200 Pieces : an excerpt

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200 PIECES

An Excerpt

by

LEVI TEAL

B.A., University of Colorado, 2003

A thesis submitted to the
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This thesis entitled:
Autograph Letters of Marcus Whitman From the Oregon Country in 1846
written by John William Doe
has been approved for the Department of Spanish and Portuguese

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Marcia Douglas

__________________

Jeffrey DeShell

Date________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
A B S T R A C T

Teal, Levi Christopher (MA, Creative Writing)

200 Pieces; An Excerpt

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Marcia Douglas

I have only assembled one puzzle in my life. It spanned several years and took three attempts. It featured Dick Tracy’s silhouette. Two or three others I have swept back into the box months after beginning. The puzzles were: Homer Simpson, Batman, tessellating crayons. This list may supersede my list of influences.

The seed for 200 Pieces was planted five years ago, when I read Juan Rulfo’s Pedro Paramo. Reading the text was like studying a painting, which has no beginning or end; the eye simply explores the canvas, jumping from one area of interest to another. At the end of Pedro Paramo, one has constructed in one’s mind a picture of the whole from pieces that sometimes seem incongruous out of context.

Pedro Paramo helped me understand what was already happening in my work, and helped me improve upon how and why I was jumping around in chronology. It suggested a proper framework for what I was already doing.

200 Pieces is not yet complete. The final draft will hopefully be comprised of about 200 single-spaced pages. It’s been important throughout the project not to exceed one page per piece. Turning a page in the middle of a piece breaks a two-dimensional rule that puzzles do not
break. This excerpt spans the first third of the entire work. One version of the thesis included pieces from only two storylines, but it seemed hollow, and did not represent the tone or scope of the whole. The first seventy-five pages aren’t supposed to feel complete in any way, but better represent the desired end product.

In many ways, *200 Pieces* is nothing innovative. Almost all novels are puzzles. Either the reader or the text itself assembles bits of information into a story or a character. I realized this early on, but continued the experiment, as it benefited my writing.

I am interested in works that are fragmentary, but can’t ultimately be resolved into a single, clear whole. Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* contains many disparate anecdotes that affect the atmosphere more than the plot or characters. None seem essential, but if they were cut, something would be lost. Winterson’s open-ended approach makes her story creative and ambivalent, whereas my approach may make *200 Pieces* too stable, or too tiresome. At present, *200 Pieces* could simply be a “regular” story cut up and shuffled. I am contemplating mixing in pages from other puzzle-novels, or perhaps omitting pieces that contain critical bits of story. The story has not yet gone this way because a resolution must be written before I can throw it out.

I have difficulty contextualizing my work. I feel writing is my job, and contextualizing my work is mostly a job for others. I do know what I like to read, though. Perhaps my writing can be contextualized by association. I do not like to read: Annie Proulx, Dan Brown, Kazuo Ishiguro, Nick Hornby. I do like to read: Tom Robbins, most of Thomas Pynchon, a lot of

While the jumbled jigsaw structure makes the project more demanding, I wanted to write something that was easy to read and enjoy. This was one of the motivating forces behind the omniscient narrator, who, though modeled after the puzzlecutter in piece #5, does not play tricks so much as clarifies.

I am still having trouble with character, mostly Paz’s. My protagonists frequently function as vehicles for the brighter, more interesting peripheral characters.

The story is not functioning as much like a puzzle—like the one described in piece #5—as it perhaps should. There aren’t instances of confusion, where a reader instinctively links two pieces that seem to fit at first but eventually do not. There is one feint I am saving for the end, but that may be the only thus far.

Titles of the individual pieces function best when they tie one piece to another, or tie the piece into a central theme. Many of them are sill underdeveloped or corny.

I am interested in how playing with the chronology flattens time. Almost makes it meaningless. I’ve considered making some of the events or objects progress linearly through the story, even as the chronology jumps around. For example, perhaps Paz’s shoes deteriorate
linearly through the novel, so that if the reader organized the pieces in chronological order, the condition of the shoes would fluctuate randomly. I will not be able to make this decision until I am nearer the end.
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CORNER PIECES
Small Explosions

In the twenty-fifth hour of the twenty-fifth day of the twenty-fifth month of whatever year the Olympic Movement voted against offering a jigsaw competition, Paz Playfair was born five miles above the Earth’s surface. Exactly twenty-five years later, to the minute, he received from one Aurora Leading a parcel in the post, brown, tied with twine, white. Paz recognized Aurora’s handwriting and his heart fumbled a beat, which clattered into his liver, tumbled through his small intestine, and crashed into the scallops of his kneecaps. Her address—Paz had spent three years searching for it—was scrawled right there in the upper-left corner. No contact for three years and suddenly that parcel in the post, brown, tied with twine, white.

The heart had always murmured an uncustomary cadence. In his childhood, it wheezed and squished and whistled into the cold ends of stethoscopes across the state. Heart specialists shrugged at the harmless arrhythmia.

Aurora Leading drove in the fast lane with hoop earrings you could fit a fist through with her hair loose and her gum popping between whitewashed picket teeth. Paz sometimes took a ride with her. Quick lane changes and illegal shoulder driving made his heart race; she mistook the sound for engine trouble.

Severing the twine with his teeth, Paz unwrapped the package and found a small square card taped to a cardboard box, which clattered when shaken. The card was handmade from a quarter-sheet of typing paper: ‘Time again to engage, bring me the ring.’ The box was plain brown cardboard on which Aurora had stenciled simply: 200 Pieces. The jigsaw within was also handmade, and resembled more an old wooden puzzle than an ersatz modern cardboard puzzle cut into interlocking pieces by a machine.

In the college dormitory, Paz and Aurora spent many Saturday nights kneeling on
the rug amidst jigsaw scatter. By the time the puzzle was assembled, deep into Sunday morning, Paz, too, was restored, reconnected with that tusselheart, dizzybomb feeling she provoked. They photographed the completed puzzle, crashed—in the same room but separately—and woke in the early afternoon. She left before he woke, and he disassembled the puzzle alone, chucking the pieces into the box. During the week they seldom spoke. When Paz bought puzzles with more than 200 pieces, or of a higher level of difficulty, hoping for extra time together, she excused herself from that Saturday’s engagement and Paz assembled the puzzle solo. 200 was the limit, which could also be said of Aurora’s freeway behavior.

Aurora Leading had long ago sacrificed drawing, at an age when she was sketching sixteen year-old television stars, the occasional unicorn. Once, she exhibited her art for Paz in her dorm room, starkly lit with focused desk lamps. He perused them, crushing his sodden shirt with sweaty pits and thinking tongue her tongue her tongue her. She stood against the doorway with mantis arms. The boomsnap of her spearmint. Always spearmint. Never wound around a finger.

But from what Paz could tell of the pieces in his birthday parcel, they were all part of a recent ink-and-paper Aurora Leading creation. Perhaps her disappearance was due to a renewed and fierce interest in her art. That would explain it. Paz felt a bit of the old relief.

Aurora with her tight white shirts and tan arms, Aurora with her hair pinned up, Aurora with the skeet-shooting trophies and the motorcycle birthmark above her left hip. Aurora.

He secured the mail in a saddlebag and, on his motorcycle, puttered home through the wet streets of Rain City.
The sun rose cold over the eastern peaks and cast harsh orange light upon two hundred faces seated at twenty-five sticky public picnic tables protected by one hilltop shelter. The site was on hourly rental from the city. As he was freshly twenty-five years old, it was Paz’s Final Day of Initiation. He stood before the Body. They blinked into the sunrise or nested their eyes in cupped hands, preserved in waterproof gear and still as leftovers in a fridge, waiting for something to happen before whatever date was stamped on the undersides their feet.

No rain. First day in thirty.

Before the permanent shelter, they’d met in an old barn for their Sunday Gatherings, but the stink was too much and the hay made for sneezing. Before that, an airplane hangar served them well for some time, but was felled by a storm. Before that, one member cleaned house for a wealthy couple and had a key to, and free reign of, the wine cellar, so they Gathered there for a few months, but the Mystic often grew intense in his homilies, and bellowed into the cellar’s gloom, rattling the bottles, and the nervous housecleaner asked if they might find a new location. They did, but the housecleaner was ejected from the Body, and soon after could be found on the missing persons list at the county courthouse. Before that, they Gathered in the gymnasium of an elementary school where one member taught physical education until they were discovered and the teacher fired. Before that, they Gathered in a hotel meeting room until the manager stumbled into a sermon and from then on lent the room to a knitters’ guild.

The Mystic watched Paz from the back, leaning against a post. When Paz was younger, a madman with a gun burst in during a Gathering and so many members of the Body threw themselves onto the Mystic that he was nearly pulped, and the madman was restrained before he shot off his ammo or his mouth.
A boy named Duncan Pobud didn’t show up for his Final Initiation. They found him in the river. Lesomme Turrell, forty-eight, seceded from the Body and was walloped by a bus altered by six long-haired welders to resemble a gigantic mobile doobie. John Ty Brill took a job in Texas and left the Body with regrets. Weeks later he was pushed from a hotel window during a business trip to Reno. The Body attended his funeral. Darren Hackler left for reasons unknown but returned shortly in a wheelchair, legs absent. Shannon Slee left to chase men but, recurrently heartbroken, ultimately turned to chasing sixty Seconals with seven dollar Scotch.

Paz stared at the Body—through their transparent raingear. Many of the women in puffpaint sweatshirts and handmade wool hats had baked him cookies when he was wee. The men—in greasy jumpsuits, heavy flannel, or oxford-and-tie—had slumbered with Paz and his pals under the stars, showed them how to stack the kindling and sling the bear bag.

Paz stood at the podium, tapping his fingers throughout the silence that slowly turned awkward, a cottony wad in time’s mouth.

He folded his prepared material into his pocket. “Good people of the Body, I came prepared today to list the tasks I plan to perform as a full member, but I know now that I cannot complete them. I will likely be excommunicated to face plagues and famines, but I want you to know—”

The Mystic appeared at his shoulder and confiscated the microphone. “We hereby find you uncommitted to our Deity Who Is Capricious. Leave at once, heretic. We pray to our Deity Who Is Capricious that he will watch over you, but expect him to denounce your name and curse your head and the heads of your family.”

An outburst from the back, Maddox the Anus, “His family was cursed from the start.”
Paz’s mother plucked him from his booster seat. He had the foresight to seize his grilled cheese before she whisked him outdoors, strands of dirty blonde caught in the crunch of the sandwich. She took him around to the cellar door. “Green sky,” he said.

She set Paz on his feet. “Get a look. That’s amazing scientific phenomena.” A foot planted on the slope of the cellar door, ankle cupped in a white tennis shoe nook, and a lean body bent over the latch—iron clutch wrenched up barking. Every step, flex, and tuck a lithe cheerleader motion. Not until after the Procedure did Paz realize light feet were uncommon.

Harmonic wind chimes tinkled on the front steps, and again across the street, and again half a block away, and again a block away, all down the neighborhood stretch. Leaves snapped and shattered. Hidden in the wind, there was another noise, detectable not by ear but by foot upon the ground.

“What’s phenomena?”

“A phenomena is more than amazing, not quite a miracle.”

The thing coming across the corn coupled the clouds and the earth, and was shaped like a straw. Bits of airborne debris orbited the straw as it spun.

“It’s a big whirlygig.” He took a bite of sandwich.

“That’s right,” she said. “But instead of water, it’s made of spiral air. A whirlygig will spin your rubber ducky, but this whirlygig is called a tornado, and it’s dangerous.”

“It could kill me,” he said, chipmunk cheeks.

“Right.” She straightened her uniform, yellow bust P luminous in the gloom.

A cornstalk landed nearby, the dull impact capped by a wet snaprattle. A second stalk and
a third. Paz’s mother heaved up the large wooden hatch. Paz looked at the green sky. “I never knew it did that.”

“The tornado throws it.”

Paz picked up the corn and peeked under the husk. “Too early.”

A red plank spinning around the tornado caught a different draft and paused. Not a plank at all, but the entire side of a barn.

“We don’t have tornados in this state,” his mother said. “When you see a tornado, you get in the lowest place.”

“Lower than corn, anyway,” he said, licking his fingers.

She led him into the cellar, stopped to stick the lock, then into a secluded nook.

“Ouch,” he said, pinned to the wall by a formidable thigh.

“It’ll be over soon,” she yelled. The wind chimes struck furious chords. Tree roots popped and burst underground. It was television static, turned up all the way.

The cellar smelled like wet fur, potting soil, and the grease can under the sink.

Shortly after Paz plugged his ears, the wall of the cellar lurched brutally and his brain sprawled inside his skull. The house above them ruptured, each blast an overture to the next, and the structure diffused quick as the twigs of a sparrow’s nest, giving way to dark green clouds. Paz screamed but never heard it. His mother’s mouth was wide and the wet tissues rolling, but mute. The tornado rolled up its sleeve and poked its long arm into the cellar, root root rooting for the home team.
Check-in

The black lettering on the clapboard sign was almost completely scoured by sandstorms, yet the paint had protected the underlying wood, so the word ‘Hotel’ stood out from the rest of the sandblasted boards. In the dim window of the office, a faulty neon hieroglyph flickered ‘Vacancy.’ It duped Paz, and he pulled into the lot.

Long ago, the sign over the door, the door itself, and the building had been painted—curled flecks of paint remained in sheltered crevices. The desert had milled the hotel to gray rot. A light illuminated the corner of the parking lot, and charmed a cluster of insects. The light cut an orange cone into the darkness, in which there was little to see save the hotel’s sign, a corner of the building and its entrance, a sand breeze trickling onto the highway shoulder, and a few aimless tumbleweeds. Beyond the orange light, the highway was absorbed by the overcast, inky night. The building was tall, evident only by the blue glow of a television in a fourth-storey window. Where the dark of the structure became the dark of the sky was undetectable, and the window hung in space.

Paz lowered the kickstand and killed the engine. The hot metal of his motorcycle ticked, and insects communicated in mechanical twitters. Only two cars were present, both rust heaps, boasting a total of five inflated tires.

The office, too, was a desert. Wilted flowers in a cracked vase drooped over a tarnished reception desk. Water spots like black icicle streaks on the walls. As Paz handed cash to the night man, he asked, “Where’s the closest breakfast east of here?”

“You’re a long ways from breakfast.”

“You have a vending machine or something?”
The night man plunked a bottle of Jim Beam on the counter. “Buck twenty a swallow.”

The ceiling creaked as someone stirred on the second floor. “I bet the wind really howls through here some nights.”

“Every night, sir. Room two fifteen.” The night man placed a key fastened to a worn plastic rectangle on the counter. “Check out any time.”

Paz received the key. “First floor’s booked, huh?”

“Very well, sir.” Irritated, the night man swapped keys. “I suggest room three fifteen, sir. Anything else, sir? Perhaps an audience for your droll and sardonic wit, sir?”

“No.”

“ Assistance with your bag, sir?” He gestured to Paz’s backpack, slung easily over Paz’s shoulder. Paz shook his head. “Very well, sir. I expect you are quite tired. You room is up the stairs and to your right. Goodnight, sir. You have very clear skin, sir.”

On the landing between the second and third floors, he encountered a single molar, almost certainly human. He let it lie.

The carpet was heavily worn in traffic areas, down to the underlying mesh, a tacky, repeating pattern common to hotels—complex but uniform, interlocking. Paz placed his feet neatly between the lines.

He entered his room, undressed, and got into bed to read. The bedside lamp was broken, and the overhead light was painfully dim, so he closed his book and flicked off the light. The sheets were paper and the wispy comforter wanted to slide off the foot of the bed. He was in the midst of arriving at an apt description for the scent of the pillow when a shadow interrupted the strip of light under his door. A key clicked in the lock.
EDGE PIECES
The art of the puzzle, like many arts in the motorized computerized nation, was failing. One by one, stimulating peaceful wholesome pastimes were eliminated in favor of deafening dance barns, thriller films, and the shopping rage. Cribbage was aced by video poker. Shut-the-box was shut out by Shoot Out, a harmless laser pistol tag game. Squails and Crokinole were tossed. The art of the puzzle, it seemed, had gone to pieces.

A renowned puzzler near the end of his life said, The moment my life ends, my memories will amass to form a portrait of my face. The last thing he uttered before death scooped him hollow was, A piece is missing! He was the last of the renowned puzzlers.

Of the few puzzles still produced, almost all were stamped out by large mechanized presses. It was with this new process—versus the old process of craftsmen hand-cutting wooden pieces—that the art of the jigsaw began its decline. The machines didn’t understand the art in puzzlemaking, and for efficiency’s sake cut the pieces into uniform shapes. Uniform shapes meant that assemblers had to try all reasonable possibilities one by one, instead of developing an eye for shape. This was acceptable to the machines—a human assembling a puzzle was a human killing time, and how better to kill time than monotonous trial-and-error? The humans failed to demand more from the machines.

What the machines failed to consider was that part of the pleasure of assembling a jigsaw puzzle was to have a hole in the puzzle that accommodated both the red fire hydrant—cut to look like a fire hydrant (a contour cut)—and the sheaf of wheat, tied with a scarf—cut also to look like a fire hydrant. In older puzzles, pieces were often cut along color lines, hinting at nothing. And some pieces—figurals—were cut to complement the picture’s theme; if the puzzle was titled “Thar She Blows” it might contain pieces shaped like anchors, whales, and harpoons,
though the image on all three pieces might be rough sea. Before the machines took over, puzzle pieces weren’t distributed in boxes that revealed the final appearance, so the puzzler might find that the fire hydrant piece filled the nagging gap he needed filled, but then later would be stuck with a sheaf of wheat squirting water into the street. The jigsaws, before the machines, were not mere dilemmas of shape, but also of placement of interchangeable shapes.

Back then, it was common for puzzlers to work in teams and discuss the puzzle before them, the events of the day, their memories. Their memories came to them out of order, but they didn’t mind. They kept talking and looking for the piece to tie all the other pieces together.

Yes, it was recognized as work. Working a puzzle, is what people would say. As in, “My regular girl and I are working a puzzle.” Puzzlemakers—cutters—would try to make the work difficult. That’s what they called their creations, too. Works. Back then, before machines, people knew that work was more fun than fun.

Why the cutters enjoyed making difficult puzzles, or why the assemblers enjoyed assembling difficult puzzles, was a mystery to people in the world of machines. In that world, fun was more work than work. They bought heaps of expensive hobby gear. They dressed in uniforms for these hobbies, many of which required waiting in long lines or fastening oneself to a complicated piece of equipment. But ask one of those people to work and they wouldn’t. Work? they would ask. That’s what machines are for.

A few collectors remained. A few enthusiasts. Wooden puzzles were still available on the internet, but for hundreds or thousands of dollars. The few remaining assemblers made do with machine-made puzzles. Sometimes, the assembly process was secondary to cooperating with a fellow assembler, especially when she had starlet hair, hoop earrings, and a daring skirt.
Paz dialed, but the line didn’t ring. A long black silence. “Hello?” A small perplexed voice on the other end. Definitely hers. He hung his rain jacket and sat on his sofa with the package he’d received in the post. Her little hello—a rope to grab in the depths.

“It’s Paz. You picked up before it rang. Missed that about you.”

“I was about to call you. You received my package in the post.” Talking to her was an old favorite jacket, in the pocket of which he found ten bucks. “Happy birthday.”

“You’ve been drawing again.”

“I’ve been thinking about you. I two minutes ago found that picture of us on the air hockey table. That’s why I was going to call. Which birthday was that?”

“I forgot about that photo.” Pinning the phone to his ear with his shoulder, he burrowed through his closet in search of his photo box. “My fifteenth.”

“Ten years.” She mounted the sentence in the air, for admiring. Just talking to her and his apartment smelled like a wet afternoon on the high school football field of a small school six miles away, the fresh square tops of the mown grass. The detergent in her skirt. Her shampoo.

Flipping through the photo box, he said, “How have you been?”

“Listen, we can’t talk until you get that puzzle assembled. We can talk about nothing until we talk about that. I shouldn’t have called. You shouldn’t have called. Didn’t you see on the note not to call?”

“It’s only two hundred pieces. Have it done by morning.” He found his box of photos and opened it to look for the air hockey photo she mentioned. The box slipped from his lap and capsized on the bedrug. “Damnit,” he said. “Oh!”

“What’s wrong?”
“I dropped a couple hundred pictures on the floor. They all landed facedown except one. It’s us on the air hockey table.” In the photo she’d slid two pucks behind her glasses, so her eyes were large fluorescent green circles.

Her breath fizzed in the phone. “The same one that’s in my hand?”

“Yeah.” Pause. “What I wouldn’t give to be face-to-face right now.”

She exhaled heavily again. “Just a minute.” Her mouthpiece swam in what sounded like fabric, and there was the faint, quickened lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub of her heart.

“Paz,” she whispered. “Paz I’ve got to go. My fiancé is home.”

Paz lay his head down on the photographs, which lay facedown on the rug.

“We’ll talk when you get that thing assembled. Gotta go.” She wotta went.

The photographs smelled stale and papery as cheap sheets. When the off-the-hook siren sounded, Paz hung up. He scooped the pictures into the photo box and retrieved the parcel from his bag. He removed the moaning lid and frisbeed it onto the bed. The bottom of the box, a platter of pieces, some facedown, brown, and others face-up, white. A cardboard salad. Fiancé.

He meant to dump the pieces onto the kitchen table, but he was sidetracked by a cluster of helium balloons rising languidly past his window. The strings of two red balloons in the center of the huddle had tangled, and the two balloons clung like two lobes of a cartoon heart. The wasted sack of a third balloon dangled just below. Paz, watching the balloons, bumped his hand on the back of a chair, which sprung the box and launched the puzzle pieces into the air. Bits of cardboard rained softly on the carpet, but a few tumbled through the slots in the heat register, clinked inside the air ducts, and plunged into the veins of the building, wherein some surely landed facedown, brown, and others face-up, white.
One week before his Final Initiation was his Semifinal Initiation, during which Paz had to reveal to the Body his greatest sins and detrimental secrets. Only mildly inconvenienced, not really embarrassed, Paz approached the podium with his weight box. A large balance scale awaited him atop the podium, platters like the upturned palms of a shrug. This test of the scales would decide his position in the Body. The previous Initiate had faired so poorly he became Graham the Appendix, and wasn’t even allowed to serve coffee at Gatherings. He consequently left the Body and one week later suffered a falling piano to the face. C sharp or B flat, members of the Body chuckled, graveside.

The rising orange sun lifted a corner of the hulking cloud blanket, and for a few minutes, half of the sky—from horizon to apex—flared orange. Brighter even than if an airliner had ruptured its fuselage on a sharp cirrus citrus cloudcluster and sprayed its payload of cadmium orange oil paint onto the empyrean canvas. For the first minutes of Paz’s Semifinal Initiation, the sherbet raindrops sparkled.

“Good morning, members of the Body.” Half the eyes out there were wide witness to his first Body address since puberty. Over fifty children had been with the Body at one point, and only two lingered with the Body into adulthood. Bunnie Liston, recently Initiated, and this heretofore discreet Candidate, Paz. The speakers crackled and boomed. Moderating speaker volume was the duty of Neil the Calf, and since one body part did not order other parts around, the speakers continued to crackle and humbuzz no matter how soft Paz’s speech. Judging by the position of the portable sound system in the hilltop shelter, and the position of the hilltop shelter above the city, Paz imagined many sleepy families below waking to his amplified confessions.

“My sins,” he began, “are plenty, and today I shall make known to you each and
every one, so that you may help me avoid similar sins in the future. I do not wish to fail in the face of such sins. I wish to be part of the Army of Light.” From the weight box he drew the first item, which would be the same as all of the items he drew, a cheap iron ring. Each Initiate was given a box full of identical items, selected by the Mystic on the orders of the Deity Who Was Capricious. The previous Initiate, to his misfortune, was supplied with dictionaries. Paz then spoke about each of his sins, placing for each sin a cheap iron ring onto the platter of the balance. He testified to his transgressions until a mound of cheap iron rings tipped the scale to the utmost. With each admission, cheap iron rings dribbled onto the podium. What the Deity Who was Capricious labeled sin was not traditional, clear-cut, nor consistent.

Usually when an Initiate’s wicked items were stacked upon the scale, weights would be loaded onto the other side of the fulcrum, and a measurement would be taken. The heavier the measurement, the worse the sinner. The worse the sinner, the lower the rank granted to the Initiate. The lowest ranks served coffee and taxied Body members who did not own cars, and the exalted ranks counseled the Lost and were relieved the chore of driving. However, Paz was not finished. “Next,” said Paz. “I shall make known to you each and every triumph, steps I’ve already taken towards becoming a soldier in the Army of Light.”

Paz doubled the length of his address, for each victory filling a balloon from the small tank of compressed helium hidden in his weight box, and tethering the balloon to the heavy side of the scale. At the end of his catalogue, the upward force exerted by the balloons combined with the downward force exerted by the pyramid of cheap iron rings measured zero—balance.

“You have done well with our Deity Who Is Capricious,” said the Mystic. “But thou shalt not outsmart Him. Be wary, Paz.”
His brain was a twittery, feathery bulb of whipped cream as the tornado slurped him up, and the higher he went, the deeper his thoughts piled upon the pie of autonomous flight.

In his stomach, the grilled cheese pulled on leotards, stretched, and executed a world-class routine, jackknifing and screwing round and round and around the stomach’s parallel bars.

Paz reached the apex of his flight, and his guts, driven into his pelvis by the force of his ascension, climbed back into their designated cavities. There was the top of the school. And there, that was the climbing tree in the park. Over there, the river he wasn’t allowed to play in but did. As he looked down on these things, the difference between the impossible and the implausible walloped his four year-old mind.

His belongings swirled above. His pants kicked and spread. Picture books on the wing circled like vultures. His baggy comforter was a magic carpet rippleride for wooden soldiers. His toys, his puzzles, his treasures—they churned above him and then were gone, whisked to some other corner of the sky. Looking down, straight down, there was the hole where his house had been, and its remains were smeared across the street. Gazing up from her cellar burrow, his mother was all eyes and mouth. Losing Paz to the wind was her first fumble since she went pro, and the first fumble associated with the unbeatable Pelicans in two years.

A bunch of photographs swarmed past, snapping and cracking in the current. Paz snagged one of his father skydiving, at the hatch, about to leap. The one with the goofy suit and goggles, and a bowtie around his neck. Paz tucked it up his shirt. He also snared a white bolas—a pair of tennis shoes. He put them on his bare feet. Snug as bunnies.

To his left was another cluster of items, the large brown crates in which Mr. Trebuchet’s items were kept. Paz knew only that they were stored in a room he wasn’t allowed to enter. He
could never remember Mr. Trebuchet’s exact face, but when his mother muttered his name, in
the same tone she used for jury duty, he thought of wires. “Mr. Trebuchet was a friend of your
father’s,” his mother’s catchphrase. “And he was a big help to us when your father died.”

The day Mr. Trebuchet left the items in Paz’s house, Paz’s mother cracked one of the
boxes against the doorframe. “Goddamnit,” he said. “Be fucking careful. Lucky you I’m in a
good mood.” When he was about to leave, he asked Paz, “You want a present, kid?” Of course
Paz wanted a present, but Paz’s mother gripped his arm. “Say no thank you, Paz.” Paz said no
thank you. Mr. Trebuchet chuckled.

Other things Mr. Trebuchet said to Paz’s mother that day:

“If you——” and whispered the rest in her ear.

“How dare——” but he said the rest with a gesture Paz couldn’t interpret.

“You will.” His face the color of scalded chicken.

Paz couldn’t tell what the items were as they were shaken from the boxes that had been
locked in the room he wasn’t to enter, and fell onto the plains far below, which was probably bad
news for items that couldn’t be bumped against a doorframe.

On the descent, Paz’s guts tried to slither out his mouth. His mother was out of the cellar
now, running away from the tornado, directly under him. Her mouth was a flat line and her eyes
dots, gouged with a hard marker. He wiggled in the new sneakers. He spread out against the
wind. The grilled cheese prepared to dismount.
“Do not disturb!” Paz said as a key clicked in the lock of room three fifteen. The brass knob turned and, as the door creaked open, found its cavity in the drywall. In the doorway, a man’s silhouette. A sliver of foul light lit slices of his face as he turned his head—an eye, a nose, a broad cheek, all filthy, ash gray, save small vertical pink streaks of clean skin under each eye. Droplets pattered on his shirt. When he looked straight into the room, the hallway lights illuminated the hair curling from his ears. Ragged clothes hung from his frail frame, and one dilapidated boot was a four-toe spectacle. A minute passed where nothing happened, like a stutter in time. Paz rose to close the door, and the man watched without betraying a single point of IQ. Breathing, at least.

Paz gently closed and locked the door. Ten seconds after he returned to bed, the lock clicked and again the door, again the man. “Ahoy,” said Paz. “I think you’ll find an empty room anywhere else you look.” Paz clicked on a light. The man wasn’t looking at Paz, but at the window. “What do you want?” The man said nothing, so Paz said, “The Window? There’s a lovely view of the dark.” Conversation, apparently, was not forthcoming, so Paz rose to shut the door. Before he could, the man dashed into the room and popped the curtain rod from the wall. Paz kept out of his way.

On the man’s forehead, under the bedraggled black curls stuck to his skin, was a tattoo—the outline of an interlocking puzzle piece. An identical tattoo encircled his elbow, another dipping under his collar.

On the man’s thick hands: lacerations, scabbed over, raw knuckles. The scabs were the supports under the tent of his skin, reluctant to bend as he seized the wooden chair in the corner, with which he busted the window, shattering the quiet in the room, bound by the silence of
the hotel, swaddled in the still of the desert. The man thrust his head through the opening and inhaled. Paz backed into the hall, because in movies there was always that nameless walk-on character getting murdered for practically no reason.

From the window, the man turned and said, “Sorry, kid.” His voice, sand ripples on a dune. He lobbed his key at Paz’s feet. “You’d do the same.” He threw the door closed. His boots tromped to the window, thumped and scraped along the wall under the window. “I’m out!” the man yelled. His giggle drowned as he fell to the ground. A three-storey drop? Freako.

Paz opened the door with the man’s key but the room was different. The key slipped from his hand. The window had vanished. The curtains had vanished. As had the bed, the dusty table, the broken television, the bathroom. The room was not a room, but a blank rectangle of nothing.

His belongings, too, had disappeared, which was fine, they were inexpensive and replaceable, but he could not lose the engagement ring. He had not held onto it for so many years to lose it in a shithole-tel. All was lost if the ring was lost.

The number on the door was gone. All of the numbers on all of the doors in the hallway were gone. He jogged toward the front desk, but encountered a wall where there should have been a corridor. At the other end of the hallway, another wall where there should have been a window. No burned-out exits signs overhead. Only clean rectangles on the walls, framed with grime, where there had been fire escape arrows.

The key was ancient—a long shaft coming off of a scalloped disc, and at the end of the shaft a single tooth hanging like a stalactite. The key-holes on all of the doors had adjusted to accommodate.

The disk of the key was cut in the shape of an interlocking puzzle piece.
But You Can Never Leave

The suburbs. Paz refused suburbs. His mother refused them as well, but try and argue with a my-way-right-away suburb native. He was a suburb inbreed, Mr. Trebuchet. He wore tedious beige suburb clothes. His hair was a small, blond suburb lawn wrapped round his head. His body was xeriscaped with fake jewels and a little crescent moon earring. When Paz was six, Mr. Trebuchet and Paz’s Mother moved into a suburb.

Docile suburban memories frothed up like bubbles in milk as Paz rode his motorcycle past the cul-de-sacs. Children lackadaisically played games like Foam Catch and Kick-the-Foam. Adults washed beige luxury sedans of the day’s commute on spicspan suburban streets.

Twice he was lost in the maze of circles and drives and places and ways, all named Spillsbury, but eventually rolled up to a beige house with the correct address. A plastic lawn ornament fashioned after a popular religious figure extended his plastic arms toward Mr. Trebuchet’s rose garden. The popular religious figure was faded and cracked from exposure. Paz removed his helmet and put it on the head of the popular religious figure.

Three knocks, and a stranger’s face appeared in the door’s small windowpane. It was contorted and full of shadow, but Paz said, “Paz,” and the face changed its expression and became his mother, her truffles aged to peanut brittle.

The door opened and a spindly spry little thing sprung onto the porch, in her hand a glass of early afternoon pinot, and gave him a fierce yet feeble hug. “You’ve come to visit!” she cried. “It’s a phenomenon!” Her svelte brown dress was not a cheerleader’s dress, but was cut like one, and though her dark brown shoes were stylish and velvety, they were sneakers. The real surprise was the string of pearls around her neck.

In the country, there were hikes to take, bikes to ride, trees to climb. One could live in
peace and seek the self one forgot sometimes in the cities and suburbs. One could eat simply from their own garden. One could contemplate.

In the city, there were concerts. There was the theatre. The city was the hub of what currently counted as art and literature and what had always passed as philosophy. One could stand at an intersection and watch the collisions—of tax brackets, of traditions, of ethnicities, of mores, of automobiles.

Then came the machines that could reprint a housing blueprint one hundred times over, and the machines that could raise a home in mere days, machines that could paint that home in mere hours. Developers bought large rectangles of land and butted the homes up against one another. Rows upon rows of prefabricated boxes.

In those suburbs, there was no place to go. To the gas station, sure. To the supermarket. If one was lucky, perhaps an office supply superstore or a furniture warehouse. To keep the owners of the suburban homes from wigging out, developers painted all the homes light tones of beige, pink, and yellow, tones invented for prison walls.

“First we have to make dinner. Then I’ll take you on a ride,” he said. “To the east coast.”

“Oh yes,” she said, and closed her eyes. A smile rose upon her face like the sun after a gray Rain City winter, but her delight must’ve seen its shadow, for the clouds returned. “I can’t, you know. Come into the house.” She led him in, past a card table in the living room, upon which sat an unboxed jigsaw puzzle.

“Everyone is assembling that puzzle,” Paz noted.

“Paz, I think I’ve forgotten my cheers.”

“Huh?” But she didn’t hear him.
Wedding Plunge

Only one picture of Paz’s father survived the tornado, tucked inside Paz’s shirt. Photo albums were amongst the lost or unsalvageable Playfair belongings.

The photograph was taken right before the wedding ceremony, Paz’s father standing before the open hatch of the airplane looking dorko in a baggy blue jumping suit and bulging goggles. The bowtie didn’t help. Paz’s mother stood behind him, her suit white. A veil was stapled to her helmet. Mutual thumbs-up.

Below, far beyond the scope of the photograph, reception guests watched the sky but kept an eye on the table lush with fruits and berries and cheeses and toast points.

Other photographs of the ceremony were gargled to pieces in the tornado’s throat: the wedding couple holding hands with the minister as they fell bellies down, like slumber party teens telling boo stories; left hands clasped, on the fourth metacarpal of each the tiny tattoo: I do. I do. I do; the cassette player with a certain Elton John song loaded, play button depressed; the minister—a friend ordained through a mail-order outfit, as they hadn’t found any local ministers willing to take the plunge with them—wrestling with his holy text.

“We jumped, joined hands, and said our vows.”

“Say the vows.”

“I can’t tell any more,” she said. She said, “Your father’s vows were the most romantic, the most honest, the most bedazzling vows in nuptial history. That’s that. I’ll tell no more.”

“Yes, but what did he say?”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Please please please please please please please please please?”
“The last thing he said was he’d follow me to the death. I’m zipping my lips. See? Mmph.”

“But what did you say?” He reached up, unzipped.

“I can’t talk about it,” she said. She said, “I was crying. I said I would’ve given exactly those vows could I compose them.”

“Then what?”

“No. That’s it. Not one more word. It’s too painful, son.” His chute malfunctioned. They were never sure whose fault it was—the skydiving company, the manufacturer—but your father pulled the cord, and the reserve cord. They didn’t open. Thus, the reception began a few minutes early with the premature arrival of the groom.

But his mother never told that part of the story. Paz had pieced it together on his own, his mother’s frantic pleas at the playground when he climbed higher than she could reach, the conversational detours she took to avoid particular words, the tick in her cheek when a parachute appeared on television, or when a pedestrian’s rayon skirt billowed in the breeze.

“How come you didn’t follow him to the death?”

She shrugged and wouldn’t answer, except to say, “I knew you were on your way.”

“Marriage makes babies?”

“You never know what’s going to happen. Love while you can. Just make sure it’s the right kind of love.”

“How many kinds are there?”

“Too many. All bad but one.”

“You always say you won’t tell that story.”

“I never do. That story tells itself.” She bent and patched his brow with a kiss.
Occupied

Five weeks shy of due, the pregnant woman sidled down the aisle of the airplane, leading with a hip, belly and bag bunting the seats. Her cheerleader outfit had been altered for maternity. Finding the correct row, she carefully heaped herself into the assigned space, sucking air. Rain rambled on the shell of the plane. Rivulets twitched on the windows.

Her destination: Florida. Weary of foaling alone, she wanted her sister’s company in the delivery room. Also, she wanted a sunshine baby. How she hated those cloudy babies of Rain City and their constant drizzle. A Florida baby had nothing to worry about.

The pregnant woman gingerly snapped the seatbelt around her bellyswell. A flight attendant approached. “Ma’am, may I get you anything?”

“A crowbar?”

The flight attendant winked. “I know the feeling. You must be due yesterday.”

She shook her head. “Another month. I’m growing him big.”

During the safety lecture, the man beside her hooked her arm. “Where’s your husband?”

“He died at our wedding.” The plane taxied down the tarmac and swiveled toward the waiting sky. The man beside her said nothing.

The jets hummed and the plane canted upward. Everyone was going to Orlando but none of them to the same place.

“Oh god,” said the pregnant woman.

The man next to her said, “I hate this part, too.” He pinched his eyes shut, and his crow’s-feet grew three crow’s-shoe sizes.

“Oh god,” the woman said, and said again.

“It’ll be alright, ma’am,” from a woman across the aisle.
The airplane rocketed toward thirty thousand at a menacing angle. They pierced the cloud layer and the cabin was packed with sunlight white as the cotton in bottled medicine.

“Water,” said the pregnant woman.

“I don’t have any,” said the man next to her. “We’ll get you some as soon as the seatbelt light is off.”

“No, my water.”

The man hammered his finger into the little orange button overhead like he was in an arcade. As soon as the seatbelt light was extinguished, the flight attendant returned. “Once is sufficient, sir.”

“You don’t understand!” he shouted. “I need a different seat!”

“I’m sorry sir, we’re at capacity,” said the flight attendant.

The pregnant woman clutched her armrests. “You’re about to be one over.”
Two for Peace

Erolia O’Bannon, stood in the open door of her first floor apartment, drumming ten wooden fingers on her thighs. The barbs at the tips of the prosthetics sometimes snarled in the strands of her dress, shredded from prior drummings. “You,” she said, her voice squirrelly and cold as an ice cube trapped against the kitchen baseboard. Erolia O’Bannon flushed her lungs in a single blast and mashed her lips. “No reason to see me unless you’re moving out. Shoo.”

Paz held up a brown paper bag. “Brought you a present. I’ll attach these nails for you while I relate my crisis.”

Her wrists and forearms were dotted with small, light scars where the barbs had blundered into her. A ring of raw wood enwreathed her doorknob where her barbs had chewed away the finish. “Can’t help you.” She stepped back to slam the door, but couldn’t sever the line of sight between her and the paper bag. “Tea?”

“Of course.”

The door fell open, and already she was a swish of dull blue dress on its way to fill a kettle. A long meticulous white braid swung pendulously as she slogged with a mild polio falter. Her fingers hung harmless at her sides, but the walls were scored and gouged from missteps past. “What’s the problem?” she called from the kitchen. No infirmity in her voice.

“Puzzle pieces.” Sitting at the dining room table on a piano bench, Paz breathed lightly through his mouth. The upright piano, forlorn in a corner, was obscured by the large plants roosting on top. A small tray sat on the keys, lined with red velvet, in which rested ten smooth wooden barbless obelisks. “I spilled them down the heater. How can I get them out?”

From the kitchen: “Buy another puzzle.”

Around and around the room he looked, seeking a respite from the heavy browns and
russets. The patterns on the swollen, yellowed wallpapers clashed. Tapestries thick as cakes drooped from the ceiling. His olfactory squirmed and itched at the concentrated tang of the old woman’s dried up body, despite the mouthbreathing. The centerpiece on the dining room table was a cityscape of crusty cups and glasses.

Erolia’s fingers rapped a rumba on the metal kettle.

“It’s unique. Handmade specifically for me. From someone I thought had chosen to abandon me. It could even be a proposal.”

When she deliberated, her fingers wriggled and clacked against one another, like her brain was typing a memo to her mouth. Her fingers stopped. “Probably fell into the furnace.”

“I wouldn’t bother you if it weren’t important.” Paz shook the bag of press-on nails

The kettle shrieked. Cups clattered. Water teemed onto crisp clumps of dried tea. The aroma reached Paz in the dining room and he sighed. On her way to the table, one mug slipped from her flat fist and shattered. Erolia’s fingers clacked. “That never used to happen.” The heavy fabrics and upholsteries could not absorb her irritation. “You expect me to forgive you?”

“No. I stopped believing in that word a long time ago.” Paz gathered the shards while Erolia went for a towel.

One of the musty glasses in the center of the table caught his attention. What he’d mistaken for a moldy slice of lemon in the bed of the glass was actually a small white piece of cardboard carved into an irregular shape. He rescued it, wiped it clean, and stuffed it into a pocket. Above the table, set in the ceiling, brown, was a small grille, white.
The first time he heard the sound, lying in his dark bed, racing for sleep before the seize of dawn, he thought he’d heard a traffic accident. The screech, the horn, the impact. It came again, the sound not so far away as he’d thought, maybe a pipe in the wall—a toilet flushing several stories up. In a dormitory accommodating two thousand, a sound could be anything.

Another recurrence established a rhythm. Those fifth-floor idiots at the stairwell with their delicates? The sound, depending on Paz’s frame of mind, changed texture with each occurrence, once a drill, once a furnace, once a safety flare.

No, the sound was much closer than he’d thought. A rodent in his closet? Aurora sneaking out? Paz, percolating in hasty sweat, turned his head and blinked into the darkness. Aurora was on the sofa, still, her shoulder in a ribbon of light.

Again the sound.

Unbelieving, he wriggled quiet, so quiet, from bed and crept to her. It issued from her mouth, echoed in her sinuses. Every last juicy burble of that sound was hers, having journeyed quite a distance to reach her lips, stewing in her chest, moiling in the pot of her throat. What happened inside of her to air that entered so peacefully?

Yes, car accidents, tiny ones, at the bronchial intersections. That was the sound.

Her dank and sloppy sighs smelled earthy, sluiced through sleep’s detergent. Like the old cellar. A clay vase. His mother, already reeking of the grave.

A crescent strip of cheek that could’ve been anyone’s. Three fingers poked under the pillow, the meatless pad of a palm and two coiled fingers beside her face. The toes exposed below the bottom hem of the heavy pink quilt bequeathed by some relative, which hugged her
helpless, beguiled body. The moccasins crossed at the foot of the couch. The almost pleasant leathery foot pong.

Paz placed his hand one inch in front of her mouth. Her exhalation tickled.

This soft sleeping face joined all of her other expressions in his memory, a cluster of balloons tangled by twine tails. Often he was caught in the center, pressed upon by the mob of her, and could not beat his way out. Other times, that cluster of balloons was tied to his belt, and he couldn’t set a toe on the ground.

On the floor beside him was the puzzle they’d assembled together. He’d spotted it at a moldy futon garage sale—one of the many on the weekend of the students’ return. Then the odd run-in with her, the bumbling invitation, the long silent walk to his dorm room. And now she was a gurgling lump on his sofa.

Atop the microwave, the pizza box, a broken ring of crusts. On the desk, two empty cups, a disc of sticky soda syrup in the bottom of each, a ring of lipstick folded in half over one rim. Next to the cups, six lager bottles, their labels loose and limp on the polished wood. The anonymous beer bottle was a Rain City landmark. Local breweries printed elite labels that did not absorb moisture. The drenched label of an import fluttered to the floor inside of ten minutes.

In the desk drawer, the handmade card, the pressed flower, the crafty poem. In the drawer it would stay, and she would never learn of them.

Paz stepped slowly back to his bed, lifted the covers and settled himself without provoking a single bedspring. He listened to the bellows of her guts, and noticed through the window a lean hint of dawn. Rain City dawns were not a scratch of navy along the horizon, but a slight alleviation of the clouds, from suffocating black to looming charcoal. As if Aurora was blasting them away with her gurglings. No sleep now. What could he say to invite her back?
The Famine

The Sunday after his failed Final Initiation, instead of attending his first Gathering as a full-fledged Body member, Paz went to the supermarket. As always, he made his first stop at the coffee counter just inside the door. The best remedy for the sloppy stroll to the supermarket. A sign taped to the vacant java counter read, Temporarily Out of Everything.

The supermarket had none of the items on his list. The lettuce had taken leave. The eggs had scrambled off. The beets, well, they beat it, the raisins gave themselves the runs, and the bananas gave Paz the slip. The kaisers rolled and rolled away.

Packages, packets, and pouches of gummy worms were plenty. Paz hated gummy worms. They had no malted milk balls. Anywhere.

The dairy coolers were bare between the extremes—half-and-half or skim? Paz plucked a lone carton of soy from the rack, but it slipped and exploded on the floor. “Asshole,” said the cleanup boy. He thrust the mop at Paz.

Only the scratchy brands of toilet tissue were available, as well as the un-absorbative brown paper towels.

In the frozens, they were out of rocky road, cookies and cream, and cookie dough, so he settled for vanilla bean, sugar-free, dairy-free, even white-free.

“When do you restock?” he asked an employee.

“Every night.”

His shopping cart, after a wheel snapped free, careened into the deli case and shattered the glass, so Paz had to purchase all of the macaroni salad, a side he couldn’t stand.

They had noodles, but no sauce. Bread, no butter. Heaps of flour, no sugar. Plain tortilla chips but no dip, no salsa. No cheese to grill between bread.
Aisle six, where the peanut butter should have been, was barren. Plenty of jelly, but only flavors like blandberry and crapple.

Giving up, he went to the registers. The week spread drearily before him as an array of anomalous casseroles and buttered noodles. He chose the shortest checkout line, which turned out the slowest, and waited behind a wisp of a lady with flesh baggies dangling from her arms and pot-scrubber hair.

Finally, finally they reached the front. “Did you find everything alright, ma’am?” asked the cashier.

“Oh yes,” said the woman, laboriously counting her pennies.

“Where did you find that sugar?” Paz asked, spotting a bag of sugar in the lady’s cart.

She pushed her glasses to the tip of her nose and glowered at him.

“Asshole,” said the cashier.

As the cashier rang him up, he smiled and said nothing. The cashier eyed him, shook her head, and snorted. “One hundred thirty-four dollars and twenty-nine cents.”

“I’m sorry, that’s not correct. I only have a few items.”

The cashier put her hands to her hips. “I’m calling the manager.” She grabbed her red phone and mashed a button. Paz ran.

Another grocery warehouse down the street offered no more variety, so Paz filled a small basket with clashing fodder, overpaid, and went home to flip through the news stations, hoping to learn something about the food shortage. No problem was mentioned, locally or nationally. Uneasy, but hungry for nachos, Paz went to the kitchen.
The Misfit

The Sunday before Paz’s Semifinal Initiation was his Second Trial. Paz stood before a giant wooden puzzle, waiting for the Deity Who Was Capricious to speak. Behind him, the Body was still. A smaze crept over the city below—a real choker. Lo the rain, the rain eternal.

Years before, when Paz was ranked Begat-ling, the Mystic held a Retreat for full members that focused on the integrated nature of the Body, and how integral one member was to another and to the whole. A carpenter and an artist built for the Body a large jigsaw puzzle to serve as the Retreat’s central metaphor. The pieces were strewn on a table, and each member selected one of the 200 pieces and together they assembled the puzzle, and learned how integral each of them was to the others and to the whole. There were not two hundred members, so the Mystic inserted unclaimed pieces. After the Retreat, each member kept their piece as a reminder.

Twenty years later, Paz approached that same puzzle, assembled and displayed upright on an easel. Some pieces were worn dark. Within the abstract image, five runic figurals: D-E-I-T-Y.

Paz listened for the Deity, who whispered softly and perhaps capriciously yes when Paz studied a small yellow piece. He took it from the puzzle and handed it to the Mystic.

“Are any of you already bound to this piece?” the Mystic asked, holding it aloft.

If someone was bound to the piece, it meant Paz was not in tune with the Deity and had misheard His instructions. He would be excommunicated like Libby Munn, who had fallen onto grated decking material from a height of thirty-two feet and landed on the ground below, sliced neatly into limp and leaching rectangles. Or shunned like Carl Lowsen, who survived an airplane crash to burn alive in the hospital where he was receiving care.

“Ith mine!” said Bunnie Liston. Of all people.

The Body was silent. The Mystic replaced the piece and closed his eyes, his head
tilted slightly upward, lips trembling, wet and pregnant. He opened his eyes and put a hand upon Paz’s shoulder. “Our Deity Who Is Capricious has told me this is part of his plan, and that you have selected the correct piece.” He summoned with a finger the piece’s proprietor. “Bunnie Liston, join us please, in the name of our Deity Who Is Capricious.”

Bunnie hopped to, wearing a sky blue leotard under her pink dress. Her wild curls flounced, and she tripped over the untied lace of her plaid canvas shoes. Between the trailing lace and her overall blurriness, she looked like a person unraveling. Only one of her bare arms was sunburned. Her head cocked to the side and her lips were held ajar by two enamel giants that had often suffered graffiti while she slept. Newly twenty-five herself, she’d completed her Initiation two months prior. Paz could not recall her assigned body part.

“It’s a good pieth,” she told Paz. “I’m not thurprithed you picked it.”

“Our Deity has decided,” said the Mystic, “that these two must cleave to one another and share their lives as they share this puzzle piece.”

“Cleave!” cried Bunnie, and knelt in thanks.

Paz nodded. “I shall do as the Deity asks, of course.” His pores opened, his bowels soug hed, and his toes curled under. Cleave to Bunny Liston the, ah yes, the Cecum.

“You may return to your seats,” said the Mystic, and began his sermon, which typically resembled a wrecking crane pounding a building to rubble. Bunnie followed Paz to his seat and squeezed onto the bench next to him. He repeatedly moved her hand from his knee.

It was difficult for Paz to heed the Mystic’s prophecy about the imminent maturity of the Body into a globally influential organization, with Bunnie whispering things like, “I know where to get a good mattreth” and “Leth honeymoon in the Tall Thity.”
Unscathed

The grilled cheese flooded Paz’s mouth, rough and starchy. He let it out, a molten mass on the grass. The fluid rippled in the wind, and smothered green blades slowly drew apart, slick slimy bridges spanning the growing gaps.

The tornado ploughed an eastern field and festooned the tip of its funnel with a wheat wreath. Paz’s ditzy stomach boiled.

He wiped his mouth and stood on new shoes. Had the shoes or the tornado amended the laws of gravity? Each step tread on the purple dust of a nebula.

Paz’s mother lay sprawled on the lawn, cradling her left arm, cheerleader skirt undulating in the wind. When she sat, her ponytail reached for the west. “You land better than your father.” Picking grass out of his collar, wiping dirt from his face, she said, “How did you slip away? I feed you too many greasy foods.” The bright yellow P on her chest was unstained, emblazoned there by a divine typewriter in yellow Teflon ink. Her left arm was badly bruised, but functional. When Paz produced the photograph from inside of his shirt, she took it with a saltine smile, and swallowed. “You gave me a scare.” Give me an S, give me a C…

Their Mt. Valor economy house moved out on them, leaving behind a plank here and there, a few appliances. The oven door was open. The house had taken with it the dinner roast.

“Mr. Trebuchet’s things fell.”

“Where?”

It was difficult to orient himself, and he was still a bit muzzy. “Maybe there.”

Paz’s mother held him. They watched the tornado recede behind a ridge, a portion of the ridge following. The wind turned mild and the roar diminished into whisper. The tornado eventually wound down into an angry cloud, glowering from the low sky.
Other families cautiously emerged from their cellars, pressing hands to their mouths, snagging each other in embrace. Some waded through rubble, some ventured into splintered ruins, and some wailed in their yards. One family discovered a resilient cooler in what had been their kitchen. With a few bottles of salvaged beer, they toasted to Rubbermaid. A buried phone rang. His mother, watching the neighbors, said, “There will be times in your life when you’ll feel you’ve stepped over a cliff, and you’re looking down at where you’re about to fall but haven’t fallen yet. The secret is to forget about falling. Look up. Walk across the abyss.”

Paz and his mother went into the field to look for Mr. Trebuchet’s items. They didn’t spot any of the large crates, but Paz’s mother found a small, headless body in a torn blue skirt and white blouse. Lying nearby, Paz found a wide smooth cheek, rouged, attached to part of a soft blue eye. The cheek was heavy and cold. “Porcelain,” his mother said. “Like glass.”

“Why does Mr. Trebuchet have glass?”

“Mr. Trebuchet has a very large, valuable doll collection. We should try to find them.”

“He’ll be mad.”

The tornado had scattered dolls in a relatively straight line. Every hundred feet or so they discovered another broken little body, deformed, defaced, depressed into the dirt. His mother hoisted him easily with the good arm. “How would you like to travel around for a while?”

They returned to the ruins. A few people huddled around something in the street. Paz’s mother wouldn’t let him near it at first, but finally took Paz over to see.

A bright blue motorcycle sat in the middle of the neighborhood, still propped on its kickstand, unscathed. Paz had probably seen motorcycles before, but in the face of that blue beauty, the knot of metal pipes, something in him was baptized in chrome.
Wearing only boxers, he was chilly in the hotel hallway. He stared through the open
doorway in front of him and into the nothing beyond. Not darkness, not an empty room, *nothing*.
No color, not even black. He put a finger in it, up to the knuckle, and the finger looked strange,
being the only something in the nothing. The door was stuck fully open. He wasn’t so stupid as
to enter, so he explored the halls instead.

Though sealed, the interior of the hotel was unchanged. Ten stories, bad carpet, musty funk. No rooftop access, no fire exits, just corridor after corridor of unmarked doors—the brown teeth of the creature that had swallowed him.

In his situation, it was natural to forget about his stomach. However, twenty-four hours
was a long time. Something like 168 stomach hours.

The wind could not be heard, as the night man said. In fact, the ambiance was that of an
underground building. Paz made cloistered sounds that died quickly in shallow echoes. Odd,
irregular thumps occasionally radiated from deep within the building. His ears rang in the
silence, deafening at times, though he could brush a hand along the wall or snap his fingers and
the tiny sound obscured the ringing.

The engagement ring wasn’t worth money, but it was worth a lot to Paz, and there was no
replacing it. His belongings had to be behind one of those doors.

He tried again to close the open door, but it wouldn’t budge. He tried to open other doors
along the corridor but his key wouldn’t turn. Clutching the key, he returned to the open door. He
stepped into the nothing. The door slammed shut behind him, and he fell. Or perhaps levitated. It
didn’t feel like his guts were trying to climb out of him, but as if none of them were touching. He
was back in the tornado. Twenty-one years and that feeling had never truly left him. No telling
how long he levitated or fell, and though he didn’t think he’d slept, he suddenly woke, or had a similar sensation, on a hospital surgery table. The room smelled of disinfectant, but a heavy, bodily stench lingered, as if behind the walls of scrubbed blue tiles, something organic had gone to rot. Machines beeped politely. A small assembly of people masked and capped in mint green peered down at him.

“Please try not to fidget or squirm, Mr. Playfair,” said the surgeon, his white mask forming and reforming vertical pleats as he spoke. “It may tickle at first, and there will be a sting toward the end. The procedure is extremely simple and ninety-nine point nine percent successful. There’s nothing to worry about.” The surgeon cracked his knuckles. “Unless you move.”

“But—” said Paz, trying to sit. His body was immobile.

“Now see,” said the surgeon, “that’s what I was saying. Please don’t move.”

“What—”

“Shhhh. Don’t worry. We perform a great many of these procedures, and they are every one successful unless the patient moves.” With a marker the surgeon drew a line down Paz’s chest. The ink was slimy and cold on his skin. No one approached with an anesthetic drip. With that line on him, Paz felt like a football.

“I’m very allergic to surgery. Isn’t it on my charts?”

“Quiet. Do not move, Mr. Playfair.”

“We’re ready, Doctor,” said an aid in navy blue scrubs. He held a tray full of instruments, shiny and smooth.

“Very well. Let’s begin.” The surgeon wrapped his fingers around an instrument. His latex gloves chirped.
It was his first weekend in the apartment, and a breeze whisked mist from the ocean. Light rain tapped on the sill of the window, as the window was propped for the scent of the mist. When the prop—an oversized puzzle piece Paz cut from a two-by-six for a dorm-room doorstop—was removed, that archaic casement crashed down like Armageddon.

Paz paused his video game and answered a knock. In the hallway stood a worn old thing in a kerchief. “Hello,” she said. “Erolia O’Bannon. I manage the building.” Somewhere on her person there was a strange clacking. It stopped. “I’m a lot of fun, Paz, and I’m old, but I am the city’s most notorious landlord. If you ever make a rent problem for me, I can and will find you. I can and will make life unpleasant.”

“I’m steadily employed, ma’am.”

She rose onto the balls of her feet. “Of course! How about some tea?” While Paz put some water on, the television chimed—his video game had been un-paused. In started the simple melodic warble of Thrillcycle, and the musical beeps of acceleration and wheelies. There was also a curious rapid clacking. He finished with the tea and returned to the living room. Erolia O’Bannon was curled on the sofa, biting her lower lip, holding a close second. The odd clacking was her stiff and awkward fingers on the plastic controller. Her thumbs kneaded the buttons expertly, but all eight fingers were wooden prosthetics, and inept with the controller.

Expertly rounding a corner, she moved into first. Erolia O’Bannon caught Paz’s look and shrugged. “Grandkids.”

Handing her the tea, “A little two-player?” He picked up the other controller. “What happened to your fingers?”

Their motorcycles rattled up to the starting line, and a stiff flag wiggled go. “I lost
them in four separate, unrelated accidents.” Right off the first jump she pulled ahead. Paz stopped going easy. “I lost the pinkie and ring finger of my left hand when I was seven, feeding the ducks at the pond. I was ripping hunks from the loaf, and miscalculated. I pulled those two fingers free and threw them into the pond. Father searched for them, but green scum clung to everything. No luck. The same two fingers on the right hand were stolen less than a year later. It was my first trip to the city. I was careless, and didn’t keep my hands to myself. I’m not sure where or when exactly the theft occurred. I’d recognize them anywhere, though, my fingers.” On a corner, her biker rammed into his, and he almost flew off the track into a green band that represented a wall or something. “I taught piano lessons through my forties. You’d be surprised by my six-finger technique. One student in particular was extremely talented, but due to a birth defect had only three fingers on each hand. I gave him my index fingers, as they were worth more to him than to me, and it earned him a marvelous career in music. Come down someday to hear one of his records.” Paz reared up on his rear tire and threatened to overtake. “Finally, I absent-mindedly left the last two on a bus not long ago. The memory goes with age, you know.” What was that wink supposed to mean? She was kidding? About what? The fingers? Her memory? Her age?

Paz, enjoying himself, said, “Chores must be difficult.”

“Yes, but the thumbs are invaluable. I do everything with the thumbs.” Her biker stood on the top tier with a gold cup in hand. Paz’s held bronze. She was on her feet, moving. “Do you mind if I close the window? All this spare fat you’d think I’d stay warmer than I do.”

Before he could warn her, the window crashed down, separate and unrelated to the other accidents.
The Burnt Offering

There was not yet a boo of dawn when Paz woke, but the Mystic, as he poured percolated coffee from a charred pot, was lit orange by the campfire. “We know, we know,” said the Mystic. “But our Deity understands how we are without caffeine. The fast is nearly over anyway.” In that first person plural, where did the Mystic end and the Deity begin?

It was the morning of his First Trial. The Sacrifice. Two days previously Paz and the Mystic hiked into a valley. They made a quick and simple camp and went to sleep. Next morning they climbed into the hollow atop the overturned stump of a gigantic tree, its roots in the air, yawning for the sky. The roots cradled them while they fasted, reflected, discussed—prepared Paz to sacrifice the object most important to him.

Paz rose and joined the Mystic at the campfire. Their bedrolls lay on the ground behind them, closer at the heads than the feet, so that someone flying overhead might think they were an arrow suggesting: a burnt offering is this way.

The Mystic wore denim shorts and a long sleeved t-shirt he’d decorated with a laundry marker. It was maybe forty degrees, but the Mystic did not seem—never seemed—cold.

“It’s time,” said the Mystic. Paz retrieved the only item he’d carried to the campsite aside from his sleeping bag: a canvas pouch cinched at the neck. “We are curious,” said the Mystic. “But showing us is not required.”

Paz untied the rope, withdrew from the bag a black leather book, and handed it to the Mystic. “Aurora gave this to me before she left. She kept a journal for me in college. There’s an entry almost every day.”

Flipping to a random page, the Mystic read, “You can read the tiny curves of a puzzle piece but can’t read a single one of mine, and I’m throwing the best curves I got.” The Mystic
returned the missive. “We are sorry. The Deity asks for the sacrifice, not us.”

“Yeah, well.” Paz prepared to toss the book.

The Mystic put a hand on his. “It must be page by page.”

“The Deity likes to prolong tortures,” raising his volume at the end, hey you up there.

The Mystic’s lips quivered, his eyes welled and caught the full brilliance of the fire. “We don’t know, Paz. We just know what must be done.” He looked away. “We’re not supposed to help you, but we will.”

“No,” said Paz.

The Mystic began: “Your mind holds onto an object because the object symbolizes something of spiritual significance the mind wants.”

“But,” Paz continued, “in holding onto the objects, the mind prevents itself from reaching that significance.”

“Begin.”

Flipping through the pages filled with countless colors, sentences bent into shapes. Paz tore out a page at random and fed the fire. It landed in a seat of logs. Purple and green flames dissolved the page, reading Aurora’s words in a dialect of crackles, snaps, and sizzles. A portion of their story was made into smoke. She slipped a little further away.

The Mystic put his hand on Paz’s shoulder. “Let us help. We want you to pass.”

Paz thought his head was splitting open like a cooked sausage, but it was just a cry, he realized. So long since the last cry. What was that pressed against his chest? Oh, the notebook.

The Mystic forced the thing away and fed the flames himself, crying as well, and scuffled with Paz in the dust to keep him from going after it. “We are so sorry. We want you to pass.”
Paz did not want to see, but they had his eyelids chocked open. In Paz’s peripheral vision, the surgeon’s hands glistened cherry under the lights with Paz’s blood and abdominal fluids. Though he couldn’t see the operation, he’d watched surgeries on television, his teeth milling themselves to nubs. He knew what he was like down there, body lips stretched open, glowing with orange grease. The surgeon’s hands burrowed into his guts. “Where are you hiding them, Mr. Playfair?” Paz had no idea where. Or what. “I must compliment you on your heartbeat.” The surgeon smiled like cellophane pulled too tight over a dish of tuna salad. “It’s better for dancing than for marching.” The surgeon had cold fingers deep in Paz’s spaghetti. “There they are.” The surgeon’s hand closed around something sore inside of Paz that sensed the temperature, dimension, location, age, color, and pressure of the hand. Once the surgeon put his finger on that something, Paz knew it had always been there, and a part of him had always known it, but kept the secret from the rest of him. There was a tug, a pinch at his center, and with a silver snip of sheers, the surgeon withdrew two globes from Paz’s chest. Paz felt suddenly light, like he had been bloated all of these years, without knowing, by his own guts.

The surgeon held the globes for Paz to see. Resting in the latex palm, wet with mucus and blood, were two eyeballs, their paths slightly crossed. They noticed Paz, and the pupils dilated. He didn’t like the looks of them. “I thought you might have green eyes,” said the surgeon. “You looked like the sort.” The blue eyes in Paz’s sockets called for eyelids. They could not compete with the exotic nature of a green eye. Since his lids were chocked, his eyes did all they could—rolled.

The nurse sutured the incision, elbows flared like a mad organist. The surgeon rubbed the
eyes with solvent. A luminous rainbow gloss swirled around them after the mucus was removed.

“This is the part that stings,” said the surgeon, and came at Paz’s face with a metal ladle.

“No soup here,” said Paz.

“Be still. I insist.” He pried an eyelid up and stuck the ladle around the side of Paz’s eye, which made a kissing sound when the surgeon scooped it out. There was a blunt, thick pain like his socket was one of those underground rooms where bombs were secretly detonated. The new eyes went in dead fish cold. “Shhhh,” said the surgeon. “Don’t move.”

Things looked very different through the new eyes. The new eyes were cubist.

“One last step.” The surgeon snaked a tube into Paz’s mouth and vacuumed the air from his lungs. His eyes throbbed with each clatter of his heart. His lungs were hard and tight as grapefruits. When the breath was all out, the surgeon sealed a canister against his lips and flooded him with another, sweeter, colder breath. Breath that knew no funk. “That does it.”

The operating light went out, and Paz fell into darkness. He fell and fell.

Or didn’t fall. His back remained on the table, but without pressure, and again he felt the tornado. No telling how long he fell through nothing, and though he didn’t feel he’d slept, he suddenly woke, or had a similar sensation, in the hallway of the hotel.

He lay on the carpet staring at the ceiling, a discolored continent of little state stains. Cigarette smoke had soiled the paint. He pressed a hand against his abdomen. No sutures, but his right eye looked into his left, and he could see around corners, so Paz deduced that he and the eyes in his sockets had never read a book together.

Standing, shivering, it was easy to see out of which door he’d come, as the knob had disappeared. The iron puzzle key lay at his feet. On the inside of his left elbow he found, tattooed, the outline of an interlocking puzzle piece.
...What You Eat

Paz spread corn chips on a baking sheet, sprinkled them with bleu cheese, one cup chopped asparagus, one cup minced tofu. Into the oven, nachos of woe.

He rarely watched television, but after four grocery stores in two hours, and with peculiar nachos in his future, TV seemed natural. Except his preferred shows had disappeared, replaced by a baseball affair, a documentary on freshwater lakes, and an emergency broadcast about rocks. He poured a glass of skim milk and took the nacho slough from the oven. Man, he’d sure prefer steak.

Spread on the dining room table, the pieces of Aurora Leading’s puzzle numbered one hundred and seventy-seven. Two of the twenty-five missing pieces had been found—one dangling from a cobweb just inside the heat register in Paz’s apartment, and the other on Erolia O’Bannon’s dining room table. He decided to assemble the puzzle without the lost pieces, but in the bottom of the box he found instructions. He scoffed a toxic nacho.

~Jigsaw requires sequential assembly. Overlapping pieces will confuse the final image if jigsaw is assembled out of sequence.

~Don’t be a square, gorgeous. Find one.

If she meant a square piece, it must’ve been missing. He scraped the nachos into the garbage. There was drumming on his door. Someone drumming out the 1812 Overture. Barely had the door cracked when Bunnie Liston hustled inside with a paper sack in hand and turning a full load of watermelon bubble gum, her mouth a miniature cement truck. “What’th that thmell?”
“Nachos. Where’d you get my address?”

“We’re having a date. I’m ficting you dinner.” In her yellow rubber rain suit, she might’ve been a bath toy, squeaker included. “Ta-daa!” She handed him a Wreath-hole™.

“Wait, Bunnie.”

Bunnie swept one hundred and seventy-seven puzzle pieces from the table. Some made it into the box, many tumbled onto the floor. On hands and knees, Paz recovered. Bunnie lit flagrantly two candles in brass candlesticks. “I’ll get exthcommunicated if the Body findth out we’re thtill together, but we won’t disthobey the Deity. Right, Path? We’ll do what’th right.” Opening a cupboard, she plunged into his cookware.

“But Bunnie—”

“I’m tired of the name Lithton. I can’t even thay it, Lithton. Playfair I can thay.”

“Bunnie.”

“Thyut up. Where’th a frying pan?”

“Bunnie.”

“I brought you thomething. I know you like puzzleth.” She reached into her sack and presented a box. It was that fad puzzle, supposedly the best ever. “I’ll help you put it together.”

“That’s extremely kind, Bunnie, but—”

“No, Path. I’m not kind. You’re mine until I’m through with you. I am making you dinner. I am putting that puzthle together with you. Tho thyut up. You thet the table while I cook.

Do you like thteak?”
Though tens of thousands of dollars worth of dolls had been destroyed by the tornado, Mr. Trebuchet’s rooms were lined with tiered shelves full of dolls. Lil’ Lucy, Sleepy Sally, and hundreds of others supervised household activities. It was worst at the end of the month, before Mr. Trebuchet dusted (Paz’s mother did the housework, but was not allowed near the dolls). With dust killing the sheen of their hair and the glow of their cheeks, they assumed a universal somber shade.

The all looked related, the dolls, from the same family that shared a silent dinner, that looked at each other sweetly, sleepily, sadly, and never reached for one another. The family where nothing was out of place. Always waiting. Maybe for emotions. Even when Mr. Trebuchet went scalding mad and ripped the head off of a Little League Leslie and pounded it on the corner of the kitchen table until the dolls’ face caved into itself and her expression was a deep black hole, and threw it across the room into the fireplace, and Little League Leslie’s head liquefied and drizzled down the logs—even then other dolls observed, unmoved, unafraid, unconcerned.

The following morning, however, the dolls all wore black armbands.

In the presence of so many silent beings, on always felt on trial inside the house, encompassed by jury boxes. When Mr. Trebuchet raised a hand against anyone, the dolls just looked on, as they had upon Little League Lucy, in hungry silence.

At night, if one needed to urinate or hydrate, one tip-toed to the bathroom with the lights off, not wanting to see if the dolls in any way changed when no one was watching. Occasionally the lights would be on already, and Mr. Trebuchet would be standing in a room, whispering to them. Paz thought about making little coats of arms for them, but couldn’t sew.

In the mirror at school one morning, while other children dinked around on the
playground, Paz took a pair of scissors to his heavily-conditioned hair, so soft and shiny it fit his head like a varnish, and made it scruffy. He sliced holes into his slacks, wrinkled his shirt, cut off the sleeves, and dragged his glossy shoes along the cinderblocks. His suspenders went into the garbage. When class started, his teacher gasped, “Paz, did you get in a fight?”

Because Paz thought it would get him detention, “Yes.”

She sent him to the office for fighting. The office sent him home.

The dolls watched him enter, watched him slink past his mother sleeping on the couch, watched him bring up six empty cardboard boxes from the basement one at a time, silently. They watched without complaint as he lowered them into the boxes, first those in his room and then those on the table behind the sofa who were keeping an eye on his mother. Surely the boxes signified something unpleasant to them, yet being put into boxes meant nothing to them. They went sedately. Many closed their eyes and napped. Not heavy, sunken napping like Paz’s mother, but sweet sleep, comfortable sleep, like they had no fear of waking.

He carried each box to dumpsters several blocks away, and never put more than three boxes in the same dumpster. Into each he threw an ignited book of matches. After the last box, he ran home and pressed his face against his mother.

Later, he and his mother huddled on the living room floor, blue-lipped, shivering, and wet, listening to Mr. Trebuchet screaming in the back yard the dolls’ names. Paz’s mother picked Paz up, but was too cold and her arms got lower and lower until he was on the ground again. They worked at getting out of their soaked clothes, but their fingers were too numb to unbutton buttons or grip zipper tabs.

“Brave,” she said. “I wish I were as brave as you. I’d get us out of here.”
While crossing the great dry state, Paz stopped in a very small town for a late dinner, and six glasses of water. He was very thirsty. He considered spending the night, but the only hotel in town looked too much like the hotel he’d finally escaped the previous morning, and he wasn’t ready for a second long, weird stay. He ate a bacon barbeque oozeburger in a diner on main street, which was the road in and out of town, out of town being the only place travelers wanted to go after they were in town. The great sand bed south of the settlement—upon which the tides of Lake Mirage were born at dawn, grew, shrank, and disappeared at twilight—stank of urine. Lake Mirage was the country’s largest fallacious lake, so asserted Paz’s waitress, and it had claimed fourteen lives since the town was unofficially founded. All of the dead had washed up near the town on hives of salt and sand by silent, illusory waves, all with lungs full of water. A ‘Swim at Your Own Risk’ sign guarded the shore of the sand sea, and after dinner Paz went to take a picture.

The bare hills and mountains to the west were piles of rumpled silk, growing more and more transparent in the distance. North of main street were two rows of houses that were loosing their battle with the desert, and the general store, which was also the bar/gas station/post office. The populace lived three and a half hours from weekday morning bustle, from medical aid, from fresh produce, from a ream of paper.

The evening clouds were scoops of sherbet on the blue bowl sky when the semi truck rolled into town. It was the loudest noise within two hundred miles, and could be heard when its headlights were still a blink on the horizon.

It grumbled through town, stopping right in the middle. Paz returned to main street and took a photograph.
The purple cab was outlined with traveling white lights, and the trailer walls were made of vertical bars with space between, and it too was outlined with white lights. The trailer looked very much like the kind of train car in which a traveling circus might transport its traveling lions.

On the side of the trailer, at the top, was a brash sign, also framed in bright white bulbs, that read, Eddy N. Nivens’s Traveling Prison. Paz snapped a picture.

There was stirring within the cage, and animals appeared at the bars, peering out at the town. Only after they wrapped fingers around the bars did Paz realize those were men leaning against the bars, squatting, kicking about in beds of blankets. Some of those hands getting chapped by the great dry state were walloping hands passed down from forefathers that had wielded broadswords and built ships. Knuckles big as acorns. The bars hummed dully as those hands wrung them.

They wore a lot of denim. Many wore sleeveless t-shirts, the two skinny ones were in denim jackets. There were ten men in the back of the truck. Between the ten of them they had eighteen eyes, thirty-nine limbs, 1,342 I.Q. points, good blood pressure, below average cholesterol, and fifty-two pockets. One had a scar where his mouth had been extended at the corner almost to his ear. Another was scarred from from eyebrow to cheek—the eye missing.

None of them spoke. One spit on the ground.

The truck driver cut the engine, and silence chased the echo out of town. The cicadas were not yet out. The silence pressed the desert to glass. Then one of the prisoners called out to Paz—alone on the street—and shattered it. “Nice tattoos.”
New Arrangements

Stuck to the center of the sister’s forehead, the suction dart looked like an on/off lever for her brain. She said to Paz, who held the bright red dart gun in hand, “Come here you little cretin.” She said, “I’m going to kill you.” Paz, on the loom in the deepest sanctuary of his noisy heart, wove tightly a tapestry of revulsion, using for material the coarse black hair on the back of the sister’s neck.

Paz’s second dart somehow missed the sister’s gaping mouth. Out of ammo, he ran into the living room and wriggled under the couch, where he often slept, for the safety of the twelve-inch squeeze. The clutch of a tight space was a guarantee.

Beyond the dust ruffle, his playing cards were scattered—cards lying face-up were whitecaps on the red sea of those lying face-down. Beyond them, the overturned coffee table. Beyond that, the dark wet spot on the wall where the glass flower vase had burst. His Hotel Hoyle had reached ten stories, too. But that was the fate of card houses. All houses.

“Little fucker,” said the sister. She’d probably removed the dart, but Paz pictured her like that, with a lever on her brain—and would always—both positions labeled “off.”

“Pulley! He’s your brother,” said Paz’s mother.

“Only if we’re feigning civility these days.”

Paz’s mother sighed. “Can’t we just…” Out of options, apparently.

Outside, in the driveway, the clap of a car door. Paz scooted further under the couch, up against the wall. If only he had more darts.

“I don’t see any pictures of my father,” said the sister, each word a rock in the sling of her mouth, meant to bonk a teeny birdie from the sky.

“They were destroyed in the tornado.”
“Yeah,” said the sister. “I bet they fluttered right into your lighter.”

Footsteps on the stairs outside. Porch planks moaned.

“Do you understand what you’re doing to us? To your little brother?” Paz momentarily mistook his mother’s voice for his grandmother’s.

“Little, yes. Brother, no.”

The front door moaned. There was a brief influx of light as the sun shone through the open door, but it was quickly staunched. Mr. Trebuchet’s heels snapped on the tile. Everything in the kitchen was quiet for a moment. He grinned. “It’s been too long.” His voice reminded Paz of the cold, smashed glass faces he’d found with his mother in the tornado’s wake. “You will be taking my name, Mrs. Trebuchet.”

“I’m sure you’d like some time alone,” said the sister, and went upstairs.

“Where is that boy? How old is he now? Seven?”

“Six.”

“Forgive me. Searching for you was exhausting. I lost track of time.”

“You found the few dolls we were able to salvage?”

“Oh yes. I could not possibly express my thanks.”

There was a hushed noise upstairs, and Paz realized too late his mistake. He flew out from under the couch and ran after the sister. The picture of his father, which usually hung in the hallway between his bedroom and his mother’s, where they could share it, was missing. Following the smoke stink, he ran into the master bath. The sister sat on the tank of the toilet, smoking a cigarette. The picture of his father—preparing to take his wedding plunge—was ashes in the sink. “Don’t worry,” she said. “It was a bad picture of him anyways.”
Engine Trouble

“Do you hear that?” One hand on the steering wheel, one palm raised for quiet, Aurora held a dancing posture. They’d been together for two minutes, and already Paz soul, permanently benched, felt like getting up and getting out there and shaking out the kinks. If not for Aurora, Paz would’ve spent all his time in the darkness surrounding the dance floor, looking on.

Paz turned his head slowly. “Hear what?” But he knew—his heart was still troubled from a perilous left turn.

Aurora turned down the radio and swiveled her face like a sonar dish. “It stopped.”

“Watch where you’re going.” Under the guise of flipping her hair, Aurora looked back at the road. Her dress was a tight red club number. Paz told her, “You look like vermillion bucks.”

She gave him another look. “Who are you taking to prom?” She whacked his arm. “Let me guess. Bunnie Liston.”

“Come on. She does that thing with her hair.”

“But she’s a dork. Perfect match.” She turned the radio up, bracelets clinking. Zeppelin.

Paz picked some schmutz from his pants and ground it to powder with his thumb. “Who are you taking?”

Aurora accelerated through a yellow light. “We’re talking about you.”

“It’s like always. I don’t have a date.”

“Paz. Darling. Prom is five days away. Any girl worth her malt has likely been retained. What are you waiting for? Do you have a crush on Flora Hause? Of course you do. Everyone does.” As usual, she was leading.

“No.”

“She’s not for you, Paz. She’s easy.”
“I didn’t ask her, did I?”

“Then what are you waiting for? An invitation? You won’t get one.”

“Girls here aren’t worth it. You know it. You don’t have friends at this school.”

“Just you, Paz.” His name left an embouchure on her lips.

They came up behind two cars clogging the road, one in each lane, traveling equal speeds. Unable to get around, she charged between, gobbling the dotted white line with her bumper. May we cut in? Paz got a good look at the man driving the car on his right, as their faces were only ten inches apart. What Paz noticed about the face was its parted lips. That soft hole awaiting words that had yet to make their way down the tongue. Ask! Ask! Ask!

“Did you hear it?” She turned the radio down. “That noise again.”

“Didn’t hear.” He looked at her, watched the knot in the corner of her jaw clench and release as she chewed gum. “Who are you taking?”

“The proper thing to ask is, Who’s taking me, since traditionally the boy asks.”

“Who’s taking you, then?”

“You kidding me? Dances I can live without. You couldn’t invent an event that was more awkward. I might as well sit at home in the dark, listen to bad music, and grope myself.”

“You’re just mad Hoode Crosby didn’t ask you.” His turn to mash a toe.

Aurora spat her gum at him. It clung to a wrinkle on his shirt, a little beige bud. “Hoode Crosby can eat every yard of flannel in his closet. I hope cheap cologne rots his flesh.” Her irises red as coals.

“Well, if you’re not going, I’m not going.”

“Perfect.” She stomped on the gas. “First class.”
And Now Iris, Fleet of the Wind

Paz glued a translucent plastic fingernail onto Erolia O’Bannon’s wooden pinkie, where it clung like a drop of baker’s glaze. She spread her fingers at arm’s length to look at the nail, glistening in the sparse light that beat its way through the heavy brown corduroy curtains, the lone luminous speck on her body.

“Sure,” Paz replied. “I’ll tell you. But it comes out jumbled and there are as many versions as I have moods.” He touched the ridge in his pocket, the puzzle piece he’d found in a dirty glass.

Gazing at her new nail, “I can’t keep things straight anyway.”

He pressed another nail onto her ring finger. “This finger ever worn a ring?”

“There are different versions of that story, as well,” said Erolia. “Mine and his.”

He squashed a nail onto her middle finger. “When I was young, I ran away from home. To help, I thought. My mother and I needed help. I came here, to Rain City, to where the helper was waiting. Instead, I was kidnapped by a prominent scientist.”

“The Procedure?”

“Yes.”

“Only one or two other children survived.”

“Perhaps we survivors were unfortunate. In my case, I believe the reason I survived was because of the girl. Aurora. No sugar and spice, but something. Were I to list the best moments of my life after the Procedure, they’d all include her. Lying awake all night at a sleepover birthday party with my ear against her stomach, listening to the soft cake ease through her. When she won two raffle tickets for a balloon ride, chose me, and on a morning cold enough to crumple up, we floated over a rural county east of here. She put her hands in my pockets.”
“Paz. You were in love with her. That’s what that’s called, you know.”

“A glib word. I don’t understand the word. I don’t know that feeling.”

“Please continue.”

“Things became complicated. Sometimes I’d run into her at a restaurant. She’d be with some meatneck jerk, and give me a half-cocked smile. Or she’d take me places where I couldn’t keep up with the drinks or the jokes. I called her friends an underground clan of rebel investment bankers with assets divided between hemp clothing, independent music, and latex futures. I was never sorry. Neither was she. But I’ve felt nothing since she left. I’ve spent most of my free time looking for her. Reading phone directories. Following vague leads to places that barely exist. And I stand in the center of those dusty hamlets looking at a scrap of paper with an address on it for streets that were never laid, I feel like the town is there, but I’m not. Beyond a shroud, bow-legged ranchers are carrying feed, women are buying eggs and milk, kids are in school, and she’s there, working the postal counter or doctoring sick animals. I’ve searched every city on the coast south of here, all the way to Mexico. It always rains. Everywhere I look there is a wet blonde curl stuck to a cheek. I never catch my breath in the cities. Today she sent me a puzzle. Handmade. It may be an invitation. But I need all of it. I can’t not know. When I unwrapped it, I remembered what it felt like to be cared for. To exist.”

Erolia studied the nails on her shriveled claws for a minute. “What does she look like?”

“She can change the color of her irises by will, though they match her mood as often as they match her outfit. After her eyes, she has a birthmark shaped like a motorcycle. After that, there is too much. Help me. Can you?”

Erolia gave a wooden thumbs-up.
After breakfast, Paz sprang outside for a morning bounce on his new trampoline, but the black tarpaulin was slashed. The trampoline’s metal legs were bent in half and cast about the yard. Springs lurked in the grass.

All night he’d dreamed of flight, of swooping under bridges and slaloming treetops, of rocket ships and catapults, dreams in which gravity could be shaken like water off a dog, and he spent the hours at the wind’s mercy.

Paz went down to the basement, pulled the recently purchased umbrella out of Mr. Trebuchet’s golf bag, and put it on the stairs. He then emptied an entire tube of Mr. Trebuchet’s miracle epoxy into the golf bag, and jammed the empty bottle in there, too. Once the epoxy foamed up the entire bag, Paz took the umbrella upstairs.

Outside, Paz tied the umbrella to his belt loop with the black cord strung through the wooden handle, slipped his fingers into the bark of an oak, and climbed. He turned his feet sideways, pressed the rubber toes of his sneakers into the crevices, and hauled himself upward.

He made it to the first fork, where the lowest branch arched over the yard, and shimmied to the branch’s apex, where the space between the ground and the branch was worth three of him. He opened the umbrella and dropped out of the tree. His stomach was in its favorite place, behind his sternum. He secured the umbrella and started up the tree again.

From a higher branch this time, he drifted to the ground like a sacred autumn leaf with nothing on its mind. Not a trampoline, but not bad. It was one of those times life felt so big to him that it threatened to rip his body in two and leap out of him.

Upon landing, the umbrella was ripped from his fingers and closed into a green and white stick. “What do you think you’re doing?” Mr. Trebuchet, Dr. No.
“Having fun,” said Paz. “You wouldn’t like it.”

“This is my good golf umbrella. Do not touch my expensive things. You know this.”

“You touch my stuff.” By which Paz meant the trampoline.

“You were told not to ask for presents. You mother was told not to buy them for you. You both must learn to listen. The two of you can haul the pieces to the garbage.”

“I bought it myself. I sold limeade.”

Mr. Trebuchet swatted Paz with the umbrella. “It’s your mother’s fault you’re dishonest, but we’ll fix that.” Mr. Trebuchet threw the umbrella aside. “Undress.” Mr. Trebuchet went around the side of the house for the hose, with which he gave a mostly naked Paz a cold pressure-wash. Not even ten a.m. A new record.

As soon as he was dry and warm, Mr. Trebuchet took he and his mother outside and sprayed them both down, for their bit of deception with the trampoline. Not long after, his stunt with the glue was discovered and swiftly avenged. Paz was stage two hypothermic. “You’re lucky I’m a forgiving man,” Paz was told, his head tilted back, his hair clutched in Mr. Trebuchet’s fist. “I could get rid of you in the time it takes a Rain-o-gram to get from Rain City to here.”

“A what?”
The Long Rain

Paz had been in Rain City for an hour when he saw the fire truck. Though he was soaked, and wanted to reach his destination, he was curious how a fire could burn on such a bogwater day. The fire truck passed, kicking up a breake. Cherry red and nickel-plated, the fire truck rumbled onward. Paz followed.

There was no shelter from the rain. Even people who stayed indoors were moist. Paz stowed his ineffective umbrella. It was impossible to fly it in a downpour anyway. The city didn’t need sun—it needed wringing out. Earlier, while he wandered the downtown labyrinth, he’d spotted a pod of sea lions barking in a planter, and signs had warned him that if the water rose above the knee to watch for sharks. Romps of otters occasionally arrested travel. Colonies of gulls crowded onto sheltered ledges.

Sheets of water cascaded down vertical surfaces. Consequently, the skyscrapers oozed with water, ever melting. Pedestrians, slicker-people, splashed along crosswalks mounted with rubber nubbins for improved traction. Parents lugged babies in papoose packs fitted with awnings and wicking fringe. The walking mall was enclosed under a Plexiglas shell. Holes in the Plexiglas allowed water to tumble into fountains below. Diners sat at covered outdoor cafés, clicking the rubber heels of their boots together, nibbling bread out of plastic baggies. Everyone’s faces were full and healthy as fruit. With the white noise of the drizzle, sounds were desperately far away. Paz had stayed in the walking mall for a while, unsettled by the murky street water, so he offered a passing man fifty cents to ferry him to the fast food restaurant across the street. The man carried him for free.

He passed a sun bar downtown, where customers were ushered into small cubicles. At home, these were called tanning salons, which his cheerleading mother was required to visit.
Smokers huddled in designated kiosks, their cigarettes snuffed by the humidity between drags, which they took by holding flame to the tips of their cigarettes throughout.

Presently, the fire truck wound through one-way streets and into an apartment complex. A woman stood out front in a blue rubber suit, waving her blue rubber mittens overhead. Paz jogged inside after the firemen, careful not to interfere. He was glad to get out of the immediate wet.

The firemen charged through the narrow halls in their heavy, retardant suits. The drywall had absorbed so much water it looked like cornbread. Wooden stairs creaked and moaned under their boots. Unwittingly they performed an oak concerto. Into a small fourth-floor apartment they filed, and Paz heard the woman shouting, “There! There!”

Paz peeked around the doorframe and observed the firemen gathered in the living room, knelt on the old, shag carpet, fishing through their gear. Two of the firemen disturbed the stack of wet, mossy wood in the fireplace, saying to each other, This one’s good, this one’s not, this one will do. One fireman got a small can from his bag and removed the cap. He squeezed a long stream of fluid into the fireplace, where the wood had been carefully rearranged by his associates. Another fireman blasted the woodpile with a torch. The pile lit. More slight modifications were made, and the fire set deeper into the wood. The woman said, “Thank you, thank you, oh thank you.”

As the firemen funneled out, Paz caught the attention of the last. “I thought the fire department put fires out.”

The fireman smiled down at him. “You must be a visitor!” He crouched to look Paz in the face. “In Rain City, you want a fire put out, you call the water department.”
Often, flood victims who were trapped on their own rooftops swam purchase orders over to the lumberyard, rowed home on a pallet of timber, and erected additional stories on the tops of their houses.

In the early summer, as the city dried out, the rotten wood of the lower stories washed out incrementally to sea, leaving the new stories, in most cases, on the original foundations by late August.

A particular tenant therefore might live, say, on the thirty-fourth floor and also at ground level. It gave the impression that the house reached deep underground. They didn’t, of course.

Before the rotten wood washed out, though, an enormous number of gulls were killed by flying into windows, so many of them suddenly so high in the air.
Visiting Vortices

With the lights off, Paz packed his waterproof bag. One shirt, one wad of underwear, the engagement ring, his camera. He tied the bundle to his motorcycle. He put a picture of Aurora’s assembled puzzle in his jacket pocket. To the rest of his possessions, goodbye. Goodbye Rain City. Thanks for what? Swimmer’s ear? No note for Bunnie, or for sure the Body would find out. He wished her one last pleasant dream. Just as he left the building, there was an explosion above. Looked like his apartment. Rain City returning his goodbye? One way or another, Bunnie was involved in the explosion. If she was dead, Paz felt nothing. Nobody wanted to wake in Rain City anyway. “Rise and tread water” is how they woke each other in the mornings.

Rain City was mostly asleep, its streets empty save a few police cruisers dredging the commercial districts. The drizzle was effervescent under the orange streetlights. Another place to rot in memory’s moldy basement. Better if the water rose, submerging his years there.

As Paz turned onto the freeway, he was confronted by the lean tea green horizon line. No pillar of salt, Paz, looking some 2000 miles and twelve days ahead. The road out of town passed the hilltop shelter where the Body Gathered. Though it was Wednesday, a day the Body did not Gather, the shelter was full of people, gray lumps in the murky light, watching him pass.

Though Rain City sat on a lush coast, it wasn’t long before Paz entered the desert that constituted most of the state. Naked brown bluffs were ancient faces pressing up through the dust in the long morning shadows.

Before noon, he came upon a powdery plain. Fine sand, the color of ripe orange rind, made pillows along the road. To Paz’s left, a small tornado dragged across the sand, sucking it up into a euphoric blue sky. Paz hadn’t seen a tornado in his state since the one he’d ridden. But there it was, drinking the dust like butterscotch milkshake through a straw.
Cresting the next hill, he entered a tornado garden. Fifty or more dust devils danced in deuces or alone, leaping the road, tickling the sparse bushes, breaching fences that served no purpose other than the interception of tumbleweeds, which the tornadoes nabbed for do-si-dos.

A lone cow munched spare brown weeds, and ogled the tornadoes. One of the dust devils broadsided her to no effect, that slow jaw mauling scruffbrush.

One pursued Paz, but on the dustless highway it went invisible. He pulled onto the shoulder. From his saddlebag he retrieved his camera and snapped his first picture since the last time he and Aurora assembled a puzzle in his dorm.

A few miles later he encountered a motorist parked on the opposite shoulder, bowed over the engine of a blue sports car. Paz pulled over and hailed him.

“Nice day for a ride,” said the motorist. “Where you headed?”

“East,” said Paz. “Stranded?”

“You don’t have much money for vacationing.”

Paz recognized Jerry the Spleen, the Body’s treasurer. “Always wanted to see Florida.” Paz, of course, wasn’t going to Florida.

“Oh I believe it,” Jerry chuckled. “Florida. Of course. Florida. Maybe we’ll bump into each other in Florida.” Laughing, he closed the hood of his car, got in, and started up. He waved as he drove off toward Rain City. Paz retreated to his motorcycle. Miles later, he spotted a blue glint two long hills behind him.

When he stopped at a small café for lunch, he told the waitress, “I just drove through a tangle of tornadoes. Fifty, maybe seventy tiny tornadoes sweeping the desert.”

“Huh,” said the waitress, slopping water into a glass. “No tornadoes in this state.
Halfway through dinner, Bunnie removed her yellow rain jacket. It squeaked and squabbled as she hung it from the back of her chair. Her fingers, runny with steak juice, left round, russet prints on the rubber. She pounced on her steak again, taking the brown bulge in her hands and pressing it to her teeth.

The sirloin lulled in Paz’s mouth, afloat on a salivary lake. “Good steaks.”

“Yeth I know.” She gnashed another bite, wet steaksap glistened on her chin. Watching those large front teeth work on a piece of meat, especially before she shirked the rain jacket, Paz thought he was watching a fireman cutting, prying, ramming—hydraulically—a wrecked car with the jaws of life. He speared a forkful of three-bean salad.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Bunnie. “You thyood really beg for the Body to readmit you. Ath a member of ill favor. You can’t thtop now. You had thuch a bright future. In a few yearth you could probably reapply for full memberthyp.” Talking with her mouth full, she was nearly incomprehensible.

“Members of ill favor have to face too many trials. It’s living hell. I prefer excommunication.”

“Living hell ith better than eternal hell, I remind you.” She took another bite, the steak pulled into a taut triangle between her hands and teeth. Chewing, she asked, “Have you thuffered any plagueth or famineth yet?”


Droplets of brown juice dribbled from her chin. “Who made that puthzle?” She pointed at Aurora’s jigsaw. Paz had given the jigsaw its own seat at the table. A thin bead of grease trickled
down Bunnie’s wrist, and she apprehended it with her tongue. “I can make you crafths if you like crafth.”

“Puzzles aren’t just crafts, Bunnie.” Right then, Paz stuck a toe into the current of jigsaw essence. “They’re divine.”

“Who made it?” A cold fleck of meat shot from her mouth and stuck to Paz’s cheek.

Paz plugged his mouth with the sirloin. He closed off the world with it, gave it all of his sensation, until Bunnie kicked his shin. “I’ve known her for a long, long time. She has a fiancé. Until recently, I hadn’t spoken to her in three years.”

“I don’t get thtuff from boyth I haven’t heard from in three yeartth.” She stared at him with her eyebrows tented, her eyes weak and watery, her cheek bulging with food, a cyst of food. She looked at the puzzle as if it had swept her off the table. “And there’th a lot of boyth I haven’t heard from in three yeartth.”

“I haven’t spoken to her in three years. But I am going to marry her. I need to.”

“But the Deity thaid we thyood cleave.”

“No, the Mystic said.”

Bunnie stopped chewing and looked at her plate. Her mouth quaked, and bundles of chewed sirloin hash fell through her lips onto her three-bean salad and mashed potatoes. She sucked air and pressed her greasy fingers to her face, smearing even more juice—war paint for bovine battle. Rain pants whistling between her legs, she ran into the bathroom and with a cry locked herself inside.
Paz’s mother helped him assemble the trampoline in the back yard, springs ablaze in sunlight. The black mesh tarp smelled rubbery and aseptic. Paz vaulted onto the tramp and bounced easy a few times. His mother stood aside, watching. “You’re really getting up there.”

From up there, he saw the swamp cooler perched atop the neighbor’s ridge, the cobwebs under their eaves.

Then, down, he faced the fence, new brown pickets interspersed with weathered grays.

The neighbor’s dog mining their garden, veils of dirt fanning between his hind legs.

The fence.

Mr. Trebuchet would not agree to an allowance, nor would he buy Paz anything but socks. A hole in a sock meant a hole in the soul. So to earn money for the thing Paz wanted most, his mother suggested he try the limeade concern. She fronted him the starting capital, by slipping it into the toe of a clean sock. The laundry was one thing Mr. Trebuchet failed to monitor.

The fence.

A polished red ’57 Chevy pulled into the driveway. Mr. Trebuchet was home early. “Did you hear it?” Paz asked his mother. She bit her lip.

The fence.

The Chevy rocked as Mr. Trebuchet climbed out. Though the house was between them, Paz knew exactly the look on his face. Arriving home early meant a good day at work, which meant he’d expect a good night at home, which meant he’d look like an advertisement.

The fence.

At the grocery, Paz bought sugar pop and nougat bars. He took the goods home and piled them in his rusty red wagon, and pulled them to the ball fields in the center of the subdivision,
where an evening softball game was underway. Men like Mr. Trebuchet, who annually exhausted their desks, plodded around bases. Their stiff tendons yanked at limbs; they lurched and pitched like amateur marionettes. They swung the bat awkwardly, trying not to stress faulty backs.

The fence.

A smudge on a second storey window where a bird had flown into it earlier that morning. Paz’s mother hadn’t wanted him to see the carcass, but he snuck a peek and watched her gather the bird in a dustpan and dump its body in the trash. Of course he snuck a peek in there, too, and the bird still looked as a bird should, except for one small bead of blood dried hard on its beak, and a red trail leading up into its nostril.

The fence.

Paz had parked his wagon between the dugout and the bleachers. The fans and players bought him out before the eighth inning. Paz didn’t spend a cent all season. After seven games, Paz had the money he needed. He looked down at the trampoline.

The fence.

The neighbor’s dog gnawing on the rawhide it had unearthed, pink with gumblood.

The fence.

Trebuchet, through the window of his upstairs room, eye to eye with Paz through the smear on the window left by the bird at the instant of its death.
Standing before the greasy alleyway dumpster, one shoe squishy from a puddle mishap, Paz held little hope. This was his chance to reclaim the lost pieces of Aurora’s jigsaw, but judging from all that had gone wrong since his excommunication from the Body, he would find only bloody needles and tobacco juice, and contract AIDS, asthma, and a brand new disease that would turn his bones to mayonnaise.

Ten minutes before, Erolia O’Bannon called to tell him that the sweepings would be placed in the dumpster. Two days before that, Erolia O’Bannon had called a service. In between, that service had come and swept the building’s ductwork.

Paz pushed back the heavy metal lid. It growled in harmony with his stomach, which fluttered at the scent of fried chicken. He hadn’t eaten palatable food in days. The only fortunate thing that had occurred recently was that after losing his job he had ample time to work on Aurora’s puzzle. His life was wreckage, and the passengers were devouring the crew.

First he discovered roommates, a band of little mice in the cupboard, eating or tainting his anomalous foods. Even the mice, Paz thought, looked a bit dismayed about the rice cakes, the bag of dried beans, the cyan pepper, Crisco, and powered tapioca. What is more embarrassing than the scorn of a mouse? He opened the door to the patio and evicted them.

Then, some belongings were purloined from his apartment. Not that he watched a lot of television, or cared deeply for his floor lamps, but the hardware store was out of floor lamps, so he’d passed the last few evenings in darkness.

Next was the accident. He remembered little, aside from the thrashing of his heart afterwards, and a foggy image of the bus passing an inch from his nose. He’d tripped, but after
he regained his breath, he found no uneven cracks in the sidewalk, no untied shoelace, nothing. He was completely alone on the street.

The worst thing was the disappearance of a certain handmade puzzle, all one hundred and seventy-seven remaining pieces. He was about to sift through a dumpster of sweepings for twenty-three pieces of a puzzle no longer in his possession.

Canals of yellow sky ran between the tops of skyscrapers, reminding him of the lonely Saturday nights he spent with Aurora Leading in college, when they broke from their puzzles and ventured to the roof in fair weather to watch the Pacific extinguish the sun. There was something about that time of day—the imminent doom of the shadows, the light that was not light enough, the ebbing heat—that made Paz scramble after something to hope for.

Lifting himself over the iron lip, he submerged a shoe into the black fluff, the downy, black lint. The moldy, musty dust came to his thighs, and he couldn’t see what he’d stepped in that was soaking into his shoe. The frizlint was thick enough that the cardboard pieces might not have settled to the bottom, so he went though the fuzz handful by handful, scooping it like bath foam, poking it with a finger, and discarding it in a trash bag, of which he’d brought several. It rose into the air and he was soon coughing up globes of black mucus and spitting them into the alley. The mucus membranes in his head burned, itched, wept.

He found crusty little discs, where the lint had concentrated around something wet that had fallen into the vent and dried. Some were still gummy, and had be flicked or scraped. Rusty pens. Bits of food molded gray. Nests. Tiny carcasses leaching viscous purple fluid.

Too quickly it grew dark, and the work slowed, restrained by the weak light of Paz’s flashlight. When he got through all of the sweepings, he poked carefully around the trash bags and the bottom of the dumpster. All in all, he found thirteen of the twenty-three missing pieces.
At the End of His Rope

Though he didn’t think he’d been asleep, Paz awoke, or had a similar sensation, in a place right out of the Sunday funnies. The vibrant colors, the simple shapes, the second dimension; his cubist eyes had nothing to unfold. He was in a sparse wood that overlooked a meadow, all of which was a Kelly green, except for the small brown sticktrunks under the triangle trees. The sun above was a round yellow circle with fins spurting radially outward. There was one cloud in the sky-blue sky; it was a perfect cloud shape. The air smelled like faintly metallic television static.

Below, at the bottom of a rocky overhang, a herd of overstuffed puffsheep munched grass. Teetering atop skinny, inadequate black legs, they blinked vapid eyes and traded vacuous stares. Tasty tasty puffsheep snapping at the grass, filling out.

Paz wanted those sheep. Stuffing for his rumbly tummy and a mop for his messy mouth, too. He licked his chops and rubbed his hands together. He shimmied down the rocks and ran at the puffsheep, arms outstretched. He leapt into the air, and when he was mere inches away from the puffsheep, the animal stood up and removed its wool and there stood a big ol’ sheepdog with walloping fists, with which he swiftly dispatched Paz from the meadow. Holding his sore nose, Paz devised a new plan, cunning and ingenious.

Onto a rocky precipice he stole with an ACME scissor-proof lasso. He lowered the loop down, down toward the meadow, and loosely ensnared the head of the puffsheep. The puffsheep had no neck, however. The puffsheep was ovular. When the puffsheep ate all the grass immediately in front of it and stepped forward for more, it stepped over the rope. Paz yanked, and the lasso cinched around the puffsheep’s belly. The sheep, now a white bowtie, blinked and continued to chew as Paz hoisted it upward.
Suddenly, Paz saw that below his rocky precipice, a second identical precipice jutted from the cliff face, and on that precipice sat the sheepdog. In his paw he held a very large and shiny pair of scissors. Paz laughed and continued reeling in the puffsheep. The scissors would break in half before they’d cut the scissor-proof lasso. The sheepdog reached up with the scissors and cut Paz’s rocky precipice from the cliff, and the whole thing plunged into space, whistling like plummeting rocks ought to. The puffsheep hung right in front of the sheepdog, was untied by the sheepdog, and Paz turned and climbed up his own rope as fast as possible. The rope fed through his hands, and he realized that he had climbed right past the end of it.

Don’t look down. That’s the thought that looked at him vapidly from his consciousness like the puffsheep had looked at him. So Paz walked through the air, advising himself that his feet were still firmly upon the precipice. This mistake was made all the time. Individuals were always running straight off of rocky precipices such as this, and only when they admitted it to themselves did they fall, first their feet then their hips then their shoulders and finally after their necks had stretched out like rubber bands, their forlorn faces. To not look down, Paz had to forget all about those puffsheep, put his hunger aside. That was the trick.

Don’t look down, he told himself, and he took his mind off of those tasty sheep down there and walked across the chasm, loping along like he had nothing better to do. The hunger was still with him and in fact would never leave, but to look down was to fall. So he walked and walked, stopping now and then to cool his feet in the rolls of a puffcloud, walking and walking until he walked right out of the sky and into the hallway of the hotel. A second puzzle piece was tattooed on his tummy.
Twenty Peethes

Once again, Bunnie Liston in the hallway, resolute as a roach. Her stomach sucked in, her posture straight, a tray in her arms. “Wow,” said Paz. It was a heavy chocolate cake, flourless, cut into twenty interlocking shapes and spread on a large, flat board. “About that puzzle you stole last time. I need it back.”

Bunnie Liston smiled at him. Every flat or sagging thing about her had perked roughly thirty degrees. She smiled so wide those two giant teeth looked like boxer shorts on a clothesline. When she smiled, her eyes never quite played along, always a tag-along happiness there, doubting the mouth’s optimism. “My puzthle ith better. Put it together.” The smile faded, the eye twitched, and she said, “Put it together!” She tried the smile again. Moderate thuc-ceth!

“But it’s cake.”

She forced her way into his apartment and set the cake tray on the kitchen counter. “It’th sthurdy cake. Come on do it.” Bunnie snapped a picture. “Now.” She spread a red-checkered cloth on his table. She wore a lime green skirt over black stockings, a yellow long-sleeve shirt under a brown short-sleeve, like she too was covered in frosting.

Paz let her know, and instead of mistaking the comment as mean-spirited, and slouching into the bathroom as expected, she said, hand trembling as it placed a fork upon a napkin, “Eat me later.”

Paz confronted the cake, flourless, chocolate, drizzled with raspberry. Even disassembled, Paz recognized the picture in the frosting. Starting with the corners, he spread the pieces out on the plastic tablecloth. In a puzzle so small, the edge was fourteen of twenty pieces.

The tips of Paz’s fingers were gummy with chocolate. Because she could’ve been right about the Deity, because just maybe he was stuck with her forever, he waited until she was
fiddling with the camera and wiped a gob of chocolate and frosting on her nose. She looked up at him with strange hurt eyes. “It not good?”

He licked a finger. “Yummy.” As he surveyed the cake for a shape notched just so, he said, “I would like to have my puzzle back. A prime opportunity to make a good impression.”

“The puzzle is gone. The Deity thaid we were made for each other. Put your cake together.” She wound the film with a fickle thumb.

Paz fit two edge pieces together and searched for a third. “What do you mean it’s gone?”

“It’s destroyed. I’m helping you forget the path. You need to stop thinking about whoever made that for you. I’m your future.”

Selecting the next piece of cake, he mashed it into the first two, squashing the flourless chocolate blocks and heavy, cream cheese frosting into a paste with the consistency of wet sand. Bunnie’s face looked like a face printed on the side of a balloon that had withered. Into the mound he mashed another piece, and another. The chocolate, the frosting, and the raspberry drizzle intermingled, and when he was done with it, he squared it with his hands, and the cake looked like a slab of dark marble. “It’s together,” he said. Bunnie was a huddle on the floor, head between knees. He almost apologized, but didn’t have the energy.

She leapt up, and where he expected moist sorrow were pursed lips, which she planted on his forehead. “You thaw my pride and stopped it, without thpite or argument, and you even did what I athked with the cake.” She gave him a hug. It was a size too small. “I didn’t destroy your puzzle. I’ll get it.”

“Thank you. Want milk?” Paz asked.

Bunnie wrinkled her nose. “Yeth! You are the frothing on the cake!”

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After salvaging thirteen pieces from the dumpster, Paz was only down by ten, assuming he could retrieve the bulk of the puzzle from Bunnie Liston.

Erolia’s apartment, where he’d recovered a single piece, was directly under Paz’s apartment, though twenty-four floors below. Perhaps the air ducts had shuffled pieces into other apartments. Paz conducted an inquiry.

Paz didn’t recognize any of his neighbors until one man bent to tie his shoe, and Paz realized he recognized only the tops of heads—from his balcony, that’s all he saw as they entered and exited the building. Tops of heads and umbrellas.

One door on the fourteenth floor went unanswered. Paz knocked for the ninth time in three days. Still no answer. A vacancy? A young woman emerged from the lift with two bags of groceries, came right up to him. “Uh, scuse me.”

Paz stepped aside. “Usually you knock on a door, the tenant answers from inside.”

She nodded curtly, the door propped open on her foot, keys between her teeth, groceries braced against the doorframe, purse fallen to the crook of her elbow. “Mmmff-mm,” she said.

“I lost some puzzle pieces in the heating duct. They might’ve fallen out your vent.”

The woman kicked open the door and cocked her head for Paz to follow.

Veils of light came into the murky apartment between the window frame and the shades, and rippled as their passing disturbed the shades. Smelled of vinegar. “My uncle’s bedridden,” said the woman. “Can’t come to the door.” She snapped open a blind and critters made for the crannys. “Let’s see if he knows about them.” She led Paz through a close corridor, constricted by boxes stacked along either side. The woman slipped between the cardboard cubes like a velvet drape in the breeze. Into the uncle’s room they went. Though the window was open and the
overhead fan spun lazily, the stale air was custard in the lungs. Paz explained his troubles.

The uncle shouted, “You want the pieces back? Strain my shit.” He spoke sandpaper words that milled themselves to dust.

“You ate them?” The woman crossed her arms. “Don’t I feed you?”

“They fell into my mouth.” The uncle pointed at the vent overhead. Wormy strands of hair stuck to his scalp. “So I fucking chewed ‘em!” There was so much stuff piled in the room that perhaps the uncle was bedridden only for lack of standing room. He rolled a magazine around a speckled banana, and stuffed the business into a tube sock.

“Do you remember how many you ate?” Paz asked. The uncle hadn’t looked sick at first, but Paz began to see the sickness lurking not in the skin, but under, not in the lungs, but between, not in the mind but riding it like a pro wrestler on a butter carving.

“Thirty. Forty. Ate them right out of you!” The uncle, his liver spots, they moved independently.

“Oh Uncle, you used to be kind.” To Paz, “He was kind. Now he’s kind of unhinged.”

“What’s the diagnosis?”

“The can’t figure it out. He was fine when I left him that day. He was assembling some renowned jigsaw puzzle. When I came back? Lunacy. A good case of the crazies.”

They inspected the vents about the apartment just in case, but recovered nothing. “It’s funny,” said the woman, fingers and knees buried in the deep brown living room shag by the vent. “My favorite family member for so long, I mean, that’s the uncle who put the unc in funk, and in a couple of hours some small component completely altered him.”

“And now the funk is coming out of him.”
An accident happened during summer camp, the one hot week that children of the Body—the Begat-lings—spent under the Mystic’s guidance. Summer camp was held in the eastern part of the state, so inclement weather was not a threat. The Mystic lectured twice a day. Between lectures there were structured activities led by adults from the Body, such as Edward the Brain and Sylvia the Elbow. There were enough children that there had to be two or three activities at once, assigned, for who would choose mask-making over baseball?

The accident happened on the day Paz endured the mask rotation. The boisterous cries of the baseball players were a constant distraction.

In mask making, the first step was find a partner, or in Paz’s case, to be trounced from behind by Bunnie Liston as soon as Jillian the Forehead said “Go.”

“We’re a team,” she told Paz. “I’ll do you first.” Her adult front teeth had just grown in, two hulking slabs that had changed the contour of her silhouette, thrusting her upper lip into space like a second tier of nose. She wore her hair so it covered the sides of her face and hid her profile. Her dirty green shorts and t-shirt featured puff-painted teddy bears she’d made herself. Somebody on the diamond hit a triple.

Step two, Bunnie opened a plastic pot of Vaseline and dunked three fingers. The smooth, yellow petroleum cream went onto Paz’s face cold and thick. “Close your eyes,” she said. Paz did, and she sealed them with Vaseline. She carefully applied the jelly to the corners of his eyes and the rims of his nostrils. Something strange pressed against Paz’ cheek. Only after Bunnie asked, “Did you like it?” did he realize he’d been kissed.

“That wasn’t a step.”

“Nobody saw.” She trapped the kiss under a smear of Vaseline. “Okay,” she said.
“Here we go.” Water purled in the plastic container as Bunnie moistened a strip of plaster. She put it on his face, vertically, a cold swathe reaching from his forehead to his cheekbone. Step three was cover the partner’s entire face in this manner.

Step four was let the plaster dry. As the crust hardened, Paz, blind and mute, could do nothing but suffer Bunnie as she sat close, imprisoned his hand, and murmured into his ear tentative names for their children.

Paz handled step five himself, which was to remove the plaster mask once it had hardened. “Sit down,” he ordered, after wiping the Vaseline from his face. Step six was perform the same process upon the other partner.

She sat with her hands in her lap, reaching out with her face. He applied Vaseline first and foremost, of course, to her pursed lips.

The accident happened after Paz covered her eyes with plaster. A dry crack came from the baseball field followed by the distant call, “Heads!” It wasn’t that he wanted it to hit her, it was that he didn’t care. He didn’t care if it hit him, either, but having turned to look for the ball, he was no longer in its path. Pow, right in the kisser. Bunnie pressed a hand to her mouth and with the other clawed at the plaster. The baseball skulked by her heel. Paz removed his t-shirt, pressed it against her mouth, pulled the sloppy plaster from her head, and dabbed the Vaseline from her eyes. Jillian the Forehead appeared moments later with a nurse, and before they carried Bunnie to the back seat of the nurse’s car, where she would accept seven stitches in her upper lip, she watched Paz with eyes stung red by the petroleum jelly, “Path! Why did you hit me!”

Placing the dusty ball in her hand, “You kissed this.” It was a home run and a hole-in-one.
The Enchanted Item

The engagement ring was forged from silver dredged from the little rich girl’s veins. Silver accumulated in her bloodstream, doctors guessed, during prolonged sucking on the spoon, aided by accelerated salivary activity. The collected silver was smelted on lust’s molten tummy, shaped by devotion’s blunt word, and cooled in tears shed by the eldest old maid in Rain City.

The little rich girl gave it to Paz, not in the traditional manner that engagement rings were given, but for safekeeping. “It’s very important that you hold onto this enchanted item,” she told him, placing the ring in his palm and making a bundle of his fingers. “Though it can be worn only by someone in love, I’m sure it could be somehow employed by the forces of evil.”

Paz had just finished his first day of high school, and was already tired of its trumpery. These cryptic instructions required altruism that exceeded his stores. “Keep it, Aurora.”

They slouched in their seat, near the front of the bus, depriving the hooligans in the back viable targets. “I can’t be trusted. I’d make whimsy of it, and it would corrode in some jerk’s sock drawer.”

She dropped the ring into his hand, and he inspected it. For all the hoo-hah, it looked like woven paperclips, meticulously curled and looped. “Why me?”

She peered at him. “You’ll give it due seriousness. Probably too much seriousness.” She picked her teeth, sending a gold bracelet tumbling from wrist to elbow. “One of these days I’ll ask for it back. Your job is to make sure I’m not acting on whimsy.”

There was a pockmark of sound toward the back of the bus, and a soft green slimebomb zipped overhead. It hit Hoode Crosby in the shoulder, sunk its roots into his blue flannel shirt, and dangled there, from the back of his arm, as he talked to Ely Gordon about a computer game, unaware. The hooligans in the back howled, a testosterone broadcast.
The passengers hushed as the second loogie was mustered into the hot mouth of one of the other older boys, all of whom rode the bus because their driver’s licenses were suspended. There was another wet, pneumatic scum launch. It overshot, and dribbled down the windshield. The bus driver did or did not notice.

A third loogie was primed. A thick pair of damp lips fired its missile, and the little rich girl spun into the aisle and started for the back of the bus. The projectile was an easy snag for her, and it hit the soft open palm of her hand. Her short skirt swished between the seats, and glances followed her down the aisle like she was walking to the alter. Approaching the hooligans, she held out her butterskin hand. “It seems one of you has lost a precious unit of fluid. Annually, dehydration causes tens of thousands of hospitalizations.”

“I’m marking my territory,” said one of the boys, stretching a hand toward her. A square slab hand with fur on the knuckles. His eyes simmered in his head like hot raisins in a pale load of dough. To his buddies, “This here is my piece of freshman meat.”

She high-fived his forehead, and the snotwad stuck to his brow. “From now on, consider your brain annexed.”

He looked at his buddies briefly, his stupid mouth ajar, revealing crooked tips of teeth. His face was amorphous, drifting through expressions like a cloud through shapes, building into a thunderhead. With staggering leisure, he brought up his hand as if reluctantly raising it in class, and slapped her. He yelled obscenities that shall not be transcribed for the sake of aesthetics. Another hooligan ruptured the subsequent silence. “Dude.”

Aurora returned to her seat, firm in nipple, short of breath. “Let’s have that ring.”

Paz shook his head. “Whimsy.”
Though Mr. Trebuchet had confiscated the umbrella, Paz found it behind the refrigerator—which was probably the most outlandish place Mr. Trebuchet’s imagination had ever ventured. His imagination was clogged with lunk gravy, or was shriveled in a cracked specimen jar—the formaldehyde seeping out—shelved with the primate imaginations.

Paz put a toothbrush and a few pieces of clothing in a backpack, and left a note for his mother in a dirty sock, telling her why, and where, and how, and please follow. He told her where she would find Mr. Trebuchet’s umbrella, so he would not suspect conspiracy.

He took the umbrella to the oak tree in the backyard, and secured it to his belt loop. Paz scaled his way to the tree’s first crotch, and took the thicker trunk up to a second crotch. He removed the umbrella from his belt and opened it, the long silver arms extending like bats’ wings. The mechanism clicked.

The screen door banged open and Mr. Trebuchet stamped onto the porch. “Get out of there!” he yelled. He wore stiff leather slippers.

“I’m about to,” said Paz. “That’s the idea.”

“That’s my good golf umbrella. I took that away from you. Climb down this instant.”

Paz closed the umbrella and returned it to his belt loop. He jammed his fingers into the tree bark and climbed higher.

“Excuse me,” said Mr. Trebuchet. “Are you deaf?”

“No, sir,” said Paz, continuing upward. He stopped when he reached a large, horizontal branch. Straddling it, he scooted away from the trunk. Never had he jumped from so high.

Mr. Trebuchet crossed the lawn and stood under the tree with his hands on his hips. “You can’t stay up there all day, and as soon as you come down, you’re getting punished.”
Punishment meant the hose, the freezing water, the sin rinsed away. All that sin splashed on the grass, and the grass still green.

“Right,” said Paz. “I don’t like this spot either.” He returned to the trunk and climbed still higher. The dog in the neighbor’s yard was digging in their garden. Kids in the yard beyond played Foam Frisbee.

“If I have to get the ladder, you’re going to be a very sorry little boy.”

The limbs were getting thin. Paz couldn’t go much higher. The roofs of the houses on their street formed an arc that met the highway on both sides. Paz opened the umbrella. Mr. Trebuchet was foreshortened, just a little red toadstool on the lawn.

“Which direction do you think?” Paz asked, wrapping the umbrella’s cord around his wrist.

“Don’t you dare jump!” Mr. Trebuchet abandoned his station at the base of the tree. He went around the side of the house and returned with the hose. “Get out of the tree right now.” Mr. Trebuchet fixed a jet of water on Paz, who simply employed the umbrella for its classic purpose. “Goddamnit.” Mr. Trebuchet lowered the hose.

Using the branch as a springboard, Paz launched himself away from the house.
The Dreamreels

It turned out, as Paz learned in the next hotel room, where he awoke, or had a similar sensation, though he didn’t think he’d slept, that all dreams were concomitant. If people were individual, stationary pieces of a human puzzle, exposed to a limited number of others, then dreams were the slender fissures between the pieces, rivers of space shared by all. So much was explained to him by the large plaque on the observation deck where he awoke, or whatever, despite not being asleep, overlooking a colossal warehouse. The plaque explicated that there was, in fact, only one dream. Every night it was the same dream, and every night that dream was chopped into as many bits as there were people, and dispatched throughout the world. The dream was so long that the chances of a person receiving the same snippet twice, or adjacent snippets for that matter, or even related snippets, were extremely low. Largely, the result was confusion, as no one person could dream enough in their life to get a sense of context.

The dream was a film—extraordinarily long—stored on enormous reels, which were kept in orderly rows in a warehouse big enough to contain Paz’s spatial comprehension of it many times over, big enough to serve as an apartment for the core of the earth and her roommate.

Paz held onto the railing that circumscribed the observation deck and gazed at the giant warehouse, the rows of reels reaching into the darkness like steel waves. The cubist eyes were overwhelmed by the sheer space—lit by the diffuse glow of bare bulbs—and soon had him teetering dizzy. He closed his eyes.

The automated machines pulled film from the reels at a furious pace, clipping it into snakey segments, which were shot into one of seven tubes—one for each continent—that forked infinitely. There didn’t seem to be any forethought or agenda to the assigned dreams; the machines appeared to be fulfilling quotas.
Paz did some quick figures. With a population of six billion, at an average of eight hours of sleep per night, the Dream had to contain some forty eight billion hours of footage. Which meant each reel held bazillions of feet of film. Paz stared at those giant reels, contemplating the number of people he’d never know, the amount of experience outside his own. What if he looked upon all of those people with the cubist eyes? Maybe a glimpse of God?

He turned around and found a door to a small theatre. The projector at the rear of the room ticked and wheezed happily as it cast images onto the screen. Film fed into the projector through a hole in the wall, and left the projector through another, and through a window Paz saw that the film was strung on a giant reel labeled in letters big as skyscrapers: Viewing Print.

Paz viewed the Viewing Print for a while, until he woke in the hallway of the hotel, or had a similar sensation, as he didn’t think he’d slept. What he’d seen of the Viewing Print was a woman in a gorgeous, white dress, size four, rich satin with a sheen to it. It folded around her like a soft, smooth sea. They sky was overcast, and it was tough to distinguish exactly where dress met clouds. Then from nowhere, this dog, all over her, teeth popping skin, blood saturating the gown, weighing down the breezy fabric, catching ill light. The blood spread also into the sky, filling first the valleys of the clouds and then bleeding into the billows, until the image was just her open face, surprised, and the black muff of dog leaving ovular splotches in the sticky and otherwise homogenous red as it loped off-screen. After recalling the dream sequence, Paz discovered yet another puzzle piece inked onto his skin, this one tied snugly into the first tattooed piece, and forgot everything he’d seen on the Viewing Print.
Three hundred and twelve doll eyes watched Paz slurp soup, two hundred and twenty-four watched him sleep, and from within a glass enclosure, thirty watched him bathe. Four hundred and seventy-eight saw him sneak into the room Mr. Trebuchet shared with Paz’s mother, and eighty-six saw him sprayed down in the backyard for that very trespass later in the evening. Though it was not allowed, Paz had been the only one home at the time of the intrusion, and had been careful to leave no evidence. After the spray-down, Mr. Trebuchet yelled at Paz’s mother for leaving him home while she went for milk.

The bedroom shades were drawn. It smelled a little different than the rest of the house, which smelled like wigs when the sun hit. The bedroom smelled faintly sweet, a little rubbery.

The dolls’ eyes were just glass. But they did watch.

Paz’s mother took to sleeping more often during the day. Sometimes Mr. Trebuchet would come home from work to find her on the couch, snoring on her back, eyes half-open. He’d shove her awake and she’d say in defense, through a stretch and a yawn, things like “If we were living one hundred years ago, we’d be getting twenty percent more sleep. It’s proven.” Or, “The Exxon Valdez oil spill, the chemical disaster in Bhopal, nuclear incidents at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island all occurred between midnight and four a.m.” When he woke her from catnaps in the evenings, she’d quote facts. “Car accidents increase seven percent the week after we lose an hour of sleep for daylight savings time.”

He came home from work and said, “Your arms are getting fat. I’m not the only one who’s noticed. Do some cheers after dinner.”

“The body is quite active in sleep,” she replied. “Pulse, breathing, and temperature
increase. The eyes dart back and forth.” Three hundred and twelve unmoving eyes watched her say it.

Her arm sometimes dragging the ground. Without disturbing her, Paz folded the arm upon her chest, as she complained of shoulder pains. The arm did not look fat.

Paz had peeked into Mr. Trebuchet’s bureau and, in the top drawer, which Paz reached by means of a chair, found clothes Mr. Trebuchet never wore. Paz had seen leather on motorcycle riders. Mr. Trebuchet hated to be outside. If he’d ever worn that stuff, only the dolls had seen.

Behind the bi-fold doors of the closet, his mother’s cheerleader outfits hung neatly on one side and Mr. Trebuchet’s suits on the other, organized by size for when his weight fluctuated. On the floor, rows of white sneakers and brown loafers, and under Mr. Trebuchet’s suits, a large black trunk, which begged, as large black trunks do, to be opened. Paz sprung the catches and heaved up the lid. The smell was the only thing that kept him from screaming—the sweet, rubbery smell. Otherwise he would’ve mistaken the naked women for dead bodies. But he realized, after his heart resumed banging, that their nostrils went nowhere. Dolls. They watched him. Their skin felt just like his mother’s, only cool. They were undressed. Their sex organs were not like their nostrils. Breasts nested in the cleft between their torsos. Mr. Trebuchet, his mother, the dolls; Paz could not figure it out, but he felt wrong. The dolls, heads canted unnaturally to fit the trunk, watched Paz seal the lid. Quietly, he drew the closet doors shut, crept into his room, and crowded under his bed.
The townspeople emerged from their small dwellings, their air-conditioned chambers, and warily approached the semi. Parents gathered children in their arms or clutched them by the hand. The men in cowboy hats drew themselves up and pressed to the front of the crowd and spoke in voices too amplified, while hiking their pants and rolling their sleeves.

“You need a permit to park a prison in this town.”

“Looks like just another toxic waste truck on its way to the federal dumping grounds.”

“Hey, fellas, it’s kittens for sale.”

One of the prisoners split his face wide and laughed. “Count his teeth!” hollered an old woman. “Count his teeth, all of you, and he’ll fall dead as a doornail right here and now.”

“That’s superstition, Murial,” said another old woman. “I been counting your dentures every night for years, yet here you are, much to the consternation of many.”

The prisoner nearest the semi tractor slowly unzipped his jeans and carefully threaded several inches of penis through his fly and splattered the pavement with a stream of urine dark as merlot from a bladder of unusual capacity. He looked like the type whose chemical composition was primarily urine. The crowd was silent throughout the episode, watching the puddle run off the shoulder of the highway, make slow trails across the sand, picking up granules as it went, sheathing itself in sand, and finally falling prey to the absorptive powers of the desert. As the prisoner shook off, someone whistled low. A woman standing on the second-storey balcony of the building on the left, the only two-storey building in town, under a mop of tangled hair and wearing a faded red dress that had slipped from one shoulder, said, “You dock your truck in this town anytime, honey.” With a thin black stick, she smoked her cigarette long-distance.

A woman in the crowd, who looked perhaps forty-five—but Paz guessed that if the
desert worked its magic on people as well as structures, was nearer thirty—said, “Keep your filthy talk to yourself, Louise!” In her arms, a small boy worked a fist through her hair.

Louise bent over the balcony. “Way you talk, Margaret, I figured your husband for a fine ride, not a dime-fed drug store pony.” This kept the woman in the crowd quiet.

One of the men at the front of the crowd looked at the others. “I could go for a good piss myself, eh boys?” And with chuckles of encouragement, the man unzipped and arced a pretty good jet, though nowhere near marvelous, between the steel bars, dampening a few standard-issue traveling prisoner boots. Discontent was expressed by another man in the crowd, and the peeing man called over his shoulder, “These kinds ‘a boys like getting pissed on, Vernon. You’d know about that kind ‘a boy, Vernon.” He finished and zipped up with no more boisterous nonsense from that poke Vernon.

Then, a burst of smoke between the truck and the crowd, and out of it stepped the biggest man Paz had ever seen, in a snappy, inky tuxedo. His features were so sharp that everything else looked a little out of focus. With his top hat, his zenith was easily three feet above the tall men at the front of the crowd. His voice crackled down Main Street and likely rose the drowned souls from Lake Mirage. Critters, no doubt, scampered for burrows. “Please welcome my prison to your village of Salt Wash.” In his hand was a scepter as tall as his shoulder, an easy seven feet, which he ignited with a breath of fire. In his other hand was a large steel hoop burdened by a single enormous iron key.

The wind whistled down the street and stirred the garbage in the gutters.
The Lost and Found

After abandoning Mr. Trebuchet’s umbrella exactly where he’d promised, Paz boarded the bus for downtown. He’d brought exact change.

Paz knew that Rain City was very near sea level, and that the elevation of the suburb was three thousand, two hundred and nineteen feet. Feasibly he could float most, if not all, of the way there, if, that is, he could find, lurking in the recesses of an odds-and-ends shop in the heart of the fair-weather city, an umbrella.

Having never visited the city before, Paz mashed his nose against the bus window and gawked at the huge towers that looked from Mr. Trebuchet’s house like toys stored methodically in the closet of a kid robot. Most likely their vertical construction had something to do with a capability to withstand or elude the gusts of tornados.

Paz disembarked at the station. No umbrellas in the shop windows, only clothes and necklaces. What he did see, an image that would stay with him for a long time, and be the first triggered when the word city entered his mind, was a pair of men, modern, of the machine age. The first was obese, his brusque blue suit meticulous, and walking backwards, away from the second man, who pursued in stained olive drab pants and jacket, old gray tennis shoes, a dirty wool cap, scraggly hair, grubby beard, and hauling a large, greasy bag on his back. The obese man brought his hand to his mouth and blew into what must have been a concealed whistle, as a shrill blast came from the back of his hand. As the obese man continued sounding his alarm, the other man spoke evenly: “How dare I? How dare I? When we die, my friend, one of us will know a few of the world’s secrets, while the other will die in secrecy. I will know things about every part of the country, and what it is to sleep in a field, while you will know that the buildings
in Phoenix very much resemble the buildings in St. Paul, and how dreadful each is out of doors.”

“What do you mean, ‘when we die?’ Are you threatening me?”

“And when we die, my friend, my knowledge and yours will be absorbed alike by dirt, and none of it will matter. The one difference is that I am not threatened by you and your sharp suit, or your umbrella organization, but you are very much threatened by me, one who has peered through the keyholes of any doors that are closed to me, and have glimpsed something great and invisible behind them.” They didn’t get much further before policemen made the pair a huddle. In minutes, the policemen had the speechy drifter in a cruiser, handcuffed.

Paz tried a boutique. “Umbrellas?” a sales clerk repeated. “We have over three hundred days of sunshine here. How about a lace parasol?” A lace parasol would not do.

Paz was no thief, but even so, there occasionally came times when moral boundaries had to be stretched, so when he spotted an umbrella propped against the tweed leg of a sleeping old man, he filched it. As compensation, he left with the old man his good luck string, which he soon regretted when he discovered moths had chewed the umbrella into a lace parasol. He returned it.

Already the sun was dawdling in the late afternoon sky, and Paz knew cities could be dangerous at night. He reached the end of the shopping district without seeing so much as a rain jacket.

Up the street, men in long red coats guarded front doors, rows of shiny gold buttons winking on their lapels. They stood under awnings that looked like toes to the skyscrapers’ calves. Hotels. Paz smiled. Walking into the nearest, he approached the front desk. “Hello. Do you have a lost-and-found?”
A Piece of Ass

They neither one consumed liquor at the party. He drank water, and she a cream soda. Raspberry.

Forty-five minutes after they separately arrived at the party, they left together.

They left without planning to, exactly. It was the simple catching of one bored eye by another across a room crowded with moist clumps of partyfolk. He was standing in a sudsy puddle of light beer at the time, in which hair and grit were suspended. She, in heels, stood mostly above everything, a metaphor that amused him.

Their glances met at the moment a noisy individual—who had been bumping into everyone all evening without apology—managed to remove his shirt and holler one of the obscenities hollered by such individuals at such parties.

As their glances met, she held above her head for him to see: her car keys. He nodded and they cleared separate paths to the door.

Meeting at the door, she put her hand on his elbow. It was noticed.

Also at the door, as he led her through it, he kissed her cheek. Metal bracelets clattered on her arm. Her black shirt, which would later be removed so gently that she would assume the role of the disarmed explosive, fit so close and so well he was caught counting her pores.

Her pores were mostly content, slightly gummy with sweat.

The black shirt, after it had been removed, was turned right-side-out and used to caress the chest it had recently girdled. The chest then heaved a sigh that turned the falling rain outside into snow.

Of the forty-five minutes he was at the party, he spent fifteen of them devising and
contemplating that very move, and the next: unzipping her red skirt with his teeth while running his fingers lightly over her stomach.

A significant difference between the way it happened and the way it was imagined was the hair on her areolas. He had no idea that was a viable place for it, hair.

One of her black boots, the ones with six-inch heels, was removed, but almost immediately replaced. The bracelets also remained on, jingling.

The tickle of the down at the corners of her mouth on his neck. The tincture of raspberry on her breath. The soft crush of her curls against his cheek. It was the little things like that he would recall most frequently and favorably.

She employed her tongue as a wet carpet, a duster, a piston. It seemed she could moderate its temperature. It was in his ear when they rolled over, as one, and he felt four simultaneous, anonymous trickles. Later, she used it to say, Ungh.

Her body, which moved and felt and tasted like it was free of pollutants and was often sponged of impurities, made him aware of his body, every unsightly, grisly black hair on his shoulders, every odor, every fat cell.

That tongue uttered in whisper the very obscenity hollered by the obnoxious partyboy. Subsequent chuckles provided an appropriate and requisite intermission. He drank water, she a cream soda.

After the intermission, the obscenity was performed, and it was virtuous. After which she or he remarked, We ought to have asked for more suggestions. At which point the other thought up a maneuver all their own.

At the end, when it was all over, more done than said, they had to sort through the limbs to see whose was whose.
Blackout

Gray huddled clouds under a chrome sky. Paz was on a rural road, amidst farms and ranches, smoke lifting from the chimneys. Lights smoldering inside parlors offered the lone warm light that morning, so cold that colors had frozen, or Paz’s eyes had iced over. It was completely gray, the fields, the air, his thoughts. Never had he felt so through and through gray, as if his life were a gray piece of thoughtful piano music, played softly by a gray and melancholy pianist on a dark stage to an empty gray theatre.

Though cold and hungry, a roadside spectacle piqued Paz’s curiosity, and he pulled over. Six horses stood along the barbed wire, some craning to munch the grass beyond the fence, some merely keeping company. All of them wore gray cloth blindfolds. The horses turned their heads this and that way, seeking a horizon that would show the first sign of that long awaited sunrise.

Paz’s presence upset them, so he cooed, patted their muzzles, fed them handfuls of roadside clover. As one horse clicked its teeth upon the herb, Paz lifted the lower edge of the blindfold. The black mouth opened, and the horse whinnied. Rolled eyes drowned in white pools. Paz replaced the blindfold after trying to get a photo, and the horse trotted into the field, stumbling, swerving haphazardly. At a distance, the horse froze, nostrils twitching.

Paz walked up the gravel drive next to the field, past a barn that had long ago hatched from its red paint, and up a half-flight of moaning gray steps to the gray farmhouse. He knocked on a gray, crooked screen door, which banged against the gray doorjamb. No doorbell, just dogs.

The door opened, the dogs were warned, and a man wearing, amongst other things, a blindfold, said, “Hello.” There was something familiar about the man, but in blindfolds people were mainly mouths, and mouths were mostly familiar.
Advancing the film with steady thumb, “I’m curious about your blindfolded horses, sir.”

“Yeah?” the rancher replied. “What about ‘em?”

Paz cleared his throat to mask the shutter’s click. “What are the blindfolds for?”

The rancher leaned against the doorway, arms crossed, and chewed his lip. “Well, every day around this time a pretty little mare passes by here on the road, and I can’t have my boys busting down the fence.”

“Oh,” said Paz, sly camera finding a pocket.

“Or,” the rancher continued, “I could say I’m performing a kind of equine experiment. See, I have this hypothesis that a horse can get to the point where it remembers every inch of its home field. Horses don’t watch their hind hooves because they remember the terrain from the front hooves. It’s logical.”

“Wow,” said Paz, watching the rancher’s thick lips, brown with chew.

“Or I’m teaching my horses a lesson that would do you good.”

“Peep!” Paz exclaimed, finally recognizing the man. Peep the Thumb. His wife, Willa the Index Finger, was a terrific cook; breakfast might be on the agenda after all. But then again, perhaps there would be no breakfast, only a piece of cloth around the eyes and a rope around the wrists, a fast knot behind his head tied by a sneaky agent behind him, and a faster knot tied by Peep when Paz’s hands went to grapple with the blindfold, and a quick hustle to the barn, where a final quick knot fastened him to a post. At least it took his mind from his stomach.

“Lemme feed ‘im, Peep,” murmured Willa.

“Waste of food.”

Even with the gray gone black, even with his arms restrained, he dug out his camera, turned it upon himself, and shot.
The Calling Card

The law’s long arm reached and reached for him, ever unhinging at the elbow, unfurling like a rug, and dropped its heavy hand on Paz’s shoulder. “Hold it, Kid.” Paz clutched the umbrella he’d claimed from a hotel lost-and-found. He wanted to leave the city before dark, which was approaching all too quickly. The policeman’s shiny badge flashed under warming street lamps. “What’re you doing out alone?”

The umbrella had been cramped in the lost-and-found for two months, next to a small green purse, some paperbacks, and a framed photograph that had been left on purpose. These items had a profound effect on the umbrella. Feeling like an unwanted trifle, the umbrella, upon being reclaimed, was feeling rather antsy, even aggressive, or so Paz carefully explained to the police officer after the umbrella swung around Paz’s wrist and clipped the officer’s large knuckles.

The officer explained that Paz’s mother was looking for him, and that he’d done something very dangerous and irresponsible, running out like so. He’d caused a lot of people a lot of worry.

Paz informed the officer of his mistake. His parents weren’t looking for him. They were long dead. Mashed up in the worst accident in the chronicles of the pudding industry. He himself was almost twenty, but suffered Peter Pan Disease, looking much too young for his age. The officer, obviously, was hassling the wrong citizen, but Paz wished him luck in his search.

The police officer crossed his very long arm and asked after Paz’s identification.

With apology, Paz explained that both his driver’s license and his passport had been recently misplaced, along with his car keys and credit cards. Their business completed, Paz wished the fellow a pleasant eve.
But after he spun and moved away, the heavy hand returned, and the officer made clear that he was not yet released.

Paz apologized a second time for the umbrella’s behavior, as the article had, a second time, swung around into the officer’s arm. No more of that would be tolerated. At least that much was clear.

Feeling that he might be able to help the officer sort things out, Paz disclosed his name, N. Horns Chesapeake, just as it was stitched on the umbrella. This at first confused the officer, but bewilderment soon turned to anger.

Wait one minute, was his request. Wait just one goddamn minute. The officer then disclosed that he knew precisely the identity of N. Horns Chesapeake. He remembered N. Horns Chesapeake giving the law a lump of trouble some months back. Reaching for his gun and radio, he informed N. Horns Chesapeake of his arrest, listed numerous rights, and ordered the release of the umbrella. That’s right, the officer recalled N. Horns Chesapeake’s odd anachronistic, anti-aging disease. Also recalled were the umbrellas N. Horns Chesapeake left as calling cards at theft sites.

Perhaps he’d been mistaken, Paz, for he suddenly remembered he was Paz Playfair, runaway, and that he’d like very much to see his mother, yes please.

Unfortunately there was no chance of that. The officer meant to bag the renowned criminal, and what a futz he’d look like if N. Horns somehow managed to talk him out of the arrest. Slowly get down on the ground, N. Horns. Face-first. Hands overhead, please.

A crash, followed by an exclamation from the street—a doughnut wagon just hit a coffee tanker!—and the officer craned, long enough for Paz to nab the umbrella and make his getaway.
Though he didn’t think he’d been asleep, Paz awoke, or had a similar sensation, in a quintessential 1930’s detective office. Sparse. Desk and chair, green lamp, newspaper clippings tacked to the walls. The lights were off. Venetian blinds sliced the meager sunlight, which fell in horizontal stripes upon Paz, in his boxer shorts, tied to a wooden chair in the center of the room. Three men in zoot suits leaned against the office walls. The stenciling on the fogged glass door was reversed so it was legible to those outside the room: Paz Playfair P.I.

One of the gentleman snickered and said to Paz, “☐.”

The smallest one dug into his pocket and came up with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. There was a series of dry sounds as he removed a white stalk from the pack and plugged it into his lips. With it dangling there, he leaned over Paz and said slowly, “☐.”

“What?” Paz asked, but the small man ignored him. He gave a hand signal to the other gentlemen, and all three shrugged out of their jackets and began rolling up their sleeves. Their white shirts poofed out around their suspenders.

“☐,” said Paz, getting worried. “☐.☐.”

But the men ignored him. The small man cupped his hands over his cigarette, lit it, and took a long drag, which sounded like paper rustling several rooms away. He blew the smoke in Paz’s face. “☐,” he said. “☐.☐.☐.” Paz’s eyes saw this sentence not only from the front, but from the side as well, from where it looked thus: |

Paz hardened his gaze and said distinctly, “☐.”

The small man retreated for a moment, turned to Paz, and said, “☐.” Paz didn’t understand, but then the symbol sped through the air and poked Paz right in the ribs.

“☐!” he cried.
The man in the fedora said, “□.” The character jabbed Paz in the eyes.

“□?” asked Paz.

The man in the fedora slowly shook his head, and replied with a “□” that stung the left side of Paz’s face.

The man spoke again. “.” The character moved close to Paz and became “.” From within came a “□,” which flew into Paz’s nose. When it exploded, all of Paz’s language was blown apart, crumbled into piles of debris, and he thought nothing. His stream of consciousness no longer babbled, but ran silent, the stream completely clean. To be alive, but completely silenced, it was the first time since the procedure that Paz felt like himself. The □ had silenced a nation of voices inside of him, countless people who he was not, and without their speech they ceased to exist, leaving Paz, for once, alone inside his mind.

“□,” said he. After the small man unleashed a flurry of “□’s” that stuck their sharp spines into Paz’s soft flesh and froze him into fragile glass was when he started losing consciousness. “□□,” he said. And finally, “□.”

“U,” said the small man, and the “U” jangled around Paz’s neck like a horseshoe, rendering him silent. Next, the man spoke a terrifying “T” that sunk to the hilt into Paz’s shoulder. “E,” said the man, and the three prongs of it bit into Paz’s chest, and it began to revolve around the central prong, shredding the skin. “R,” was the last thing Paz would remember. The “R” turned ninety degrees counterclockwise and stapled Paz’s lips shut.

Paz awoke, or had a similar sensation, on the carpet of the hotel hallway, physically unharmed, save pain on his lips he suspected was a new puzzle piece tattoo. The door he’d passed through was missing its knob. Nothing was all he could think.
# 3
An Assembly of Two

Assembled on the floor of Bunnie’s apartment were the one hundred and seventy-seven pieces of Aurora’s jigsaw that Bunnie had appropriated from Paz after their steak date. “But you’re missing some crucial pieces, Bunnie. Didn’t you read the directions? There’s more than one solution. It has to be done in order.” Indeed, it looked like a black and white cartoon character had been murdered on the floor. “What are all these boxes? Are you moving?”

“I want the whole thory, Path,” actually on tip-toe to bear down on him, borrowing a menacing look from a model in a magazine advertisement that Paz had just seen taped to Bunnie’s bathroom mirror. “I’m entitled. Who’th mad enough about you to make you a puzthle, but tho mad they made a defective puzthle. I detherve to know.”

“Well, you know Aurora.”

“Aurora Leading?” Bunnie plunkered onto the floor, kicking her legs and holding her stomach. “Thyee’th nothing but a hickey mathine!”

“Hickeys aren’t so bad.”

Bunnie hid her face under the floor rug.

“You must’ve known I liked her.”

Bunnie sat, wiped her face. “Let me try a hickey, then.”

“I’m sorry, Bunnie,” a preventative hand on her shoulder.

She grabbed his shirt. “You can get over her. It’th not ath hard ath it thounds. I’m here for you.”

“Sorry, Bunnie. Deity Who is Capricious or not, that’s who I need.”

Bunnie leapt up and paced around the linoleum. She pounded her fists upon her thighs as she walked. For a while she squatted on the counter top and peered down at Paz, who, after
a few strange seconds, began disassembling the puzzle and fanning pieces into the box. Bunnie
got down from the counter and stood beside him, her thin white pumps rolling through shapes as
her feet worried them.

“I think the Deity ith trying to talk to uth, Path. The Deity thinkth it’th time to let go of
that girl. It’th time to think about me. The Deity hath ended that relationhip for a reathon, Path.
Everything happenth for a reathon.”

“She made a puzzle for my birthday. That’s a good reason to forget about the Mystic.”

“Lithen,” she thaid. “I have thomething for you. Be right back.” She left the room, and
Paz finished dismantling the puzzle. She returned with a large notebook. “I’ve been having
imaginationth, Path. They come to me at weird timeth. Even in the middle of the night. They hit
me right here.” She pointed to her forehead. “In thith lobe. I feel them. These imaginationth are
about us, Path. I can thee how happy we’ll be.” She opened the notebook and showed him page
after page of drawings, all featuring Bunnie and Paz engaged in some activity. Nuzzling on the
beach. Kissing on the sofa. Standing beside the lion’s paddock at the zoo. Bunnie dropping
quarters into the mechanical horse at the supermarket, Paz hunched on the tiny plastic animal’s
plastic saddle. In one sketch, they were skinning an elk. In each imagination, both Paz and
Bunnie were wildly happy. The characters’ identities differed only in that one wore a dress and
the other pants. The heads were round, happy skulls. “That’th just how it ith in my
imaginationth,” she said. “We can have that together.”

“Oh,” said Paz.

“Have them.” She closed the notebook and slid it into his arms. “Much better prethent
than an incoherent puzthle.” Paz found nothing suitable to say, and Bunnie ran to the bathroom.
I know you’re in dere, wabbit!
Bones

Paz started with the skull, Aurora with the feet. The puzzle had 206 pieces, each a bone of the human body. “Did you know bones are levers?” she asked. “At every moving joint there is a fulcrum, effort, and resistance.”

Spreading the skull bones on the floor, Paz said “How many bones are there in a head? Look at these bones.” He referred to the human physiology textbook they’d borrowed from a Sports Med student down the hall. “Did you know you have an ethmoid bone? It’s right back here.” He pushed his finger gently against the skin below the inside corner of her eye. “What about a sphenoid. If somebody told me I had a sphenoid, I’d be offended or something.” He squeezed the top of her head. “These are your parietales, one on each side.” Touching her cheekbones, “Zygomatic.” Her lip, “Maxilla.” Digging through her hair and gripping the back of her head, “Occipital.” He smelled his fingers while she searched for a piece that fit her calcaneus. They smelled like her shampoo. He bore a finger into her ear. “External auditory meatus.”

“Shut up,” she said. “I do not have one of those. I do not have a meatus.”

“Says right here you have one.”

“Well.” She looked at the textbook. “It’s wrong. I don’t have a meatus. Disgusting.” She found the talus and connected it to her calcaneus. “You’re the bonehead. You have a meatus.”

“What do those twenty-two bones protect?” Grabbing her head like a melon, “What do you keep inside?” He massaged her head. “The contents of your life are in this box.”

She escaped his clutches and whacked him with a tibia. “It seems like a paradox that my body knows it’s full of levers.” She held up the tibia. “I’d call this my tibia, but I wouldn’t call it me. What’s my brain? Should I call it my body or should I call it me? Take away a leg and I’m still me. But take away an organ and I die. But I don’t think of my organs as me, per-se.”
“There’s that old saw, greater than the sum of parts.”

She sat upright. “Are you religious, Paz? Never would’ve thought.”

“No no no no no,” he said. “No no no.” A breath. “But I’m involved in a group.”

Fitting the fibula and tibia together, she stabbed him with a pointy look. “Do tell me it’s not the group I’m thinking.”

“You’ve heard of us?”

“Through my external auditory meatus. I’ve heard rumors. And I always believe rumors. Give me a little notice before you commit mass suicide, will you? I’ll bake you a cake.”

“It’s not what you think,” he said, getting the major bones of the skull into good shape.

“Then it’s probably worse.”

“You could come with me. I’m allowed to bring an occasional guest. But I’m not sure I want you to come. It seems in my head that there would be less there, in terms of substance, if we were hearing it together. I have years of context that you don’t. The Mystic is not easy to listen to for the first time.”

“Allowed? Whoboy. Sounds nuts. Do I have to bring my own human sacrifice?”

He glared at her. “Not on your first visit. But you do have to submit a list of your bank account numbers.”

She gripped his head. “Hmmm. Feels a little soft.”
“Paz!” When bellowed, the P and Z softened, and his name resembled a common scream.

Bunnie hit him square, solid, and drove him into the pavement. He felt compacted. Aurora’s puzzle and Bunnie’s book of drawings were suddenly missing from his hands. Paz lay on his back, the cold grit of the sidewalk biting his shoulders, pinned by Bunnie Liston’s warm hips. Rain in his eyes. Oh dear god she was going to make a move right there in the open.

Bunnie’s perfume or shampoo, or whatever it was, had a cheap, gaudy bouquet, which was working to cover up a burnt odor. She smelled like worn out but clean underwear.

Expecting a sour cream kiss, Paz raised his hands to defend, but she leapt off him and, dragging him to his feet by the collar of his jacket, pulled him back into her apartment building. Finally, Paz saw the wreckage on the sidewalk, mere inches away from where he’d lain. Five concrete balloons were crumbled upon the cement, cracked and cratered by the impact. The balloons had chains instead of strings, clasped at the ends into a bunch. If not for Bunnie, the bunch would have landed on Paz’s head and driven it deep inside his rib cage, and he would’ve died looking at his own lungs, listening to his glugging organs, his chugging heart.

Bunnie put her hands over her mouth. “Oh my. They’ve theen me. I’m out. Exthcommunicated.” Her cheeks, typically sallow, dried up like porcelain scabs. Dark pink rings formed around her eyes. She drained her stomach onto the lobby floor. Okay—didn’t she know she was supposed to remove the fortunes from the cookies? There were like, fifteen little light blue pennants in her gastro-hollandaise.

“Bunnie, you saved my life.” Paz sat her on the steps. “But why?” He fixed her collar, smoothed her mussed hair.

“What thyoold I believe in now? Who will I thpend time with? The Body wath
everything.” She looked at Paz. “You were everything. What have I chothen? I don’t even know what to think about.”

“Why didn’t you let them kill me?”

“It’th not right, Path. The Deity Who is Capricious is no killer. You were chosen ath my partner for life.” She pressed a hand to her mouth, the veins big as garden hoses. “I’m out, Path. I’ve been in most of my life, and now I’m out.” She touched her face. “Or maybe the Deity Who is Capricious ith a killer. What if I’ve dithobeyed? Oh no. What can I do with my life now?” She latched onto his shirt. “Pleath, Path. Try to make thith work. Maybe the Deity wanth you to let go of Aurora. The Deity couldn’t try harder to get you to depend on me.” She produced from the waistband of her skirt their shared puzzle piece from the Body’s puzzle. “And now that I’m exthcommunicated, I really need you. Without you I’m completely lotht. The biggetht part of my life ith gone, and you’re the only part left. I’m out. I’m out. My life.”

“I, for one, never found the peace they promised. Waste of time.” She didn’t even hear him. “Why don’t you grab some clothes? You can stay on my sofa for a few days. My place isn’t any safer than yours, but we’ll help each other keep watch. I could use company.”

Bunnie didn’t move at first, but then she started pulling out her eyebrows, one or two black hairs at a time, creamy white follicles clinging to the tips. Pressing her palms against her eyes, she made a noise very much like she was trying simultaneously to yodel and swallow her ears. She jammed her hands into her damp armpits and then licked her fingers. Hugging Paz she said, “I’ll be just a moment. I’m all packed.” She ran up the stairs to her apartment. Paz wanted to retract the offer.
The night they made love, it lay in bed with them, on the soft margin of sheet, and poked them in the ribs with its warm finger.

They made love, and it squirmed between them and tickled their faces with a red feather. It stared at them with googley eyes and took all the covers for itself. When they weren’t looking, it tied their flesh together at the toes.

They made love, and it hovered overhead and dropped upon them its little trajectiles, which stuck to their skin and itched and burned and delighted. It occupied itself with the ceiling fan, weaving around the blades, swatting at the pull-chains, and diddled nonsense on the expansive white ceiling in its own blood, which, when it dripped upon the couple, turned into chocolate mousse. When he got up to use the restroom, he pulled love’s dangling ropetail, mistaking it for the light, and tore love right out of the air. It rained on the floor in pieces, bouncing on the hardwoods like cinnamon red-hots, or the swish of surf.

They made love, and it tore the bedroom from the building and carried it piggy-back to the ocean floor, lit the room with a fish that glowed green, and choreographed a visual opus outside the window with the corals, kelps, sponges, anemones, mollusks, and octopi. The whole thing made the woman hungry.

They made love, and in a chef hat, it sautéed for them mushrooms, served them with oysters and green M&M’s. It served in champagne flutes a dubious, viscous, warm fluid, which tasted like fluffcream and some kind of liqueur distilled by Wonka.

They made love, and it carved with a pocketknife their initials into everything.

They made love, and hid it in a top hat. The plan was to perform a trick at parties, where they would extract it from the hat and let it hop about the guests, taste everyone’s drink, nibble
everyone’s ears, upset the houseplants, rummage the fridge, dig up the garden, dim the lights, slow the music, toy with the thermostat, and hump a leg or two.

They made love, and it told a dirty joke.

They made love, and it husked their bodies away, kneaded what was left into a paste, and flung it against the wall. It stuck.

They made love, and it bashed their skulls together.

They made love, and it stayed up all night reading *Pride and Prejudice*.

They made love, and with it won a chili cookoff.

They made love, and it made a home with obsession, with darling pink curtains and quaint little shutters with hearts in them and a round-topped door and actual honest-to-goodness peppermints for siding. The house remained sealed for a long, long time, until one of them, unidentifiable, crawled outside, gasping and clawing the air.

They made love, and it went for a dip in a pool of strawberry Jell-O, and even after the shower, and after the washrag, it was sticky to touch.

They made love, and it hung around murky bars smoking thin cigarettes, dancing with anyone, wailing into the karaoke microphone any of the sad black ballads, its drink down to slurry, tiny ice chips and watery well liquor, finally retiring at two a.m. to a modest trailer with bad carpet, where it would peel off in silence its own stinking stockings and lurk into bed.

They made love, and it released from a large sack banks of cloud matter, which it pressed firm to the ceiling. Strange lightning struck and made their bones buzz.

They made love, and it snatched the satin sheet, rolled it up, and smoked it.

They made love. They had a litter of it.
Delicacy

Though he didn’t think he’d been asleep, he awoke, or had a similar sensation, in a city where every citizen had a malady. Many were missing fingers, hands, arms, a foot, a leg. Quadriplegics lined the sidewalks rattling coin cups. Sometimes clothing rippled in peculiar places, betraying a missing a chunk of chest. Otherwise, the people looked good. Young. Was this the city where the problem of the wrinkle had been solved?

No matter where Paz went, he salivated after a pleasant scent. His stomach souged.

A child, while his father was distracted by a store window, contemplated his tiny hand for a moment, and then chomped down upon his little finger. There was no blood, no cry, not even a grimace of pain, as the boy rushed his hand back into his pocket. The front of the boy’s jeans did not darken with blood. His jaw rolled slowly.

The father, who was missing everything below his left bicep, turned to the boy to make a remark, and immediately dropped to his knees and caught the little boy’s jaw in the vice of his hand and forced his way past the boy’s lips. When he pried the mouth open, and found it empty, he grabbed the boy’s wrists, pinned them between jaw and shoulder and stump, and spanked him. Recklessly. But soon the father picked the child up, cradling him, and rushed him away.

Paz sniffed his arm. He slobbered all over his wrist. Surely a taste of his forearm couldn’t hurt. But he waited.

It was getting dark, and the downtown streets were getting busy. The people wobbled and lurched on whittled legs, full of holes and divots. Nobody had earlobes; many had no ears at all. Everyone so emaciated it was like living in a perfume advertisement. Live the passion. Disfigurement by Ralf Lauren.

People in formalwear waited in a line. For what? Looked like a restaurant. In the
window, a man with no left hand was eating a left hand. Someone in line said to a friend, I’m going to try my flank. I’ve waited long enough. The crowd was mostly quiet, clutching their clutches and roughing their muffs. They snapped at each other in low tones; their shifting glances could not have pierced onionskin. Those who saw Paz told him he was a chicken. An insult for his abstinence or speculation at his flavor?

No other flesh smelled good to Paz, only his own. Imagine. Cannibals spattering the streets, crazed hunchbacks moving in tribes, teeth of the fallen strung around their necks, fillet knives flashing in the firelight of burning rubbish.

Paz passed an episode; it appeared someone had completely consumed themselves. Mourners held each other, others—probably strangers—stood at a distance and watched with white faces the exact scene that had played out in their own minds countless times, the denouement of their own lives.
Fancy

Paz was surprised when he drove off the end of the pavement and into the sister’s neighborhood. He pegged her the type for smoothie bars and trend-jogging, always finding her reflection in the corner of the window, the roll of a doorknob. The roads had once been paved; chunks of asphalt were half-submerged in the dirt. The concrete sidewalks were plagued by jagged fault lines—each slab broken into several planes. Scraps of odd, clashing colors hung from side-yard clotheslines, giving the old houses their only spark. Cars locked with rust sat on cinderblocks over spare patches of brown grass. Young boys were outside without shirts on, swinging plastic golf clubs wrapped with duct tape at empty tin cans. A group of winded and wounded children suspended a roadway football game so Paz could pass. Children were everywhere, ascending dirt mounds, hanging upside-down from tree branches, digging in the mud. A group of older kids threw hatchets at a stump. No televisions to watch, no fad puzzles to assemble.

Teenagers climbed the chain-link backstop at the baseball diamond, and sat on the metal bar at the top, eighteen feet off the ground. There was fence-shaking, chicken fighting, leg-pulling, whatever was necessary so that the fence-shaker, chicken-fighter, leg-puller could be alone atop the fence. Some toppled over backwards, some were shook off during ascent, some were struck by those tumbling from above. Once the fallen caught their wind, back up they went, dusty, scratched. A suburban teen would only fight that hard for air conditioning.

The poor neighborhood was not out of place so much as out of its time. Paz had crossed some meridian separating the present and the time before the television mania, the video game craze. Back then, in whatever time Paz was in, youths were responsible for their own fantasies. In the future, that flickering screen assumed those fantasies, relieving the nation’s youth of
any reason to exercise their imaginations, which wither quick and regenerate only in mutated forms that work in mediums of cynicism or sorrow. Because they do come back, imaginations. Most adults claimed to have lost theirs over the years, not seeing their crippling pessimism, their acidic fatalism as creative acts.

In the sister’s neighborhood, proof. Pirate ships rolled through the dirt mounds of the abandoned field. The KGB was about to flank and prevail over the CIA in a firefight started by a dispute over potato sandwiches. The Queen of Alaska sipped tea with a superhero. So Paz, too, decided to play with the sister.

The sister’s place was a modular, the windows scabbed over with anomalous cruds. A red wagon with a broken axle sagged in a sandbox out front. Plastic sunflowers pinwheeled in the breeze. The sister would be, hmmm, fortyish.

Paz parked his motorcycle on the sidewalk so that his kickstand wouldn’t sink into the moist dirt. A good punt might not blow the sister’s front door wide, but it would put a foot-sized hole in the cheapjack wood. Instead of knocking, Paz pressed his face against a small window and peered inside.
A Death Fortold

Bunnie on the floor, strange sleep smells oozing from her. Paz hunched over the jigsaw, making scant progress only to sweep the table every hour and try again. Finally, when he yanked open the door to escape the apartment, he realized the banging in his head was in fact knuckles on a door, his door, and now that the door was open, the knuckles hung suspended, unsure of how to proceed. It was the woman from a few floors down. With the uncle. The puzzle-muncher.

“How long have you been knocking?” Paz asked.

Her fist still an impediment between them, she said, “I wasn’t knocking.” She lowered the fist, and raised the other, in which a small white cardboard square was wedged. Paz gasped. “Piece at last! Piece at last! Good God almighty, piece at last!” He took the piece from the thin, olive fingers. “Your Uncle must have very poor digestion.”

“My uncle passed away two days ago.” She handed Paz a box—that fad puzzle. “I found this under his nightstand. It looks like he put your pieces in with this other puzzle. Please keep it. I hope everything you need is here. And give this other puzzle a try. I tried it. Everybody is trying it.” The woman made a great weary wind like only a mountain should make.

“What was the cause?”

The woman shrugged. “There were very few physical symptoms. He hid things. He stopped moving, through he wasn’t in pain or weak.” Gesturing to the puzzle box, “As you can see. We found many, many things squeezed into socks and hidden in sacks under his bed.”

“So no one’s certain?”

“No, but there have been some similar cases popping up within the past few months across the country. New bug.”

“Well, are you doing alright?”
“Alright? Sure. Why do you ask?”

“I mean, your uncle…. Were you close?”

“Oh. Yeah, I was probably closer to him than to anyone in my family. How long do you think it can keep up this rain?” Persiflage on the Moot Topic.

“Going on a trip?” Paz asked.

“Huh?”

“The bags.” So many bags slung over her shoulders she looked like a suspension bridge.

“No,” she seemed confused. “This is just my purse. Carry it everywhere.”

“You didn’t have all of those when I met you.”

She looked at him. “You mean it. Singular.”

“No. What’s in them?”

“There are essentials in my purse.”

“Right,” said Paz. “Be prepared.”

She shook her head and uttered a little black nonsense in the tongue of an imp. Not baby gargle nonsense, no, it was nonsense that might leak out of bad yogurt. Her hands went to her gut and her eyes steamed over.

She yawned and said, “How long do you think it can keep up this rain?”

“Thank you for your help.” Paz shook the puzzle box. “It was nice seeing you again.”

The woman smiled. “Good luck with that puzzle.” She turned and hobbled down the hall, straining under the weight of the bags, the cords in her neck taught, the lumps of muscle on her calves hard as wood, the leather straps creaking and moaning as the bags dangled around her hips.
The Theif

After his journey across the broad crop surf of the Ordinaries, Paz stood in Sunburn City, which was tucked in against the base of a giant mountain range, where jagged white peaks wore cloud beards. If Paz could get up there, he’d surely be able to float the rest of the way to Rain City. There were plenty of skyscrapers to leap from in Sunburn City, but he’d need to be launched from a cannon to get over those peaks.

The people on the street smelled like sunscreen. Business folk were on lunch break, the breast pockets of the men’s suits bulging with pink plastic bottles, SPF 30. Many women wore large hats. Windows were tinted blue, brown, green.

The aroma of food pervaded the city, awash in noontide. Most restaurants sat primarily outdoors, under giant square umbrellas. A breeze made it impossible for Paz to escape the scent of countless delectables. His stomach had learned a few things from his heart over the years, including a catchy, syncopation in 6/8 time.

Staring across the street at a fruit stand, scouting for possible security measures between him and lunch, Paz spotted another boy about his age with very red hair and a yellow fisherman’s cap. The boy looked directly at Paz, and had been looking for some time. In his hands was an oily black umbrella, good-sized. After eye contact was made, the boy grinned, and his umbrella came open and lifted him from the pavement, way up into the sky, and around the corner of a skyscraper, all in a five Mississippies.

Paz pursued, of course, but there was no hope on foot. How on a calm day had the boy gained so much altitude so quickly and changed course? All Paz could do on the umbrella was decrease his altitude by fluttering the canopy. He had no idea there were techniques.

Paz returned to the boy’s point of takeoff; he found no vents or air jets. Perhaps
the boy had modified his umbrella with a propulsion system. Pedestrians were oblivious.

    There was a flash, perhaps a shadow, a muffled flapping, and a light tap on his shoulder. Paz whirled around to an empty street, but perhaps the sky had not been so empty moments before, as a strange current lifted his hair. His hands were still fists vertically aligned, but the umbrella in their grasp was missing. Paz looked about, and finally spotted the redheaded boy far above, tossing Paz’s collapsed umbrella onto the roof of a building, a hotel.

    Paz rode the elevator to the top and found a rooftop lounge up there, napkins folded carefully into fat wine goblets. The maitre ‘d exercised a look of displease. “What do you think you’re doing up here?”

    Paz replied, “My parents are waiting for me out there.” He went onto the patio. His skin tingled in the sun. The lunching adults were engrossed in conversations and croissants. Paz recovered his umbrella from a planter. No harm done. He backed up and took a running start, so as to leap from the seat of a chair to the railing, and from the railing into space, where he’d open the umbrella and search for the redheaded boy.

    Before he reached the railing, his hands were empty, the umbrella gone. No sign of a thief at surrounding tables or in the sky. Only the maitre ‘d was watching, arms akimbo, from inside. Either he had not seen the theft or had no sympathy in matters of personal property. Paz turned as something clattered behind him. His umbrella lay collapsed on the patio. Paz bent to retrieve the umbrella, and when he stood, there was the redheaded boy, holding still as a hawk in space, his umbrella fastened to the sky. He took a small bow.
Correspondence

Paz dropped little orange carrot coins into a pot, enough to fill two pockets. They tapped on the metal, but also shooshed and flapped, confusing Paz for a moment, until he realized the shooshing and flapping had come from behind. His mother had overturned a box of paper on the dining room table. Mostly envelopes, with little blue teeth along the top where they’d been opened. Bright stamps winked in the pile of ecru. “You sent me these. Remember? This one just last month.” Two pages of loose-leaf trembled in her hands.

At one end of the pile, the envelopes were yellowed, the handwriting sloppy and garish, much like Paz’s had been when he was young. Then, not far into the pile, the writing changed to script, which grew, over the course of a few letters, tidy. “No,” Paz replied. “I never remember my letters. That’s why I use Rain-o-grams. What have I been writing all these years?”

“You wrote about how much you loved boarding school. You didn’t come home over the holidays in order to catch up with your classmates, who’d all had more schooling.”

“My cursive is nice.”

Staring into her wine, “Yes. We were proud.” Mr. Trebuchet’s dolls watched expectantly from the room’s perimeter. A wrinkled fist latched onto the back of a chair. “You learned so quickly. It wasn’t long before I felt I was writing to another adult.”

Paz put down the knife and the halved onion. “Then what happened to me?”

“You were chosen as one of the brightest from among your peers and offered a chance to study in London.”

“I loved it there.”

“Yes.”

“That’s why I never came home.”
“Yes.”

“What did I study there?”

“In college you went into law.” She sat. Paz filled her glass. “Met someone.”


“Both of you were against the idea of photographs for some moral reason I never understood. You did send a drawing, though.” She pointed into the living room. Framed.

Paz squinted. “I was a lucky man. Then what? I graduated? First in my class?”

“Second.” Her glasses went onto the table. She reached for a handkerchief in her pocket. All of the dolls, smug spectators, made Paz want to smash their heads in, each and every, because together their effect was compounded, like one would have to demolish them, yes, but also spread them to remote areas of the Earth in order to break whatever curse they cast over the house. That old feeling.

“Why didn’t I bring my girlfriend home?”

“I thought you were…embarrassed.”

Paz put down the chopping knife and stood beside her. “I remember a very different story. It’s long, though, and we have things to do if we want to be out of here on time. I can tell you that when I write in script, it looks like a ferret tracked dirt across a piece of paper, and as for these typed letters, I’ve never owned a computer. The story I would’ve written, and will tell you soon, is much more disappointing. No career. The someone I met, met someone else. If one of us is an embarrassment to the other, it is I to you.”

She looked at him, showing all the metal in her moth, and said, “Seventeen years.” Those old bones reached up and formed cheerleader shapes around him.
Taxicab Thimblerig

It’s the shuttle game, where the mark is taken by the conman and his shills, where the mark is taken for a ride, and when the bright yellow cabs crack, it’s not the pea, where’s the pea gonna be, but the mark himself who’s disappeared under the shell, the shell, follow the shell one two three, follow that cab, but when a cab turns a corner one becomes twenty-five, and that distinguishing mark, dent or scratch, well, they all have it, and the pea is lost, find it again, find the pea in one two three hundred thousand shuttle shells, at the stoplights, at the greengrocers, at the department stores the cabs crack and who gets out is not who got in, so the house wins, always wins and the shells shuffle through the streets like slick bugs in the dry mud crust, between the cracked scabs, deep down in the skyscrapers’ shadows, their iridescent paint roiling like oil, and the mark, overconfident, plunks down a fat wad, and the shellcab cracks open to let him in, the mark, and when he is let out it is not at the intersection he’d intended, but so what, he is no longer the man who sought the intersection, and the shuttle has disappeared, a thousand have come in its stead, come and gone, bringing nothing hidden inside, and the mark has no clue where he himself went, where did they take him, him and all the other marks, and as he stands wondering on the cold and drafty corner, a hustler comes to take his money, always a hustle in the city, the horns, whose horns, the taxi’s or the devil’s horns, but there is no one to ask who has not been stolen away, locked away in the vinyl slammer, the slouch-seat breaker, the rickshaw slam-on-the-breaker, slam the door, step on it mister, kick it into gear, beat that light, from a dead stop, lay into that horn, punch it, this is the mark’s crash course in the hustle, now here, now there, is it any different one street corner to the next, is there any corner where they aren’t all after your money, the money that the mark is trying to catch, or was, once, before he was caught up in the hustle, shuttling now just to shuttle, in the shuttle, having just evaporated
from one street corner and about to materialize on another, who cares where or why, or why not, just pay the meter fee, man, the fare, which it ain’t, just keep pushing cash through the slot because it’s go go go, hustle hustle hustle, and when the mark gets where he’s going there’s always someone waiting, waiting to take his hey mister, can I have a moment of your time, all you got’s ta do it keep your eye on the P, it’s not hard, it’s a one-in-three chance, one in three now, oh come on man, says the mark, I know where the P is, oh yeah where, it’s under the princess, well where’s the princess, I know where, oh yeah where, she’s under the peasant boy, but you can’t get a hint of a smile outta people in the city, it all moves too fast, too fast for you, huh, you small-town soggy Skagit cryboy, does the shell move quicker than the eye, never stopping, the pea under there somewhere, well that’s the trick, kid, you never find it, because it’s not there, no, it’s pinched between folds of skin in the hustler’s hand, it was never in the shuttle, sliding from side to side on the vinyl as the shuttle rounds the corners, what are we on two wheels, the whole city stumbling from curb to curb half-sick cuz the cabbies drive like cheerleaders on drugs, which is half-accurate, drugs are necessary, in order to compensate for the drudgery of the job and to tolerate the passengers, who also take drugs to subdue hearts that would otherwise burst during transport, those skittering cab rides that make the blood vessels chug, that bleach the face with adrenaline, like yours boy, save the wormy black squiggles that divide your face like streets divide a city, like the cracks divide the crust, like lights divide the night, like cops break up a hustle, the hustle, and where, after the hustle is broken up and the hustler is high-tailing it down the alley stuffing cash in his underpants, does the pea end up, because that’s the only time you might spot that pea, nestled in the pitted sidewalk, part of it still a pea but half mashed by a combat boot.

Stamped upon the sky, the redheaded boy waited while Paz snatched his umbrella from the patio, opened it, and leapt into the firmament, tipping the umbrella just so, to catch the draft. He approached the redheaded boy without losing much altitude. “Hello!” he called. “Who are you?” But, along with the rest of him, the redheaded boy’s lips remained fixed to the air.

Paz neared him, sinking too low to even poke at his shoe, when the redheaded boy reached up with his free hand, reached so slowly it looked it might never get anywhere, and closed his umbrella. Headfirst the redheaded boy dropped toward the ground, his hands and umbrella at his side, pant legs whipping. Since his shadow fell on some distant, indiscernible surface, he appeared to shrink rather than fall.

Paz pressed the metal release on the stalk of his umbrella and followed. Next to a skyscraper he fell, in tandem with his reflection, which rippled and mutated in the bowed and dimpled glass. No longer was he thinking of the redheaded boy, but instead of the funnel his umbrella might become when opened. Had his organs bigger pipes, citizens below would’ve heard his heart pounding out Bach’s Toccata en Fugue. Far below, the redheaded boy’s umbrella popped open, a black speck, and he zipped sideways as if he’d caught his umbrella on an invisible airborne train, and his body followed his umbrella horizontally out of sight.

Paz deployed his umbrella too early, and though the canopy held, it took too long to swing around the corner of the building behind which the boy had vanished. No sign. A peal of laughter turned his head, and the boy rounded the corner behind Paz, having traveled all the way around the skyscraper.

Paz laboriously swung around; the boy dropped to a few feet above the street, plunged past a fruit stand, and soared back up to Paz’s altitude with an armful of candied apples,
which he lobbed at Paz one two three, who was able to avoid one and two, but took three in the cheek, which spun him around. The redheaded boy charged past, twirling Paz like a gyroscope. Paz lost speed, altitude, and his visual lock on the bobbing hover-pest.

Extending his right leg and left arm, he reduced his terminal whirling, but full recovery was impossible and he smashed into the sidewalk. No gulls or even pigeons up there in the sunburned sky. A lone, thick cloud putzed along stupidly.

A bruise brewed in his left calf. As he rubbed it, a pair of splenetic feet appeared on the sidewalk before him. “Who are you?”

Paz looked up at the redheaded boy. “Paz.”

“Please. My umbrella.” The redheaded boy extended his hand.

“It’s mine.”

“No, I swapped them atop the hotel.”

Paz studied his umbrella, and found along the outer edge of the fabric a name stitched with white thread, the very name he’d removed from the umbrella he’d claimed back home, N. Horns Cheasapeake. Paz spotted small holes in the open umbrella the redheaded boy spun over his shoulder, where stitching had been removed.

“I switched them to give you a technological advantage, but since you cannot fly umbrellas, new or old, perhaps you’d take your old one, which in fact was also mine.”

Paz consented to the trade. “I’ve heard of you. You’re not a boy.”

“True. I neither outgrew my young body nor my preferred method of travel.” Looking Paz over, “It appears what I mistook for competition is just a boy on his way to somewhere. Rain City, perhaps?”
The Procedure

There was a feature in the paper. A Prominent Scientist discovered how to accelerate a child’s mental growth and developmental progress. The Prominent Scientist took ten children from various ethnic and sociological backgrounds and observed how their age hindered efficient learning. Too inattentive, too excitable, too imaginative. Instead of redesigning the schools’ already immaculate curriculum, the Prominent Scientist attacked the problem from a new angle. Each of the ten children underwent a three-hour process that increased their mental ages of six through nine to that of college graduates. He introduced the children into adult society and university courses, where they fared wonderfully.

After two weeks of college, the results were better than the Prominent Scientist predicted. The children spoke at length and with comprehension of the material they’d been taught, and had thrown only one conservative kegger. The subjects who shared rooms with each other showed the same results as those in living situations with students of traditional college age, as well as those working with middle-aged adults or with the elderly, proving that the children were equally adept with social interaction on all levels and scales. None of the children played on playgrounds, though it was not forbidden. Instead, they read Darwin and engaged themselves socially. Only one in ten opted for afternoon naps.

Teachers were interviewed, and all praised the children and the Prominent Scientist. The children’s questions in class were intelligent and exhibited a firm grasp of the concepts. Fielding questions of concern for how the process affected the children’s personalities, one professor stated, “In other words, does this process rob the children of some fundamental experience that they would undergo if aging naturally? Such as the humiliation of puberty? The anxiety of school dances? Showering in high school p.e.? We can’t have children missing out on that!
Seriously, think of the emotional stresses these children can handle. Family problems, social problems, learning problems: no longer detrimental.”

There were no reversals or lapses. Coffee ingestion rose ninety-eight percent. Hygiene improved. Truckloads of plush toys were taken to goodwill. A syndicated cartoon about the children aired. Bumper stickers around town read, “My eight year-old has a 4.0 at Dartmouth” and “Caution: toddler driving.”

Contention arose from activist groups. Normal neighborhood kids were embarrassed, and quit Kick the Can and Tag and played “College.” At the beach, they built sand castles and did not trample them.

Many considered it a breakthrough for the mentally disabled, and wondered why it had been wasted on quote unquote normal children.

Some of the children from the experimental group were interviewed. “Miss it? I am enlightened, and I do not wish to return to my cave. Can you believe I used to do things for gold stars? Ponderous. I mean, wow. Our parents used to read me this junk,” the child said, flipping through a storybook. “Now I’m reading worthwhile books, such as *Ulysses*. My first article on it will be published next term. While I think it best for individual families to make their own choices, I’ll venture that no child who goes through the Procedure will regret it. No, I am not morally unprepared for my environment. It’s suddenly clear to me that adults aren’t convinced morality is worthwhile anyway.”

Though they’d signed confidentially agreements, the children claimed to remember nothing about the actual process.
N. Horns Chesapeake removed a crushed pack of cigarettes from his pocket and planted one between his lips. “You fly like you got a sack of quarters under each arm,” he said, half his mouth clamped around the cigarette. He flicked the lighter but kept talking while the flame boogied near the tip of the cigarette. “That looks like the umbrella I left in the Midwest. You come that far on it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How old are you?”

“Eight, sir. And a half, sir. Can you teach me to fly better?”

N. Horns laughed. “Of course. But I won’t.” N. Horns lit his cigarette, which prompted a sour look from a passing woman who mistook him for a boy. “Fact is you don’t have a single quarter on you.”

“Yes I do. I have my own money.”

“I’ve been through your pockets. Just a picture of your mom.” N. Horns blew a smoke umbrella. “Nobody taught me how to fly them. Teach yourself.” He turned and raised his umbrella, but Paz grabbed his arm.

“How did you know I was going to Rain City?”

N. Horns smiled and blew tusks of smoke from his nose. “No other place a runaway your age’d be going.” N. Horns shook his head and opened the umbrella. As he rose, he caught a light pole with his hand and spiraled around it.

“Teach me that?” cried Paz. His skin was getting sore in the ultraviolet sunbath, so he stepped into the shade of a small tree, one of many planted at regular intervals along the sidewalk. He sat against the bottom of the tree and watched traffic, the sleek metal shells
piloted by vacant faces. Paz was about to fall asleep when a cigarette butt sparked on the sidewalk in front of him, and was moments later crushed by a heel descended from the sky. There, in that look, each of N. Horns’s forty-two years were evident, condensing in pouches in the skin of his face. “You give me a hand with something.” Flecks of cool spit tapped on Paz’s cheeks. “Maybe then we can talk umbrellas.” N. Horns lit another cigarette, and Paz hoped that might be one of the things N. Horns taught him how to do.

“I don’t trust you yet.”

“Huh?”

“You’ve got crooks in your elbows.” Paz cracked up alone, but recovered in time to latch onto N. Horns’s arm as he turned to walk away.

“I need help, not a playmate.”

“What do you need me to do?”

Before N. Horns could answer, a man in a brown business suit halted in front of them, and ripped the cigarette out of N. Horns’s mouth. During the man’s ensuing lecture, N. Horns gave Paz the boy-am-I-tired-of-this face, dug out his cigarettes, and lit up. Astonished, the man tried to confiscate the pack, but was parried by N. Horns’s umbrella. As the man reached for the cigarette in N. Horns’ mouth, N. Horns lowered his umbrella, and the man scorched his hand on the lit end. N. Horns grabbed the man’s wrist, popped open his umbrella, and achieved flight with the man in tow, his overweight body dangling from N. Horns’s hand, his shoes some five or six feet off the ground.

“Cool,” said Paz. “Teach me that.”
The Conceedure

Though all went well initially for the Prominent Scientist and his psychologically advanced child-experiments, it all ended abrupt as a sugar high.

One of the subjects, eight year-old microbiology major Edward Sleem, devised a way to increase the metabolism of his liver through meditation.

Experimenting in his room, Sleem ingested fifty ounces of alcohol. Sleem’s roommate, fellow test subject Neiderham Chesapeake, said that this was not unusual. Sleem would frequently consume increasingly large amounts of alcohol, descend into a trance, and a few minutes later emerge sober. On that particular occasion, Chesapeake recalled that Sleem remained in meditation for fifteen minutes. Sleem was distracted by a moth orbiting the light bulb overhead and his condition rapidly deteriorated. In two minutes he was standing on a chair in the hallway singing To Anacreon in Heaven, the drinking song from which the United States national anthem was adapted. He tumbled while swiping at the moth and knocked his head on a doorknob. Chesapeake rushed to staunch the laceration, but Sleem’s blood was evaporating immediately due to its extremely high alcohol content. An ambulance was summoned but arrived too late. Because Sleem recorded the specifics of his experiment, which proved reliable, no charges were pressed against the Prominent Scientist, the dorm father, or anyone. The moth could not be found for questioning.

Much depended on the outcome of the incident; was the Prominent Scientist’s Procedure to blame? And what of Neiderham Chesapeake’s remarkably stoic reaction to his friend’s death? Psychologists theorized that while Chesapeake’s mental age was advanced, he still had no experience with death, and therefore probably didn’t understand it, and thus couldn’t grieve appropriately.
Then there was the string or candy store murders. Surveillance cameras established that someone small in stature and quick of mind perpetrated several murders in different candy stores in the Rain City area. Throttling with the licorice rope. Detonating the Sourbombs. There, amongst the motionless taffy barrels, just in front of the Toblerone morgue, the murderer killed victims one by one, their bodies outlined by the police in either chalk or sugar.

Reading the newspaper articles, one tended to imagine oneself pressed to death under malted milk balls, suffocated by cinnamon bears, slashed by sour whips, to picture one’s vision collapsing in upon itself—that final head rush—and from within the rim of darkness, within the center of the shrinking hole of light, a box of Laughy Taffy would gaze down upon the dying, in grape, cherry, lemon, and sour apple.

Death among the sugar bins, one might find it pleasant, a soft pastry pillow rising to catch one’s head, severed by lemon sharps.

The serial killer was never caught, but it was suspected that one or more of the Prominent Scientist’s subjects were responsible. No tie was ever established between the two hundred victims. The killings appeared to be random, which meant the killer or killers were most dangerous and unpredictable, or suffered A.D.D.

The Prominent Scientist, ready to send a second group of children through the procedure—and after that, perhaps all children—suddenly closed his office and cancelled indefinitely all scheduled procedures without explanation. The reason was: someone put a sharp knife to the Prominent Scientist’s throat and whispered, “Or else!”
Waterproof

After the bright red water department truck shooshed down the street, Paz headed for the city’s highest point, a tower that the city built as a place to get above the morning fog, but when they got up there, they discovered that the morning fog went all the way up to the clouds. The diameter of the observation deck was much larger than that of the tower, and the structure very much resembled an umbrella, especially during midday, when wreathed by the dwindling vapors of the morning fog and foregrounded by looming cumulus billows.

When Paz reached the base of the tower, a woman exited into the rain and made but three steps before she was besieged by, hurled from the observation deck above, an excessively garnished hamburger. From between the safety cables strung around the perimeter of the observation deck ah-way up there jutted a tiny, triumphant fist. To acquire a greatly anticipated lunch, Paz simply strolled around and around the footprint of the building until a free meal fell upon him.

After an elevator ride, Paz found atop the tower a coffee shop and a restaurant surrounded by large glass panels, which opened onto the observation deck that stretched all the way around. Paz went outside to send his signal, as described in the Prominent Scientist’s Rain-o-gram. From his pack he withdrew one of the two spherical capsules that the Prominent Scientist had included in the Rain-o-gram. Arrows indicated which way each hemisphere was meant to turn relative to the other, and inscribed around the poles were the instructions: twist and toss. Paz gripped the ball in his hands and did just that, launching the thing into the rainstorm.

The capsule’s arc was transcribed upon the rain by a red dye, making a soft curved line that bled both up and down with drops of rain, stained rain, like a streak of ink on a wet napkin. The dye eventually reached the clouds, and the puffs immediately overhead were tinted pink,
as was the water on the streets below. The red smear looked like someone had fingerpainted the 
storm in Paz’s immediate area. A device like that was precisely the kind of ingenious invention 
that made the Prominent Scientist for so long untouchable by criticism.

Paz was to wait at the coffee shop for a couple of hours, with the activity book and 
money also included in the rain-o-gram. If the Prominent Scientist did not appear, he was to 
throw the second capsule, but it did not take forty minutes for a tall male with a brilliantly white 
flock-of-seagulls hairdo to arrive, survey the clientele, and approach. “Paz?” He wore a tweed 
suit, purple tie, and white sneakers.

Paz was ushered to a limousine, where his socks were removed and draped over the heat 
vents. A pizza joint was located and patronized, and thus Paz sat, in what seemed like a blink’s 
time, in a leather seat stuffing himself with hot cheese, the pizza having been given him entire, 
and drinking a soda from the limousine’s cooler. The soda was inside of him what the red 
capsule had been in the rainstorm. It explored him, charted him, fizz in the belly, fizz in the 
savvy, fizz in the smarts. Like a foamy belch that invades the mouth, the fizz exploded from 
pores and nostrils and ear canals. Had he at some point split in two, the stronger, cognizant half 
gone in another direction? The fizz, the fuzz, the zuffle clogged his vestigial consciousness.

A private gray rain fell upon Paz in the limo. Surfaces were smeared beyond recognition, 
grayed out. The foam bomb inside of him, the rain guzzling over him, the remainder of the soda 
spilling down his pant leg—it was all as distant as that shed cartridge, the rain capsule, lying in 
some puddle somewhere, a brittle husk. The floor met him halfway.

Thanks to the Prominent Scientist, and what he did later, the first day of Paz’s long stay 
in Rain City was the first day of the rain’s long stay in Paz.
Of the many things created by the fiancé that were displayed in galleries, the most deserving of them was never exhibited: his moustache. It was black and shiny as the fine entrails of a small animal. It parted under his nose, swooping along with the shape of his mouth for a while, then leaping out on its own, into the air. Looking at him straight-on, the sharp tips of the moustache bisected the lobes of his ears and ended just beyond them in modest spirals. So fine were the tips of the moustache that, should the fiancé acquire a serious laceration, the moustache could be removed and used as both needle and suture.

When he spoke, the moustache vibrated, a stiff, twitching strand of sinew, with a bit of spring to it, and it gave his words a charming bounce.

One could swallow so slick a man whole. In his sleek black suit and slick black hair, he was a lure of a man, smooth all over save those two black barbs. Those long, twirly, shiny spears that had snagged a long, twirly, shiny fish with large earrings.

His forehead, eyes, cheekbones, and nose were a cluster of smooth circles, around which the moustache wove. No wrinkles or spots or contusions or moles. All minor facial features had gracefully withdrawn in deference to the moustache.

Could he use the moustache as a rudder in the air? Could he snag the atmosphere, lodging his head in place to round tight corners in a hurry? But a man like that never had reason to hurry, that moustache always reaching into the future and hooking, dragging back whatever was in a hurry to happen without him.

The rumor was that all of the paintings for which he was famous and critically acclaimed, had been painted with the moustache.

No one was allowed to watch him work, though some had seen him rinse tempera
from his whiskers. Experts had verified that each stroke of each painting had at least been made with rigger brushes that were the same size as the moustache. His most recent work, an eight-foot nude of his fiancé, hung facing the entrance of their apartment. The painter had turned down a six-figure offer on the piece by sending the bidder a no thank you painting.

While observing the painting, one became involved in a private moment with the subject, who was alive, living, crawling off the canvas to sniff the guest, drape around them her supple hair, and show them her tattoos. Yet it took the observer some time to realize that those streaks of color were representing any shape, let alone a woman. She required some assembly by the observer’s eye, and some suspected that the fiancé was a vorticist.

When the painter appraised his own work, the moustache was fraught with small, involuntary shudders, as if it was helpless in the presence of the painting and involuntarily mimicked the movements and lines therein.

Should a man with cubist eyes gaze upon the moustache, he might see unfolding before him a pin cushion, an anemone, a land mine. Something to be carefully handled. Should that man be in love with the painter’s fiancé, he might see an iron maiden, its inescapable piercing shanks closing in on him.

The moustache, the moustache, the moustache wound its way into Paz’s thoughts and daydreams, claiming the upper lip of every character.
How to Fly an Umbrella

“The plan’s simple. Think you can remember?” N. Horns smacked his smoke against Paz’s forehead. “As soon as I cut out, scram.”

“Yeah yeah, but this game is dumb.”

“It’s a great game, once you get used to it. You like to pull jokes on people, doncha?”

“Well yeah.”

“That’s this game. Ready?”

“Um.”

N. Horns smashed Paz’s face with his umbrella. “Your tears have to be convincing.”

Paz held his nose. His stung eyes watered. “This game is dumb.”

“Don’t blow it by crying too hard too soon. Come on. I don’t teach whiners how to fly umbrellas.”

How could anyone ever mistake N. Horns for a child? Paz swallowed hot and held up his hand for N. Horns to grab and yank, and Paz was towed two stories into the air, and deposited on a flagpole protruding from the side of a building. N. Horns was replaced by a gust. An accomplished clinger, having dangled his way across several states from the stick of an umbrella, Paz would not be in danger for some time, but called for help. The building N. Horns had chosen had an enormous lobby with cathedral ceilings, so the windows were neither egress nor easily accessible from the inside.

The howling of one Samaritan became the yipping of a camp became the clamor of a crowd, voicing, as crowds do, a billion contradictory recommendations:

“We’ll catch you kid!”

“Call the fire department!”
“Call the police!”

“Call the press!”

“Use the ledges! If that were my kid, he’d climb down on his own.”

“Get a table cloth from a restaurant. We’ll bag him.”

Paz hung and kicked and tried to get a foot on top of the pole, feigning weakness. He let a hand slip off, and stirred the crowd. While he worked, he spotted a blip of yellow down there. N. Horns wasn’t looking at Paz, and seemed to be circulating aimlessly.

“Hey,” cried Paz. “Hey!” Paz let go to point at N. Horns’s yellow rain hat. “He’s robbing you!” But his warning went unheard over all of the boisterous advice shouted by the crowd. N. Horns stopped moving immediately. Only a sliver of cheek was visible under the yellow rubber.

“Thief!”

They were catching on, but obviously couldn’t tell who Paz had fingered, and much pushing and shoving ensued. The yellow hat disappeared.

Paz looked up then, for something was pinching his fingers. N. Horns was standing on him. His fingers. Paz let go, and fell into the taught drum of white linen the crowd had prepared. The same process, in reverse, was how his mother was launched to shake pom-poms at the crowd.

The fruit stand N. Horns had robbed not long before of three candied apples to use as artillery to ground Paz once again served as an armory, as victims of theft stained N. Horns’s umbrella and face with tomato juice and zest before he rose out of range, vegetable sap dripping from the rim of his yellow hat.

And that was Paz’s lesson in piloting an umbrella.
Exhibition

Paz returned to Mr. Trebuchet’s closet days after his first visit, and plied the lid of the black trunk all the way open. One by one, he heaved the life-size dolls onto the floor, grabbing them under the armpits and throwing his body backwards, levering them over the lip of the trunk. Moving inanimate bodies was difficult for a sixty-pound boy, their arms flopping out of his grip, heads lolling, legs tangled. Carefully he lay them on the bed. Into the strange leathers from the top drawer of Mr. Trebuchet’s bureau he wrestled them. They were the stupidest clothes Paz had ever seen. Each wore thin, white gloves, which Paz did not remove. The gloves seemed very necessary. The little o’s of their mouths made them seem surprised to be out of the trunk, surprised to be dressed, surprised to be touched.

He propped the front door of the house and lugged the dolls past his mother, sleeping on the sofa, out to the front yard, where he arranged each in a reclining lawn chair, facing the street. Those dolls, tanning there in the sun, and their mysterious places made Paz’s confused heart race so fast that before he even realized what he was doing, he’d stolen back into the house several times, and found each and every bizarre piece of equipment in Mr. Trebuchet’s bureau, nightstand, and wherever, and put them on display in the yard. There was no explaining why. He didn’t even know what the floppy, soft rubber tools were for, or the rigid, stainless steel rings and rods, the be-strapped pieces of leather that didn’t seem to fit a body anywhere. But there was something about putting them out in the yard. Because it all belonged to Mr. Trebuchet, who would not like it. All of the paraphernalia he lined up around the lawn chairs. Paz crawled up a tree and waited.

By the time Mr. Trebuchet came rolling into the cul-de-sac, the crowd had sealed off the driveway, and he lurched to a stop on the street. Tearing the seatbelt away, yanking the brake,
stomping to the crowd, pushing his way to the front, Mr. Trebuchet, the agent of courtesy, “Get
the hell out of my driveway you nosy busybodies! What the hell are you—”

Next to the lawn, Trebuchet melted from one color to the next, right around the color
wheel.

Paz’s mother, probably roused by the honking, stumbled outdoors, rubbing her eyes. Her
eyes snapped fully open. Placing her hands upon her butt and bending backward to stretch her
stiff hip, she performed a handspring.

Finally, Trebuchet, returning to himself, calmly entered the garage, returned with a
blanket, and covered the dolls. “Who put these here?” Arms on his hips, staring down the crowd.
Paz had sweat under that glare before.

“Saw your boy bring ‘em outta your house.”

As Trebuchet was convincing the crowd that this witness was mistaken, the
neighborhood jogger walked up to the lawn with a man beside her. “These dolls look an awful
lot like my wife.” The man was locally famous for participating in the World’s Strongest Man
competition a year back.

“Yes,” said Trebuchet. “I suppose they do. They sure aren’t mine.”

The husband, pressing his face into Trebuchet’s, “Fine. Then there’s no problem me
taking these home.”

Even in the tree Paz saw Trebuchet flinch. “Uh, well,” said Mr. Trebuchet. “You’ll have
to ask my stepson where he got them. They sure aren’t mine.”

“They were in his closet!” shouted Paz. While the jogger and her husband each tossed a
doll over their shoulders, the crowd kept Mr. Trebuchet away from the trunk of Paz’s tree.
Epinephrine

Anaphylaxis occurs when a person encounters—eats, inhales, touches, or injects—a trigger substance. Chlorine, perfume, peanut butter. Almost anything. Dust. Dander. Seafood. Latex. A dose of penicillin killed one of the world’s best racehorses. Only trace amounts of these trigger substances, these allergens, are necessary to incite an anaphylactic reaction. In its most acute form, anaphylactic shock can cause death in minutes from constriction of the airway.

In case of an emergency:

1. Check to make sure the area is safe. There may be bees present, or poison ivy. Do not endanger yourself to rescue the victim. If you believe yourself in love with the victim, by all means endanger yourself.

2. Call 911 immediately. If you are the only bystander educated in first aid/CPR, have someone else call. If no one present knows CPR, pretend you know. Say you must cut away the victim’s clothes.

3. The victim may require epinephrine, and may be carrying their own EpiPen. Repetitive administration can cause the victim’s heart rate to skyrocket.

4. The victim may require rescue breathing if he/she stops breathing on their own. Rescue breathing may be hindered by a constricted airway. To clear a blockage, first give the victim abdominal thrusts, and then sweep the victim’s mouth with your finger. If the blockage has not been dislodged, stick your tongue in the victim’s mouth. You are kissing them goodbye.

Symptoms of anaphylactic shock can include: respiratory distress, vomiting, itching, fainting, hypotension, anxiety, severe hives.

Both red and green inks have been known, in rare cases, to cause—when inserted
into the skin—swelling, dryness, oozing of sebum, or anaphylactic shock. Some tattoo artists test the red and green inks on a client by dotting small amounts behind the ear, and send the client home for a few weeks. However, it may take years for a reaction to occur, and by that time there is a payload of allergen tucked under their skin. First the client is bothered by the forgotten dot of color behind their ear, then, a week or two later, suddenly they are asphyxiating on the ground, confused, surrounded by panicked friends, wondering what’s happening to them. Their lungs will feel like wet cement.

Which ink was it? Was it the red ink? Red, the angry blood color of hives, the first-aid red of the emergency kit. The red of sex and romance. The cause for alarm, or the siren on the ambulance. The shade of lipstick worn by the victim, which will smear and turn yours the same color as you administer rescue breaths.

Or red’s negative, green, the felt under the red snooker ball, the go under red’s stop, the gain above red’s stock loss: green! The color of growth. The color of healthy food. The color of the cushion of grass upon which the victim of anaphylactic shock lies while you administer rescue breaths.

Sixty-five percent of colored tattoos contain both red and green ink. You wont think of this as you perform CPR, though the palm of your hand will be pressing against a red and green tattoo.
In Sunburn City park, Paz found N. Horns washing the tomato juice from his clothes in a public fountain. Paz didn’t know what to do about it.

A teenage boy darted into the park, ran right up to N. Horns and said, “You little punk. Better put that out before Mom sees you.” Meaning the cigarette.

“Oh hell,” said N. Horns, flicking the smoke at a trash barrel a few feet away. Missed. “Where is she?”

“Right behind me, dude. Get on the gum.”

N. Horns pulled three sticks of gum from his pocket. He tucked one between his upper lip and teeth, another in front of his lowers, and gnawed on the third.

“We’ve been all over for you, dude. Dad’s pissed. Keep your sanity when they come round, man.” The teen punched N. Horns in the arm. “You are weirding everyone out with all these umbrellas. It’s like seventy-five degrees, man. The sun is upon us, man. Sometimes I think that Procedure made you into a moron.”

Two adults entered the park and waved vigorously at N. Horns. “Told you, man,” said the teen. “They’ve been, you know, worried about you.”

The woman stormed up to N. Horns and picked him up. “Oh thank goodness. We were so worried about you. Running off by yourself!”

“In the city, no less,” said the father, just catching up. “This is a real city, son, nothing like Carnersville. Gotta stick close in the city.” The father was sunburned.

N. Horns glanced across the part at Paz and showed his teeth in a way that was not a grin.

The mother set N. Horns down and picked at his pants. “Oh, you’ve dirtied them.”

Paz had wandered closer without meaning to, and broached the family circle.
“Oh look,” said the mother. “Our boy made a friend. What’s your name, friend?” She straightened up, hands on hips. “And where are your parents?”

“They went in there.” Paz pointed at a store across the street.

“Well, say goodbye, Neiderham. We don’t want to be late for Aunt Lilly’s wedding rehearsal. She swears this time it will last.”

We’re already late.” The father glanced at his watch. “Between his running off and your detour at the dress shop.”

“Do you have to wear that hat, man?” the teen asked N. Horns. Then he stole it. “You look like a doof. All the city girls gonna thing my bro’s a doof, and probably assume I’m a doof by, you know, genetics. I ought to boot your ass.” He put the hat on. “It’s seventy-five and not raining, but I want to look like a giant penis anyway!”

The mother covered Neiderham’s ears and said to the teen. “Randy. Language.”

“Give me one good reason I need to miss the boat show tonight just to go to your sister’s sixth rehearsal dinner? So what if I miss it? She’ll have another again soon. Woman’s been in more weddings than that one Elton John song.” He turned to N. Horns. “There would’ve been time to go to the boat show, if you hadn’t run off, mister. I am not pleased.”

N. Horns looked at Paz and shrugged. “So I lied. So what. You believed it. Idiot.”

“I knew you weren’t old,” said Paz. “I knew it.”

So N. Horns Chesapeake, national felon, terror of the skies, was dragged out of the park by his mother.
After leaving his photos with her, Paz waited outside her building until she emerged, and followed her to City Park. She wore a bright green tuxedo and top hat, with a fat black belt around her waist. In the park, next to a playground, she stopped, reached into the black belt, and brought a small latex packet to her lips and blew, her face daubed white, her lips smeared red. The little green rubber guppy thickened and expanded as she pumped into it the dregs of her lungs, into a long, translucent shaft. Her hands, gloved in white cotton, tumbled around and along the shaft. Her motions snappy, she made a variety of lobes in the balloon, her hands a ghostly blur around the squealing latex. When she finished, she had a green rabbit in hand, and passed it to a waiting child, who dropped a bit of shredded money into Aurora’s top hat. A sword for a miniature musketeer. A butterfly for the young lady, a fish on the end of a pole for the little gent. A fancy hat with grapes for the wee one. And for the men, no charge to tie a tongue.

Aurora’s sorcerous lungs filed the balloons with a gas lighter than air, and her balloon creations glistened overhead, out of reach, tethered tenuously to the fingers of tykes. Her figurines trolled the sky.

In her purple cummerbund and bowtie, in the flower made from a pink balloon pinned to her lapel, she peddled her favors to children in the park’s richer quarter, her tattoos hidden by clothes and makeup. A balloon apron rode low on her hip. Children tottered around the nearby playground chasing their floating animals, hugging them down the slides. Occasionally, when the animals were squeezed too tight or rubbed against the zipper of a jacket, they’d pop, and the child would cry. Or a string would come loose and the dog or bunny or whatever would bob lazily upward and out of sight.

After dusk, Paz followed her to another quarter, a neon splash, a fluorescent flicker.
She went into a club and then into a restroom. When she reappeared—Paz had consumed an entire beer—the tuxedo was gone, replaced by a latex suit, painted on in various colors with an assortment of fine brushes, her breasts partially concealed by tricky arabesques. The latex traced the curves of her body, darting here or there to cover this or that. Part of the suit was written on her, blistering crimson latex suggestions. And a partial mask.

The balloons she sold to adults cost four times the price of the kiddy playthings. Inflated cocks clung to strings anchored to the tan, svelte arms on their way to or from one of the quarter’s countless nightclubs. Aurora made black balloon harnesses and balloons-o’-nine-tails. At night, the balloons were mostly pink and black. Handcuffs for the pretty lady, a chest yoke for the gentleman, strap-ons for two lovely harpies, a leash for the husband, a sixteen-inch penis for the little fella. Flesh out any fantasy.

Up and down the streets of the district the people walked, their temporary genitals tagging along behind, pointing to the moon, two strangers’ strings occasionally tangling. Many balloon penises were marred by lipstick. Occasionally, when fondled abrasively or rubbed against a zipper, they’d pop, and eyeliner ran.

At the end of her shift, she stood in a ring of latex scraps from balloons she’d overstretched. And the children she’d served in the afternoon were the scraps of the adult customers. The adults were the scraps of the children they’d been, formerly. And Paz wondered if Aurora felt she was scraps of breath trapped inside the latex creatures carted all over the city by children and adults alike, for each time she heard the flat eruption of a ruptured balloon, she sighed, and the corners of her mouth turned up.
Rise and Tread Water

Paz woke, or had a similar sensation, on a waterbed, though he hadn’t slept, and was sleeping still. The man with the flock of seagulls hair stood over him with a strange machine. In his hand. “Look who’s awake! Congratulations, Paz.”

“Yes,” said Paz. “Constamalate. And who might be your name?” Paz tried to sit up but was sitting already, so he lay down. Flock-of-seagulls looked down upon him, singularly or as twins.

“Take it easy, Paz. You’ve been through a very serious Procedure. Rest a while.”


Flock-of-seagulls pointed a flashlight into Paz’s eyes, and the light throbbed hatefully inside Paz’s head. “You’ve already had it. You’re in recovery.”

“Don’t want a recovery. Wanna be in Rain City.” Paz plugged the beam of the flashlight with his finger, but couldn’t because the flashlight was gone, along with flock-of-seagulls, and took his finger with it. No, there it was, finger, on the other hand. He had to go. Had to find the Prominent Scientist. Had to throw the rainflares. He could not throw the rainflares because he’d lost his pockets. He decided to go to the bathroom. No matter how far he moved his leg, the blanket grew and grew to stay on top. Threw back the blanket, his arm a club, to find: more blankets! Some kind of blanket ambush. He decided to go to the bathroom. He twisted his legs over the side of the bed but couldn’t remember if his knees bend out or in. For a long time he struggled with the lip of the bed, the tricky floor moving up and down, sometimes so far down he plummeted to his death. He decided to go to the bathroom, but realized he was in the bathroom already. But he didn’t know what to do because there were no pants to unzip and you don’t go to the bathroom without unzipping your pants. The sink bumped into him, and he stumbled
into the wall. “I’m just here to pee.” But he could not see who’d asked. He found the toilet hiding behind the wall and straddled it but his feet got in the way. The toilet had snuck away and left a waste bin in its place. Paz peed into that until long after he’d finished, thanked it, and flushed the sink. How could he get back now that he’d lost his map? Back to where? Ah yes, Rain City. “Excuse me,” he said to the woman facing away from him. “Am I in the right direction of Rain City?”

“Well well look who’s up.” His disguise melted off and flock-of-seagulls said something in another language that sounded just like English.

“I think you’re too tired.”

“Let’s get you back in bed.” Flock-of-seagulls sometimes wore his lab coat.

“There’s no beds in here,” said Paz, in one, curling on his side against a pillow smelling not quite like a pillow ought. A pillow recycling program, obviously. “I don’t care.” Somebody had turned up the heater.

He remembered his mother was not there and wondered if he should miss her. He’d forgotten how. He tumbled the word in his mind. Miss. Miss. Mystery.

What had he just been thinking? It was important. The though was delicate as a spider web, and in his searching for it, he rent it to tendrils. “I don’t care.”

So light, the object he did or did not throw. It did or did not land at the foot of the bed, or even not in the bathroom. He really felt awful. He was not having complex emotions. “I don’t care.”

“Good morning,” said flock-of-seagulls.

“Huh?” Paz rubbed his eyes. “Wasn’t I in a limousine just now?”