

ASH AND OCHRE

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Ash and Ochre

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Chapter I: Soon the Moon Will Smolder

Night Parade

(I)

A man's neck had been cut on that carnival hill. A woman's, too. Her brothers laughed and paid a moon-colored man three coins to come alive. Up, they said. And up! Greasy birds scattered at his foot-slap stagger, his automated romp. Rakel quit the cobble for a street display. She perused paint and powder trays in colors suited to her eyes. Behind her, her brothers pressed precious gems into the mouth of the moon-colored man and said, Up!

Music emanated from his mesh skin. His hips shifted. His legs in vertical lines cut inward. He danced a sad arabesque and did not move his hands. Rakel looped a blue veil over her head and glanced backwards at his writhe. He grinned. Her fingers curled.

One of her brothers whooped. His sleeve shook and a short dowel dropped from it. He caught it in a practiced fist and beat the man in the back of the knee. The moon-colored man fell and the other brothers circled him. He broke like a vinegar bottle and her brothers took their money back.

The blue veil slipped against her braided hair and over her eyes. It cast shadows on her face. She turned back to the booth and paid for her purchases.

(II)

Night came. It spread slow over the earth like boiled tar. It darkened the house. Rakel sat at her window sill for bleary hours and when she could see no stars, she lit a lamp and spit at her

fingers. She tapped them into her powder trays and then tapped her eyelids. When they were golden, she wiped the excess color into a spare cloth.

Beyond her bedroom door, her father said, Our house is a house of order. We remember our Heavenly Father.

She shut her eyes.

Her father eased into the room and slapped her. He smiled and then thumbed the fresh swell in her skin. We remember, he said. He shook his head and went away to the room where her mother slept.

Rakel shut the door. She made a netted sling of scrap fabric and put in it a packet of sweet meat and pickled roots, a coin purse, a second dress, her new powders. She knotted the sling to her waist. She pinned her blue veil to her head, slipped over the sill and through the fields to the little town. She wandered sleeping streets until she came to the place where her brothers had overcome the moon-colored man. His parts clotted the street drains. She paused to consider his silver ear, his coral tongue. She plucked them up and pocketed them. The tongue fluttered. It dry-licked her thigh. Sighs prickled up her windpipe and she shuddered them out. She blushed at herself.

The blue veil knotted itself around her peaky wrist. She waved it off and ignored the rude and cognizant parts in her pocket. She began to walk.

Her meander led out the town gate, down dirty deer trails to the place where green water and seashells lapped at grass. She knelt and crossed her arms. The sedge tickled her elbows. Please, she said. The tongue in her pocket wriggled. The ear seemed to stiffen. Please. Gold flaked from her eyelids and spilled into her open mouth. She licked her lips. She glanced left and right.

Reeds rose up in purls of dark water. She stood and peered down into their open hollows. Scrawls of firelight needled out of their faraway bottoms and hurt her eyes. She blinked. She pulled a pickled root from her sling and pushed it into the reed. The reed widened and the root slipped away. It dropped to the bottom and put the little light out. She put the fat tongue into a reed and it, too, slipped soundless away.

Her knees were wet. She patted at them. She lifted her slippered foot and toed the rim of the shortest reed. It widened to accommodate her. Oh, she said, and she stepped into the hollow.

She was the first to fall into the earth.

(III)

Her brothers lit yellow lanterns and called out for their wives. Up here, they said. Up! Hesitant wives with hoarded goods joined them.

They followed the imprints that Rakel's feet had made in the soft earth. They threw down their lanterns into the fields and they threw down their lanterns at the old gates that marked their father's demesne. Each light rose up into bright fire. The brothers laughed and their hesitant wives clung to their arms.

Their father followed them out of the house with blackened hands. Their mother did not. Their father said, Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them.

They grinned their replies. They went their way.

Town residents woke and witnessed their passing. The brothers kicked loose cobble and formed into two lines. The wives walked behind them and wept into their colored veils. What remained of the moon-colored man gleamed in the light of leftover lanterns. Have you seen her, the brothers said. Have you helped her? Give us your short guesses.

Town residents shook their shaggy heads.

One of the brothers said, You can't hide! His wives stepped away. He snatched their satchels and broke them open in the street. Sentimental objects rolled right and left. He found a silver tong and beat window panes with it.

The brothers unbuckled their belts. They went through the windows. They came out again and yellow light leapt up in the houses behind them. Not here, they said.

A young wife with a kitchen knife waved her fingers at the town gate. The trail was there, made of dropped gold dust and the forgotten fibers of Rakel's blue veil. The brothers kissed the young wife and gave her happy promises. They walked her in front and complimented her pale whorls of hair. And when the watery reeds rose up to greet them, they pushed her in.

Night Planting: The Root That Went Down

The hollow reed sank into the earth and the gray dead shook their bare skulls at its passing. Rakel tumbled down. Pond water ran after her. It splashed her naked face in proxy—brief and borrowed immersions for each of the dry dirt graves.

commissioned of—

for and in behalf of—

who is dead, in the name of—

The dead clacked their mandibles. The dead waited within their pockets of earth. The dead died again and claimed eternal stillness.

Rakel shielded her eyes in the strange and stuttered light. She gasped. Red rays bit against her eyelids and burned them.

She dropped into a fire pit and the pond water doused the devouring heat. Her wrists were singed. She sputtered swear words and ebbed into sleep.

Under the Earth

Girls with lacquered mouths ground yellow and blue meal beneath stone paddles. Their hair hung like corn husks from their heads and their bark dresses were dark against their skin. Sometimes they sipped from water jars. Sometimes their lips pulled away from peaked teeth and they smiled.

Rakel rolled from the fire pit and into the cave. Her wet hair slapped at dirt and it stuck to her scalp. She opened her eyes.

The husk-haired girls winked in the dim light. One canted her head. She said, Are there more of you?

Rakel inhaled. Her cracked ribs cut short her breath. No, she said. There are no more.

The husk-haired girls laughed. Their earrings jangled against their jaws and spotted their cheeks with shadows. The coral tongue of the moon-colored man twitched in Rakel's pocket.

Why do you want me? Rakel asked. Why am I here?

Our mother, the husk-haired girls answered. She will tell you.

Where is she?

We will call her. The husk-haired girls pushed their paddles away. They cupped clean hands over the naked earth and whispered through their fingers. Come up, Mother, come down. The dark cave cooled.

Rakel rocked onto her hip and sat up. She wiped her eyes and caked dirt fell into her hands. She shivered.

The cave was like the hollow of a pigment pot: artificially wide and red. Wave shapes and old animal tracks wreathed its walls; extinct arthropods swam in its stone. Its ceiling was studded with hollow reeds.

Red knots of red rope slumped from one of the reeds. A woman in black wool came down their length and then heaped herself upon the floor. Her form was faceless, except for split lips and eyelashes that stuck out like spider legs. She crept close to Rakel and her neglected hair trailed her. Welcome, she said.

Rakel wrapped herself in her veil, though it was wet. She glanced at the husk-haired girls. Are you their mother? she said.

The woman plucked a white fiber from her wool. She rolled it between her thumbs. I grew them in spun bellies, she said. I am Tarantula.

In Rakel's pocket, the coral tongue twitched again.

Tarantula, Rakel said. Why am I here?

The woman poked an opening in her lip. It bled into her mouth and stained her teeth. The tongue, she said, and she plucked at Rakel. It wriggled from Rakel's pocket and shone like a subterranean larvae. Tarantula grasped it, kissed it. It lapped the blood from her teeth and smeared it in lines across her palm. And the ear, Tarantula said.

Rakel patted her dress. She shook her head.

Tarantula crouched and crawled away. She combed the fire pit and uncovered the silver ear. She held it to her head like a shell. Speak, she said. The ear tilted. The tongue began to twist.

The husk-haired girls stood and crept into the walls. They came out again with hands full of yucca suds and a water pail. They stole Rakel's sloppy clothes and cut up the wet dress. They silked Rakel's blue veil until each rupture lustered like a shot star.

Rakel scrubbed the soot from her skin and clothed herself with her second dress. She shook out her sling. The coin purse and the paint and powder tray were her only remnants.

Water burbled down the walls.

You will make it solid, Tarantula said. She stooped. She grappled at the earth floor. She formed it in her fist and it took the shape of a brown bird. She stole black beads from the coin purse and pushed them into the brown bird's eye sockets. She folded a gold coin into the brown bird's cleft breast. She bit at her fingernails and manipulated its little head. She whistled.

The bird sang back to her. It made a sound like a sad laugh.

Teach me, Rakel said.

Tarantula chortled. Try it, she said.

Rakel built hollow bones and called to her skeleton birds. They fell into the soil and thrashed there. Tarantula watched their throes.

These ones will die, she said. Break them. Begin again.

Rakel shook her purse over her palm. Coins and trinkets and a nugget of turquoise fell from it. She mimicked Tarantula. She made a little bird from mud. She powdered it gold. She gave it red beads for cheeks and brown beads for eyes. She pressed an earring into its heart and the little bird began to stir.

Give it a gift, Tarantula said. A grain of corn.

The bird became alive. It turned in tricky swerves. It chirruped and perched on Rakel's fingers. It ate what she offered. Rill, rill, the bird said. Rakel kissed its yellow face.

Tarantula gave her a glass jar. Rakel sealed the bird inside of it and cinched it to her waist. The bird fluttered against the glass. Tarantula said all a-slit-lip-smile: So swift.

A young wife haloed by pale hair fell from the ceiling. She split on the ground and sighed. Olives spilled from her shirt pockets. The embossed cloth of her skirt reddened.

The husk-haired girls gathered beside her still form. They brushed her face with flowers. Tarantula's brown bird laughed. Its melancholy chuckle filled the cavern. Then it was silent. The husk-haired girls began to cry.

That is my sister-in-law, Rakel said. The one that is dead.

Tarantula took Rakel's two hands and pressed them to her own flaccid breast. Take your things, she said. This is how you will work the earth. Her heart beat against Rakel's palm with no panic in its pace.

Rakel shook her things into her sling and slipped the coral tongue and the silver ear into opposite pockets at her hips. The slumped rope swayed. She took it and its fibers were fat and red in her hand. She began to climb. The little bird in the glass at her waist chirped and folded its wings.

The Lost Tribes

The brothers walked the edge of the pond in small groups and smiling whispers. The hesitant wives watched the fattening skies and turned their faces from the shivering stars. The brothers saw this. The brothers grinned. They shoved the wives and said, Down, down, down. And the wives weeping pinched the reeds until their green mouths were wide. They cut the snap ties from their satchels and poured in their home goods: platters and prickled pear and spice

boxes away into the strumming earth. The brothers huffed like hungry hounds and they said to their wives, Down, down, darlings. The wives dropped and the brothers warbled after them.

Your lips are red as poppies, your hair so slick and neat,

All braided up with dahlias, and hollyhocks so sweet.

White ash and water roiled beneath the wives and their bodies broke at impact. Husk-haired girls crept out of eaves and shadows. They looked at the wives and recognized themselves. They gathered them up limb by limb and kissed them.

The brothers landed on their feet and Tarantula met them. You have come to kill me, she said. Don't do that.

The brothers showed their teeth. They said, Where is our sister?

Tarantula shook her head. Her empty face swelled like a succulent root.

The brothers rubbed their chins. We recognize you, they said. You are one of our mothers. Our holy of holy.

I shall show you something, Tarantula said. I am not going to hurt you. She smiled. White lumps like stones bubbled from her mouth and she held out her hands to the brothers like empty earth-ware cups. Will you leave your eyes open? she said. She raised her hands to her head.

In corners, the husk-haired girls cooed to the dead wives. They painted their still faces and draped their bent necks with beads.

The brothers clumped together and held up flint stones. Go away, old woman, they said.

The husk-haired girls laid the wives on warp-woven blankets and covered their faces. They stood and smoothed their skirts. They fetched the water pail and filled it—and gave it to Tarantula.

The youngest brother struck his stones and they sparked. Old woman, he said through fleamed teeth and the others chuckled with him.

Tarantula wavered. Her form became translucent. Who will call you out of the earth? she said. It may not be me. The water pail fell through her fingers. Tarantula chuckled once and then was gone.

The husk-haired girls crept away and into the cavern eaves. They folded their arms and melded into the limestone walls. Lobed trilobites took their place and wriggled their spiny, fossil forms.

Water sloshed from the pail and spread silver over the already wet floor. The brothers lifted their damp ankle cuffs and shook them. The water did not drain. It continued to plunge out of the pail. It reached their shins, their thighs, their straight hips.

Shit, the brothers said. They unbuckled their belts and dropped their flint stones. They waited for the water to rise and then held their breath. Then they kicked. The cavern became dark.

The white lumps swirled beneath the surface and fastened to the busy legs of the brothers. They grew heavy. The brothers sagged into the deep water and saw the coiling hair of their hesitant wives. Their eyes opened wide. They expelled held-in air and it bubbled up their stubbled cheeks. They gave up and they sank.

A brown bird beat its wings beneath the water and its feathers fell away into wads of wet clay. It pecked at the white lumps and sang a sad song with a woman's voice.

The brothers kicked again. They rose to the surface and paddled there in coughing fits and gasping. The water swelled again and their bodies smacked against the ceiling. They reached out to each other and held hands.

The water bundled them together in a tight ball and forced them through the skinny port hole where the rope had hung. It spit them out into a fiery place and then receded away to leave no trace except for the inexplicable green reeds grouped beside a whispering blow hole.

The brothers lay against the dry ochre and earth and dirt stuck to their faces. Soot sprinkled their shoulders and they gave themselves up to a fitful sleep.

Corpse Ghost

Beneath them, the water burbled and splashed back into the cave. The water drained through red and white rocks. The wives floated down. One wife woke and sobbed, though she was dead. She turned her gray hands over like stones in the quivering darkness and water dribbled down her wrists. Her hands did not pinken. She gnawed at them with a red mouth and choked out her husband's name.

Husk-haired girls swelled to her side and prodded her sallow skin. They pulled her bitten fingers to their lacquered lips and kissed them 'til they were stained black.

The wife pushed at the husk-haired girls. She grasped their faces and clawed them. The husk-haired girls fled from her and the wife looked at her sister wives. They were content to be dead.

She began to say, They cannot be redeemed according to God's justice and they cannot die. But the words burned out in her throat and lay like ash in her mouth. Her gut gnarled. She growled and the sound was animal.

She stood on rigid legs—staggered through fissures in the cavern wall and followed their crooked passages. She wandered for many weeks. She scraped her face against limestone walls

and left black marks where she walked. Her flesh receded from her teeth and fingernails. Her hair frothed behind her.

She emerged in the morning light and her backlit hair was a crown of fire. She was on a mountain. Clouds seethed at her feet, roiling against rock and tall pine. Birds chittered. They kinked their heads. They sang in sad notes.

The wife collapsed. Dried ponderosa needles pierced her sagging palms and she howled. She rolled back and forth and blotted her faceless head with black hands. She did so until the sun set. Then she crept into the darkness. Only her footprints marked her pierced meander.

Chapter II: Consummation

Just as he furrows his fields, your father furrows his forehead. He speaks of cotton, corn, citrus—his things—and opening up his dirty palms, he grasps the ashy air. His squat skeleton settles within his shriveling body and beneath his flannel shirt and sacred layers, he sweats. The fire has jumped the mountains; the valley is burning.

Hearken, O, I say—hearken from afar and upon the islands of the sea. Listen together.

You say to him that the billowing sky is none of his, not of his celestial prophecies nor of his patriarchal blessings. It is not given; it is not received. It is not a damnation; it is not a coming. You say to him that it rose from empty oil fields, empty granaries, empty homes. He listens. His stubbled face rendered tender by his lack of a razor. He says that even at the doors—His voice breaks. The wet cough sound rises right from under his sternum. His palms touch his lips and come away purple. You prompt him: even at the doors—But he is not speaking now and won't. You see it in his sad sag of jowls. He waves and leaves you to the empty yard, old chicken bones and dried out weeds. The sky continues to rise.

Crows killed crowd canals—cap the corves. Canaries carried into catafalques or caverns or crypts carp, complain, keel over. Coalfish caress clay. Cacti caves. Carrion cuddles in the corn. I cry and caper coralloid at the clavichord. I comb cowlicks from my cut. Click!

He swaddles himself into his acrid asylum, his bed—into sheets stained in emissions, ejections. You launder them no longer: your fingers pad stiff incest in the fabric and whatever

corner he has marked with phlegm makes your belly seize. You cannot beat them over a rock; you cannot hang them from a line. You tuck him in and avert your eyes from the pocked flesh that peeks unprotected from the holes in his garments. These too go unlaundered and they cling to him. His skin is beginning to chafe. He draws his head under his wadded blankets and says your mother's name. You bunch them over him and wish for latex gloves or a synthetic skin, a constructed organ not of him nor any other—yours alone. He says her name again and asks to pray.

I will. Give me a place in the celestial world. I will. As commanded and required.

You fear for his knees but bend them nonetheless out of his bed until they crimple to the carpet and he folds his arms as if to embrace some spirit who will pour into him a revelation unknown to any other. He begins. You, intruder, shuffle back.

Where Crouchback croups and keeps his calorie cartons, I cut cuticles, cull cords, keep a cable in my cavity, a kind of coil or coir. Crouchback the cockalorum catches me, corrals me, considers me a cot quean, a cullion. In the corridor, I creep. And I am in the kitchen. And I am in the closet.

He sobs and you see sugar, grain, condensed milk, canned wheat, canned beets, canned greens, cooking oils, a gun: these rest undusted beneath his bed in painted tins. Food storage, enough for three. Your intestines twist; your insides burble. You wander away, through the kitchen and up the stairs, to your own room. Your father's maundering follows you.

At hand, the time; and behold, and lo: it must needs be that there be organization. The storehouse for the poor, both in this place and in the land of

The water was with you, under your own broken box springs. You have moved it to the larder, to make room for Ro. She has her own painted case, pink with a latch. This is where she sleeps, amid egg carton pads, beneath your bed.

Catnaps and comas: I conk out, crash.

Ro, more lovely than woman and crafted from soft plastics, aluminum, copper wire. Ro, who stumbled silly when she first learned walking and still cannot manage untaught movements. Hacked Ro, with modded code and seven shades of lipstick. She loves you. This is how she is programmed.

Through my providence, notwithstanding the tribulation which shall descend upon you, stand independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world.

Today she is unpacked and sits, her wrists upturned on her silver thighs. Her head swivels; her jaw unhinges. She puts out her gel tongue, a single black, hairy leg stuck to its surface: she has been eating beetles again. You slap her mouth and pick it out. It's dry: spitless Ro. You tell her not to do that. She clicks her digits and points to her teeth.

I consume?

She is hungry so you nod. She unzippers her left breast and peels up the skin until the socket hidden in her nipple is exposed. You plug her in and her circuitry hums.

As I cursed the land, even so in the last days I have blessed it. I partake the fatness thereof.

She moves now like smoke, billowed and lighted. She unplugs herself and, satiated, smiles.

I am chockablock, complete, crowded! I chew chow! And now I can circle and carry on and I can consummate, can clamor and crow!

You touch her, pulling at the pinafore and the petticoats that clothe her. Her hips are warm, heated by custom coils so that she sometimes feels human. You bend her over the bed rails. She makes an obliging moan. You unbutton yourself. But Ro has shifted—she buttons you back up and goes cold.

Prepare, prepare. For that which is to come, for the Lord

A bug more serious than a beetle: an error in the program. You consider the placement of her shut-off switch. Ro stands, her spine snapping. She pinches your wrists—it's both gentle and forceful—and puts your hands over your heart. She blinks shut her eyes and then opens them at the window.

Cryptoclastic cliffs char and crack. Clinkers clobber our coop, catch on the canopy and cook it. I comprehend it in my core.

The sky is coming in, orange and close. The window panes stink of ash and even the garden has gone up. No error, then. Just the intrusion of some law, some code you had hoped to have hacked before, some code that you thought you had.

And there shall be a great hailstorm sent forth to destroy the crops of the earth.

You shake free of her fists and say to her that you know, you know—it's nothing. You angle your face at her like it's a camera and kiss her. But Ro is agitated and whirring. She turns her head and you lip her ear instead of her cheek. Her sternum shudders in her chest and her fiber optics blacken.

Keep clear. Clear out.

She moves to the door with stuttering steps and puts her plastic palms to it. You say her name. Ro. Her body becomes long, her arms amplify and her feet spread flat over the floor. You say her name again and ask her to come to you. She presses the door in its frame. She does not yet comprehend handles.

And it shall come to pass: I will take vengeance. They will not repent. The cup of mine is full. My blood shall not cleanse them if they hear me not.

A floor below, something thumps. You think of your father. You move beneath Ro's odd arms and grab the handle. It blisters your fingers but you open the door.

Cauterized creature: careful! Crawl into my cradle.

Ro lifts you and frowns. The halls clog with smoke. You cough and motion at the floor. Ro kneels and sets you on it. You put your mouth an inch over the carpet. Ro mimics. Together, you crawl downwards and out.

They are little children, and have not as yet understood how great blessings the Father in his own hands prepared.

It began as predicted, in spite of your scoffing. Your father had shushed you, had quoted scripture, had invoked higher authorities until he was hoarse and had punched the couch.

Mildewed dust spilled from the cushions. He had sustained the prophet and you had turned back to your motherboard, tweaking its platinum circuits. The sun darkened. The moon darkened. The stars fell from the sky. The earth became hot and your father proclaimed wars, dreams and visions. You dismissed these as sweaty nightmares and offered him glasses of water. The tap still ran, then, and you had not yet switched to the generator.

His cranium is cracked. Crouchback is critical.

Your father has fallen. He wheezes and bleeds into the rug. Ro rips her dress. You spit into the pieces, then stuff your mouth, then his. Smoke screens. You look at Ro. The heat has softened her face.

And they shall behold blood, and fire, and vapors of smoke.

She moves her lips. They glob together like over-warm chocolate. But you are distracted by your father's clotted coughs and cannot tell what she wants to say.

C-c-care. K-keep. C-cage. Ch-ch-cherish.

You poke at your father until he rolls and you can lift up his bloodied head. You balance it on your shoulder. He twists in your arms and moves so close—troweled into his face are the seventeen drought years, the sacred symbols, the date on your mother's stone. You look and look. And your father blinks. His blood is in his eyes.

*Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble
because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer— I would that I
might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—*

Ro lifts him with you and her mechanical arms creak. Your father writhes in her hands but she holds him tight. He gives up the struggle. His legs go limp and he surrenders to her, mumbling. Ro seems surprised; her brows fold up into her hairline. A smile surges out of your mouth. You laugh, in spite of the smoke. Ro's brows don't go back down. Her eyeball swivels in its socket and then pops out, exposes wires and rolls away. Her eyelid dimples, caves in. You become silent. Ro looks at you and moves her mouth. She looks at your father. You nod and she helps you to carry him out.

My countenance cooks because of the calidity. How many Kelvins? I cannot compute it. A complication in the code—check, cripple me. Couple me to the curb. Can me. Canter. Can't.

You stand in between your coddled father and melted Ro. You open your mouth and taste ashes and burnt oranges. The cotton, the corn, the citrus groves—all have gone to blazes. Your father covers his meaty face with his hands. Ro sparks and twitches. Your eyes follow the line of flames. The skyline smolders.

Chapter III: The Spark-Shrapnel Stories

Good Dog

The sun cut into the horizon and the day dissolved in dense orange and dark. The thin men of the regiment dipped their fingers into pigment pots and ash and touched their faces. Then, rouged and blackened, they scraped sand-clots from their masks and firing mechanisms and mouthed together:

I've been all around this country. I've been all around this world.

I've been all around this country for the sake of one little girl.

They quieted and flash fires ignited on the mountains: flake-shaped smoke carried colored light and shrouded the war-writhe of angry figures. Bent, the men said. They gestured. Get a look at this.

Bent stared into the red. A small wind beat his blunt hair against his face. Eventually, he shrugged. I know, he said. Then: The letters have not come.

No, the men said. No they have not.

Huh, Bent said. All right. He touched his eyelids. Well come here, dog, he said.

A clockwork quadruped dilated its diaphragmed eye. It stood on articulated legs and whirred and slouched. On the opposing slopes, the fires flickered. The quadruped squatted at Bent's side and Bent patted its exterior shell. Good dog, Bent said, and he looked at his watch and waited.

The smoke opened like a nocturnal flower and white, whining plumes arced in the air like pale frowns and spit out barbs. Thin men thrashed and fell dead into the dust. The quadruped

pinched Bent against the vibrating earth and sheltered him. Its iris aperture pinned. It stared at Bent's shudders.

Dog, Bent said. Dog, the others.

The iris opened and its autonomous eye roved. The quadruped split and trammel net and spartle tube sprouted like twist-roots from under its exterior shell. It caught the dropped dead by their sprawled limbs and hauled them close. It probed their pulse points and injuries and made beep sounds.

The ember sky dulled. The flash fires dimmed. A foot soldier whooped and fumes rolled down the mountain.

Dog, off, Bent said. Off! He pushed against its pinch foot and the quadruped stumbled sideways. Bent palmed his sternum, contused and swelling where the quadruped had held him down. He grasped for his mask and fit it to his face.

Some of the men sat up and looked at each other. They gripped their guns and their painted faces faded into the rolling rills of strange smoke. Lean figures laddered down the opposing slopes and picked through the fumes. They shouted and were shot.

A boy staggered out, sputtering smoke and shaking. Bent caught him, guided him, and the quadruped followed. Surgical kit, Bent said. The quadruped opened and Bent took a bistoury from it. Hold still, Bent said. I'm going to take that bullet out.

The boy began to laugh. His lips parted and he said, I jump the dawn; I tame the sun. He laughed again. Little fires scrawled from his feet.

Dog, Bent said. Dog, get down. Dog, protect me.

And just before the boy erupted, the quadruped's shell shifted to extend a snouted head. The quadruped howled—a mournful limp of a sound in the black belch of sudden smoke—and

Bent pulled the quadruped down on himself like a living thing and laughed too until all the sound drowned out.

Some Sunny Day

The fire burned everything away. Ash settled like snow beneath black trees and though the morning sun cast bars of brittle light through the sullen sky, the smoke plumes were still and wakeless. Ruined stones stuck out of the earth. Glass goggles of gas masks glinted like sunken mirrors.

Bent came to consciousness beside the quadruped, his fingers fused to its hot shell. He peeled away, crying a little, and cradled himself in his own heavy limbs. The quadruped looked at him with its new head and lumbered up onto blessed legs. It nudged him. Sparks skittered along the underside of Bent's skin and Bent rolled on bruised ribs, saying, Dog, dog.

The quadruped lurched forward like a foal and opened its shell, offering flint stones.

No, Bent said. I can't, no.

The quadruped tottered; the stones dropped into the dust. Its shell snapped shut and it reversed away, crunching over pottery—or bones, Bent thought—as it retreated.

Bent lay still and examined his burnt hands. They held a new rawness—an ugly, electrical scab invisible to the eye, a hum felt deep in flesh. He doused them with sanitized water and salve and dressed them.

Winds rose. Bent called out to the quadruped and it brought him tinder: old gauze, the dry stub of a letter. The handwriting was his sister's. Bent looked at it and packed it down. He clutched the flint stones in damaged hands. The quadruped waited. Bent struck the stones.

A flame-line drawn from his finger: it wormed white over his fingerprint and did not burn. It beckoned Bent's eyes and imprinted itself there, warm inside of his skull, and coiling. The tinder burst into bright flame.

Moths tumbled towards the flame. Bent settled against the quadruped and it fed the fire with scrap wood and spare coals. Pressure pulled at Bent's brows and eyelids. He folded his arms over the quadruped, rested his head. His spine slackened and his eyes closed.

A *shhuh-tk* sound cut through the coal-crackle and then silence oozed where the sound had been. Bent forced his eyes open and leaned forward. His hand rested on the foreleg of the quadruped; he pressed his thumb into its mechanical muscle. The quadruped's head and diaphragmed eye turned and turned. Bent bit his breath and heard again: *shhuh-tk*!

Watch the fire, Bent whispered. He fumbled in the ash, snagged a rifle, stood. The quadruped lowered its head. Bent leaned a finger to his lips and took off into the gray.

A corpse ghost crouched over a dead man's chest. She wore the phantom form of a woman and her hands were black and bone-exposed and burrowed and the stringy extraction of pulp—*shhuh-tk*! Her mouth was very, very red and the remnant of her tongue raw. Her hair, guided by smoke drifts, shifted into sickle shapes and gleamed. The corpse ghost sighed and tilted her head. Her mouth hung open and she examined the sky.

Bent raised his rifle and shot at her. He hit her shoulder and the corpse ghost recoiled with a responding, tapered wail. She dribbled tar and mud. She grunted. She flung herself away and loped into the dusky smoke.

Bent turned, but other disturbances bothered his line of sight: stiff prints stamped in the ash where bare-toed children had walked away west.

Journey to the West

The sun began to fall. Bent fixed his footsteps after it and the quadruped ranged with him, head hung low. The sun drifted like a lantern in a lake; its rays rippled and dipped against his outstretched arms. When it finally escaped him, oil spilled after it. Blackness rolled over Bent's eyes. Stars pressed against the surface of the sky, their weight insistent and yearning.

Bent collapsed. The quadruped canopied him.

He rolled out of sleep to a flower-grown and fragranced copse of dense, dead trees. A campfire curled around cut wood and snarled. Bent rubbed his hands. They caught the fire's light. He flexed his fingers and the fire dimmed and sputtered.

Pale moonlight lanced through the trees. It illuminated the dark figure of a woman. She stood where the creeping flowers grew in tight tangles. A bottled bird beat its wings at her waist, and a blue silk with stars sprawled over her hair and shoulders. She squeezed the silk in her palms and said, Heliotrope?

Reflexively, Bent reached for his rifle.

The woman's brief gaze shifted to the quadruped. Its sheet-metal shell glinted, as if with bioengineered luminescence, and the woman turned her head. He calls you that, she said. Your dog.

I'm looking for children, Bent said. Have you seen them?

Her face sombered; Bent was struck with the impression of the break of hard angles, black glass on a beach. The woman was very still. Why? she said.

The rifle was warm on one side where the firelight had fallen on it. Bent's fingers quirked. He looked at the woman and she looked at him.

A howl in the distance, as if through a bone horn. It fouled the night. The woman pressed towards the dull fire, tendrils of flowers stuck to her skirt. The quadruped erected itself into an impenetrable thing. Bent stood and trained his rifle at the trees.

The corpse ghost moaned and moved close, just beyond the light. She thrashed in the flowers and rot.

The woman tightened, tendons visible in her neck.

The corpse ghost paused. Her hair slipped over splintered branches and settled over her face. She crouched. She crept closer.

You were dead, the woman whispered.

The corpse ghost's white eyes flickered. She curled over the ground and began to sway back and forth, sighing. Blood drove down her thigh. The woman reached out to her. The corpse ghost's faceless head snapped at her and her pale whorls of hair rolled. She screeched. Bent and the woman covered their ears and the corpse ghost shut her raw, red mouth. The swell of decomposition stung their faces and the corpse ghost slackened backwards into the night.

Bent glanced back, then forward. He said, I think she's gone now.

The woman nodded. Let's go, too, she said.

Bent stamped out the campfire and covered its kindling with damp dirt. They blind-climbed a slope, clutching at the quadruped for support when they stumbled, until they stood on level feet between burnt trees. The stars had skewed from their starting positions. The woman wheezed. Bent put his hands on his thighs and hung his head between his knees.

The children passed this way before the morning, the woman said when her breath had returned. They burned the trees. Follow the char marks to find them, if you want to.

Thank you, Bent said.

She repositioned her bird and looped the silk around her neck, smiled once and was gone, moving southward and silent through the clasps of flowers.

Bent squatted beside the quadruped and reloaded his rifle. He blinked in the dark and waited for the red crest of fire to strike his eyes.

In the hills, charcoal-eyed children skulked. Flares rose on the hilly ridges. Bent sighted them through his scope. Dog, he said. The quadruped stood and stalked down the mountain. Bent watched it go. The rifle became weightless. Bent bit back the thrill in his throat and raised his rifle. Heat piqued beneath his fingertips. He resisted the urge to rub them.

Bonesaw

Tasseled sunlight swelled; it was dawn. Bent jilted his rifle and said to the quadruped, Good dog. Good boy. The hillsides smoked and the children laid themselves low down in chalk-char mounds. Good dog, Bent said. Let's make a bed. Let's go to bed.

The quadruped carried pinon needles on its back and piled them into a pallet. Bent called the quadruped. He held its head in his hands and tracked its apertured eye. He tapped at a control on its underbelly and the quadruped accepted his shut-off sequence. Its eye darkened.

Good dog, Bent said. He patted its head once. He cast himself at the pinon needles and the sun scaled the sky. His eyelids sagged. His hands grew warm.

The green needles snapped beneath Bent and trickled flammable sap. It stuck to his shoulders and arms. It kindled. The pinon pallet surged in sudden, savage flame.

Dog, dog, Bent said. He rolled in the dirt and shouted a sequence of numbers. The quadruped booted and stood. It disgorged the contents of its shell. It opened its metal mouth and handwritten letters frothed out like hot cream.

Bent beat back the fire and was not burned. He stared at his hands and then at the quadruped. It continued to cough up paper and Bent recognized his sister's scrawl. Dog, he said. He swept the strange singe from his clothes and snatched up the letters. They had been written on torn scraps—crumpled maps, diary pages. Dog, how long have you had these?

The quadruped squatted against the earth. Bent turned the brief letters over. The diary entries were scratched out. He turned them again. The letters read like lies.

July 27th

*So here it is restlessly still: the place where I reach out and skim
brick-stone walls. We move nightly deeper under earth. The
muddle-tunnels are damp. They scrape my skin like cold spiders.*

July 31st

*To cease to mark absence— To fill again with words. To make the
space that was shaped. I miss the feel of your fingers between my
ribs—you palpating for nodes, you looking in the low light for
lumped rashes.*

August 5th

*This place is a pesthouse— Always the insects with fire-hardened
shells and the immolation of lightning bugs.*

August 6th

I am wild. I can save myself.

These are my letters, Bent said. He waved the paper. The quadruped's autonomous eye watched him. These are the letters for me that they said had never come, Bent said. His heartbeat and breath were tinted with smoke. The letters, he said, and his skin spit sparks and turned the letters to fire in his hands. They burned away and for the first time Bent felt the lurk of flame in his forearms. He opened his fingers and sifted the paper ashes. It doesn't matter, he said. Doesn't matter, does it, dog? Well, come here.

The quadruped slouched to his side. Its shell slid open. Bent patted it and shuffled through its compartments until he found a match that would not strike. He touched it and it blossomed into fire.

Bent nodded. Huh, he said. All right. He sucked at a chapped lip. Give me your microphone, dog. Sterilize the area and prepare a work station.

The quadruped shucked its shell. Medical instruments and glass vials glinted in the morning light. A digital voice recorder and a microphone opened out of a clockwork compartment.

Bent took the microphone and held it against his mouth. He rubbed his forehead. He began: The children—they carried the fire like a disease. Now it blisters within our remainder. I

will dose the patient with ether; dog will do the rest. He will carry home my field reports. He held his fingers up to his eyes. It looks like a whitlow, he said into his microphone.

He looked around. The quadruped had spread sawdust over the earth to soak up the blood. It had laid out the good knives, the cauterizing agents. The sunlight sprawled across his face. He closed his eyes to blank it out.

Bent held out his hands. Cut the contagion off, he said. His voice was even. Dog please, dog please.

How Bent Disappeared from the Earth

The vivid lavender of his severed hands. The patchwork sound of his own voice, recorded after some surgery before the war: What about now? Can you hear me? What about now? Can you hear me? The quadruped stood over his head and projected his voice. Its red eye roamed his bleeding body. What about now? Can you hear me?

Go home, Bent said. Good dog. The order is to go home.

The quadruped hesitated. It raised and lowered its head. It backed away. Bent heard its wallow-limp fade into the surge of tall trees and then the long silence.

Bent hoped that he was dreaming: limbs twitched in front of his eyes. He breathed. The tusked sun of succor blew by as if on wind, and Bent was with her beyond the blurring trees, the hillsides, the slope-top. Weight fell away. He thought, *Here is the luminous heart. Here is the heat.*

Chapter IV: Blasphemies and Bone Songs

Canyon Skin

He goes on all fours in animal pelts, a squealing bundle knotted to his rib, and his footprints smoke behind him. Rain spatters his back. Runnels form on the canyon floor. He traces the sky with his painted eyes. Bullets dipped in white ash whiz past his head and men whoop and shout. His path pivots. He lopes at a cleft in the canyon wall and his pursuers pass by. He is hidden from them in his pit house and he laughs, laughs because they do not want him to have the bundle but he has it.

The bundle screws against his rib. Its contents begin to cry. Hush, he says with a short bark but the word snares when he snaps his teeth. The bundle stills.

He creeps into the dark part of the pit house and squats, cutting the bundle loose and laying it on pot shards. In it is a child and the dismembered breasts of its mother. The child cradles the breasts and suckles them and he puts his hot snout against the child's neck. Little one, pretty one, he says. We will wait.

The mother comes with the night-cold and carries with her a red coal. She crouches in the canyon cleft and watches him stroke the child's small limbs. He listens to the wet weep of her wounds and his snout cracks into a curl. The coal grows dim and the mother drops it. It rolls deep into the pit house and illuminates his slumped muzzle.

His sneer drops away. Don't stop, he says. Bury it in the ground. His words snuff the coal. The mother croaks and clogs her bleeding with her hands. The child says her name and she

topples. Go to her, he says. But leave her breasts. The child totters to its mother. It palms the angles of her face.

He shucks his animal pelts and his hands become human. He presses the breasts. Their tissues are stale and faceted but they fold open to reveal crystals and carbuncles. He shakes the stones into his palm and he rattles them and laughs.

The child and its mother clutch each other. He lobbs the empty breasts at them. The child and its mother shift shape: they become canine and they yelp.

Gunmen gather at the cleft. They listen to the animal sounds.

*These, the papers slid sideways into throats and those, the long troughs, the
clawed spots, the pocks in clay loams.*

*These, the cupped pustules of plodding rot and those, the surfaced masks, the
exposed scaffolds, the moved-from memories of vital brightness.*

This, that existed from the beginning beside the drying river.

Cloud Sun Kill Moon

Beyond the mouth of the sky, the horned pater god stretches out his arms and sees his silver urges as stars. They pull towards his place like tides and waters, revolving around his wrists. The body does not lie. Who will love me? With what shadows, he says. His scars split open and he drops his arms. The succor god will catch him when he becomes uncaredful. She will trap him. She will stack light against his face and scorch it. Then the pater god will not be

beautiful. Then the pater god will be a welt of craters and he will have no right to rise from the ashes.

He turns away from the earth. His pace is quick. But still the succor god comes, satchels of gold hung from her fists, and she burns him. Your skin, the succor god says, makes me cry. The sky smells of you, of your inconstant attendance, of your horns and red roping. Her brightness crackles. It turns to tusks and she locks them into his horns and lowers him into the shadow of the earth. There they press flat against the glass of tall windows. The succor god with all her prongs of fire and light is laughing and the pater god is in penance lapping at her as if she is a bowl.

She departs, sudden and solar, and flares trail in her wake. The pater god rolls through the night. His crisp skin sticks to the sky. He moans and is ugly.

Clouds cross over the earth. They cover his mouth and drown out the dance of fire. The pater gods shudders and opens his eyes into crescents. It is then that he sees the woman in river water, her skirts on the bank, her hair uncoiling like the nests of spiders. It is then that he for the first time loves.

*These, the dogs dead in the rose rain and those, the howlers, the howitzers,
the knurled clunk-bots in the datura.*

*These, the enlarged arms of injury and those, the held-out hands to the closed-
over cuts, the red ridges that remind us of surgery.*

That, the woman washed away, who washed away.

Yes, It Springs

The roots dance deep into the ground. They dance the trees into existence and swell into the shapes of people. They fold their gnarl-arms; they sleep. It is quiet in the under. The soil is a press of vessels: warm, heaving. It sustains their mangle-mouths with water. It cribs them and through it, they hear the dull lullabies of years and years.

In the above, the trees twist towards the sun and the roots wake.

They cry out, the roots say. Do you hear them?

We hear them, the roots answer.

Soon we will cease to grow, the roots say. Do you feel it?

We feel it, the roots answer. The flush of sun will snuff us. We must go.

The roots strike through the soil. They lengthen in and out of the people-shapes and behind them the burn comes, slow and dry and dreadful. It reaches some of the roots and they curl like rigored birds and kindling. They die and drop behind.

Hurry, the roots say.

We are hurrying, the roots answer.

They willow and grow weak. They run and they hunger for spring. The soil parts like the arms of a mother and delivers them into a bone yard. They pulse there, safe but frightened. The soil recedes and gives them space. Stay alive, it whispers and the roots shiver against clumped skulls. Then they still.

They need us, the roots say. Do you see it?

We see it, the roots answer. Their shapes are the same as ours. We can adopt them.

The roots embrace the bones. They fill them with stone organs and dance them into existence. They creep up out of the underearth and into the sun. They see the startles of fire and they split into groups and roam.

These, the red pigments placed on faces and those, the shakes, the pins, the covered clutch of chronic illness in a fire line.

These, the black blisters in the mouth and those, the sores that nurses recognize, the signs lit like glass lamps behind patterned curtains.

This, that touches lips to them, that kisses eyes closed.

Wood Gathering

Fire-proof flowers grow between the flagstones where the children chalk place names and hopping games. Their letters are large and angled; their boxes distend. They draw their lines into lichen and drop their chalk.

The sister skips over a shell. The whole world is moving, she says.

I don't feel it, the brother replies.

The sister looks at him. Her eyes rove over him. They reflect the red color of his hair. She says, Let's move, too.

They slip past their parents and scramble into the creek canyon. Its walls are steep, scrawled over with oaks and acorns. The children hold hands and help each other over rocks. They pick up sticks and beat them against the ground. They wade into the creek and their feet pimple from the chill. Crayfish catch on their toes.

Let's take some home to Mom and Dad, the brother says. He plucks them from the water and puts them in his pockets. We'll cook them in the furnace.

We'll need wood to feed it, the sister says. She whirls out of the water and up the bank into a short tree. It creaks with her weight. Look, look, she says. She denudes its branches, strips it and comes down, the bark in her hands like scabs. Let's go.

They sprint up the canyon sides and pause at rocks to recover from asthma attacks. The brother missteps. His feet backslide. He falls onto his belly and says, Oof! The rock shifts. His hands tear in the gravel. It's moving, he says. Help me!

I don't feel it, the sister replies. She stands in a steady place and she clutches her collected bark.

His face warps into a wry plead. He says her name and slicks away.

The sister is stationary until his burbling quiets. Then she sidles sideways to the edge of the rock. He is punctured by pine. The crayfish crawl out of his pockets and choke in the dirt. His thumb tremors and is still.

These, the sentries and trees dismantled in the after and those, the salted rinds of smiles, the new oak, the rumors returned home.

These, the knobbed nodes of healing, and those, the banners born out of cavities, the sounds that scud from chests.

That, the woman asleep in the cold caves of the morning.

Blessed are the dead, for they know nothing.

Chapter V: Fire Fight

The fire came like a quake pulse and its fluttering tongues thumped against the earth. It spattered the sky with its heat. It dropped onto animal paths and burnt their tracks. Its ashes smeared the sky with black and the forest filled with its hiss. It crackled. The trees turned to torches and shadows of men scattered like bone shards from a blast and laughed. The fire etched into their hands shone like suns. They volleyed it and gestured at the ground. Heels had made hollows there. Rakel, they said. She is under their protection. Their twisting grins stunk of rot. Down, down, they said. We will chase her down.

They whooped and followed the footprints to the remnants of a burning building where the surviving men of the regiment slept and turned in their sleep. They clutched their chests and coughed. Brass badges caught the light of fire and gleamed.

Wake up, Rakel's brothers said. They spat out red teeth and opened their mouths to show their bloody hunger. Where is our sister?

The men of the regiment rolled away and woke up running. We are weak, they said. The doctor is dead or gone. His tools, too. His dog, too.

The brothers hollered behind them.

They will catch us, the men of the regiment said and they cut away and tripped into the river. They glared at the new shape of the sky. Moonlight wavered in the warmth of soot trills. Flares ignited.

The brothers gathered at the river bank. Give us our sister, they said. Give us your goods.

The men of the regiment genuflected. They surrendered their guns and gear.

We thank you for your contribution to our cause, the brothers said. But Rakel. Where have you hidden her?

The men of the regiment were silent.

The brothers grinned and white wisps of ash followed their mouths. They slipped into the smoke.

The men of the regiment waited in the water until the smoke choked their throats. They stumbled ashore, sticky with sweat. The smoke opened and the men panted into the snouts of their own guns. They turned and were shot. Sparks streamed from their mouths. Vessels sprang from their hair like humming wires. They hung in the air and their faces flashed. Then they fell.

The river began to boil. Its waters rose beyond its bounds and it sizzled beneath the brothers' boots. The dead men bobbed and the brothers picked through their spill. They took wedding rings and teeth and hauled the bodies into deeper water. Let them render in the water, the brothers said. Let their bones be cleaned.

They turned and searched the dead men's satchels. They found forcemeat in cans and a map marked with one route.

Here, they said. We will follow their route west.

Flames looped like loose fibers into the air and snapped. The brothers rerolled the map and shouldered the satchels. And what then, they said. Give us your short guesses. They laughed and the firelight shone in their scraped-out mouths.

The brothers dug shallow pits and the sound of guns against the ground was like shovels. They dragged the dead men to them and kicked them in. Sleep to wake, they said. They laughed and lifted shin bones. Their feet became less heavy. Come with us after Rakel.

Chapter VI: Field Songs for a Harrow

Under the Unsure Light of an Ambient Sky

A snake stretched in wilted garden greens and piddling fruit. It was small—no thicker than a toe. Laid out beneath the orange stretch of night sky, it barely moved. When it did, it rattled. Audra suckled yellow straw and said a prayer. She hacked it once with a garden hoe and its squat head separated from its body. It writhed a little. Blood seeped from stippled skin, venom from fat sacs. It stained the ground dark.

Audra bagged it. She wiped the hoe with the simple fringe of her apron and glanced at the other house. Its lights dimmed and blinked out. The voice of the other wife carried over the hill: Heber, oh Heber, it said. Pink-throated giggles followed the name. Audra spat and stamped wet straw into dirt.

The stones of an unlaid avenue were stacked where Heber had once said they would plant autumnal apples. Audra set her hoe and the bent body of the snake against them. She breathed; she coughed. She followed the soft soil path away from the garden, past cooking vats and empty cans to the place where her house had been.

Scalded beams and skeleton pipes, a shower stall and drain. Some walls still stood. Audra paused at the perfect door. Then she pushed. It split and stirred the ghosts of floorboards and furniture: black slag drifted up and settled again.

A man skulked there. He crouched on carpet remnants, was stubbled with silver hair and lighted eyes that skirred in his skull. His limbs flexed with odd longness. His pupils opened and contracted. He had seen her.

Audra tongued a tooth and watched him.

The man swayed and clicked until he had erected himself. He grinned. He wore green rag pants and a tattered garment; the compass has been torn from his chest and his left breast pierced but the due bounds of the sewn square remained. He plucked at a plaster wall and presented her with an electrical outlet. Exposed red and blue wires bobbed like soft flowers. The man gestured towards his heart.

Audra gathered up her apron in a fist. Dried snake blood flaked to the floor. Get out, she said.

The man took an unsteady step and again offered the outlet. His mouth opened. His other hand wiped at cold ash. It cleaned his cheeks and neck. It crept into his shirt and out again. It clenched.

Audra pointed at it. What is that? she said. What do you have?

The hand hooked into his chest and the man hummed in a hollow tone.

Audra said, Will you give it to me?

He put it into her palm. It was the white femur of an infant. Tangles of burnt bed linen clung to its brittle pores.

She would love most the return of a fatty heaviness or hot breath whispered out of the dust. But she is not the mother of all living and Heavenly Father does not let up the dead. Bones do not dream. Audra upturned her palm and the femur fell away. It turned in the air. Ash ribboned off of it and curled on Audra's shoes.

The man dropped the outlet. The quick, mechanical arc of his arm caught her. He tucked her forehead to his thrumming ribs and a suckle-scent of crushed, gray shells and warm iron filled Audra.

Are you a Nephite? she asked.

The man smiled. His lips moved against her scalp.

Is this what Nephites do?

The corners of the man's mouth turned up and down. He pulled silver pins from her piled hair and it slumped in curled clumps over her neck and breasts. His fingers lengthened to combs and her hair lost all its height.

Audra shivered.

The man unsnapped the clasps at her collar and wrists. He turned her in his palms. He unribboned her. The dress slipped from her hips to her ankles and he peeled away her petticoats, her stockings, her one piece garment.

She covered herself with her arms, kicking her clothes.

The man stopped and stooped. He scraped at black char—dug a little furrow. He pushed the bone into place and his face shone. Audra bent beside him. It was over, she said.

He closed his fingers and extended his thumb. He pinned her first knuckle with it. She shook his strange handshake away and he kissed her, eyes open. There was a pattern to the placement of his wrinkles and a vacant heat in his cheeks. His mouth reminded her of hard grains. The cold uncoiling of his tongue made her mouth shudder.

She shoved him backwards. She said, I cleave to none else.

The man's broad grin dimmed into a soft line.

I'm sorry, Audra said. She gestured at the exposed bone still in its shallow hole. She dressed herself and did not bother to put up her hanging hair. The man bent over it. He tucked the bone into black until its white bled away.

The fires were close.

Smoke as smooth as lard anointed their faces beneath the sheen of the sky. Dry dirt did not shift beneath their feet.

She said, Do you want clean clothes?

The man frowned.

She said, I can pleat a pair of my husband's pants.

He did not answer. He turned away and fondled the plaster walls. They crumbled in his lean fingers.

Audra went on without him.

The other wife leaned against a pine porch post and ate an apple. Why are you dirty like that? she asked.

Where's Heber? Audra asked.

What—were you rolling around in the garden?

I fell, Audra said.

Haven't you heard? Phoebe says and Phoebe knows that smoke and cinders spoil good clothes.

Audra inclined her head and lowered her eyes. What's that from?

The other wife picked seeds from the pit of the apple. They fell on her full skirt. Some old ad, she said. In some old magazine.

That's worldly, Audra said. She brushed her apron, shook her hair. Where's Heber?

The other wife shrugged and spat an apple seed onto the ground. Fire child, she said. She sat splay-legged; her skirts rode up and showed her shins. He's after one of the wicked who set fires—like the one who burned your house.

Gray fringes crowded Audra's memory—and the heavy steps and hand of her husband and the cries of the baby and the smell of sudden sulfur and lit kerosene. She said, Nobody burned down my house. Bone dust and dirt still lingered on her shoes. It just went up, she said. The curtains and crib had burned hot but the baby did not wake. Audra jerked her head. What are you saying?

Well, said the other wife. Her mouth opened wide and she fit it around the fat of the apple. The starchy flesh of the fruit crunched in her teeth. She swallowed it and said, Somebody set the fire to begin with.

Audra shifted. She said, Where is he?

The other wife pointed. Audra turned. Heber was coming up the dirt path, a flashlight and Audra's hoe in his hands. Where you been? he said.

At the old house.

Heber grunted and held up the hoe. You left this. You saw it?

It?

The fire child.

He's not that, said Audra.

Heber and the other wife looked at each other. Their slick faces gleamed beneath the electric porch light and the scented tendrils of each twined together as if to choke Audra.

Her hands rattled into her apron and she twisted it into soft knots. He's just lost, she said.

Heber swung his head. Even a man who will wander from sea to sea and from the north even to the east to seek the word of the Lord shall not find it, he said. Did you talk to this so-called lost man?

He said nothing to me, Audra said. He had nothing to say.

Heber said, A man was lurking the night of the fire.

Audra rubbed her arm—scored her skin with her fingernails.

You forget your ordinances, Heber said. The hoe in his hand rose with inflection in his voice. He turned down the path. Audra and the other wife picked up their skirts and followed after him.

What are you going to do? Audra asked.

Are you going to come down on him? the other wife asked.

Like a hammer on a stone, Heber said.

The man was still at the house when they arrived. He had picked up the electrical outlet again and thrust it to his chest. He smiled at Audra but his eyes tipped towards Heber and the other wife. The straight line of his jaw quivered. He watched their approach and cords tightened beneath his skin.

You, Heber said.

The man bent, the outlet held out to Heber; he pressed the thing into Heber's coming hands. Heber knocked it aside and it fell into ash. The man gestured at it.

Please, said Audra. The other wife touched Audra's arm and then clutched it. Audra ignored her. Tell him who you are. Tell him how you have tarried.

The man dipped his head. He pressed his knuckles into his sternum until it popped. There was a hiss, a scuffling shuffle: a compartment opened in his chest. A crank and a small speaker emerged from it.

The other wife's grip went slack. Heber was quiet.

The man turned the crank and opened his mouth. A song played; its sound quality silvery and shaky.

I've been all around this country. I've been all around this world.

I've been all around this country for the sake of one little girl.

I ain't gonna work tomorrow. I ain't gonna work today.

I ain't gonna work tomorrow for that is my wedding day.

Smallness settled within Audra's ribs, flowers crumpling into her heart. The speaker and crank receded. The compartment clicked and its seams faded into bare skin. The man shut his mouth and smiled.

Yellow skies parted; small stars blushed into light. Their wavering beams were temporary gifts and Audra folded her arms over herself. A stutter rose in her tight throat.

He's an abomination, Heber said. His movement was sudden and savage; he hacked at the head of the man with the garden hoe and the man scrambled backwards. Smiles dropped from his face like ill-fitting costumes. His mouth moved in the mimic of a kiss. Heber pushed the man into the dirt. The man's metal tongue slid between porcelain teeth and Heber cut it from the man's twitching mouth. The man shuddered. Heber grinned. He pressed the hoe into the polymer flesh of the man's neck.

Gears blurt from the man's throat, and colored wires. The man caught them in quick hands and tried to put them back in. Inside, he clanked and clattered.

Get, Heber said. Get out of here.

The man cowered and collected his spilt parts, the electrical outlet. Heber shook the hoe. The man in a panic loped lob-kneed past the house, past the canyons and fires. What do you think of him now? Heber said. Feel nice? The skies moved and the stars winked out. Audra hid her head in the other wife's shoulder and Heber herded them both back to the standing house.

The man skulked back with the sun. He held his cut throat. Audra met him. He opened up his hands and his parts hung as loose as spun wool. He laid his head in Audra's lap and she cleaned the frayed edges of silver skin with small, wet rags and q-tips. She secured in place gears and wires until he ran smooth and silent. She pinched his throat and sewed it shut with a glossy red thread. French knots finished him. He sat upright, mimicked a swallow. The red line bobbed.

She dressed him in brown clothes and shrunken shoes. She tied a scarf around his neck and put a battery into the front pocket of his frock coat. And there you go, she said.

He tapped at her heart twice. He smiled.

Not a thing, Audra said.

The man quirked his silver head. His hair swayed into his eyes. Audra kissed a silver lid and then backed away from him.

The man opened his shirt, his chest: he turned his crank and walked into the desert with accompaniment.

Will you come with me, my Phyllis dear, to yon blue mountain free?

Where the blossoms smell the sweetest, come rove along with me.

Fires on the horizon raised up their orange hands as if in greeting. The man followed along on the narrow road, kicking clumps of grass and curdled clods. Smoke obscured his departure.

A Probable Narrative for a Mechanical Man Made in a Boy and Girl Factory

Build me just such a man, the girl had said, and she had submitted in a packet a photograph of her father from when he was young along with the necessary paperwork and the

personal check. We can't exact-match the coloring, they had told her. She had smiled—had said, As long as you give me an approximation.

All the disassembled body parts arrived at her apartment in blue crates and crinkled paper. She unwrapped each with quick care and followed the printed instructions and plugged the mechanical man into the wall. For thirty-six hours, he charged.

Walk, she said when he was done. He removed his three-prong electrical cord from the outlet and secured it inside of his chest cavity. He came to her. She said, Fielding. How are you programmed?

He undressed her: he stripped her shirt from her torso; he peeled her pants from her thighs. She stepped out of the empty fabrics and said, I'll be back, then.

In the bathroom, she liquid-lined her eyes and applied falsies. She blinked until the glue set and then wrapped her hair and face with blue cellophane. She cut out a hole for her lip-sticked mouth with a spare razor blade.

Alone in the living room, the mechanical man considered a screen with multi-touch functions. He tapped its black buttons twice and it came on. —suspect contagion, said the news report. If you or a loved one has been feverish in the past week, authorities—

Stop, the girl said. The screen blanked. Put these on.

A white shirt with a wide neck; green clinging pants. The mechanical man pulled them tight over his stony skin. He looked at her and smiled.

Daddy, she said. And then, lower: Brother Fielding.

She pushed him. He stepped backwards. She pushed him again and again until he stepped backwards enough to have fallen over and into her bed. She climbed up the length of his clicking body and slapped him. He cringed; she whooped and bit down on a piece of metal.

The razor blade fell out from beneath her tongue. It landed on the compass of his left breast. Tinted saliva pooled around it.

Oh, the girl said. Oops. She pinched it, picked it up and began to nick at the fabric of his rumpled shirt. She shuddered. The cellophane clouded up and then cleared. She leaned down over him until its wrinkles touched his ear. I'm going to rip you, she said.

The mechanical man's face tangled. His bent lips and brows conveyed fright.

I'm not going to hurt, the girl said. You.

She stuck the razor blade into his chest. Gel welled up around it and the frayed part of his shirt snapped off.

Panic took the mechanical man. He began to writhe and bite: his arms and legs thwacked the mattress and the girl. She fell from him and he stood up.

Bitch, she hissed. She picked up a stiletto-heeled shoe and shook it at him. He hid his face in his hands. She threw the shoe, picked up a picture frame. Its center was empty; it held no photograph. The mechanical man looked at it and seemed to sob. She threw that, too. The glass broke and caught in his clothes.

Get out, she said. Get out!

The arms of the mechanical man began to shake. He rocked back and forth. The girl snarled and he ran from her, through the bedroom door and then the front door. She followed him in her bra-lette and panties, shouting and shaking snatched objects.

Dust gathered in smoky billows behind a thorned row of mesquite trees. The mechanical man cut into their red, dense shapes and they obscured his footprints and form.

The girl began to cry. She dropped whatever thing she had carried with her into the courtyard. She sniffled and sang to herself an old hymn, half-remembered from her childhood.

His mighty arm is making bare,

His mighty arm is making bare.

Chapter VII: The Pump House

Forge Forward

That, the year of listening to loaded guns in the guttering lamplight.

The smoke circles of the incinerator above the stagnant field and the one less ear, one less eye.

Wear red to mark them. Bring them back to life.

The foot soldier struggles alone into the silver morning and demolition dogs hunt him: they hunger and howl, with explosive charges pinned to their skinny ribs. They seek his scent and snap their titanium teeth. They snatch a rabbit and shake out its entrails; they eat and are not filled. The foot soldier flares his nostrils. His breath slips. The demolition dogs scent him and drop their charges.

Red ruptures the terrain and the demolition dogs die.

The hands of the foot soldier halve and shiver when he shields himself and his wind-ripped shirt unravels into them. He convulses. He breathes between his teeth: his hiss is released steam in the hanging chains of weeds and in spite of his internal engine, he bleeds and bleeds.

Cactus flowers close and wilt: the cistern-shaped sky fills with color. Sunlight swells behind the hills and its reds and oranges expand like rot in a body. Spread out, the foot soldier says before he remembers.

Inside of him, the engine churns.

He squints into the sun. The light blooms against his eyelids, peeling apart his skin, and a huddle of suction cups and syringes unfolds from his arms. They nurse his bleeding until he swallows. Then the huddle sucks back into his skin.

His limbs are like new. He will walk again.

The sun circles in a halo over his head and the foot soldier remains still: he scents smoke. It shrouds the sky with its single plume and acts as a warning. Pull back, the foot soldier says. Be already, already gone. He presses himself against cold clay and creeps through the weeds, dragging his legs behind him as if they are broken.

He crawls on in the bracken and his fuel reserves run low: the engine inside of him churns until he reaches the reedy edge of an acre of land and then the cylinders that power it begin to quit. His eye roves to find a shelter.

A pump house has been built over an ochre pit: its stone walls are old and sloping and it sags into the soggy ground. The foot soldier slips in and hides.

Old ashes and the split shells of birds' eggs are stacked in the corners. The floorboards have been eaten away and the copper pipes have been cut out; only an upturned table and bench populate the pump house. The foot soldier sits. The bench is hard and he is thirsty: he feels it in his innermost chamber and he unbuttons his shirt to probe its opening.

Damp chatter strokes his head. Water runs beneath the dirt floor.

Entrenching tools extend out of his arms. He will unfill the floor to find the old well. He will drink and die with a full belly.

Outside, the sun begins to set: its pale, pink light peels away like petals in wilt and stars perforate the black sky. The foot soldier works without light and without sleep. His skin softens.

Two Planets Touching

That, the flat affect spoken in the bedroom beside my own.

*The ash of the incinerator inside of plump lungs and the rasp after, the rasp
aloud.*

Don't sleep in the smoke. Don't bring the dead into your mouth.

Skies are clockwork calculation methods and at every outpost, scouts keep time by the stars. They mark their movements. Rakel watches the night from her ridge: she shudders and shelters in red welts of flowers and speaks with her spare appendages. Her brothers and their captive shadows plod at a pace the same as the sky. Even under the earth, the husk-haired girls and their mother sense the push and pull of planetary bodies and they open their lacquered mouth to laugh upwards or extend themselves like shooting roots to the studded ceiling of their cave house.

We have the hilltop, the foot soldier says as he digs. The context emerges from his memory and then he blinks it away. Outside of the pump house, the moon and sun are moving. The planets are lit with two lights. They shine and stretch across the sky.

What is wrong with my eyes? Sometimes they shut. Leaves are lost, trees become bleak and sunlight is only a red shaft of slough stacked against the window screen. When I was small, I could watch the moon. I could say its several names and it waited for me outside of my window. Its dark parts were like bruises or eyes and it could match me in my waking hours with smiles and luster.

I want it as an insert.

My brother had said the same from the place where empires die—his voice bounced from and broken by satellites. He had said it into my ear with the sound of a gunmetal grind before the shells falling from mountains cut short our connection and what could have been his last laugh was snapped somewhere in the wire.

I always wait for the opportunity to say that he is percentaged now, parts of him a measured casualty of combat. But I keep him like a secret instead.

Raw umber stains the foot soldier's fingers but he uncovers the well: in it, water splashes in its black stone basin. The moon tugs it up and the sun makes it bubble. The foot soldier stirs it. He gathers it against the pucker of skin and pore openings. His suction cups and syringes suck it into the chambers of his engine and his skin swells and plumps.

The husk-haired girls press against the cave ceiling and their mother shimmies up ropes; together, they are singing or sobbing. Rakel's brothers and their captive shadows shrink into the trees and begin to burn like small spheres. Rakel sleeps, and then wakes: she and her extra appendages listen. Above them all, the stars are clicking.

Rail Line

That, the hyper vigilance in spite of the secure walls and unopened doors.

The brightness of the incinerator under eyelids and the unforgotten report, the fire from afar.

Though they smelled of firecrackers, forget them. Bring it out only to bury it.

The wood of the well is worm-eaten: it bends beneath the foot soldier's knees and buckles, dropping him down headfirst. His entrenching tools fold between his bones; his radial nerve tingles and he curses and blows bubbles beneath the water's surface.

The foot soldier is the last of his line.

He extracts himself. He shakes his hands and stands, saying, Forward. His breath spins in the empty air. The two rings twinkle on his thumb.

He kicks at ash and scatters his scent in it. He slams the small door and its hinges break apart behind him. The pump house, small and squat, shakes and some of its stones rattle to the wet ground.

In the sky, the single plume of smoke smolders: it is lit now in the night, is red, and it writhes with the movement of a watching eye. The foot soldier surveys it and knows the distance to its source.

He walks in the opposite direction, the gold rings clinking on his hand.

A rail line runs beneath his feet. It sings with tension and the foot soldier follows it upward and away from the pump house, his legs circling like wheels above its track. It leads him to a high hill where shrub and chaparral grow.

A demolition dog with whetstone claws is there, snapping its mouth shut like shears. The thing is starved: its straps drag, its charges and its trigger lever sag. The foot soldier halts. How, he says. The dog drops to the ground and crawls towards him. Its lever pulls on a plant and the foot soldier clutches his sack of skulls, his thumb, his belly of pump water before all become ash.

Chapter VIII: Field Songs for a Harvest

Under Artificial Skin

In the heat, chimneys did not smoke. The flinty ridges of nearby mountains plumed with yellow and beyond the skulk of sour men who hid their darkening faces—where short-horned deer stamped their cloven hooves and where strange horses once ran from mound-builders and better men—there was a neck of narrow land between two canyons. Peccaries snorted. Polygamous wives watched the sky and offered up secret prayers.

But here, women hurried home and ignored the mechanical man who belly-crawled in roadside flowerbeds. The petals' crushed and carnal red stained his borrowed shirt. His quiet lips shifted over his teeth like falling feathers. The women turned their attention homeward and crossed to the other side of the street.

The mechanical man touched the little heads of the flowers and they bent to kiss his face. He internally whirred as if with happiness and rolled over onto synthetic shoulder blades. Speaker and crank extended. He turned the crank; the speaker crackled. The shared voice of young women shivered from it.

By the floods the floods of Babylon

We sat down and wept and wept for thee Zion

We remember we remember we remember thee Zion.

The flowers bobbed their heads. The mechanical man smiled as if to display the empty inside of his mouth and his systems began to shut off. He curled against the ground. His speaker

and crank snapped back into his heart. He cradled the impotent outlet. His eyes flicked at them, then grew dim. His electrical hum halted.

Clear wind swelled in the valley. It rolled over the back of the mechanical man. His hand modules swiveled. They hooked in the soil and pulled. They followed the clear wind and dragged the inanimate man away from the roadside and the burned down barns and fire fields. They traveled far from that place, to where a river ran loose like a blue ribbon in long hair and cultivated rows of citrus trees stood by the river swills.

The hand modules pivoted back and forth. The fingers crimped. Then they lay still.

A pin-colored boy stopped on the river-walk: his hair was shining and his face was flecked with pink. He pointed. He kicked at the mechanical man's foot.

The mechanical man did not respond.

The boy suckered his cheeks to his teeth and nodded. He kicked the mechanical man again and pinched his shirt cuff. He tapped twice at his own wrist-bound keypad lock and his chest swung wide: interior lights blinked. The boy beat his black, robotic eyes and said as if his throat were full of stones, We hunger.

Other automatic children crept out of the orange trees. They shaped their fingers and palms into something like a smile and said, Thank you, Hod. Their elbows double-crooked and jingled. Their broken arms slackened against their sides and then they hid their silver faces behind their hair and crackled.

Hod shrugged.

They caught the mechanical man in their good arms and grasped him: they slithered sideways and pressed their mouths to his ear. The movements were silent words. Their gums were full of ports. They had no teeth.

Hod moved away. Give us something, he said. Give us something.

The automatic children raised up their smiling heads as if in prayer or thanks and then stooped until they were on all fours. The mechanical man watched them from a stationary eye. Help me, Hod said, and the automatic children tapped at the mechanical man's chest and traced the flatness of his sternum. They peeled back the lapels of his frock coat and bunched it at his shoulders. They opened up his shirt in swift movements, tearing the homespun cloth and revealing his naked front.

His red-lined throat gave them pause. They pointed at it and formed questions with their quick fists.

Maybe we're not the first, Hod said. He moved close and peered down. Maybe he doesn't have what we need.

The automatic children shook their silver heads and rooted through their pockets. One handed Hod a kitchen knife. He considered its heft, its handle—and then poked the mechanical man's belly with it. The belly split in a long line. Hod withdrew and wiped the knife. The belly was warm. The belly was humming.

Look, Hod said. The automatic children were analytical: their lower lips tensed. They parted the belly of the mechanical man with bare hands and did not look into his wide eye.

Conductive gel swelled: it rippled past their hungry hands and up their long arms like liquid from a blister and the automatic children cupped the cut and did not cringe. Protective membranes popped beneath their huddled press and the gel seeped inward. Hod, they said. Hod! They pinched at odd tubes and electronic insides and slurped.

The mechanical man's interior stylus skipped. His records scratched.

Yes, Hod said and he bent beside the automatic children to unsnap brass clamps. Tremors travelled through the mechanical man's limbs. Hod cut at copper wire. It was a gnarled wad, hot from electric thrum.

A spine-comb emerged. The automatic children collected coils and threaded the frayed remainders into the spine. The mechanical man jerked on the floor. His crank came out and protruded. The automatic children opened their gummy mouths for a silent laugh and jangled their joints.

Hod's hands shone. He wiped them down the front of the mechanical man's bare chest. He tore a tatter from the mechanical man's frock coat and smoothed it over the mechanical man's open eyes and lips. He caressed the covered ridge of the mechanical man's mouth and the mechanical man stilled.

Eat, Hod said.

The automatic children pulled apart the cloth and the mechanical man: they took his right ear and his left eye from his head and swallowed them. They extracted circuits and inserted them into their own mouths. They frenzied and the mechanical man shook with the movement of their hungry hands. Sprockets spilled upon the earth. The mechanical man's silver skin stretched over each exit wound and glistened.

More, Hod said, and he sucked on his wrist.

They cupped their painted cheeks and soldered stringy copper into themselves. They screeched, and their electronic speech scared the animals in the orchard. The automatic children buttoned up their breasts and cradled their copper glut.

Hod dropped to his knees and knuckles and came across the ground like a spider. He opened the mechanical man's mouth and looked into it.

The stub of tongue stared back and shook like a root.

Hod seemed to snarl. His arms swung in and out. I'll have your heart, he said.

The wind shifted: it took on the texture of pigmented clay and extinguished the heat of the sunlight. The automatic children shrieked.

Hod gathered the tatters of frock coat and grabbed the mechanical man's face. He held it close and exchanged his false breath for the mechanical man's. Someone is coming, he said, smiling, and then he and the other automatic children scattered away like dropped beads on a tile floor, leaving only their laughter and their remainder wounds.

Fortunate Wind

The river brittled by. Hummingbirds with flame-licked throats drank from the five-petal flowers that hung heavy on the citrus branches and three men walked bare-foot between the trees. They spoke in whiskey-drenched mumbles and their voices were weary and full of clogs. They were covered in gray sweat. They wiped their wrinkled faces and stood over the mechanical man.

Who's he? the first man said.

None of ours, answered the other two. They put their thumbs against their pulse points and huffed into their mustaches.

The first man bent down on both knees. Nope, he said. But he's hurt and dirty.

As you say, said the other two.

Don't want to leave him, the first man said. He flattened his hand against the spine of the mechanical man. His cheeks suckered to his teeth. He turned. He said, He has a fire in his heart. He has a holy purpose.

Orange fruit fell from the trees. Sun caught its color and it split on the ground, spilling pulp and syrup. The other men bent their heads, and tension hid in their lower lips. As you say, they said. All right. They stooped beside the first man and turned the mechanical man. Their sharp twisting shook sweat from their faces and it hissed when it hit the mechanical man.

They wrapped him with new world wool and carried him to the river bank, where they peeled back the binding cloth to bathe his face. His limbs loosened into the water and its roiling cupped his cuts and washed him. The men undressed him. They cleaned his frayed rims of silver skin and mended his membranes. They put in place odd sprockets and silver tackle and sewed him shut with spare thread.

Our poor pockets, they said, and they emptied them. String, batteries and a pocket-generator. The first man opened up the left breast of the mechanical man. He plugged him into the generator. The mechanical man lay prone and hummed.

His systems rebooted slowly, one at a time, and his eyeball swiveled with precision. He blinked and wiped the wet from his chest. He pulled at the tatters of his shirt and plucked at his red-lined throat.

The men moved beyond the range of his only eye and stooped at his shivering sides. The first man said, What's your name, new one? The others were silent.

The mechanical man hesitated, then wrote eight letters into the earth:

FIELDING

That's a good name for a man, the first man said. You want to know who we are?

The mechanical man shook his silver head.

The men exchanged faces and fractured into laughter. We're the three apostles of the western hemisphere, they said. We walk the fire and witness to clinking things, cogs and widgets.

The mechanical man mimicked their faces; his lips looped into an O and he shimmied.

The men quieted. One word from him we never will get, the first of them said. Well, that's how that is. He stood and rattled his old wrists. Fielding, he said. If you meet someone and can't be sure of who he is—be sure that he is not a devil. These branches—they blossom and die, but they are solid. The two others joined him and together, they climbed the painted citrus trunks and plucked round fruit. Then they walked together through the trees and the sounds of their voices grew dim.

The mechanical man was left alone. His hand module turned and touched an orange. His human-like touch sensitivity told him that it was waxy and warm.

Chapter IX: Light on the Land

Night took the shape of smoke. It hissed at slabs of black rock and skipped into the weeds where it whirled into a float of flake-ash. Tree branches ground against each other and reeled a silver rind of moon up the reddening ridge of the mountain.

The corpse ghost huddled above a ring of clouds and grew hungry.

She stooped and churned her knuckles in the soil, exposing the valves and vessels of a pinyon root. She snapped her hands and scratched it. The root split. Sap swilled and the corpse ghost moved suddenly and laughed. The root bled beneath her. She quieted and turned her head back to the ground to lap at the red root.

The sky was black, packed with plumes of smoke, and it stank of embers.

She foraged on all fours in the darkness but did not fill herself and her hair swung like a clapper tongue back and forth behind her. She probed the earth for centipedes and they scattered from her claws. Her eyes gleamed. She snarled and a new scent sliced through the black sky: a perfume that curled to blue fibers and granules of gold.

The corpse ghost halted. Her hair bristled behind her and she scraped her bare teeth through the soil. She stood and began to sway. Her rigid legs creaked. The perfume wavered like a fire. She lunged at it and it darted from her like an animal. She wailed and the sound rounded down the mountain. She rounded with it, grasping at the scent trail until it swarmed and burst into a swept clearing. A woman stood there, a hand over her heart, blinking the ash from her eyelashes. A blue veil covered her hair and a bird in a bottle hung at her waist. The corpse ghost opened her mouth and blood dribbled off of her tongue. Flowers fell from her mouth. Her hair settled with the wind and she stared at her shadow twin.

I brought you something to eat, the woman said.

The strings of the corpse ghost's body pulled. She crouched and began to rock back and forth, breaking words like shards of glass in her mouth. She probed her shoulder and whined.

The woman held her breath and held out a satchel. The corpse ghost grew silent. The woman squeezed the satchel and her bottled bird began to beat its wings. Your mouth is a portal, the woman said. Your soul comes in and out of it and brings you back to life. But you should be dead. She stretched out her pale hands and her soft, stiff fingers. You should be dead, she said.

The corpse ghost moaned. She shriveled into a wad of skin and sobbed. The woman sat at her side and caressed her but the corpse ghost bellowed. Don't touch the dead, she said, and she grasped the woman's face and pitched her into the pine needles. The woman rolled. The corpse ghost followed her, laughing, and sat on her chest. She pressed her palm there. Her ragged fingernails twitched. The woman's heart drummed.

She peeled the skin back with a *shhuh-tk* sound and the raw, red edges of her mouth writhed into a smile. She moved over the wound.

The woman gasped, clutched a broken bough and beat it against the corpse ghost. Her eyes were bright with fright. She swung the bough again and the corpse ghost scudded into the brush with a yowl.

She settled there, clutching the strip of skin and sucking it. She watched the woman with her white eyes and the woman cried. She carried the bough to her campfire and lit it. I know you're here, she said when she turned. I know you're hungry! The corpse ghost chuckled. The woman walked the edge of the clearing and dipped her burning bough into the dry needles and brush.

Fire burst through the brush. The corpse ghost rasped and slackened backwards from the burn and the woman struck her and broke her shoulder.

The corpse ghost caterwauled.

The woman forced her face into the soil and began to murmur. I will make it solid, she said. I will give it a gift. She touched the ground and a grave opened. Yes, a gift, she said. The woman placed a stone and a coin in the corpse ghost's mouth and said, You will hide yourself. You will be reborn into a better world. The woman closed the corpse ghost's mouth and kissed her hair and she pushed the corpse ghost into the grave.

The corpse ghost gnashed her teeth but they broke on the stone and the coin blocked her windpipe.

I won't cover you, the woman said. She glanced away. Above them both the smoke fattened like fruit. It formed a film on the woman's face and she shone. My brothers, your husband: I think they're coming, she said and she darted into the darkness.

Orange light spilled into the grave and the corpse ghost wallowed in her own muck of black tar and blood. The coin choked her and she made no sound as she scored the soil walls of it with her stain-colored claws.

Chapter X: Creation Myths and Beautiful Blue Songs

Smithy House

The allopath and his flat brass fleams and his bowl of bone stand beside the boy and the bedside of the boy's brother. I will know with my hands, the allopath says as he smiles. He inflicts an open wound on the brother's arm and breathes the vein. Bloody gemstones and sour poisons spill into the bone bowl. The short segments of the allopath's fingers shine like the shells of baseboard bugs and he stirs the slurry. Desire dances across his face like fire. His hemoglobin is strange and we will be rich, he says and he bleeds the brother out. The brother blinks in code and dies.

The boy swells with grudge-ache and his teeth turn to knives. He punctures the allopath's heart and holds it in his mouth like a raw fruit. The bone bowl spins on the floor. The boy runs red into the wilderness.

Dusk drags the hills. Old ones root into the brume and they follow the boy through the blackwood. How soft, they say. How wanted, like a child, a child, a child. They set bait fires to bring the boy to their mound house.

He comes as called. Short legged dogs worry the smoke and disgorge ivory animal bones. They banter at the boy but he does not understand their warnings. Old ones skidoo the dogs. They say, May you never be sad. Would you have visions on visions? The boy snaps his teeth and says yes. Good, oh! Good, old ones say and they snatch out his eyes to eat them. The boy cries and cries so old ones set obsidian stones in his eye sockets and say, Can you see? Can you say? Oh how nice. Oh how kind. But the boy, still he cries. His sob-sounds anguish old ones.

They pin golden pages to his breast and braid him backwards through time. Good bye, they say. Good bye! His obsidian eyes will read riot words and gape at gun-triggers and die natural-like, falling through an open window towards the faces of his murderers.

And this one, nectar-drunk in the grapefruit grove, and those ones, who waded into the river to be washed, but it was too late, too late.

And this one, drawn inward like a flower and folded in white leaves, and that one, who notched absences in her foot.

And that one, with webbed clatter-hair, who peeled men like potatoes out of the yellow earth and was what she ate.

O

The horned pater god stitches himself into the night sky. The future is there, in a fissure of the cosmos; it is an ancient lust-puzzle and the pater god's grief is a quake maker: brittle stars shiver and their axes open. The pater god moans. She will never love me. He summons a star and encircles the earth, the fetid almost-flavor of vestal blood in his mouth. A gap-tooth girl bathes by fractured water. Her clothes crumple on the bland grass. He sweeps down in a slab of light.

Favorite, the pater god says. If you fall hard—

She serrates his face with her fingers, glorious in the gouge.

His anger is a rot flower; it bursts from the furrows of his face. I want you to love me, he says. They are slap tag children. They are the unforgiving gape-maw. He fetters her with red rope and lays her down loud. He makes her moon-round until her belly rends and babies and

shame spill into the sky. She keens and says to the pater god that she hates him, she hates him, that she will never love him.

The pater god burns and sees the shape of his emptiness. Death laps at his hands and he breaks her neck to quiet her. All his love-tokens crumble on his tongue. He takes her liver for a trophy and lodges it in his throat. He turns up earth with his horns and kicks her into the shallow pit. He says no words. Fire unfurls in his palm. He rides its yellow billow back into the stars.

Under the earth, the gap-tooth girl unfolds her cold angst and it gives her second life. Her lashes split into spider limbs. She produces two stones and makes for herself a dark space. She says, I am the begetter god. This was only the first of births.

And this one, crookedly named for a hurt in his heart, and this one, who grew shoots like a streak of trees along his spine.

And these, whose hands have a mind of their own, and those, who are hawk moths, wiled and hungry at white night clusters.

And that one, who once was pretty until fire lashed her face, whose silhouette splashed at a cavern wall in odd obsession.

Sweet Mouth

The bibliophage awakens to the sound of water: the cave is collecting it in small pools. Long tailed Otter, who lugs an old, plump, eye jelly between his brown claws and belly, rolls in the wet foam. His ovaloid eyes blink at his catch. His ovaloid eyes watch the bibliophage. She

sits up, opens a gunny sack. It is packed with thin and gnawed-upon pages from the book of the blue dead. Otter, look, the bibliophage says. Otter, aren't you hungry?

Dark whorls that stink of blood glut the gurney sack. Otter squalls and splashes. The whorls wind tight around the pages and the bibliophage cries out, her throat a canker of horror-hope. Otter thrashes into the underwater. The old eye jelly spools across the cave floor. It echoes with ache and pops like a pustule, a cannon colored stone at its center.

That black stone is smooth and it glistens. It whispers, too. The bibliophage snippets it and looks at it with her right eye. But the stone is strong. It flashes and berths there, and the bibliophage rolls into a white mess of paper pulp. Prose ghosts snarl out of the gurney sack, sticky with spit, and their white heads wear the same flat face. Do you hear the quiet, say the prose ghosts. You are a vessel. Forget, forget, forget.

The bibliophage snails to the gurney sack. Tell me if she is still alive, she says. The girl. Rakel! Tell me!

The ghosts chatter into laughter and chant-lists. The bibliophage does not hear them then, and she does not ask again. She pulls pages from the sack and the pages part between her teeth. Ink runs like rot, and the white rinds of the pages distend into the type. The words fade, fade and forget.

And this one, who started late like the snow in spring, and that one, who said,

I am lord, I am lord, I am lord.

And this one, who stood among the birds' eggs, whose cloak shattered like glass from her severed shoulders.

And that one, the centipede, the clicking feet—that one.

Woman in the Clay

The white-clad mechanist at her hell-bellows scalds her palms with vapor and shuts the smoke shaft. The whole world is moving, she says with slotted jaws, and the fire cannot be contained. So we must choke it.

A motorized apparatus slants and says yes, expelling nodal tongues: they slip out of its cavity and whip back and forth on the floor without preset patterns. Their movement sunders the haze of vapor and the mechanist sidles through the opening.

Listen closely, she says.

The tongues turn to snakes and they shimmy up the mechanist's leg to lift objects from her coat: oddleg calipers, tapered reamers and countersink cutters. The apparatus commands its tongues to drop their stolen pocket-treasures. The painted pucker of its mouth widens. The tongues twine back into its mouth. Smoke sags out of the bellows.

It is a long way, the mechanist says, and we will have to refigure you. She unhinges the apparatus' face plate. Cheeks breakaway like clay plates and the mechanist strokes them. Walk through water, the mechanist says. Then fire. Begin in the cobbled town. Wires reverberated and the mechanist snipped them short. Follow the low road through the earth to the landscape shaped like shadowed mountains. The air will taste of ash and dogs will defend you from danger. Leave them. Climb the ridge. You will see the trees below you.

The apparatus says, It will be dangerous to go alone.

Yes, the mechanist agrees. But this is how you will find the fire and put it out.

She plucks away white teeth and quells the extraneous tongues. The apparatus hums and opens to reveal its only real tongue: it is coral and bare. The mechanist lifts it from the apparatus and carries it into the open.

The horned moon, distinct in color from the coat of the mechanist, stares at their approach. It opens its mouth and its light becomes red-rimmed and sad. The mechanist stands beneath it and says, Father, there are some who say that you've sinned.

The moon moves with the stars and it does not answer her.

The mechanist clutches the true tongue and it lays still against her heart, listening to its clockwork beat. Father, the mechanist says. When I was young, I could look at you and you could answer me honestly.

Crushed charcoal swirls upwards with the wind and comes apart against the mechanist's ankles. Black grains obscure the moonlight and it shifts between their shadows in linear motifs. The mechanist shields her eyes but still sees the moon: it moves towards her and it steals the shape of a horned, lean man. It scrapes the soil with its feet and says with the sound of a snarl, Leave me.

Please, the mechanist says. She gestures at the red spread of fire-clots and smoke.

No, the moon replies. Its bruised eyes rove and its skin shines where it is scarred. I am not wanted here. Ask my sister the sun for succor. She will bring a brighter fire and will burn your ochre pits into a better color. Its lip twitches and its snarl becomes real. Leave me, it says again.

The mechanist grows a coldness and the true tongue curls in her hand. The man-shaped moon turns its horns towards the sky and in a fit of anger, the mechanist lobs the true tongue at it. The moon catches it, swallows, forms a lunar ligature with the true tongue inside of its mouth.

It is— the moon says. It—

You are tied to this place now, the mechanist says, and her limbs grow limp. So if you do not want the duty, pass it on and let someone else put out the fire. She shakes her head and turns away.

Behind her, the moon sputters insults.

The mechanist returns to her bellows. It is warm there, and humming. She sheds her coat. She climbs into the parasitic belly of the apparatus and clutches her knees. The clay faces of the apparatus crackle over her own and she smiles.

And this one, with the broken off arm and the fragment of aluminum, and this one, who could grow wings.

And this one, with the cold torpor of a sleeping snake, and this one, who dashed at lidded eyes and laced-over ice.

And that one, who was sodden with seed in the dark morning and all the glittering birds, who ate from his outstretched hands.

Now we become ghosts.

Chapter XI: Home Front

To the Moon Beholders Come Marching Home

When the civilians spoke of Lilah, they spoke in whispers. She is like a late snow, they said, and the wind wailed against the infirmary roofs. She is white and low. But she'll get better; she'll be better. Then their ill-at-ease faces betrayed them: Lilah listened through an open door and she limped away without words.

She wandered a rut-cut path alone in the orange ebb of the afternoon until she reached the sentry-tree. It had fallen to the fire: shafts of branches splayed in ash and wrecked warning-horns. Cogs glittered in rain pools and reflected her face. Lilah looked at herself. She was a pallid, ragged ghost: the inhabited echo of another. She shared the broad bridge of his nose, the blunt slope of his hair. The thing inside of her pittered her ribs. It remembered the cloud that had bloomed in the sky and burned. She glimpsed the slumped sun and turned her head.

Into the ground, the men of the regiment had said. Go under and go quickly. The civilians had fled the firebrands. But Lilah had heard the callow crow-laugh of children and Lilah had lingered in the red-spectrum light.

The fire had overrun her in an uncontrolled curve so frigid it burned. She had stumbled to the earth and then her brother's breath had broken over her face. Lie still, he had said. Lie still, Lilah, or we will lose you. Dog! She had been caught in trammel nets; she had been drawn into safety. She had opened her eyes. Lamps lit like blood vessels in the cave had pulsed against her peeling skin. She had lifted her hands and sloughed livid shingles of burnt dermis from her breast.

I'm cold, she had said.

Her brother had snatched her hands and smothered her with a cloth soaked in sweet oil. Lilah had gone to sleep with orange lights behind her eyes and had only half woke after when her brother had said, What about now? Can you hear me?

Hurt had bothered her body and she had itched inside, as if something were teeming in her cluster-knots of nerve and soft tissue. Lilah had moaned and the sound had shriveled in her mouth. Then the smooth lick of pain like a knife in fruit. Her breath had been a damp hiss.

Her brother had not heard her and he had shifted at her bedside. Lilah won't wake before I go, he had said. And the medical squad is dead. He had held his breath as if in hesitation.

A woman had prompted him. She had said, What will we do?

You've been with me a long time, her brother had said. Will you—

Yes, of course, the woman had said and Lilah had strained to recognize her voice. Yes, of course. Yes, anything.

We've received report and— Her brother's footsteps had echoed from the floor and the woman had gasped. He must have clasped her. Listen: you must reevaluate the wounds regularly. It will heal her from the inside but—

It will leech her, the woman had said.

He had been silent and then he had turned back to Lilah, as if drawn by a wire. He had stroked the inside of her arm and piqued a needle there. No, he had said. Not if taken out in time.

She had slipped into sleep again and the men of the regiment had gathered their guns and marched away. Lilah had learned to walk again and the thing of her had healed her. The men of the regiment had sent their whispered hopes home. Lilah had clung to every rumor.

Then they had vanished.

Bullets burst through the pine needles and native birds swelled out of the trees, their wings sticky with pungent resin. Lilah shrank into the shadows. The thing inside of her riveted itself to her ribs to moderate her heartbeat. Self-regulating chutes extended into her throat and the thing inside of her used her clotted voice to say, This is the part where you go away. Her neck tightened and the chutes retracted. Lilah shook her head no. She settled into the shadows and waited.

At moonrise, men filed down the south side of the mountain and flattened the gambel's oak, the datura blossoms. The sun was still slung low. They were laughing. But Lilah's eyes looked past the living. The men of the regiment walked dead. Her brother was not among them. They sang a song and their pale faces shone like paver stones.

I've been all around this country. I've been all around this world.

I've been all around this country for the sake of one little girl.

Lilah stood and watched their approach. The thing inside of her tottered from node to node. Its chutes extended to stroke her spleen.

The Rotator

Lilah did not know the men; they veiled their rough silhouettes with lantern smoke and walked with the tempo of a beaten drum until night tendriled into the sky and made it dark. We're less burdened than we were, they said with hollow and hungry voices. Their round eyes shone. We'll find our sister now. They unbunched stolen issue blankets and lolled like kings on frail cots. They grinned. Their breath bore the odor of ruddy wood and rotten meat. Rakel will come home with us, they said and then they crouched like animals as they laughed.

Lilah lay flat on her back against the black ground and the thing inside of her settled against her spine-comb. Stars sunk. Clouds curdled in their trail and then clung to the full moon. It lit their tattered edges.

The unknown men quieted. The dead men of the regiment stood like look-outs. The moon moved out from the clouds and tickered towards its zenith. The thing inside of Lilah branched through her arm and pushed her off of the ground. It formed a question inside of her heart and Lilah nodded.

She rolled onto her belly and shut her eyes. She remembered the winter: the earth under snow and the bears under the earth; the wrapped feet of the infirmity nurses; the warm hand of the unrecognizable woman.

Rotator, she whispered. Make me silent.

The thing inside of her stretched to touch her tongue. Yes, it said. The sound of sighs laded Lilah's head as the thing slunk through her in search of freedom. It seethed deep into her spine and murmured there. It was feral and stained with rust. It wore her as a hull and it began to creep through the brambled darkness.

A Book of Matches

It headed for high ground. The moon shone on Lilah's spine and the dead men of the regiment saw her in spite of the cover of the smoky night. They withdrew to walk with her and together they sang the old song:

I've been all around this country. I've been all around this world.

I've been all around this country for the sake of one little girl.

The thing that had made a husk of her paused. It shaped her fingers and palms into frenetic signals and mechanized her muscles to shape the likeness of a smile. They fed the carrion-eater, it said. They sought small and sunlit deaths. It was something of a sin.

Lilah throttled her own throat to chase the thing inside of her out of it. It slunk to her spleen and its chutes went with it. Lilah was rigid, then loose. She coughed and croaked. She looked at the dead men of the regiment and said, Where is my brother?

Their faces fractured into frowns. They lanked over her and burned boils fizzed on their dead cheeks. Something strange will happen, the dead men whispered. They winked out like feufollet lights and green beetles skittered into the sky. Birds rattled up the mountain. The rotator shied from their touch and Lilah thrashed on the ground. No, she said. No! She hid her head in her hands and staggered on her knees. She limped up onto her feet and ran the rut-cut path back to the infirmary.

There, pamphlets for civil defense curled behind the fire grate and their words rose like dull warnings through the chimney chute. Hello? Lilah said. She halted. Her hands tremored and she turned, unbuttoning her shirt to touch the tissue ridge where the thing inside of her had edged in.

Lilah hissed. The thing inside of her stirred. It slid through her with a soft sucking sound and spanned for her throat. No, please, she said and the thing slunk back into her depths. The regiment is dead. There are dangerous strangers and my brother, he—

Her voice broke. She swallowed to recover it and she shook her head. She turned away and stood over the infirmary hearthstones.

They had all gone away, the gossipers. The floors had grown cold. They had left Lilah behind.

Inside of Lilah, the rotator turned. Her limbs grew heavy. The thing settled like sediments in her belly and slumbered. Lilah drooped into a chair. The space filled with the fizzling light of the last stars before the cold morning. The moon shook itself and its light caught in the window panes.

Lilah turned to the dawn and pressed her warm hand to her irregular heart beat.

Dog Trot and the Wildwood Flower

She woke at the edge of the forest. Cold, crushed cinders clung to her fingers and clothes. She sat up and touched them. They stuck to her wrists and she shook them.

The day sky was dark: rain was coming. Thunderheads weltered in the warm air. They wandered over the stands of pine like mechanical animals and extended clammy tubes of moisture to the scorched earth. But rain was not relief. Lilah scooped up soil. It was as fine as sieved bone. It filtered through her fingers and spun in an air-bound arabesque. When the rain came, it would run off and the soil would slough away like skin. Her hometown would drown in the post-fire flood. Lilah looked up and held her breath.

Behind the red pines, a crouch and a whir. Lilah heard it. She let go her breath and said, Who's there?

The quadruped came out of the shadows. Blossoming weeds clung to its shell. Its inner pumps stuck together and its forward progress was clogged. It tripped over its torn legs.

Dog! Lilah said.

The quadruped paused and raised its inexplicable head. Its one, apertured eye opened and flashed gold and it extended a shaking stilt to point at her. Lilah held her breath and looked at its

extended leg. Faulty sinews snapped in it, but the quadruped buzz-toned and began through the trees anyway, stumbling and shedding its shell.

Oh, dog, Lilah said. Didn't you bring back my brother?

The brush buckled under the quadruped's weight and the quadruped lost its footing and lurched. Lilah ran to it and cradled it. The quadruped shook its head like a cudgel. It extended itself and offered an oblong box: it was silver and square-cornered and had been wrapped around with a red ribbon.

Dog? Lilah said. Did my brother—?

The quadruped shuddered. Its eye diaphragmed and shut and it nudged her towards the oblong box.

Lilah drew the ribbon across the box and it fluttered in her fingers like a fire. A spring-mechanism opened the oblong box, its silver, square corners slowly unfolding and turning towards the raw ground.

Her brother's severed hands lay in it like flower bulbs. Their red ends bloomed into bright cotton.

A wind rose. It shivered in Lilah's skirts and Lilah held the box in front of herself. Come on, dog, she said, staring at an undefined space. She moved past the quadruped and it followed in her footprints with its head hung between its broken knees.

She came to a ridge and a fissure full of roots. Dog, she said. Did he—

The ponderosa boughs bent with the wind and silenced her. She stared into the fissure.

Lilah dropped the box. It broke apart at impact and the hands pitched into the pine roots, their open ends bobbing and fading into deposits of different colored clays. Lilah watched their descent and she bit her knuckles until they bled.

The sickening clouds came closer. They stank of rain. Lilah curled and ignored their cluster. The quadruped collapsed. Its legs seized. Its clockwork clunked.

There was a woman he loved, Lilah said. She took care of me when he went away. She—
We should—

An odor of ruddy wood and rotten meat rolled over the fissure and strange men laughed. Lilah looked up. The strange men stood on the opposite ridge and opened up their red mouths to ask, Who is she? They grinned. Is she up on the mountain?

Lilah locked her knees. Lilah did not answer. Her hair hung down in front of her face and obscured her vision.

The strange men raised their rifles. They shot the quadruped. Little one, they said and their teeth gleamed. They extended their hands. Little one, have you seen our sister?

The thing inside of Lilah began to twine in a gentle bell-twist. It took her tongue and said, No. We have not seen her here.

The Forest of Steep

The clouds came down and addled the landscape. They whorled in the red pine and the green needles stood on end and became sodden. The splintered water shone like semi-precious stones and the pine roots swelled and ruptured the earth.

Dog, the thing inside of Lilah said. Dog.

It did not move.

On the opposite ridge, the strange men shouted and lit lanterns. They stripped out of their shirts and set them on fire. They whooped and waved their flames to part the soggy brume. They

stamped and their strong thighs were bright. They raised their gloves and clapped. This is a death dance, they said and they laughed. We learned it in the under earth. They exhaled. They tramped.

The dead men of the regiment reappeared. Their green eyes opened and blinked. Lilah, they said and they toppled from the tall ridge. They collected in the cleft. They rippled up and they gripped her. The strange men smiled.

She struck at the dead men's wrists. They did not release her. Please, the thing inside of her said. I know your names.

The dead men did not answer but the strange men tongued their dribbling lips and took aim. They look good on her, they said, laughing. They look like kings. It is good to give ghosts a reason.

Lilah struggled. Stop it, the thing inside of her said.

The strange men sombered. Hold her, they said. Keep her still.

One stepped forward. Down, down, little darling, he said and he shot her.

The bullet bled into her, spurting through her sternum and heart. The dead men of the regiment dissolved and Lilah shrunk, then fell into the fissure. The strange men laughed. They dropped down stones after her and she ricocheted from root to root. She landed and lay at the bottom of the hole.

The rotator spun into gradual stillness. Its chutes spasmed and Lilah shook. Rotator, she said. Ro. She drew her hands up her hips and searched out the entry wound. She palpated it. Her breath seethed in her teeth. Ro, she said.

The thing inside of her spartled out.

Lilah stood up and swayed, grappling at the fissure walls. You're cold. Come back. Take me and make me forget. Rotator. She slumped and stumbled backward.

The rotator struck her like a snarling animal and stood on her chest. Its odd angles reflected her in her own red dribble. Her cheeks were damp, but with perspiration and not tears. Her hair stuck to her forehead. Her skirt stuck to her thighs. She watched it and exhaled.

The rotator grew spines. It grew colder. It tightened in the crook of her arm. It curled into her muscle.

The strange men sidled down the sides of the fissures. They clung to roots and circled her. They blinked as if bored.

Lilah moved suddenly and laughed. The clay was red beneath her. She quieted and turned her head back to the ground. They have not died, Lilah said. She smiled and her gaze grew unsteady. The men of the regiment. They are here—they say they will come with me. They say I will rise again. And they have not died.

Chapter XII: Coming Storm

She will not tell you how she came to be in this place, Crocodile in the bath in the yard. She washes her hair with golden oil in a cistern and wastes the saved water, the soap, the warmth made from matches. She smiles at you and you smell the threat of rain. Crocodile aims a wet forefinger at your throat. Bang, bang, she seems to say. See you later, Alligator.

I cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance. For behold: the field is white already to harvest; and lo, he that thrust in his sickle with his might, the same lays up in store that he perish not, but brings salvation to his soul.

Desert dust and black scabs of cinder tumble like a brown weed over the asphalt and into her hair. Your hand drops from the doorknob. Crocodile grasps at the rim of the cistern and shakes her shaggy head. Her neck is naked and she is pink, soft pink, and red. Urges swell beneath your sclera. Words form in the foam of your mouth but your lips will not speak. You blink and turn away. The gray sprawl of smoke from flash fires wobbles into the air and strays into blue sky. Crocodile catches it in her hands and presses it to her breasts. Her wet skin sizzles. She inhales and exhales so slow and you leave her to the dark yard and the scrawls of smoke.

Catch me in a covenant and collect coins from my cheek! I keep them in my cleft, caress and coddle them 'til caught.

You search your pockets. Like the cabinets, the vegetable beds and even the ashes, they are empty.

Behold and heed unto my word, which is quick and sharper than a two-edged sword, to the dividing asunder of both joints and marrow; therefore give heed unto my words: fear not, little flock; do good; let earth and hell combine against you, for if ye are built upon my rock, they cannot prevail.

An ash clod skitters up the sidewalk and into the house. Crocodile, her hair swaddled in silk, stands on the front steps. She has brought the clods across the gravel and she clutches them like semiprecious stones.

Clever call, you canker of a coquette.

You say to her that she must stop it, stop it—drop the dark rocks and not wash away all the old-world water. You shake her until her shoulder straps slip. She only smiles and skips away with a primitive, half-hummed song. She steps out and unwinds her wet hair: it lopes like a mapped topography over her neck. She dances in the dropped leaves and in the dropped rot of oranges and shoos away spiders. Her hands circle like dowsing rods and she gestures towards the northern corridor, where the storms used to swing in. Her face is expectant and strained. Her half-hum becomes an old hymn.

*I do not condemn you. I bear the prints of pierce-nails and am a flaming fire;
I am the light and the life of the world—My eyes are a fire and my head is
white and bright and I speak with the susurrus of the rushing of great waters:
I have accepted this house, and my name here.*

Crocodile is crying. She flips her fingers and her hair swirls. She flips her fingers, and she is holding a match. The match ignites in her fingers. She touches it to her strands of silk. The dried fibers flare up and catch.

Cry out: the clockwork compositions of creation. I cannot come to you.

When the rain will come, you do not know. You collect Crocodile in your arms and wait for the white roll of thunder to put her fires out.

Chapter XIII: The Space Between Two Worlds

Land Finder

The coral tongue throbbed. Rakel felt it against her hipbone and she shivered. It pulsed again and the ear answered to it with a ripple. Rakel slipped her hands into her opposite pockets and the remnants of the moon-colored man stilled. She sighed. She stooped and gathered some sand in her hand. It ran out of her palm in a curdled stream and spilled over the ridge into the trees below. The sun was rising and its light was like orange jewels cast from dark sacks: it echoed along the edges of the earth and spun into brilliance. The bird matched the light's movement from the glass jar: it fluttered in it and gold powder pitched from its beating wings. Sad bird, Rakel said. Her fingers lingered over the jar's seal, and then she unplugged it and set it in the sun.

Rill, rill, the bird said. It rippled out and into the air.

Rakel watched its wing-dance and did not move her hands. She called to it and it perched on her fingers and preened for her. It came to her to kiss her with its yellow face. Its red bead cheeks and its brown bead eyes glimmered. Rakel laughed but the sound of it was sad. I must find the fire and put it out, she suddenly said. I must shroud it. A warm wind rose. Her blue veil slid over her forehead and she let it be. But I don't know where it is, she said, and I'm alone.

The bird broke from her hands and turned to the west. It flittered for a moment.

Little bird, Rakel said. Where will you go?

It winged away and winked out over the horizon.

Rakel staggered backward and collapsed into a cluster of silverweed cinquefoil. Its yellow petals tethered her feet and sprung into the empty jar. Rakel glanced at it and began to cry.

Lost Tribes II

Rakel's brothers walked in a ridgeless meadow and grinned with more than just their mouths. They carried the dead woman and her snaking, metallic insides dragged in the asters behind them, uprooting weeds with their independent writhe. Her insides rolled her white eyes, collected clods of clay earth and broke them against the brothers' ankles. The brothers glanced back and laughed. They lay her body on the ground and said, Down, down, down, little darling. They swabbed out her open mouth. They unbuttoned their britches and belted her insides to the ground. Down, down, down, they said. They bent and grinned again. Their voices lifted and they serenaded the dead woman so that she would not snap awake.

Your lips are red as poppies, your hair so slick and neat,

All braided up with dahlias, and hollyhocks so sweet.

The dead woman twitched. The thing inside of her shut her mouth. The brothers bellowed and fetched sticks to pry it open. They fit them between her teeth and jerked apart her jaw. Mercy, little darling, they said and they positioned themselves.

Knots of tinny song seeped through the bordering trees. The brothers buttoned their britches and strained to discern its measure. When the words came, they were slanted through with scratch sounds and long lulls.

Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down,

Darkness be over me, my rest a stone.

Yet in my dreams I'd be nearer, my God, to Thee,

Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!

The mechanical man limped into the meadow and slumped against a mound of flowers. He clapped his hands against his knees and his crank sputtered to a stop. His speaker retracted into his ribs and he turned his impotent crank. He looked at the brothers and his eyes hung open like wounds without sutures. He sputtered.

The brothers dropped the dead woman and began to walk forward, saying, You are a horned and dangerous god. We've killed you already. They pulled their short sticks from the dead woman's mouth and lunged towards him in an unangled line.

He moved his mouth and held his head. His movements were like slammings-shut.

Your moon color, the brothers said. It is a trespass.

He shook. The brothers beat him and his soft, silver skin parted like broken tiles beneath their blows. In his chest, his phonograph dislodged. His needle pierced his navel and conductive jelly spun from the injury and slapped his hands with white and pink colors. The mechanical man shuddered with a soundless moan and he sank against the ground.

The writhing thing tilted into the stiff limbs of the dead woman and began to wield her like a weapon. It twitched into her bloated lips and her swollen tongue. It tightened and pulled in her throat. It said, Stop.

Brown and blue birds shrieked from the surrounding trees and took flight. The brothers dropped their sticks and stared.

Her body was a blister of distension and the livid purple of pooled blood unfurled from her neck. The thing rotated within her abdomen. It shook her arms. The dead woman sat up and the thing said, Lilah carried the contagion. I was cut into her to cut it out. Now the contagion is in you. The thing inside of her loosened its hold on her tongue and the tongue bulged between the pinched corners of her mouth. It shifted beneath her skin and the brothers watched the black roll of its coils as it slunk into her feet. Toes twinged. The dead woman lurched.

The mechanical man scraped at his red-threaded throat and clutched his bleeding belly. A monotonous sound kicked out of his mouth and he chugged. He touched his left breast and beckoned.

The dead woman ceased to sway. The thing inside of her stilled. The brothers gripped their sticks and the meadow was silent.

It screeched a series of numbers. The brothers covered their ears and the mechanical man took off into the trees. His lob-kneed lope carried him from the snatching hands of the brothers and the thing inside of the dead woman began a mechanical laugh of smattering sounds and warnings.

The brothers bent over the body and began to gouge it: their fingernails forked at her like lightning and erupted her rot. Down, they said. Down! Damn! Tissues latched to their hands. The thing jumped from her skin and struck the throats of three brothers. They buckled and choked. The other brothers showed their teeth and said, You've come at us to kill us, but you won't. They formed cudgels with their knuckles and they broke the body apart. They held the writing thing in their hot hands and they grinned. Up, they said. And up! They immolated it and it churned into a black streak of smoke in the sky.

Over the Earth

Fires followed the smoke line. Their spontaneous starts billowed into the black after of brothers' set fire and together the twining smoke stifled the sky with its scaffolding.

The little bird beat its bright wings and trilled. The smoke was warm and upswept; it battered the bird sunward and blocked the bird's mud-made beak so that it could not sing. It blackened the bird with soot and the bird waived its winging and toppled down.

Branches struck the beads from its cheeks but did not break its wings. It came to rest in the silver hands of the mechanical man.

He lifted it to his remaining eye and his crooked clockwork made a strange sound: beads clicked on an abacus, pebbles poured into an open vessel. The bird blinked and the mechanical man mimicked it.

Rill, rill, said the bird.

The mechanical man dipped his head.

They folded into each other. They walked with the wind and the bird beat its broken wings in the direction of the mountain's red ridge.

There, the wind rose and wailed. Rakel wept into wads of yellow flowers and the wind ruffled the skirts of her second dress. Her cries carried and the wind became wild: it raided the mountainside and swept into itself a pother-knot of pollen and smoke. It gathered like a storm over her sobbing body and struck at her. It broke the floral tethers that had held her. It spilled her satchel; it split her pockets' seams. The wiggling remnants of the moon-colored man stretched in the sunlight and glistened.

Please, she said.

The bird heard her and it made a sharp, shrill sound. It swelled and the mechanical man pressed it with his palms. His mouth made an O. He puffed compressed air and it roused the bird's yellow ruff.

It chattered.

Rakel grasped the sides of her second dress. She stood and shielded her eyes. The black clouds spun and unspooled and she saw the bright bird like an ether light beneath their roil. Oh, she said. Oh! The tongue and the ear lay still in the soil.

The mechanical man turned to her as a flower turns to the sun. Rakel held out her hands and the silver sections of his skin shifted. The sky spined into sand-colored afternoon. It lit his scorched skin and he mouthed without sound, lifting the little bird to her breast.

She took it and sat down in the flanges of flowers. The bird curved in a gyre and fell flapping into her lap where it thrashed then lay like a clod of dry sod. It sobbed. Its beak was blunt where it had beaten against the bottle's glass and its brown bead eyes were wide. Rakel touched a cloth to her tongue and touched the bird, but the yellow came away. *Shhh*, she said to calm herself when her hand shook. *Shhh*. I should have never. I am so sorry. Behind her, the mechanical man held his head in his hands.

Rill, rill, the bird said.

It began to crumble: its beads broke away first and then its slanted surface of plumes. Rakel's bones began to crack. Her marrow ran river-wild in her arms and she dropped the little bird. It became a fold of red and yellow dust falling against the warmth of the earth. An earring and a grain of corn rattled from the fold. Sad bird, Rakel said and she sucked her lip until it bled.

The mechanical man stroked her shoulders and they shook.

The afternoon spiraled into snatches of stuttered light: the fires turned into the flowers and burnt them like paper offerings. Rakel watched their approach and the mechanical man crouched to move his silent mouth against her veiled ear.

She turned to face him and she traced his surface of wire and white tubes. He hummed; his face followed the arc of the sun and he blushed. Rakel saw the spin of small-tooth gears in his open head and remembered the other man. Heliotrope, she said. You, too, then. The mechanical man stilled. She kissed his skin where it had been scorched and it felt like sandpaper between her lips. She smiled.

The mechanical man opened his empty mouth: His stub of tongue stretched but did not touch the pink pockets of his cheeks.

You will not die, Rakel said. Break. Begin again.

She stooped. She grappled at the mechanical man and forced him to the ground with her white fists. She unplugged the stub of tongue from the red root of his mouth and swabbed out his open mouth. His hair wavered like flames. His remaining eye opened wide.

A gift, Rakel said. I give you a gift.

She picked up her purse and shook it. The turquoise nugget fell into his throat and did not plug up his plenums. It rattled into the open bowl of his belly and he began to glow with blue, live light. His wounds unwound and seamed: the swell of conductive gel seeped back into his belly like rain water. His ribs contracted. He prodded himself with forked fingers and felt for his injuries. He scooped the pucker-scars of his skin and rolled the red grit between his fingers. He looked at Rakel and she smiled.

Black waves rolled over the sky and the ground grew as dark as an old coal. Only the remnants of the moon-colored man retained their luster. Rakel held them in her hands and they

were heavy like heartaches. She extended them to the mechanical man and he tapped them with his thumb.

The coral tongue shone and the silver ear was an exact color-match. She held it up against the side of his head and it adjusted its shell shape so that it fit beneath his silver hair. She stitched it there with strands of her own hair. The mechanical man opened his mouth and she slipped the tongue into it.

Can you hear me? Rakel said when she saw the shaking of his jaw. Can you speak?

The mechanical man was quiet. His eye skirred and then stuck in place and beneath his skin, linchpins barbed. He looked at her and his glow dissipated. The kingdom must come down, he said with two voices.

Meteor: The Root Returned

The moon and the sun moved together over the planes of the earth and they locked their prongs of light as if to afflict each other with red wounds. They were eyes opening and unbound. They were beaten knee caps against the ground. They were hipped tremors in scented bed linen, and their broken, red ropes slouched out of the sky like cinders.

The earth was alight with fire.

Rakel with white ash in her uncovered hair walked abreast with the mechanical man and they held hands in the fitful light. Their footfalls saturated the soil and before them, the spread of fire ceased.

Suspended stones speared the sky. Their sodium and silicate streaks burned brighter than the fires.

Rakel held her breath close to her heart. Then she said, This is a second baptism. The mechanical man turned to her and shook his silver head. He smoothed the ash from her skin and then kissed her.

Earthward March: The Red Vessel Bloom

(I)

The end was not the end.

The brothers did not bury their dead but took them away and with their threatening fires they leapt like severed limbs in a skillet over the hills: they lengthened and burned and laughed. The animals on all sides of the earth kept away from them. They opened their mouths and they filled their ribs with smoke and sky.

Sister, they said. Sister!

They held up blackened hands and the fever slid out of their shoulders: it lit their hands like lanterns and jumped up. It set fire to the forest. Blackjack stands of pine fragmented into flame. Their branches flashed and fell.

Show me, one of the living brothers said. He whooped and went wild, bashing brush flowers in his fists and basking in the burn-light. His sleeves shook. They caught the fire and became bright wings which stirred the air. He cried out and crumpled. Fire fanned from him in five lines; it spread in circles.

Put it out, the other brothers said. They beat him with their hard hands. He rolled and extinguished.

Stars fell and followed the fibers that had fallen from Rakel's blue veil. They littered the red earth with their rare color. The brothers grinned.

They were not native to the land: it withered when they passed and stones broke open beneath their burning feet. They death-danced. The mountain ridge rose up red before them.

(II)

Night came. It strung its stars over the world like illuminated glass and their flat filaments of light laid low against upturned faces. Rakel watched the stars and the mechanical man watched her. The blue veil slipped against her hair and skimmed her warm skin. She shivered and held herself.

The mechanical man touched her shoulder and said, I have been a companion. I have been an absence.

Yes, she said.

She shook free of him and unpinned her hair. The blue veil uncoiled: it tumbled away and was lost against the black backdrop of ash. The mechanical man shadowed its airborne slump with his arms and stilled. Rakel felt her heart rate rise like a fever. She took his hand and walked with him until they stood above a ravine. The starlight swelled in it. It spilled over the ravine's rim and lit their feet.

It's golden, Rakel said.

The axis of the earth began to quicken: the stars spun away into shifting lines and the green arms of common reeds spanned at them then dropped. The dance of planets did not stop.

Rakel's brothers ranged over the red ridge. They laughed and the sound was like hammers. Sister, they said. They waved as if to welcome her into their arms. Your time is done. Come home with us.

The stars will follow me, she said. She pointed into the ravine. They are strange and they should not cross into the under.

We will build a ladder, her brothers said. They will rain down without us. Their smiles sagged. Come home, they said again.

Rakel raised her arms and slapped the flat earth.

The mechanical man stumbled and his second voice said, This is how you will find the fire and put it out. He held his belly and felt empty. Rakel had fallen. He ran through the fire and bent over her body. It will be dangerous to go alone, he said. His blue breath pulled her from the ground and he held her.

Yes, she said.

She pulled the fire from the earth and it with its animal froth opened. Rakel looked down through four worlds: small things squirmed in silt and dull drums of two-tone laughter thudded up through the sifted ash. Recent dead in raw graves curved into claws and bit at stones: the corpse ghost and the thin men of the regiment flicked their tongues through the stones and licked the brothers' feet. Beneath them, the husk-haired girls sang sad dirges and lower still, the gray graves of the old dead and the hesitant wives smelled of cinders. Knotted roots and red ropes connected them all and the husk-haired girls with their black-lacquered mouths said, Rakel. They killed their wives and will kill you, too. Look.

Her father lay at their center. Our house— he said. He stretched upwards and faltered. His blackened hands moved like mirrors of each other. They shone like steel. We remember our Heavenly Father.

Rakel's brothers howled. They dropped their dead and leapt to throttle her: her thin neck began to break and it bloomed into a blue bruise. Rakel choked.

The mechanical man shifted. Music emanated from his mesh skin. He beat the brothers. They released Rakel and fell away into the opening of the earth. Their shakings and screams echoed upward and changed the shapes of the stars. Rakel clung to the mechanical man and listened to the falling of far places.

(III)

The mechanical man held her through the violent night when she writhed away from the world's opening and said, No more. He, blind in one eye, watched her and saw her as a flat space: her lips and eyes the same as pins of pine shaken onto a page. The starry sky grew faint. Her features faded into morning. Only her silver sweat shimmered on her face.

I am an echo, he said. He slicked the sweat from her chin and she pressed close to him to listen to his sound.

Lava throbbed from the opening. It sutured shut the earth.

The husk-haired girls shucked their skins and their black lacquer whipped like lizard tails over their entire bodies. Their eyes reflected the red color of the lava-light. Their lips pulled away from their peaked teeth and they grinned.

My eyes are open, Rakel said, and I think that I see the moon.

Yes, the mechanical man said. His second voice edged into his first and the sound was like a low-level screech.

Rakel was silent. She spread her fingers in front of her face. She said, I will be born here. Or, I will die here.

The husk-haired girls spun sideways and skipped into the air. They caught fistfuls of insects and split their green shells open with their teeth.

We will wait for the rain, the mechanical man said, and it will always be both.

Chapter XIV: Epilogue: Departure Song

The ocean is an impermanent boundary. It churns its heads and hands and simmers up the shores, becoming a binding that encircles all of the earth. The surf shines red rocks and smooths them: it extinguishes all fires and rolls in with the dark like a tincture of ink. People pass away under its waves and it takes their death bloat into its blue belly without urge.

Still, some go on. They make their lives on what once were mountains and row out in reed boats to find other lands. Their children beget children and all in a line have sharp, peaked teeth.

Little girls laugh and curl toes in the ocean froth. White birds screech above them and they stomp and splash. Their frolic upends something solid in the soil and they delight in digging it up: it is a foot and an ankle and a man. He opens an eye and looks at them.

Come up, they say. Come on—up!

And he does. The mechanical man rises and smiles, the fragments of his frock coat tied in a ribbon around his red throat. His bad eye blinks and spills out a blue stone. The girls take it and all but one spin away. The last little girl loops a red skip rope around his neck and says, What else have you got?

The coral tongue flicks at her pink cheek like a yellow bird. Next time, I will be swallowed by the sun, it says and the mechanical man begins to laugh.

The little girl stretches her lower lip and worms it. Then she breaks into black laughter and says, No, I know you. She touches the hair-sewn sutures that hold his silver ear to his silver head. Her face is uncrooked. She pulls his stitches. You are a strange sort.

The mechanical man and his moon-colored parts agree. He shakes out his crank and speaker and sands spill out of both his mouths: its sound of tuff and split shells is a beautiful sound and the little girl bends her head to better look at him. He mimics her movement.

She says, What's your name? But she ignores his answer. She speaks over him to say, Look, look! She has caught the wet sound sands from his mouth. She has formed them in her fist. Look what I can do! It steals the shape of small bird and flutters.

The mechanical man moves forward. His hatch unhinges and his records spin and scratch.

He's hungry, the little girl says. He wants to wake up. Let's give him a gift.