. In order for it to keep standing my mother is going

to have it filled in with cement. If we don't do anything it will collapse." This seems normal to me. Many shrines do this to old trees, but Akiko seems unhappy.

"I'm sorry."

"Please go inside." Akiko motions towards the thin opening at the bottom of the hollow trunk. Immediately my mind is filled with all the different holes and small spaces I've crawled into. This thought is followed directly by an image of Aunt Keiko's face filled with worry and sadness. For the first time I find myself afraid to go into a small dark space, but one look into Akiko's soft eyes and I find myself crouching to enter the hollow. I look up at Akiko just before I go in. She is looking down at the ground. Something important is about to happen.

The opening is incredibly thin and long, so I must push my way in sideways. The old wood rips at the flesh of my arms leaving pink scrapes and scratches. After a moment of awkward maneuvering I find myself seated within the small hollow. I'm just able to sit cross-legged with my back curved into the shape of the old tree.

It's much cooler inside. After a moment my eyes adjust to the darkness and the space around me is revealed. The walls are covered in small scratches. Upon closer inspection I realize they are drawings carved into the wood by a childish hand. I crane my neck to see how far they stretch around and realize the entire hollow is covered. Even though they are drawn by a young hand I can tell that the drawings are a visual rendition of the creation myths in the *Kojiki*. The entire myth stretches around me. Most of the drawings are just stick figures, but some are a little more intricate than others. Above the entrance to the hollow is a large blank square representing primordial chaos. The three original high *Kami* are walking out of this. Each of the *kami* are represented by different body shapes, One is tall and skinny, one is fat, his belly is just a large lopsided circle, and the last is short.

Next to these *Kami* I find *Izanagi* and *Izanami* leaning over the bridge of heaven and stirring the chaos below with a magical spear. The brine dripping from the tip of the spear is forming the Japanese islands.

Below this picture is one of *Izanagi* and *Izanami*, now on the land they created, circling the large tower that they have built. Next to this one they each hold children in their arms. The children are shaped like different Japanese islands.

I crane my neck around looking at more and more myths. On the other side of the hollow I find a large group of gods setting up a party hoping to entice *Amaterasu* out of her cave with the sound of their merriment. *Amaterasu*, the sun goddess, is poking her head out of the cave to see what is going on. The picture next to this one shows *Amaterasu* being pulled out of the cave while the entrance is sealed over with a huge rock. The other gods are rejoicing at the sight of her face, and its radiant light covers the land once again with daylight.

Below all of this, *Amaterasu's* brother, *Susano O*, who was responsible for *Amaterasu's* exile in the cave, sits and rules over the land of the dead. He is grinning happily, obviously proud of the trouble he has caused above.

Even further below this is a small carving floating in a slash of green paint. I put my face down as close as I can and realize that it is the Leech Child. Before *Izanagi* and *Izanami* gave birth to the islands of Japan they gave birth to an abomination. In order to understand why they had given birth to such a child they went and asked the high *Kami* for help. The high *Kami* told them that the child was deformed because the female *Kami*, *Izanami*, spoke before the male *Kami* *Izanagi*. The two *Kami* returned and tried to create the land once more. The leech child is pushed into the sea of chaos and never mentioned again. In Akiko's rendition he has a large circle for a body and a small one for his head. His mouth is set in a huge frown; in fact he seems

to be the only figure carved on the wall who is frowning. The streak of green paint, the only color anywhere, surrounds the crude carving leaving him to float eternally. It is this carving that stays with me. I'm reminded of the dark green water of the Uji river.

This hollow represents years of work by a young Akiko. I can imagine her crouched down in here, her small hands carving out all the myths that her mother taught her. I run my fingers over the carvings softly. On the very highest point of the hollow these words are written.

“Dear people 1000 years from now. This is how these islands were formed.”

Akiko's post-apocalyptic reminder to the people of Japan a thousand years from now, left in a place that she thought would never be destroyed. Now she will see it covered in her own lifetime.

I take one last look at the carvings, ingraining them into my memory the best I can and then begin to push myself out of the hollow. My first lunge pushes my head into the outside world. Akiko is squatting down with her face near the opening. Because I don't realize she is there my initial push brings our faces within inches of each other. I'm so close to her that I am struck mute. I swallow hard. Akiko quickly leans in and kisses me on the lips. I can feel myself blushing, but I close my eyes and open my mouth slightly. She quickly pulls away and runs into the shrine. As she is shutting her door I can't help but think of *Amaterasu* hiding in her cave.

The Akiko here with me now is older. We are no longer embarrassed by our kisses, we chew wildly, hoping to swallow each other, hoping to somehow get closer than we've ever been.

Akiko and I make love twice. Afterwards we both lie naked on the blanket and drink beers. As the sun sets the stacks of our things slowly fade into meaningless shapes. Akiko gets up and goes to the bathroom, then roots around in some of the piles until she finds our alarm

clock. She sits down on the blanket and sets the alarm. Once she's finished she lies down beside me and wraps her arms and legs around me. Tomorrow I will go back under the sink and find my way back to the shrine. Tonight, I will stay awake as long as I can cuddling with my wife. Something is up with Akiko. She seems further away from me now than she ever has been.

Just before I slip into sleep the phone rings. Akiko groans and rolls over. The clock says its 12:45. I can't think of anyone that would be calling us this late. Maybe it's a call from Japan.

I get up and pick up the phone.

"Hello."

"Yes, who am I speaking to?" It's a man's voice.

"This is Jason, who is this?"

"Not too fast now, I need a moment to celebrate. This is my first attempt and it worked!"

His excitement comes through in his voice.

"I'm sorry, sir. I think you have the wrong number."

"No I don't, that's the beauty of it."

"I'm going to hang up now." I start to move the phone away from my ear, but his protests stop me.

"Wait, don't hang up yet, we just got started. We need to meet." He covers the mouthpiece and coughs.

"I don't even know who you are, I really don't think I need to meet you."

"You're wrong there, you desperately need help, you don't even know what you're doing. I've been keeping an eye on you and I need to give you some warnings."

"I really think you have the wrong..."

“Oh stop that and listen! Tomorrow you and I will be involved in a car accident and I will be able to help you from there. I just thought I’d call ahead and see if the number you are going to give me tomorrow is correct.” He lets out a laugh and hangs up the phone.

6

~Stirring Chaos~

The sunlight wakes me. At first I'm confused because I expected to wake up to Akiko's alarm. I reach out to pull her close, but there is nothing there. I open my eyes to Akiko's empty pillow. A few minutes later I sit up and rub my eyes. Akiko isn't in the front room or the dining room. After locating my clothes from the night before I stand up and get dressed. I check the bathroom and our bedroom, but still no Akiko. Finally I find her note on the kitchen table.

Jason,

I wanted last night to be perfect because that is how I want you to remember me while you are under the sink. I can't help you find the thing you're chasing and I'll be honest, I'm devastated that you broke your promise. Didn't you tell me you would never go somewhere I couldn't follow you? You are too selfish. It seems you have a lot of alone work to do right now so I will leave you to it. I've closed our account. You will find half of our savings in an envelope on the fridge. Yours came to the amount of \$4328.67. Use it however you wish. I hope that someday you realize that the world is bigger than you think, and it is full of people. You're not the only one who feels isolated. When you go under the sink this time, please remember that I won't be here to pull you out. I hope you make it to where you want to go.

Akiko

At first the room is dead quiet, but this is an illusion. The fridge hums, the heater screams and beneath it all is the sound of crying. A soft sobbing as if someone's heart is shattered. I try not to listen, but the sound is in my head. They are my tears, my sobs, and my shattered heart.

I'm out the door before I even realize I had the idea. I run to my car, but it seems I grabbed the wrong jacket; my keys are not in my pockets. Instead of driving I walk. I'm not quite sure which direction and it doesn't really matter. I venture out into my white isolated town hoping to disappear into anonymity. The world is alive with a symphony of dripping water and shaking trees and I'm finally able to take inventory of my situation.

I looked for the gate under the sink for my entire life. I yearned for it when I was a child and I still long for it now, but the price is too high. I've lost my wife, my job, and my house. What else does it want from me?

A car shoots past me and I'm reminded of the strange phone call from the night before. Perhaps I should've taken my car. Maybe this is the final scene. I get into a car accident that was prophesized the night before and the shrine takes the last thing I own, my life.

There is a folded piece of paper in my pocket that I have been unconsciously playing with for my entire walk. I pull it out and look at it. It's the itinerary from Akiko's flight. The last time I wore this coat was when I took Akiko to the airport. I fold it up and put it back in my pocket. It sits there like a stone that needs to be turned. Something isn't right. I pull the itinerary back out and read it. The date of Akiko's departure is December 15th. I stare at the paper in shock. All this time I've spent mulling over how I lost so many months and the answer was right here all along. This paper went under the sink with me, so it never changed. My memory was correct.

Suddenly, there is a large splash behind me as if someone dumped a bathtub full of water out a second story window. I involuntarily crumple the itinerary when my hands ball into fists and my body jumps. Directly after the splash a rush of air pushes past me followed by the unmistakable scent of the ocean. I'm reminded of the gust of air from inside my wall and all the hair on my body stands on end. I'm not alone. The thing from inside the wall is behind me. I can

hear its labored breathing and the water dripping from its body. I'm caught like a deer in headlights, unable to turn around and finally see what I've brought back. I know that the thing is reaching for me. I can imagine its decayed hand getting closer and closer while its lungs push stagnant water out of its mouth and down its chin in torrents. He will grab me and pull me backwards into a world of dark water where I will drown without even knowing the face of my assailant.

This thought breaks me from terrors paralysis and I run blindly, trying to get away from the thing behind me. The screech of tires on my left alert me to the fact that I'm about to get hit.

Then I'm on the ground and someone is talking above me.

"There you are! I was wondering when you were going to pop out!"

I'm arching my back, trying to look for the place I was just standing, hoping to catch a glance of the water demon, but all I can see is a pair of dirty sneakers and the bottoms of wet brown pant legs. Suddenly I'm looking at everything through a long dark tunnel that slowly closes out all vision.

I'm dreaming about the granary. The sun shines so brightly that it overwhelms the colors in the yard forcing them to pale under the constant onslaught of white light. The scene reminds me of faded photographs taped into grandmother's old black album. Mom's gone to her classes in Salt Lake City, Dad is over tending to the bees with Uncle Al, and I'm here in the field looking for long forgotten treasure.

The tall rye rubs my pant legs and leaves burrs in my socks which penetrate the soft cotton and scratch the pink flesh beneath. I stop and pick them out every time the itching becomes unbearable. Beneath the rye lie mysterious treasures and relics from old ghost stories.

An old brown bottle is the dusty remnant of a secret meeting between settlers and natives. The rusty prong of a pitchfork is the claw of a giant and horrific beast. This land encompasses my entire world.

The rye makes it almost impossible to see the ground, so I have to focus all my effort on one small area. I stomp around until the rye is flattened and I've scavenged any items that I've stepped on, then I get on my hands and knees to look closely for anything I've missed. The cracking and breaking of the rye makes me think of giant insects taking flight, while the golden color makes me think of Rumpelstiltskin and the straw that he gave the maiden to spin.

After searching a few spots I finally find an old bone. Not a skull unfortunately, just a leg bone. With a little inspection I realize that it is another bone from the werewolf that died in this field. The scorching sun must have peeled away his sorrow and left nothing but these bleached white bones. I run over to the granary and drop my new discovery into the pile of other bones I've collected. Mom won't let me bring my discoveries in the house, so they stay here under the eaves.

Dad says this granary was built back when his dad used to keep sheep. The wood is a dry pale gray. All of its moisture and color has been sucked out by the sun's rays. The eaves and the roof are made from tin that has rusted to a dark reddish-brown. The granary is built a foot off the ground in order to avoid heavy rains and rats.

My new discovery tempts me to take an inventory of my entire collection. I look at each bone and then piece all of them together in the rough shape of the werewolf. Most of these bones I've found myself, but some were given to me by my father. The only bone missing from the beast is the skull. I stare out across the sun drenched yard wondering where to look next.

Eventually my eyes tire from the sun so I look back to my beast outlined on the ground. I start to dismantle the werewolf and stack his bones in their regular spot. I try to stack the pile as tall as I can and then get angry when it inevitably falls. During the collapse one of the bones rolls underneath the granary and I have to lie down on my stomach to get it. When I lie down I am confronted with the vast dark space under the granary and I realize that this is a large part of the field that I've never thought to explore. I reach out slowly and grab the femur that rolled under, afraid that something might come at me from the impenetrable darkness. Once I've got the leg bone I stretch my arm back and drop it near the pile making sure to keep my eyes on the space in front of me all the while.

The sun's light only reaches a little way under the granary. The part I can see is littered with trash and old clothes. This has always been here, every sunny, rainy, or snowy day this darkness has watched me playing and exploring, one square of space completely invisible to the world.

My stomach turns at the thought of having to crawl under there so I begin to push myself up with my arms. The moment I move I catch something smooth and white in my peripheral vision. I stop moving and scan back and forth for the object. Finally I find it just barely poking out of the darkness, a whiteness that my treasure hunting eye distinguishes as bone. I squint my eyes and try to focus. It could be a skull. I stare at the skull fearfully and try to keep a hold on the terror that is threatening to overtake me. I must control my fear because I must go under. This is, after all, the skull of the beast hiding from me just on the edge of the darkness, and if I go in quick I should be back out in no time.

I try to ignore visions of living creatures squirming in the dark and stretch my arm as far under the granary as I can. Suddenly the distance seems much farther than I thought. All motion

ceases and I'm perched precariously on the edge of the world. The ground under my palm is damp and sticky. I rub the warm ground behind me with my other hand and wonder how two places could be so close and feel so different.

My hand is about to retreat so I will my legs into action. One push and my head is under. The pale sunshine is blocked and my eyes are not adjusted. The darkness around me is absolute so I must rely on my other senses. The sweet wet smell of trash and rot makes my eyes water. The light cracking and popping must be the surprised movement of insects. I'm only one push in but it feels like I've gone miles; I can't even tell how much of my body is under, probably about halfway, and the darkness is already crushing me. The thought of getting out quickly abandons me and I'm left with a slight tremble in its wake. I have to stop and wait for my eyes to adjust; I can't push myself any further into this darkness.

I prepare my legs for another push and wait until I can make out the grey lumps in front of me. After a moment everything comes into focus. I reach out my arm and push with my feet. From this closer perspective I can confirm that the white lump is indeed a skull, half covered in old papers which make it seem like it has paper hair. I stretch my arm out toward the paper haired treasure but it is still far away. The eyeless sockets stare back at me, the eyes of darkness that have been watching me all of these years and waiting to lure me in; even now the darkness is reaching towards me as I'm reaching towards it. I jerk my arm back just before I'm completely frozen with panic. My breath is racing towards a scream, but just before it peaks the truth of the situation stops the piercing sound dead in my throat. I'm stuck under here.

A few nights before I was sitting in the TV room with my father. I had a long stick that had an old wizard's spells trapped inside it. I was trying to read the hidden language the wizard had carved on the stick in order to let the magic out when my father spoke.

“Jason, you should let things be what they are. God made that stick. It doesn't have to be anything else. That is God's perfect stick that he created just for you. I used to have all kinds of fun with sticks just being sticks, I didn't have to make up stories about them. Now listen, I'm going to give you some logic to live by, how's it go? Oh yeah, if it walks like a duck, talks like a duck then it's probably a duck. You understand?” I looked up into his gray eyes. He had just gotten out of the shower so his sandy hair was wet and his smooth skin seemed too tight. He smelled of soap and aftershave.

“I don't get it.” I was afraid to say it, but I had to be honest. He sat down on the couch and put me in his lap.

“What that means is that things are exactly what they appear to be. God made this world perfect, and it's a sin to try and make it different than he intended. If you go about putting too much thought into stuff, it gets all confused. This is advice I should be giving your mother. Ever since she went back to school she's been getting more and more confused. Just let things be what they are, that's all I'm saying.” He rubbed my head with his big hands and set me back on the floor by my stick. Unfortunately, the stick wasn't fun anymore.

I think of my father's words again here in the darkness under the granary. The sky is bright and warm today, but I'm cold and blind here. Outside it is open and airy, but I'm cramped and inhaling stink. The difference of only a few feet proves that I've crawled into another world. My eyes are wet and I'm heaving for breath. How come nobody warned me that this gateway to

another place was in our yard? I shouldn't be here. I can feel the truth of my trespass, and now I'm afraid that I've lost my way. How many doors does this new world have, how many exits? If I push myself backwards will I make it back outside? What if the exit has closed behind me?

The fear coursing through my body makes it shake violently and weakens it to the point of release. My bladder lets go and I start crying, which finally releases me from my panic. I scramble backwards as fast as I can, craving the light and warmth outside. I hit my head on the edge of the granary on my way out, a small price for freedom, until I'm finally standing back in the field.

I stand quietly with my arm over my eyes; I don't want anyone to see me crying, so I sob into the arm of my shirt. Behind the blurry veil of my tears and below the arm of my shirt is my pile of bones. Feelings of shame and anger overcome me and I start kicking my pile under the granary. After most of the bones are gone I'm able to calm down and survey my surroundings to make sure I've come out in the right place. The sun drenched field looks exactly the same as it had that morning. I look towards the house and even it looks the same. My father's car is still not in the driveway, which means he is still with the bees. My mother's car is there, which means she has come home from her classes. It seems that I've made it back to my own world.

I jump the old wooden fence that surrounds the field and run towards the back door of the house. I stop at the window and peek in. My mother is sitting in a chair in the middle of the kitchen. She has a towel over her chest that is covered with locks of her blonde hair. Her long hair is being cut short by a strange young woman standing behind her. The young woman's hair is black and pulled back into a bun. Her skin is brown and she's wearing a robe with red and orange designs held closed by a thick cloth belt around her waist. She is the strangest person I've ever seen. Her eyes are like a cat's, her small hands are like birds, and every strand of her dark

hair seems alive. My mother radiates from her chair. Her cheeks are pink and her shoulder length blonde hair frames her face perfectly. I've never seen her like this. I stare through the glass into a scene so exotic that I am stunned.

They are talking, but I can't hear them. I watch their lips move, smile, and laugh, but without sound it's all meaningless movement. Suddenly the strange woman bends down and puts her arms around my mother's shoulders. She interlaces her fingers over my mother's chest and puts her face against my mother's ear. My mother turns her head and they kiss. Not the quick kisses she'll give me and dad, but a long kiss. The strange woman's hair falls out of its bun and over her cheek. The blond hair of my mother mixes with the long black strands lying across her cheek.

Suddenly I'm picked up from behind. My father has come up behind me without my noticing and now he turns me around and stares into my face. His face is red with anger. I twist my head around and look into the driveway, but his car is still missing.

"This isn't what it looks like." My dad calls my attention back to him with his words.

"But Dad, if it looks like a duck then it's a duck," I say automatically. My father hugs me close to him and keeps repeating his words. The pressure of the hug is painful and I'm about to protest when I'm taken out of his arms by my uncle Al.

"Come on, Jason, let's go look at the bees." He's dragging me away as my father begins kicking in the back door. I bury my head in my arm and shudder. I haven't come out in the same place at all. I'm lost in a world that isn't my own.

Once again I find myself waking up in unfamiliar surroundings. My eyelids are colored red by sunlight, but this time I'm too tired to open my eyes. My head aches and I feel like I've

spilled my life all over the place. I'll never be able to collect everything I had. Why did I dream about the old Granary? To my right I hear movement followed by a gravelly voice.

“Oh, you finally wakin' up? Was I right? Tell me your phone number.” I rattle off my phone number without thinking. He continues speaking the moment I stop. “Ha! Not bad, not bad at all. I wasn't quite sure it was going to work, but it did.” I can hear him stand up and move away from me. I was hoping that he would disappear, that maybe if I kept my eyes closed all of this would go away, but that is impossible. Slowly, the last hour of my life comes back to me. I remember the itinerary and the thing behind me. I remember trying to run away and someone hitting me with their car. After that my mind is a blank. Perhaps I'm in the house of the man who knew we were going to get into a car accident. I open my eyes and sit up.

The room I'm sitting in is huge. There's a large wooden table to my left and a kitchen directly in front of me. To my right there are two doors, both shut, that lead to other parts of the house. The man who hit me is in the kitchen with his back to me. He sets a large stainless steel kettle on the stove and comes over to me with two mugs. He's incredibly skinny and probably twice my age. His skin is like leather and his eyes burn with boundless energy. He puts a mug down in front of me and holds out his hand.

“I'm Steve. It's a pleasure.”

“Jason.” I reach out and shake his bony hand. He gives me a smile then sits in an old leather chair across from me.

“This is good stuff, it'll make you feel better.” He motions towards the mug as he speaks. I nod my thanks and take a sip. It is the worst green tea I've ever tasted. He must have used way too many leaves and let it steep for too long. I set the tea down on the coffee table.

On the wall above me is a Mayan calendar, a dream catcher, and one of the tackiest yin-yangs I've ever seen. Every bit of available table and counter space is taken up with rocks, sticks, and other random found objects. A large branch leaning against the wall serves as a coat rack. I rub my head lightly with my palm. There's a huge bump on the back.

"Don't worry, I didn't hit you too hard. I was expectin' you to pop out sometime today so I was drivin' real slow. You shoulda seen how pissed off people were, like their lives were gonna end cause they had to slow down." He lets out a short bark of laughter. "You would be amazed at how many beautiful buildings there are in this town. When you really slow down you see a lot more of what this town has to offer."

I clear my throat in order to stop him from talking and ask him the question that's been on my mind since I woke up. "How did you know?"

"How'd I know what?" He looks confused.

How'd you know that we would be in a car accident? How did you know my phone number?"

"We've all got our gifts, and it seems yours have gotten you in a little bit of trouble recently. Your phone number was easy, I used future recall. I got the tapes over there." He points to a tape set lying on the table. The package is bright white and says, "Future Recall. Win the lottery, Impress your friends, and never be surprised again!" Just under this is a little sticker that says, "As seen on TV" in the center. I'm struck dumb, which isn't a problem because he keeps talking.

"Yours was my first test and it really seemed to work. Next I'm going to try and win the lottery. I'd like to fix this place up." He looks around his house, then turns and stares at me. The

American need to make eye contact has always made me uncomfortable, so I try to look anywhere but at him.

“What do you need?” His question fills the room with its uselessness. He takes a long gulp of his green tea.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t meet nobody unless they need something from me, so what do you want to ask?” He stares into my eyes. I look away. He seems to know something so I decide to give it a shot.

“I think something... supernatural is happening to me and I’m not sure why.”

“First off, that’s not a question, second, you shouldn’t generalize. The supernatural occurs around you constantly. Where do you live?” I’m confused by how quickly he changes gears, but I go with it.

“I’m over on Fifth and Lewis.”

“And where is Fifth and Lewis?”

“In town, here.” These questions are worthless. I feel like I’m sitting with a five year old.

“And where is here?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to jump ahead, but I think I know where this is going. We are in Wyoming, which is in the United States, which is on earth, which is in the solar system, which is in the galaxy, which is in the universe, right?”

“Good! Now, how many rooms does your house have?” He takes another gulp of his tea without taking his eyes off me.

“I live in a two bedroom.” I feel like I’m being spun so hard I’ll end up dizzy.

“And how many closets does it have?”

“I don’t know, two or three.”

“And how many cabinets?”

“A lot, where is this going?”

“Keep your pants on, I’m getting there. The space you inhabit is endless. You can zoom all the way out of the galaxy and still be in endless space. Conversely, you could zoom to infinitely small amounts of space within your own home. A home is nothing more than empty spaces piled on empty spaces, and within each of those spaces are even smaller spaces. You think your walls are empty, but there are pipes within them that are also filled with space and so on.” I smile to myself thinking about how apt his choice of metaphor is. He continues. “So, the places within your house are infinite and the world outside is infinite. Our minds can only comprehend as far as science has defined, for instance, there is nothing further out than the universe, or nothing smaller than an electron.” He sits back and smiles at me.

“I’m with you.” I’m non-committal, waiting for him to continue.

“You live in two infinite spaces simultaneously, and if you consider each space its own little infinite world, then you live in an infinite amount of worlds simultaneously. How’s that for supernatural!”

“That’s not supernatural, that’s semantics.” I feel like I’ve been cheated out of an explanation.

“It may seem that way, but that’s because your ability to live in multiple worlds at once has been with you since you were born, so it seems natural. If you were to meet someone that could teleport to any location on the planet, that would seem pretty supernatural, but if he had done it his entire life it would feel natural to him. The same principle is at work with you now. You don’t know what’s happenin’ to you now so you immediately generalize the events to the broad category of supernatural, when in reality the things that are happening to you now are

completely natural and have been with you since you were born; only now you are aware of them for the first time.”

“So, what is happening?”

“Not so fast, why don’t you tell me what you think is going on first.” He leans back in his chair and finishes the last of his green tea. I try to piece together all of the things I’ve come up with so far.

“Well... I recently curled up under my kitchen sink and stayed there for three days. When I came out I felt like everything was going to be fine, then I realized that somehow time had shifted and certain small things had changed. I figured I must’ve somehow jumped tracks. Like my life before the sink was part of world A, and somehow when I came out from under the sink I was in world B.”

“That’s pretty good. What is your plan now?”

“Well, before you hit me, I was planning on getting back under the sink and trying to find my way back to world A.” It feels somehow refreshing to lay everything out so simply. My throat feels like a desert, so I take a drink of my ridiculously bitter green tea.

“You are right, you jumped tracks, but labeling things A and B is a little too easy. Let’s go back to spaces. There are an infinite number of spaces, both small and large, that we all live in simultaneously. Now each of these spaces has the ability to affect some sort of change. An insect could die under your sink or a tornado could hit Texas. A star could explode or one small cell in your body could turn cancerous. The point is, these changes are just as infinite as the spaces they inhabit. So, you not only live simultaneously in an infinite number of spaces, you live in an infinite amount of spaces that change infinitely.”

“Okay...” I take another gulp of tea and try to swallow it as fast as possible. Steve is getting more and more animated as he speaks and his excitement is beginning to wear off.

“Now you understand the hard part, everything else is pretty simple. Sometimes, within these infinite and infinitely changing spaces, a door will appear and if you just happen to be in that space at the right time you can walk through the door.” He leans back, obviously satisfied.

“A door to what?”

“That’s a good question, and one that you’ve already answered for yourself. Like the spaces you inhabit, you yourself are also duplicated an infinite number of times. I’m sure you’ve heard of the concept of infinite possibilities?” He pauses just long enough for me to answer.

“Yeah, I’ve got a vague notion. Every choice we make creates a parallel universe where we make the opposite choice.”

“It’s bigger than that. Every moment presents us with an infinite number of choices and we can only make one. Every choice we don’t make creates another universe. Now you can truly begin to understand the size of the universe.” He stares intently at his tacky yin-yang and contemplates his own words.

“So the door could lead anywhere?” I’m hoping to get him back on track.

“Exactly! The best way to look at this is like a wagon wheel. A small circle with an infinite amount of spokes coming off of it. Each spoke is one of an infinite number of worlds. Some are completely different than the one you inhabit now, some are almost exactly the same. We don’t want to oversimplify, however, so you must imagine the wheel in four dimensions. The hub is a globe with spokes shooting off in all directions and each spoke has an infinite number of spokes shooting off of it and so on. And the entire thing is moving and growing with every passing second. The entire thing is infinitely large, but it continues to grow. Now sometimes, like

I said earlier, a door will open up and it could lead to any number of different spokes, so the answer to your question of where the door leads is who the hell knows.”

“How is that people aren’t jumping around all the time?”

“Well the doors are rarely used. Most of the time they appear in places people never really go, and if people are there they usually peek in without going through the door. I’ve met quite a few people who have come close to doors and they just experience a kind of déjà vu, none of them ever jumped spokes like I did.” His words trail off slowly and he stares out the window.

“What happened?”

“I was playing out in the dump when I was a kid and I shut myself in a refrigerator. I screamed and yelled but nobody came. I could feel the air running out when suddenly I found an open door behind me. I stepped out into the junkyard and thought I was saved, but I slowly began to realize that the world I came out in wasn’t the same one I’d left. Ever since then I’ve known when doors open near me and I’ve known when people come close to them. You’re the only person I’ve ever known who has also gone through a door.”

“That explains so much.” Although the explanation is absurd it is all I have to grasp onto, and who can say that anyone really understands all the ins and outs of the world they live in?

“Well there’s a little bit more to your story. Your journey is a little more...complicated.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are on another spoke, at least you are new here in this universe, but your door didn’t lead here.”

“Where did it lead?”

“To the hub.” He stares into my eyes.

“The hub?”

“The center part, where all the spokes originate. This is only conjecture on my part, but I believe that at the center of everything there is a place that is only one place, and the beings that live there exist only once and only have one choice. There is no infinity there. Nirvana, heaven, or whatever you want to call it. That is where your door led.”

“Wait, you think I went to heaven?”

“Yes, and it isn’t the first time. The chances of getting a door that leads to the same place twice is impossible, but somehow you’ve done it. Not only that, but you’ve left something there. You are incomplete. It all very confusing, I don’t really know how to describe it.”

“What should I do?”

“Well, I think you have to make the impossible happen again. You have to make a third door to the hub appear and you have to get what you lost, but I don’t think you can do it here. You have to find the spot where you first went through.”

“Impossible.” A catalog of all the places I’ve ever crawled in hoping to find a gate runs through my head. Dryers, trunks, and muddy holes - how can I possibly know which one was the first.

“I agree, it is impossible. But it’s all you can do. It seems to me, and I’m not quite sure how you knew, but somehow you instinctually understood how our universe works and because of that you reached out to the doors you felt around you. If you reach out far enough eventually you’ll touch something, and you reached out far enough. One thing is for sure, if you try to live here, without the missing piece you left behind, you will be miserable.”

“Well, thanks for everything.” I stand up and drink the last few gulps of my tea. He’s right; I can’t be happy here.

“Before you go there are a couple more things I want to tell you. First, don’t be confused by other people’s doors. Everyone has the ability to find a door and every door will be personal to them, so don’t go searching for a door that won’t work for you. Second, I suggest you get far away from your family and loved ones, because you’ve brought something back with you, something incredibly dangerous.” He looks around the room and I can tell he’s nervous.

“What is it?” I can’t help but look around the room also.

“I don’t know, but it’s dangerous and it’s getting mad. That’s all the help I can give you. Are you feeling alright? Do you need a ride home?” He places his hand on my shoulder.

“No, I feel okay, just a bit of a headache. I think a walk will do me good. Where am I?”

“About a half mile outside of town. Follow this road south and you’ll reach Grand Ave.”

He walks me towards the door, opens it and lets me out.

“Thank you for everything.” I bow to him. He smiles at the gesture.

“Good luck.”

It’s not until about a half an hour down the road that I’m finally able to structure my thoughts in a coherent way. I must vacate my house. Well, it’s not my house, just another possibility of my house, just like the Akiko in this universe is not the Akiko I fell in love with, just another possible Akiko. And I’m just another possibility of myself. There must be so many more possible me’s that are doing so much better than me. Lawyer me’s, doctor me’s, and me’s who don’t lose Akiko. What have I done? I wonder if any of the other me’s are doing any worse?

I’ve lost my chance to go under the sink. I wouldn’t have enough time to complete anything now. Akiko always said that everything happens for a reason, so I’m probably not meant to go under the sink. It seems that Steve hitting me with his car gave me a much needed

answer. When I was passed out I dreamt about the granary, it must be a sign. That's the first place I ever experienced a different world, so that's where I have to go back under.

Which means I have to go back to Laven, the town of my father, the man who told me I would catch "the disease" of homosexuality from my mother, the man I always thought I could ignore forever.

Part 2

The landscape changes so subtly that you barely notice. You're twenty minutes outside of town and the last dirty brown piles of old snow are still lining the highway. The melt water makes the road sparkle in the sun. By the time you reach the bottom of the mountain the snow is gone and it is spring time in the west. Pine forests give way to grasslands, and grasslands to the weeds of arid climates. The hours slip by like lead weights and your mind spins in never ending circles. A light layer of sweat collects on your back as the sun turns your old car into an oven. Now that you're returning to this town, completing this circle, it seems that none of your life in-between happened. You've worked hard all your life to erase any memory of this town and now you are driving right back to it.

You are a cicada, lying in wait beneath the ground, sucking life from tree roots and dreaming for decades. In the cold earth you dreamt of another life in a far away country. Even in your imaginary world you tried to make it back underground. You tried to cram yourself into anything that would serve as a gate to return you to the buried truth. Your father's town owns you. You were ruined when your lesbian mother took you away, you were ruined, just like your father said you would be, and not even the inferno of Akiko's love could burn away the dark dead spots that your father gouged into you with his looks of disgust. If your mother has it...

And now instinct tells you it's time to come out, to crawl out of the ground and return to the place of your birth. Your translucent and unused wings crack and pop as you spread them to take to the air. This is the first step of the journey you must take. You hope the town won't smell your fear, and you hope that your father's face has lost all of its power.

7

~Granary~

I reach town just as the sun is setting. The sky is scorched and I'm left to drive aimlessly around town until I can find my house. I haven't seen this place since I was a child, so I have to try and remember everything from a kid's perspective. In my mind, the town stretches into eternity in all directions, in reality it is only a six block square. My family's past stretches back six generations in this town. My ancestors were all Danish immigrants who came to America to join the Mormon Church. This small square of a town holds six generations of skeletons. The walls of every house have seen the great and terrible deeds of everyone who came together in order for me to drive aimlessly through town. It is during my second time around that I spot the old granary. It still stands tall in the sheep pasture next to our house, the old wood bleached to white. The space beneath the granary is overgrown with foot tall stalks of golden rye. There are no sheep in the pasture to graze. I pull the Reliant off the street and onto my father's gravel driveway. The vibration of the seat sparks an inferno of nostalgia. How many times did I ride with my father as he drove a little too fast up the gravel driveway? All I really remember is the Charger's glove box shaking. I was too little to see out the front window.

The Charger is still there, parked in the driveway. All the tires are flat and the seats are filled with boxes of old newspapers. The hedge, which my Mother used to keep perfectly trimmed, has grown uncontrollably and blocked the house from view. I have to push my way through the small opening that leads to the walkway. The grass has been replaced with the same rye from the pasture. Nature has reclaimed our manicured yard. The house is in a similar condition. The roof is rotting away and all the windows are covered with cardboard and garbage bags. The paint is peeling off the porch but the old wooden toy box full of blocks that my father made is still sitting there.

Everything seems exactly the same, as if everyone disappeared the moment I left leaving everything to rot. The screen door screeches when I pull it open and my short sharp knocks echo endlessly in the old house.

The door doesn't open until the fifth knock. An older man stares at me. His face is stamped by the town. His cheeks sink in and the skin around his mouth is chapped and cracked. It is obvious he has just woken up, even though it is late afternoon.

"Dad?" My voice is quiet, too much like a hiss.

"Who the hell are you?" His eyes squint.

"Jason Jenson. I'm looking for my father Bill." His angry expression melts. He looks down at his foot and kicks the door jamb lightly.

"Why'd you have to come back now? If you would have been... Your Dad... Aw shit, your' dad's dead, son." He stares at me, trying to gauge my reaction. I have none. After a moment he continues on.

"He died from cancer in his brain about three months ago, left this house to me." This last bit is aggressive, like I would want to try and take away this mess from him. I spent my entire life trying to forget about my father, and now he's gone.

"Did he say anything about us?"

"Nope, I mean he said lots of things about your mom, but nothing like your thinking. To be honest with you, the poor bastard went crazy."

"Well, thanks. If you don't mind, I'm going to go look around the sheep pasture a little bit." I turn to go.

“Sorry about your loss.” The door shuts with a small click that is deafening in the quiet afternoon. I feel let down. Everything happened so fast. I have to face the fact that part of me was hoping that I could confront my Dad.

I walk slowly around the side of the house and over to the pasture’s gate. The warm air enfolds me and the silence clogs my ears. I can barely hear my steps as they crush down the rye. Already I can feel the burs in my socks. There is nothing left for me here. My mother left years ago and my father is dead, yet somehow this place still feels like mine. That’s not right, it still feels like part of mine, like I left a piece of myself here and I’m finally returning for it. Somehow, this town manages to always stay the same. Everything I see is stained with old memories. I can’t help but feel sorry for my father. He lived exactly as he was raised to. I wonder if he wanted to see me before he died. I wonder what he would’ve said.

Up close the granary is still tall and imposing. I remember once my father let me go inside with him. It was dark and musty. Directly inside the door were an old baby stroller and the headboard to my grandmother’s bed. Up above us, in the loft, came a low angry buzz. The roof was alive with wasp nests. I walk around to the spot where I used to pile my old bones and push down the rye with my foot. The bones are all gone, but the air coming from underneath the granary is a few degrees cooler than the scorching air around me. I get down on my knees and peek under. The rye doesn’t grow underneath. Instead I’m confronted with the same dark brown sand and trash that I saw when I was a child. The skull, however, is nowhere to be seen.

If Steve is correct, this is the place I need to re-enter. This is my original gate. I lie flat on my belly, ignoring the sharp pain of a million tiny burs. I bring my legs up and scoot under the granary. The smell is terrible, but the tiny sound of movement all around me is even worse. Probably earwigs, long black insects that I haven’t thought about in years. When I was young my

friend told me they were called earwigs because they like dark places so they would burrow into your ear and lay their eggs while you were sleeping.

I give another strong push and the light of day fades to a dark gray. Beneath me the ground squirms and I try to push myself away. The movement is everywhere. I lie still and let the small insects crawl over me. I cringe as they make their way inside my clothes and into my hair. Every gate has a price. I lie still, face down in the muck and think about the past.

When my father discovered Mother with Aunty Keiko he beat her up. I could hear them screaming at each other as Uncle Al pulled me out of the yard and towards the bee house. A few hours later I was in the hospital sitting next to my mother. Her eyes were swollen shut and her lip was split open. Her face was a mass of purple and black and I never thought she would look the same again. It was at that exact moment that I started to hate my father, not only because he beat up Mom, but he also made me afraid of her. Instead of comforting her as I should have I sat stunned and silent, wanting nothing more than to be far away from her. She didn't look my mother. Dad reshaped her with his fists into something else.

Instead of going home to Dad I went to Salt Lake City with Aunty Keiko. Later, when Mom healed I remember silently praising God for bringing her back to me. When I looked back at these moments from an older perspective I started to hate myself, but I funneled all of that hate onto my father. It was him that made me fickle. I still hate him for what he did, but now that he's gone I feel a little sorry for him. My grandfather was violent and my father always swore he would be nothing like him, but in the end he turned out exactly the same.

My eyes are closed. I'm thirsty and cramped. How much time has passed? The space behind my eyelids is white. I rub my hand along the ground and feel the dirt. My mouth is full of

thick saliva and the dampness of the ground is soaking my clothes. The darkness under here is not perfect. My eyes are adjusting to the light.

My father and I kept in touch for the first few years that I lived in Japan. At first his letters were personal attacks on mother. He tried to convince me that she had been taken by the devil and every time I imagined my poor mother broken and bleeding in her hospital bed. If anyone had been taken by the devil it was him. A few weeks after we arrived my mother started receiving letters from the Bishop of Laven, a few weeks after that we started getting visitors from our local ward in Japan. Mother never showed an interest in the Church again.

After a few years my father's letters turned into personal attacks on me, accusations that I was a "homo" and so on. For awhile I was afraid that he was right, that somehow I was going to turn out to like guys. When I brought these fears up to my Mother she would take me in her arms and ask me what was so bad about liking guys? Eventually the letters got so vile that I wrote my father and asked him not to write me anymore. The letters stopped immediately. He must've been tired of writing anyway. To him it was a war. Instead of trying to maintain a relationship with me he was trying to use me to get to mother. Once the letters stopped I did everything in my power to forget him.

And now here I am, cramped under his granary trying to relive some crazy moment from years earlier. Suddenly I'm overtaken with the certainty that I'm wasting my time. There is no gate here. There never was and there never will be. This is the place where I first dreamed of another world, but I was mistaken. I never entered a gate here. It is merely coincidence that Mother brought Aunty Keiko here the day I crawled under the granary. I've wasted my time. I didn't need to come here in the first place. Nothing left to do but get out of here.

“Jason!” Someone is outside, grabbing my legs. I look back towards the opening and I can see a pair of worn out work boots. I start sliding backwards. Every insect on me scrambles off to stay away from the light. They are all jumping ship. Two or three slides later and I’m standing out in the pasture with the light burning my eyes. A man, about my age, is standing in front of me.

“Jesus! Are you okay?” I stare at him confused.

“It’s me, Richard Thompson, we used to play together.”

“Richard.” I remember him.

“What were you doing under there?” He looks at my dirty clothes and hair.

“I’m in the wrong place. There’s no door here.” Richard ignores my words.

“Your uncle told me he saw you go under about thirty minutes ago. Are you okay? Never mind, let’s get you out of here, come on, we’ll go to my place and get you cleaned up.” He begins pulling me towards a car I’ve never seen before. I twist and turn, to get one last look at the granary. Richard drags me forward and pushes me into the back seat of the car, speaking as he does.

“What in the world were you doing under there?” Once he gets me comfortably arranged in the back seat of his car he goes around and hops into the driver’s seat. The car is idling so he puts it into drive and shoots off. The vibration of the washboard road lulls me into a fitful sleep.

A few hours later we are sitting in Richard’s kitchen as the light slowly fades behind the horizon. Richard puts a beer in front of me, goes around to the other side of the table, and sits down. The table is a portable card table that shakes so badly when he sits that I must grab my beer. I keep my hands wrapped around it, relishing the coolness, then pop the top and take a

drink. We both look around the room quietly. His house is prefab, with a large concrete porch out front. The swamp cooler fights the continuous downhill battle of trying to cool the house without all of the cold air escaping.

Richard and I played together when we were kids. It was only really one summer, but we spent it together. Some of my fondest memories from childhood in my father's town were with Richard. Now his face is a map of wrinkles and he is permanently tanned dark brown. His hair is just long enough to look scraggly. He wears a green baseball cap that looks about as old as he is.

Richard takes a chug of his beer, leans back in his chair and finally meets my eye. I can tell he's nervous, but I keep quiet. After a moment he speaks.

"What the hell possessed you to get under the granary? Were you looking for something?" He takes another pull on his beer.

"I was looking for something, but it's not there." I suck down half my beer and put it back on the table. I'm a lot thirstier than I expected.

"Is it true, what your dad always said?" Richard looks embarrassed.

"What's that?"

"Your mom's gay right?" He leans forward as he asks this

"Yes."

"Your dad always said that she'd pass it on to you." He sits back once he's finished, pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and lights up. This is like a visual period on the end of his sentence, and I finally realize what he was nervous about.

"My father had no clue what he was talking about, but he kept on talking nonetheless."

We both grope for some way to break the silence, I come up with something first.

"Are you married?"

“Divorced. I married Teri from school but we fought all the time. About four years into our marriage we both realized we hated each other. She wanted to stick it out, thought maybe we could change somehow, but I wasn’t up for it. I just realized one day that you only have to stick with people you hate if they are family, and she was only family on paper. If I got rid of that paper then we could both walk away. We met with Bishop a few times so he could try and talk us into staying together, but my heart wasn’t in it.” He hides his sadness below a veil of uncaring hardness, and changes the subject.

“Did your uncle tell you about your dad?”

“That was my uncle?”

“Yeah, that was your dad’s brother Vaughn. He runs around telling everyone that your dad left him the house, but your dad didn’t leave no will or nothing like that. By all rights the house should be yours, but since you weren’t around nobody really challenged him.”

“What happened with my dad?”

“After your mamma took off with you your dad tried to forget. He went on with his work and life just like nothing ever happened. This only lasted a couple of years. After awhile all the gossip got to him, so he up and left. One day he was there at work, the next day he was nowhere to be found. He left almost everything he had in the house and drove away. The house stayed empty for about ten years, and then he returned. Just like he’d left, one day he just walked into Pete’s like he’d never been gone. He ordered a beer and sat down with all the guys.

Everybody was happy to see him, but we quickly realized that he wasn’t the same man as when he’d left. A couple of weeks later he told everyone that he had discovered a door in his basement that hadn’t been opened since his great grandpa was alive. He told us all that it led to a complex set of tunnels that stretched for miles under the town. He said that it was the biggest discovery in

hundreds of years, and that he was going to write a book and map it out. He promised everyone that the tourism alone would make everyone rich.” Richard lights another cigarette off the one he’d just finished and continues.

“A few weeks later Bill Peterson found him in his basement. When Bill asked him why he was there your dad said that one of the tunnels led him to the basement. Your father was real excited and told Bill that the tunnels led to everybody’s basements. Bill got real angry and forcefully removed him from his premises. After that your dad covered up all his windows and stopped coming out of his house. The strange thing is, no one ever went in. No one brought food or anything. Somehow he was getting food and water, but none of us could figure out how. This went on for about three years, and then one day he just came out, said he had mapped the tunnels for the last three years and still hadn’t found an end to them. He said they must go on forever.” Richard takes a drag and then exhales. He stares into the smoke like it is revealing the past and licks his lips.

“What happened then?” I leaned forward in my chair.

“For some odd reason your dad had always taken a liking to me. Even when you and I were kids he would sit and talk about stuff with me that adults usually don’t talk to kids about. Well, one day he came over to my house, he had a whole box of big rolled up pieces of paper. He kept looking around him, like someone would spot him. I asked him if he wanted to come in, he peeked inside the house and asked me where Teri was. I told him she was asleep and he seemed to calm down. He stood outside for a moment, and then came inside. He was very excited when he came in and he started telling me how he had decided to let me in on the deal. He took some of his papers out of the box and unrolled them on the table. They were all complex maps of these tunnels and they really creeped me out. He had worked really hard on these; I mean it was three

years of mapping work. I stared at all the intricate lines and passages and I couldn't believe that anybody could be that crazy." Richard crushed out his cigarette and leaned back. He fidgeted a moment and then pulled another out and lit up.

"What was the plan, the one that he wanted to let you in on?" My voice scratches in my throat.

"He wanted us to move down there. He told me all about how much nicer it was down there, how much better our lives could be. He explained that the cave had three distinct sections. The first was the nature section, which he said was exactly like you imagine a cave. The next was the urban, which was made out of square concrete tunnels covered with graffiti. The final, and this was the weirdest, was room after room of decorated rooms like you'd find in a house, hallways and doors and the whole nine yards. He said that the further back he explored these rooms the older the decoration style got, like he was going back in time."

"I told him that maybe I would go see them with him. He got real excited when he heard that. I figured it wouldn't do any harm. He stood up and walked to the door. I followed him and was just putting on my coat when he told me that there was only one small problem, not a big thing he said, but he thought something else was living down there. I asked him what it was and he said he'd never seen it, but he knew it could control mosquitoes. The mosquitoes would sometimes come out and move things around, as if commanded by a higher intelligence. Thousands and thousands of them would cover an object until it was nothing but a black mass of crawling mosquitoes, and then they would push, pull, and fly until they got the object where they wanted it."

"Did you go?"

“I couldn’t. I told your dad to go get some rest, these were all just dreams. He was real upset. He called me a coward and stormed out. That was the last time we spoke.” Richard looks down, so our eyes can’t meet. He’s ashamed.

“Why didn’t you go?”

“I was a coward. Your dad was right. I thought he was crazy. I knew logically that none of it was real, but when he showed me the maps and told me about the mosquitoes I started to doubt. What if he took me down into his basement and there really was a door that led to endless tunnels? The world is full of strange shit and I really didn’t want to see those tunnels if he was right.” Richard takes the last gulp of his beer and sets it on the table and continues. “He was found dead in his front yard. When they did the autopsy they discovered a tumor the size of a fist inside of his brain.”

A few hours later and I’m lying in the bed Richard made for me thinking about my father’s life. It is his insanity that I’m really afraid of. Tunnels, water, holes, Shrines under my bathroom sink, what’s the difference? For the first time since coming out from under the sink I’m less afraid of what I’ve brought back and more afraid for my own sanity.

I close my eyes and think about Akiko. Did I lose her because I’m losing me? Suddenly Steve’s words pop into my head. Something about be careful not to mistake someone else’s door for your own. He’s right, and so is Richard. I’ve mistaken my father’s door for my own and strange shit happens in this crazy world all the time. Hell, even my father was right. If it looks like a duck, it probably is.

The unfamiliar sounds of Richard’s house lull me into sleep.

I’m dreaming I’m back under the granary. I can smell the stench of rot and feel the insects crawling on me. This time I’m on my back and my eyes are closed. I rub my hands over

the sand, it is cold, not the warm sand of the desert I expected. I open my eyes and find that I'm no longer under the granary; I'm sitting in a deep hole. Far above me is a round disc of light, the opening. The sun is shining bright way above me, but its rays do not reach the bottom of the hole. Down here I am in darkness. I keep my eyes glued to the disc of light above me and listen. Small things are moving all around me. Crawling cracking and popping, moving over and under me, coming out from under the ground to sit on me, and stretch out their wings. My whole body is about to start thrashing and shaking from fear when I notice a person peeking over the edge of the hole. I hear the rattling of paper. It is the Paper-Haired God. He opens his mouth and a torrent of water shoots out. Why is he here?

The water hits me in the face and the things crawling over me scurry to get away. The water coming from his mouth is nonstop, like a faucet filling a tub. Soon the water is an inch deep and I relax. The insects crawl on to me in order to avoid the water, but this is a temporary fix, soon we will all drown here, all of us cicadas. I'm not afraid, the Paper-Haired God doesn't want to kill me, he wants to show me something.

The water rises to my ears. I lift my nose as high as I can but the water keeps getting higher and higher. I should get up, I think to myself, but my body doesn't react. I lie there until the water covers my face. The small face of the Paper-haired God distorts as the water overtakes me.

I can't find the walls. I am no longer in a hole; I'm floating in perfect green. The Paper-Haired God is floating in front of me. His legs are tucked up under him and he seems much smaller than I remember him. Red strings come out of every one of his pores and wrap around me. They pull me slowly toward him, he is chanting

They'll eat up your love

They'll take it for me

There's nothing here

There's nothing here

Help me, help me

Hurry up!

If you leave me

I will drown

I try to grab onto him but he is gone. I can see the sunlight shining through the water so I head in that direction. I break the surface. The water stretches to the horizon in all directions. Within the depths I can see him, his paper hair flowing out behind him.

I startle awake. I'm not sure what time it is. The room is completely dark. I let out a sigh and relax my body. I'm back where I started. I know I left something in the other world, I just don't know where to go to find my way back.

I close my eyes and rehash the events of the last few days. When I first came out from under the sink I realized I wasn't in the same place I'd left. The next day there was a puddle of green water on the bathroom floor. The day after that the leak had moved into the wall. When the plumber broke down the wall he couldn't find a leak, just a white crust of salt. Akiko left me the next morning and I went out for a walk. I heard a huge splash behind me and then Steve hit me with his car.

Water.

The one thing that unites all of these things is water. Just now I was dreaming about water. Green water.

I shoot up in bed. I've been missing clues this whole time! The Uji River. It was the last thing I remembered when I was under the sink. The puddle on the floor, the salt on the pipes, all of it was from the Uji river. How could I have been so stupid? This isn't my home, I need to go back to Japan.

I pull myself out of bed and head into Richard's kitchen to find the phone. I find the number for the airport in the phonebook and dial the numbers. A few minutes (and 2000 dollars) later and I have a flight booked for the next day. I go back to my room and try to get a few more hours of sleep.

The next day I thank Richard for everything and we walk out together. I sit down in the old Reliant and try to turn it over, but it just groans. I've sucked the life out of it. I lay my head on the steering wheel.

"Sounds like your starter, or maybe the alternator." Richard comes over and looks under the hood. I look at my watch and grimace, I have about three hours to get to the airport and check in. I don't have time to fix the car.

"Richard, I'm in a bit of a hurry, I know it's a long drive, but I need you to take me out to the airport. If you do I'll give you this car. It's got a Hemi." Richard lets out a small laugh and looks at me.

"You officially have the oldest Hemi running, or recently running. Come on I'll give you a ride."

8

~Vagabond~

Temples.

That is what I'm thinking about. My head resting on the headrest and my body crushed into the small airline seat. Most Japanese temples are built on mountains and they are only approachable by a long stone staircases. When I was young I always hated these steps. By the time I reached the top my whole body would burn as if I had just run a mile and I would be covered in sweat. I complained loudly one day and Auntie Keiko explained that the stairs were made in order to help separate the sacred from the mundane. By the time you get to the top you are tired, but you feel like you have truly worked to leave the regular world behind. If it was easy to walk into a temple then its importance would be lost.

I can't help but think of this flight as serving a similar purpose. When I step off the plane I will be entering another world, one that few people in America can understand and, when I return, it will happen in reverse. I live in two kingdoms.

The Boeing 777 hums to life. The plane holds 450 passengers and this flight nearly full. People shove suitcases into overhead bins, push past each other, and try for some semblance of comfort. The seat next to me is empty, a rare and beautiful thing on a trans-pacific flight. I shove my backpack under the seat in front of me and flip through the AAttractions magazine. It's been four hours since I arrived at the airport and I've been marking time with pages. The magazine has a few articles about classy hotels and restaurants, plus places to go when in Brussels or Paris, but the bulk of the magazine is ads for duty free shopping. Strange and useless objects, like hot dog bun toasters and scissors that cut pizza, are sprinkled between brand name perfumes, handbags, and jewelry.

After everyone has found their seats the cabin begins to pressurize. The last traces of desert air are filtered out of the plane. It will be nothing but recycled air for the next 11 hours.

The screen at the front of the cabin lights up and soon the pre-flight announcements are droning on, spoken in Japanese and then English, by an attendant who obviously has many years training in looking as plastic as possible. She's wearing the regular JAL uniform, blue business jacket and skirt with a scarf tied around her neck. JAL and American Airlines share these flights, so both languages are given the same amount of airtime. I stare at the flight attendant's grainy face on the screen and try to imagine what she would look like without her work face on.

Unfortunately, the JAL image, plastered smile and all, makes it impossible to look past the company and see the human. Perhaps it is for the best that their humanity is hidden, I couldn't think of a worse job.

The plane taxis out onto the runway and takes off. I look across the empty seat to my left at the only other person in my row, a woman about my age, early to mid thirties, and smile. She bows slightly and turns to look out the window. A small golden earring hangs delicately from her pinched earlobe. In front of me an American and a Japanese are having the what do you do conversation. The American man is leaving Japan after a short business trip and he tells the Japanese man that he found Japanese culture to be "Cute." The Japanese man smiles then tells his wife in Japanese that the man next to him has no idea what it means to be Japanese. This is a conversation I've grown tired of.

Two hours later and my feet have swollen to nearly twice their size. I get up and walk around, hoping to get some of my blood circulating. I think about all those old sci-fi books where the lone spaceman floats over the earth missing the blue skies and the green trees. The truth is the earth gets lonely without us. It wants us as much as we want it. The pull of that desire makes all the blood collect in the lowest parts of our body. Perhaps that's what gravity really is, the manifestation of loneliness.

Back at my seat I slowly drift into a fitful sleep filled with memories of the first time I left America. The memories replay and suddenly I am once again in Aunty Keiko's house for the first time.

Her house smells nothing like my own, it smells of earth and sky. It is not the domain of my mother or father. Gone is the scent of my father's cigar smoke and the air freshener sprays my mother uses to cover up the smoke.

Although my mother assures me we will leave for Japan as soon as she gets out of the hospital it feels as if this is the house I will spend the rest of my life in. It's been two days since my mother kissed the strange lady and we've been here away from father ever since. The strange dark-haired lady is Keiko, but mother told me to call her Aunty Keiko. My mother says she's known Aunty Keiko for awhile and that is why she kept going to the city.

The house looks nothing like anything I've ever seen before. I know all of the objects individually, but they are used in ways I'm not used to, as if the whole house was set up by someone who only partially understood the meaning of all the objects. Maybe she understands the hidden meanings of things, and we don't.

I sit up in bed and turn on my bedside lamp. The charm Aunty Keiko gave me is sitting on my bed table; I pick it up and inspect it for the thousandth time. She told me what the symbols said when she gave it to me but I've forgotten again, what really attracts me is the absolute foreign quality of the object. It is something that never existed in my mind, conscious or subconscious, until a few days ago. Just like Aunty Keiko this charm opens up the world far beyond the field next to our house. This is an artifact of a world I can only imagine, the world Aunty Keiko calls home.

I put the charm back on the nightstand, turn off the light and lie back down.

The day before we leave Mother agrees to let me see my father. Her wounds are still healing and I can tell that she is uncomfortable taking me there, but I really want to see him. I will spend a few hours with him and then Mother will pick me up and we will go to Japan. I close my eyes and try to imagine Japan but all that comes to mind is the charm and this house. The stories Auntie Keiko tries to tell me are too hard to follow, and her strange way of speaking make it even harder to understand.

The drive back to Laven is hot, but nobody makes a move to turn on the air conditioner. I'm sitting between my mother and Auntie Keiko. My mother drives and Auntie Keiko stares silently out the window. Her eyebrows are knit with worry. My mother is explaining everything to me one more time.

“I wanted to leave earlier, Jason, but I had to get permission from the government to go to Japan. When we get there I'm going to be a teacher! I will teach little children like you English.” She rolls the window down a crack to let air in as she speaks. Her short blond hair is ruffled slightly by the wind. I look over at Auntie Keiko, but I can only see the side of her face and most of that is obscured by the long black hair falling over her cheek. Today she kept it down instead of putting it up into a bun like she usually does. Her kimono, a word I'd been taught recently, covers her body all the way down to her hands, but she doesn't seem hot.

I reach out and touch the skin of Auntie Keiko's finger. She looks over and smiles like the sun coming out from behind the clouds. Her skin feels normal. My mother continues beside me.

“We will live as a family, you, me, and Keiko.” She smiles down at me showing the tips of her teeth. Her blue eyes sparkle.

“Are you and Aunty Keiko in love?” The question sits quietly in the warm air of the car for a moment before my mother responds.

“I love her very much Jason.”

“More than Daddy?” This question is also met with a short silence. My mother’s brow knits and finally she answers.

“Your dad is having a hard time, Jason, and he never should have hit me. People should never hit each other, but deep down inside he is a good man. He’s your father and he loves you, that is what is really important.” Part of me feels like my mother is lying, but I ignore it. She continues. “I care about your father, but Keiko is the love of my life. The person I want to be with forever.”

“Do you love me and want to be with me forever?”

She smiles at this question and rubs my hair. “You bet. So does your Aunty Keiko.” I look over to Aunty Keiko. She smiles down at me and her brown eyes are almost closed. I reach out and touch her hand again. She takes my hand in hers and we drive on in silence.

Father doesn’t seem to like the situation as much as mother and Aunty Keiko. He answers the door and I run and put my arms around his waist. I breathe in deeply the smoky acidic smell of his clothes. He does not react to me; instead he focuses his gaze on my mother. When we drove into Laven we stopped and met Officer Thompson and he came with us to meet Daddy. Mother returns Father’s icy stare, and the silence seems to stretch into eternity. After a moment my mother speaks up.

“We’ll be back to get him at eight. Please make sure he’s ready, we have a plane to catch.” My father doesn’t respond, he turns his back and walks further into the house. Mother leans down and kisses me once distractedly.

“We’ll be here to get you in awhile, Jason. Make sure to have a fun time with your father.”

“I will Mommy, I love you.”

“I love you too, darling.” She kisses me lightly on the cheek, then turns and walks down the path towards the driveway. I watch until she and Aunty Keiko have driven away then turn and follow my father into the house.

I find him sitting at the kitchen table with Uncle Al. Uncle Al is eating, but my dad has pushed his plate away and lit up one of his cigars. He is wearing a dirty white shirt and a pair of jean overalls. Uncle Al is dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. The pale sun shines in through the kitchen window and reflects off the table.

“I told you not to get messed up with her.” Uncle Al’s shoveling food into his mouth while he speaks.

“Shut up Al. How was I supposed to know she’d turn out...” He looks up at me and stops in the middle of his sentence. Uncle Al picks up right when he stops.

“I’m just saying you was warned, that’s all.” My father ignores him and speaks directly to me.

“Come over here boy and get something to eat.” I walk over to the table and pick up a slice of bread and start to bite it.

“You want some peanut butter or something on that?” I look at him and nod. He stands up and takes the peanut butter out of the cabinet. He brings it over and uses the knife that was in the butter to spread some peanut butter on my bread. Mother would be very mad if she saw him using the same knife in the butter and the peanut butter, but I decide not to say anything. Once he’s done he hands me the bread and I sit at one of the empty chairs. My dad picks up his half

smoked cigar and puffs deep on it to bring the cherry back to life. The space above the table is filled with smoke.

“You looking forward to Japan, son?” He ashes his cigar.

“Kind of. I wish you was going with us.”

“I don’t. I don’t want no part of that damn country. Many Americans died to protect people like you and me from that country son, including your grandpa.”

“I know Daddy.” I don’t know, but it’s easier to agree.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into your mommy’s head, but I hope she gets over it and comes home real quick, for your sake.” For the first time in my life my father seems defeated.

“Why for my sake Daddy?”

“Because she’s sick, son. They got doctors can prove it. She’s sick and she’ll pass it on to you.” My dad’s green eyes sparkle with anger and I start crying. I try to block the tears, try not to let them out, but they spill down my cheeks unchecked.

“Mama’s sick Daddy? Is that why you hurt her?” He puts his hand on my shoulder. His eyes are sparkling in the light.

“Not physical sick, son, mental sick. There’s something wrong with her brain. All I’m sayin is you need to be careful or she’ll pass it to you. I’d take it to court and try to get custody of you, but the court would side with her, the court always sides with a baby’s mama.” My crying is uncontrollable I put my arm up over my eyes and my peanut butter bread falls face down on the table. After a moment my dad picks me up and holds me in his lap. He tries to quiet me for a bit.

“I’m sorry, son. The world is a hard place. Forget about it and enjoy being a kid. I’m gonna miss you boy.” His voice cracks with sadness and that makes my tears come stronger and harder.

Later, as I'm driving away with Mother and Aunty Keiko, my dad stands on the porch and watches us go. I turn around backwards in the seat and try to memorize every aspect of his appearance. His short sandy blond hair blows lightly in the dusty wind. His hands are in his pocket and he's slightly hunched over. I watch until he is nothing but a small speck on the horizon.

On the plane two worlds collide. There is no distinct area where one begins and the other ends and I slowly realize that there never were two worlds to begin with. There is one world with two languages and two people reaching over me and kissing quietly while the vibration of the plane sends me into sleep. The quiet hum surrounding me contains sounds that have meaning, and sounds that I'm slowly beginning to recognize, but that still hold no meaning to me. I lie on the brink of sleep and listen for the words I recognize in the new language.

I wake up slowly. My legs are tingling so I get up and walk around. I stop at the door near my seat and look out the small foggy window. We are flying over Kamchatka and from up here at 40,000 feet, nothing moves. The sheer height locks everything into stagnancy. Below me is nothing but flat land. The snow is a white page with a river drawn across it, helter skelter, as if by the hand of a child.

I often think back to that last moment with my father, when he held me on his lap and told me to enjoy being a kid. I think those were the last loving words Father spoke to me, before the abusive letters and his mental break down. I still can't help wondering what we would've said to each other. What could I tell him about my life? That I'm homeless now? That a few days ago I had a job, a house, a wife and a dog? That now I've got my wallet and a backpack with two

changes of clothes and a paperback book? That I'm free to go anywhere? When I think about it, I can't tell which life is heavier.

Somewhere in Japan Akiko is lying in bed and I'm out here in this eternal white. The night stretches out from Akiko in all directions and I'm following one eternal day. If the plane were to go down now I would welcome my new home, it's just as good as any others I can imagine.

There never was a gate in Laven. It took me all these years to realize it. Every time I climbed into some small dark area I was looking for a gateway that would somehow reconnect me to the world I thought I knew, but there never were two worlds. Just my poor mother, who grew up knowing that she liked women, but forced herself to be with my father so she could seem normal to her friends and family. Auntie Keiko freed her from Laven. Unfortunately, no one could free my father. Laven was the cancer that rotted his brain.

Once I'm back in my seat I sit down and close my eyes. I really am tired. A few minutes later and I'm asleep again.

I wake up just as we start our descent into Kansai airport. The landscape out my window is all ocean. It's still light outside. I've chased the sun halfway around the earth. I can imagine the weather outside, the heat on my body and the moisture in my skin.

We make the descent and land safely. I stand up and collect my backpack from the seat next to me. I don't have anything to collect from the overhead bins so I push my way up to the front of the plane. I stand and wait as passengers shuffle dejectedly off the plane.

We all disembark and move through the grey halls of the Kansai airport, making our way to the small desks that stand between us and Japan. There are two types of passengers here. The excited, who walk quickly in order to make it to the gates before anyone else, and the tired, who

shuffle dejectedly down the corridor, hoping to eventually get back to their hotels and houses and fall into their beds. The first group is made up mostly of people who are entering Japan as tourists. The second are returning, some happily, others full of anguish.

I walk behind both groups, slower even than the zombie returnees in front of me. The corridor, stretching in front of me endlessly, is the most neutral shade of gray invented. Even the carpet is gray. We are on the second floor and windows line both sides of the hallway. Those on my right look out onto the runway; to the left is a view of the airport beyond customs. The worst part of this purgatory between countries is that it has no smell.

The large customs room comes into view on my left. It is on the floor below us and it is filled with people. Passengers are all lined up like cattle around baggage claim carousels and in front of customs desks. I walk over to the baggage claim and wait.

I stand at the baggage claim for the next twenty minutes watching each bag fall dangerously down the metal shoot. A young girl with shoulder length brown hair and green eyes stares up at me, her eyes tired. She can't be more than 13, but I can't find anyone near enough to be her parents. I give her a smile. She cocks her head to the side and watches me.

"You're in the wrong place." Her eyes are glued to my own. I look around me, trying to figure out what she means. I'm between her and the conveyor belt; she probably wants my space.

"I'm sorry." I turn and walk further down the row, opening up my space for her. She watches me as I go, not moving an inch. Finally, she pulls out a cell phone and walks away from the baggage claim.

Once I turn back to the conveyor belt my baggage has already come down and passed me. I wait for it to come back around and grab it off the belt. The lines for customs are right behind me. I jump into the shortest and wait my turn. As I get closer to the desk I take in the employee

behind it. His hair is parted perfectly on the side and his black uniform doesn't have a wrinkle on it. His is a job that should require compassion, but it rarely does.

Once it's my turn I walk up and hand him my passport. He looks me over and then inspects the picture on my passport.

"Where are you coming from?"

"America." I always get nervous at customs. The amount of power each employee holds is enough to corrupt.

He looks me over one more time.

"What were you doing out there?"

"My wife was going to school."

"Where's your wife?" He does not ask with interest, he wants to catch me doing something wrong.

"Probably with her mother, but she's not my wife anymore, we're separated."

"I'm sorry to hear that." He's not sorry. He stamps my passport and motions me on. I walk through the path marked "nothing to declare" and step into the airport. A man runs past me and into the arms of a waiting lover. They kiss and chat nervously. They haven't finished building the structure of their relationship. Things are still new enough to allow uncomfortable silences and nervous conversation. No one is here to meet me, so I move further into the airport. The first thing that strikes me when I step out of customs is the smell and moisture. The sea floats in the air at Kansai international airport and to me it is the strongest welcome I could hope for.

9

~Symbiosis~

The vibration of the train makes me nostalgic for my youth. All around me passengers have their noses in books or they are quietly dozing off. A young girl is sitting with her mother in the seats across from me. She peeks at me every few minutes. I have to switch trains three times, but after three and a half hours I finally step out into the Uji air. A ten minute walk and I'm praying at the *Byoudo* Temple. Behind this temple the Uji River flows ceaselessly towards the sea. I remember I was amazed at the boundless nature all around me when I was growing up, but now the place just looks like a cheap attempt at drawing in tourists. Still, this feels right. My mother's essence lives here, and I breathe her in with each time I take in air. I think I've made the right decision.

I'm not sure when or how I fell in love with Japan. When we first arrived here my mother was the only thing I could cling to. Her unconditional love kept me afloat. It was through her eyes that I began to fall in love with my new world. She adored everything about Japan, the cities, the shrines and temples, everything. At first I couldn't see it. I wanted nothing more than Laven, but as I began to understand the language living in Japan became an adventure. Every place seemed strange and interesting. Now it looks like home.

I haven't been to the Uji River since I was a child and everything looks much smaller. The sun is high in the sky and the sound of the river overpowers the birds. The benches are all empty and Genji still sits on his pedestal with Murasaki. These two seemed gigantic when I was a kid, but now they look old and weathered. Small splotches of bird shit cover their hair and clothes. Still, Murasaki's stare is no less strong.

I stop for a moment at the statues. A few couples sit on the benches giggling and passing the time. Now that I'm here my body and mind are completely relaxed. I've made it to where I need to go, now I just have to do the work. The fear strikes me once I make my way to the top of

the stairs. At first I was afraid they wouldn't be there, but nothing has changed. I sit down on the first step and try to dispel my fear. The current looks strong. This is a trip I might not make it back from. I close my eyes and imagine Akiko's face. Three nights ago I was cuddled next to her. Maybe this is what she meant when she said she wanted me to remember her in happiness. She's afraid for my life, and with good reason.

A young couple is sitting on a bench a little ways down the path from me. Their backs are to me and they seem to be imbedded in their conversation. I stand up and take a few steps down the staircase. The moment my foot touches the third step the strains of the couple's conversation double and triple until my ears are filled with a million voices. I turn around and the world is in absolute chaos.

It seems that every possible occurrence is happening right now. An infinite number of images move and jump in front of me. Every space on the steps is covered with ghost images of the infinite number of people that could be here. In one image there is no river, in another there is no stairs. I catch flashes of love, sex and violence. The roar is so deafening that I have to bring my hands to my ears. My hands are every possible size at once.

My brain is starting to over load. I close my eyes, but the constant roar of sounds still pushes its way in. I'm frozen to the spot and just as I'm about to scream, I feel a light tug on my chest. I look down and notice a red string coming out just above my heart and trailing into the water. Something is tugging on the other end of the string. I grab onto it and follow it down the steps towards the river. Soon I'm taken by the current.

The water seeps in. It penetrates my pores and turns my insides into green liquid. The water is the cold arms of a river god cradling me and sending me further and further into the abyss. I'm sinking into the same green that Akiko's leech child floated in. I am the leech child,

born from a union that was unnatural and discarded into a world I didn't understand. This is my homecoming.

Something brushes past my face. I grab it and bring it close to my face. The red string stretches from my hand into the depths. I grab onto it and pull myself down. It is my guide in this primordial ooze; it stretches into the dark below me. Small black specks float in the green around me and are pushed around by slight waves. The waves are sound. They enter my mouth with the water and I can taste centuries of incense. They enter my ears and I can hear ancient court music. I've found my way to the shrine once again.

As I pull myself down to the bottom of the river I notice that the red string is buried under the wet mud. I pull lightly and the perfect green is disturbed by swirls of black mud. Slowly a door opens on the bottom of the river bed. The opening behind the door is so dark I'm not even sure there's anything there. I try to feel inside, but my lungs are about to give out, so I do the only thing I can. I step inside.

I'm gulping in huge mouthfuls of stagnant air. Water drips from my clothes onto the dusty floor creating small muddy spots. I'm in a perfectly rectangular hallway that leads into darkness. Behind me, from the direction I came, gray light seeps in and lights the stone walls. I turn around to see where the light is coming from. A sandy beach stretches out to either side of the opening. The sea flows all the way to the horizon. The tunnel I'm standing in is carved into the side of a hill or mountain. There's no door. I turn back to the dark interior and try to see the end of the tunnel. It seems to open up into a square room at the end of the hallway. I'm in a tomb, the kind often found dug into hillsides near temples.

The walls are covered in scribbles. When I look closer I realize that they are crude drawings. Childish landscapes and portraits cover every single inch of the hall. As I move further

towards the tomb the drawings become more intricate and skillful. Some of the landscapes are desert scenes and others seem almost tropical. I recognize these scenes. Quite a few of them are Auntie Keiko and the rest are my mother and father.

The first thing I notice as I enter the room at the end of the hallway is that it contains no coffin. The room is completely empty except a small desk in the corner. A young boy sits with his back to me. He is hunched over some work that he obviously finds very important.

“Wait a second.” He obviously doesn’t want me to disturb him. I stay quiet. The portraits and landscapes in this room are better still, although all of them still have a childishness about them.

“What do you want?” He turns around and his face is illuminated by the thin gray light of the beach. He is me. I’m staring at a young version of myself.

“What are you doing here?” I’m shocked and this is the only thing I can think to ask.

“Who are you?” He doesn’t seem to recognize me.

“I’m... well never mind who I am, I’ve come to get you out of here.”

“I don’t need your help. I’ve already sent help. My double should be returning any day to take me back.” He seems completely confident. His clothes are the same clothes I was wearing when I almost drowned in the river.

“What happened? How long have you been here?”

“Why do you want to know?” He turns around in his chair and gets more comfortable. I feel simultaneously drawn to him and repulsed by him.

“I’m just curious.”

“I came swimming down here looking for this underwater kingdom. While I was down here a door opened and I stepped through, but I was only halfway in when the door slammed on

me. It split me in half. I saw the other half of me swim back to the top and I've been down here ever since."

"How long ago was that?"

"About three months ago." He picks distractedly at his fingernails. I step back a few paces and pretend to look at the pictures on the wall.

It's been thirty years since I almost drowned in the Uji River but for him it's only been three months. When I was under the sink for three days I lost three months.

I turn back to him and hold my hand out.

"Your double couldn't make it, so he sent me instead, but I think we better hurry."

"How can I trust you?"

"Your double told me to tell you that Aunty Keiko is waiting and we shouldn't make her wait." His face lights up at the mention of Aunty Keiko's name.

"You know Aunty Keiko?"

"Yes and she's waiting for you, let's go see her." He grabs my hand and follows me out of the tomb. I can't tell him that I'm his double. I don't want him to know how I've wasted our life. Outside, the light is much stronger. We are in the same cavern I found under my sink. The tomb is dug into the same mountain that the shrine is on. To our left is the stone staircase.

Ancient Japanese court music fills the air and the Paper Haired God is slowly descending the stairs. He is looking straight ahead with his eyes on the sea. His paper hair rustles in the breeze. I have no idea how to get out of here. I scan the beach, looking for some kind of clue, but nothing is there.

The Paper-Haired God has made his way down the stairs and is now walking along the beach. He stops in front of us. This is the closest I've been to him. His face is covered with some

kind of mask in the shape of an animal skull. Beneath the sockets is only darkness. He opens his mouth and releases a stream of water. I try to step back but my feet have sunk in the sand. I reach back and pick up my double. The spray hits me in the face and suddenly I'm immersed in water. The current is dragging me along. I'm back in the river.

My double feels like he's going to slip out of my hands so I hold him tighter. His body feels like dough. He is melting. My arms push through him and I can feel him seeping into every pore of my body. I look down and he is looking up at me. His face is framed in perfect green. Once again I'm reminded of Akiko's representation of the leech child. This is him. Like Izanagi I left him to float away on the river. He looks angry as his face collapses in on itself and melts slowly into my chest. Finally we are together. Finally we are

one. The sun cuts a large shaft in the water. I follow it towards the surface. How long have I been away? 3days? A week? At least I made it back. My head breaks the surface and I gasp for breath. I try to keep my head above water while I swim towards the bank. No one is around and the night sky is filled with stars. I pull myself out of the river and start walking down the path.

I'm soaked and covered in mud. Every muscle aches and my legs are exhausted. Every step I take sends a dull pain up my back. My head feels like it is so full that it will explode. I've never felt so complete, and so terrible in my life. I've been living as half a person for most of my life without even realizing it and now that I am whole again everything seems deceptively simple.

I'm angry and my anger fuels me. I break into a run and let out a guttural howl. It is a noise so loud I'm surprised that I made it. I can see an old woman peek out her window as I pass. I'm making a spectacle of myself. I'm leaving traces of myself in people's minds and that is just fine. I can't take Aunty Keiko's advice, I never could. I'm angrier than I've ever been. I'm angry

that I lost my house and car. I'm angry that I'll always be an outsider in the only place that feels like home. I'm angry at my father for the things he said about my mother. I'm angry that my father put the beliefs of his religion before his family. I'm angry that my mother died so early. I'm angry that Auntie Keiko had to hide her love for my mother from everyone around us. I'm angry at everyone I've ever known, but most of all I'm angry at myself. Why didn't I try to seek out my father? It was too easy to assume that he didn't want me anymore and ignore him. Why didn't I spend more time with my mother? I assumed she would always be there. Why couldn't I keep my life from falling apart?

The anger flows out of me and dissipates into the atmosphere leaving nothing but sadness in its wake. I was so afraid of living that I decided not to live. I let every piece of my life fall wherever it wanted to and now everything has drifted away from me. There's only one place that truly feels like home. Only one thing in the entire world that I want and my legs carry me all the way there.

The shrine is dark, but I can see lights on in the house. As I'm heading for the door I trip over something sticking out of the ground. I turn and notice a large square roped off. They must be preparing to build a stage for the annual dances. I can't help but be reminded of the first time I met Akiko. I turn back towards the house, stumble up to the door and knock.

Akiko's mother's eyes widen when she takes me in all wet and muddy in her entranceway. I can tell from her expression that she is unhappy to see me. Her hair is pulled back and she is wearing a green kimono. Her lips are set in a stern line and her eyes are ignited. Akiko is a few paces behind her, but I keep my focus on her mother.

I never asked Akiko's mother for permission to marry Akiko. Akiko wanted me to but I could never bring myself to do it. I knew that her mother would never approve, so I just gave up.

Even more than that, I actively hated Akiko's mother. I still do, but Akiko can't help who her mother is anymore than I can help who my father is. How can Akiko's mother ever accept me as a part of her family if I don't try?

My knees pop as I drop to the floor and bow.

"Please allow me to marry your daughter." Akiko lets out a shocked laugh. This is a stupid thing to say, considering we are already married, but I continue on anyway. "I know that you wanted Akiko to marry someone that was 100 percent Japanese in order for her to take over the shrine and I know you didn't agree with my mother and Aunty Keiko's lifestyle, and I disagree with you strongly on that point, but I respect you as Akiko's mother and I want to do everything I can to get your permission." I keep my head bowed low.

"This is stupid." Akiko's mother turns and walks down the hallway after spitting out these words. I stand up and look at Akiko. She's covering her mouth but I can tell she's trying not to giggle. Her eyes are full of tears and finally I feel like I'm home.

"What are you doing? You look terrible!" She lets out another giggle, then continues. "I'm sorry to laugh, but you surprised me. That was a ridiculous display; I think she's really angry."

"She's going to be really mad when I ask her to make up a futon from me to stay."

Akiko looks down at the floor. "I don't know about that, Jason."

"We're married. When we travel, we should stay in the same house."

The front door is still open and I can hear the wind blowing. A sound that reminds me of the first time I ever came to this shrine with Aunty Keiko. Now that I'm here, and I've made an idiot out of myself I'm not quite sure what to do. Akiko looks back down the hallway towards

her mother and I realize that I have to do something or she'll turn around and leave. I reach out and take her hand. It is smooth and dry.

“Come with me.” I pull gently on her hand.

“Where?” She's obviously confused.

“Just follow me. I want to show you something.” I lead her out into the shrine yard and over to the roped off square. When we first met you asked me if I saw anything inside. I was too scared to answer at the time, so now I think we should both find out together.”

“Come on, Jason, I gave up on that a long time ago. Besides, we're not allowed in.” She drops my hand, but I can tell from her slight smile that she likes the idea. I always longed for a place like this, where Akiko and I could just be ourselves without having to worry about culture or our families, and here it is. All I have to do is reach out and take her hand.

“Just because we grow up doesn't mean we need to lose all of our childish curiosity, does it?” I reach out and take her hand.

“Jason, I'm still not sure I want to be with you. However, the decision will be a lot easier to make now, for both of us. I think we've seen the worst parts of each other.” She speaks these words quietly, but doesn't resist when I take her hand.

“It's impossible for us to split up, we were made for each other.” I grip her hand tight. There are an infinite number of possibilities for me and Akiko. A million ways for things to go right, or wrong, but I have control. This may not be the same world I left when I went under the sink, but this world is mine now and I will do everything in my power to make sure that Akiko and I are together. “Now close your eyes, let's see what we can find on the other side.”

I wait to make sure her eyes are closed and then close my own. We slowly count to three, step over the rope and disappear.