THE BIRD COUNTRY: AND OTHER STORIES

Thesis

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Abstract

This collection of short fiction explores themes of alienation, desire, the numinous, and death, drawing on and reinterpreting mythological and historical sources in order to pursue an ultimately supernatural meaning.
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As a boy, Tom dreams of wolves. He lives by the woods. His father is dead. His mother takes in washing from the little town of Leynmouth. To make ends meet, she says. In the mornings she washes, and she listens to the wireless. The radio reports the North Sea forecast. News comes on after, when the washing has been hung. White sheets shape themselves into great sail-cloths. They rage over the grey grass and the thistles. Beyond is the forest they wish to escape to. A smell of pine and spruce and moss, a bent-backed line of silver-barked saplings, and the lurking threat of further trees beyond. Tom wonders why the sheets want to get there so badly. He marvels that the clothes pegs can hold them so long. He runs through their coiling, fretful curtains. The sinuous caves they form are broad. His mother calls, “Don’t dirty up the washing!” He hears the wireless, through the window, toll the hour with bell-song. He lies in the grass, squinting pleasantly upwards. Sometimes an airplane goes past, its metal body abuzz. He counts those times especially lucky. His mother says, “Thank God the war is done,” when she sees the same sight, and looks very weary. Tom ponders the aeroplane. It passes over their own black wood as though the place were a small spot of darkness, something you could clean from the landscape if you scrubbed. But: no, Tom
knows already, the woods are not like this. They are not small or large. Their size
is other.

On Saturdays he walks with his mother to town. He is entrusted with the
washing money and the ration book. He shows their coupons for milk, eggs, and
sugar. The shopkeeper tears them out of the book. “Young Tom,” he says.
“Wouldst like a summer apple?” He puts a small red apple in Tom’s fist. It is soft,
and it tastes of tea with honey. The shopkeeper says, “I trust you’re staying out of
the woods.”

“He’s a very good boy,” Tom’s mother replies. Tom hides behind her
skirts. The truth is that he is afraid of the forest. He dreams of wolves filling it.
Fast, silver wolves, loping and silent. They slope between the evergreens and
birch. They pant into air grown sweet with frost. They go in packs. Their eyes are
gold. Their backs are brindled. “There are no wolves in the wood,” Tom’s mother
tells him, when he complains about these dreams. “And where have you seen a
wolf, you silly boy?”

He knows wolves, of course, from fables. From fairy stories. They are
always dragging huntsmen down, or hiding in girls’ and boys’ beds, ravenous at
all times and deceitful, thinking of nothing but how to eat men. The wolves in his
dreams are not like these wolves. They are indifferent to him. He stands in the
wood and they whisper past, their paws churning up the snow-scrim. He tells his
mother, but she does not perceive the terror that this inspires in him; she draws him close and wraps him in blankets and says, “There’s no wolves in all of England.”

Tom wonders why his mother would tell him a lie. He turns his face towards the blanket. He can hear the wolves, he thinks, out in the forest. They huff their white breath. They let their tongues loll. They turn their bright eyes from him.

***

It is well into late grey November. They are trudging up the hillside at the edge of the lane. Tom’s shoes slip and scatter on the patches of ice. Night is coming on quick and sullen. For no reason at all, Tom feels afraid.

“Hurry up!” his mother says, too sharply. Her face is pale. Her nerves are frayed. Winter is hard. The shop-man says, “No credit.” Tom has not grown much since his last birthday. He is seven years old now, little and shy. “Keeps himself to himself,” is what the neighbours say.

Up ahead, the outline of their cottage looms. “You run ahead and set the fire. Put the kettle on,” his mother says.

Tom is quick to nod, compliant. He picks up his heels in a light fast pace. His lungs burn; the frost seems to fill them. He heads for the wood-stack at the base of the house, in back, close to the forest, where the verge holds sway. Come
spring, woody vines will stray from that forest, and with clippers Tom’s mother will cut them away. Now all is shrouded in ice and shadow. Twilight’s damp brush tars the air blue-grey. Tom reaches towards the firewood. He feels a rush of superstition. He clutches a log hurriedly. He does not want to look around, towards the forest. He is afraid of what may be crouched there, breathing. He freezes. His knees fold. He hears a crackle. He hears feet on frost: crisp, steady, moving.

He sees a shadow cross the wall. A smoke-thin shadow, wavering. It comes very close. He feels its breath. He smells the smell of its breathing: a raw smell of spruce needles, cedar, and snowdrifts; of dry leaves in rot, and of carrion meat. Something touches his shoulder. He shudders. A black feather whiskers down past him, curls in the air, and lands at his feet. Whatever it is that stands behind him sighs: a long slow drawn-out sound of grief. Then it is gone. It steals back to the forest. Tom listens until he can no longer hear the cold little-bone-like crunch of its feet. He stands in the darkness for a long time. His heart pounds and his hands are trembling.

After a while he knits up his courage. He hurls himself towards the cottage door, not stopping to see what—if anything—scuttles after. He clutches the firewood wildly, so that later he will dig a splinter from his finger. When he reaches the door, he runs inside. There are great retching gasps to his breathing.
His mother is storing the shopping on the shelves. The kettle is humming in clouds of white steam. But when Tom’s mother turns and sees him, her face goes colourless as cream; she drops the apple that she’s holding. Her hands fly to her mouth. She says, with horror in her voice, “Tom?”

Tom feels tears slide down his cheeks. He can’t understand his mother’s reaction. Nor can he bring himself to speak of the wintry creature out by the wood-stack. He hasn’t the words to try and describe it; not half of the words he would need.

His mother says, “But if you are my Tom, my own Tom—” she comes close and her hands roam his cheekbones, his ruffled fair hair, the rough fabric of his sleeves—“and oh, my darling, you’re cold as death—but if you are my Tom, then who’s that boy in your bedroom? Who is he?”

She runs to the bedroom: a sharp sudden motion. Tom trails behind, uncomprehending.

There, in the little bed by the woodstove, the bed with the blankets below which Tom sleeps, another boy is sitting cross-legged. He has the same pale hair as Tom, the same round shape to his features. His eyes are cornflower blue, like Tom’s. But a restless energy hangs about him: like a wolf about to spring, or like a storm building over the land, steeped in electricity. Tom thinks to himself, \textit{I am not like this. How could you think this boy was me?}
The boy looks at Tom with no expression. He shows no curiosity. He blinks very slowly, like an animal. His hands make little fists in the sheets.

Tom’s mother touches the top of Tom’s shoulder. He can feel that her pulse is racing. “Come away,” she murmurs. And they leave the boy there. They tiptoe meekly out of the room, back towards the kitchen.

For a time, his mother is on the telephone, then—talking to the rector and then to a priest. She talks in a harsh and violent whisper. Tom can hear the voices of the rector and the priest: plain, flat, calm, and denying. At length the phone goes back on its hook. His mother covers her face with her hands. Tom sits at the table. He tries to be still. He says, “Can I have something to eat?”

He is given bread with butter and jam. He licks the seedy jam off his fingers. He is mouse-quiet; he can see his mother is thinking. He cuts more bread to toast over the fire.

The other boy comes creeping step by shuffled step, out of the hall. Out of the corner of his eye, Tom sees him—but does not show fear, or shock, or alarm. Neither does he greet him. He simply stares straight ahead at the fire. The bread gets brown and hot and smells of warm grain sweetly roasting. The other boy licks his lips. Tom ignores him. He spreads the bread with yellow butter—on any other day his mother would reprimand him for eating up all their ration—and with
strawberry jam, red-deep. The jam and butter melt together. The other boy holds out his hand.

At first Tom resists. He thinks to himself: *If he is hungry enough, he will go eat someone else’s bread and jam.* But he is a lonely child. He has no playmates. He has often played alone at sharing tea with some phantom, allegiant sibling. A sister or a brother who would go with him to skim rocks off the shores of Loch Leigin; who would lie in the grass staring up at the clouds and would say, “Look, that one is like a rabbit,” and would like the see the aeroplanes as they pass. All this Tom wants, and thought it irks him to see the boy sat there, looking so like him, he still cuts a slice of bread from the loaf. He warms it briefly over the fire, and carpets it with butter and jam. He holds it out, the butter leaking on his fingers, and the other boy snatches it from his hand.

The boy wolfs the bread down. He eats like a savage. This is something Tom’s mother says: *Close your mouth and chew your food. Don’t eat like a savage.* But the boy forces his food down fast. His mouth hangs open. When Tom offers him more bread, he tears into it—then scuttles in close to stick his hand in the jam pot. He eats in fistful, bread and jam.

“Don’t do that,” Tom tells him sternly.

The other boy stares wide-eyed at him. Perhaps he has never had someone tell him how to chew his food, someone to butter-and-jam his bread. Patiently,
Tom shows him the whole process. Then: how to measure tea out, prime the kettle, pour the milk, dip his bread into the sweet warm-smelling mixture so that it is soft in the mouth and delicious.

By this time, Tom’s mother is watching. She sits in the corner, her arms gently folded. She seems tired now, and not very angry, though her mouth has the unhappy curve it gets when her nerves have been stretched out to their endpoint. When it is late—far past Tom’s bedtime—she gathers the two children in and tucks them side-by-side beneath blankets in the bed that Tom had thought of as his. She sits by the woodstove. Embers are burning. She tells them a story about ravens that fly to sit on a wise king’s shoulder. One is called Dreaming, and the other is Thought: that is what she says. Tom is lulled by the sound of breathing that does not belong to him. The other boy is already sleeping. Tom is comforted. He watches his mother bend close to the stove-side. Its cinderous lighting turns her hair red. She is still speaking, still telling a story.

In the morning, when Tom wakes, he has not dreamt of wolves. When he turns, he sees the other boy beside him: sleeping soundly, halving the bed.

***

The next day: “Where did you come from?” Tom’s mother asks over breakfast. “Who is it that brought you here, to my house?”
The boy says nothing. He stuffs bread into his mouth, and beans, and eggs. He stares at her with a dumb, silent expression. His eyes don’t look blue anymore. By afternoon they have turned gold instead: a dark green-gold that is strange to gaze at. His face, too, has changed: grown thinner. He is little and gaunt. His hair curls, is fox-red. Tom accepts these alterations. He is not bothered by the shape-changing. It is a relief, in fact. He had found it strange to look at his reflection. Now the boy is merely a boy: a brother, as Tom always should have had.

Leynmouth’s rector comes by the house that morning. And later on: the Catholic priest from St Sadde’s. They both have cursory words with Tom’s mother. They drink their cups of tea and pat Tom on the head. The other boy they seem to ignore. Politely, they chat with Tom about what he would like for Christmas. When they leave, Tom’s mother slams the door behind them. She looks like thunder. She gets on the phone at once to Tom’s granddad, and in an hour a stranger knocks at the door: a white-haired, wizened, age-smelling old man.

“Your da rang me up,” he says to Tom’s mother. He is wearing a poacher’s stained coat and hat.

He peers at the boy who is not Tom. The boy who is not Tom peers back: his gold-green eyes dense, flat, and guileless. He touches the brim of the old
man’s hat, as though he has not seen a hat before. The old man says, “And what is your name, my lad?”

“Tom,” the boy confidently answers.

Indignation rises in Tom. “It isn’t ever!” he says. “Tom’s my name. Your name can’t be that.”

A cloud of doubt flickers over the other boy’s face. “Tom. Tom,” he says again. There is a stilted, tone-deaf timbre to his voice. Tom wants to hit him.

“Tom,” Tom’s mother hurries to interject, “he likes your name so much. Perhaps you can share it a little? You can be Tom without an h, as you are, and let him be Thom with an h in. You remember what I have told you, that sharing is the act of gentlemen.”

Reluctantly, Tom subsides in his chair. He glares across the table at the new-labelled Thom. Thom gazes happily at him.

The old man places his hand on Thom’s head. Thom’s red hair curls up under his fingers. The old man winces and grimaces. “Aye,” he says. “He is one of them.”

“And you can say that, can you, just with a touch of him?”

The old man taps at the side of face. “There’s some have the sight, and some have it deeper, the sight that goes down under your skin. I tell you now, he is a child for the woodpile. But fetch iron if you will, a horseshoe or skillet.”
Tom does not know what is a child for the woodpile. He does not like the thought of it; he thinks of himself on the past cold night, in the shadow-haunted darkness. He watches his mother walk to the door, where a horseshoe is hung on a blackened nail-pick. She takes down the horseshoe and carries it over. She hands it over to the old man. He inspects it. He hefts its black weight up and down.

“Go on. Best to be knowing,” Tom’s mother says.

The old man offers the horseshoe to Thom. Thom smiles at him a little, blankly. He puts his hand out over the horseshoe and grasps at it. Then there is a sound, a sound like screaming. A high child-scream, hard and bone-hurting. Tom covers his ears. He flees back to a corner. He watches his mother uncurl, gently, Thom’s hand: where the horseshoe has left a mark: a long white charred mark where the flesh is dead. Thom cries and cries and still doesn’t speak.

“You see,” the old man says. “The touch of cold iron. Is that clearing for you, Mary Shearsmith? I tell you, yon one has the curdling power. He’ll sour your milk and set fire to your washing. He’ll bring the birds and wolves to your house. You’re best rid of him.”

Tom’s mother stands for a long time, looking. Tears drip down Thom’s pointed chin. At last Tom’s mother goes to the cabinet. She fetches butter and herbs and cloth. She binds up Thom’s hand where the burn is welted. She smoothes her fingers through his curls and says, “Now, we’ll have no more
caterwauling,” which is what she says to Tom when he has fallen down and scraped his shin.

The old man turns a fierce countenance on her. “And what if your own child was dead?” he demands. “Or taken off in the woods, under the hills, and you not to see him again? Think on that, and count yourself lucky. You ought cosset your own child, and send that changeling back to them!”

So there: the word is finally outened. Tom knows its meaning very well. Every child in Leynmouth is taught to beware those other folk that used to live in the wood—and are but lately gone, or that linger, maybe, under the ground, or that wait for their name to be said unawares so that they can then come in the world. Their state of half-being arrests people, scares. And children know that what those folk love is to steal a child of less than ten years, and to leave in its place their own sickly child. That false child will fail, and die, and be coffined. What becomes of the real child: unclear. He goes off into the woods with them. Never to be seen again. Meanwhile the changeling takes his place, dies in his stead here.

That is Thom. He is Tom’s changeling. The folk in the woods brought him and left him; it was those folk in the wood that drew near when Tom stood by the frost-covered wood-stack. They sighed in the night; they smelt of the winter. But they fled to their cold foreign dwellings alone. They left Tom. They laid no hand
on him. He saw naught of them surpassing a feather. He shivers, now, to think of that feather. It is not a shiver of fear. Why, he wonders, *did they not take me?* A twinge of longing touches his heart.

His mother murmurs, “Dear, dear.” Thom’s head rests against her arm. Her warm hand still strokes his red-gold hair. Perhaps Thom has never had a mother. Who knows, Tom thinks, how those folk live there.

“You’d best put him out,” the old man warns. “What life is there for such as him here. No life at all. His own folk did not want him. And now he brings an ill magic in, and death. He brings death into your house.”

“That’s enough,” Tom’s mother says. She stands up, very flashing-eyed. “Put him out or no, it’s my business. You’ve done what you came to do, and spoken. Now you can leave again.”

Tom has never seen her, before, hurl someone into exile. Now he watches with some awe. The old man shucks his coat back on and puts his cap on his white head. He exits the house with hard hobnailed footsteps. The horseshoe he leaves on the table behind him. Tom’s mother goes and gathers it up. She hangs it back up on its pick.

She sits down by Thom, who curls beside her. He has stopped his weeping, though tears blotch his skin. Tom’s mother looks all at once very tired.
She says to Tom, “Would you mind so much, having a brother, just for a little bit?”

Tom examines the sleepy face of Thom. His dangerous eyes are heavy-lidded. Before, when the touch of iron had burned him, he had looked at Tom: just for an instant. A look of betrayal, a look that said: You let me be hurt. You, myself, my kin. Now Tom feels a certain demand. The weight of it presses down on him, some kind of oath he’s already sworn, without realizing it. We are brothers, he thinks, and it can’t be helped, so I will not let you be hurt again.

To his mother he says, “But will he talk? Will he order me about? Will I have to be nice to him?”

His mother smiles. “Perhaps. I don’t know yet.”

“When he gets older, will he go back to his kin?”

Then the smile droops like a frost-covered flower. “We must never speak of that, Tom. Not to him. Not to anyone. Do you promise? They won’t understand it.”

“I promise,” Tom says. After all, he would not like it if someone reminded him that he had been left on a stranger’s doorstep, that his folk had crept home through the night without him. That would be hurtful. It would break the oath he has sworn, an oath between brothers, vague and solemn.
All the same, he senses that this new promise will not stand for long. He has a sinking prescience. He presses already against his limitations: the future failures, weak spots in the walls surrounding him. He looks at this frail thing: his little brother. This not-quite-human bundle of limbs. He should feel love. Instead he feels tired. Unequal to the task. Somewhere deep inside him, a twinge of dread begins.

***

Since the war, the folk of Leynmouth are not so superstitious. Still, they lived a long time with superstition. All their lives have been steeped in it, spent beside the peril of the forest. The black feather-tips that bristle that forest have swayed in a winter-smelling wind, and at times beneath those evergreen leaves, dogs and birds have been found dead; there, on the very edge of the wood, and no one can say for sure what killed then. And so a certain legend resounds, repeated in hushes at the sides of bed.

It is no surprise, then, that word gets around about Thom. When Tom and Thom go into town, other boys throw rocks at Thom’s head. Very small rocks, ripped-up road rubble, but hard and sharp-edged. Shops close up their doorways, shutter their windows. “Sorry, my lad,” says the shopkeeper who in summer had given Tom an apple. “Best go elsewhere. Bad for business.” He acts like Thom is not there at all, like Thom is a shadow that Tom casts.
“They think that your brother will rot their apples,” Tom’s mother says, when he comes back and tells her of these proceedings. “They think he will cause their milk to curdle, and crack all the shells of their eggs.”

When Thom comes back from town bleeding at the eye, a rock having chipped the flesh of his forehead, Tom’s mother forbids them to go back to Leynmouth. “I’ll do the shopping till they find their senses,” she says. But still trouble founders its way up to their doorstep. There are notes ties to bricks tossed in through the window. There are straw crosses, and holly branches bound with white thread. These are signs to keep off the Devil. There is the bird that Tom and Thom find, dead, nailed to the broad painted wood of the door, its eyes like filmy black ice chips, its fine-boned wings outspread.

In the first few weeks, it is not clear to Tom how much of this Thom understands. Thom will say only their same shared name. He says it for all communication. He cries when hurt; he cries over his burnt hand, though Tom’s mother rubs beeswax salve into it and sings him nursery songs made up of nonsense.

At night, she tells the two of them stories, when they are tucked up in their bed. She tells them of the great king under the mountain: who sleeps with a mistletoe sword through his heart and a crown of holly berries on his head.
That is but one of the stories she tells. There are more, as the midwinter nights grow long and spiny as frost, ice-thin. Snow rattles hard against the windows. When Tom sleeps, he dreams of wolves again. Now, though, when he wakes in the night, Thom is beside him. Often Thom is not sleeping. Tom thinks, *He sees into my dreams. That is what wakes him.* He wonders if Thom has dreams of his own. Perhaps he has not, and they share Tom’s dreams.

One night, not long after Christmas, Tom wakes from the same wolf-troubled dream. In the dream, snow is up to his knees. The wolves are passing all around him. They are tall as he himself is, fast and sleek. Their eyes are dense and gold, like hawks’ eyes. They shake the snow from off their pelts. They pace on either side of him. He curls in the snow, brought low by terror. He hugs his arms tight around himself. Just when he smells the woodsy, rotting wolf-breath and feels its warm damp on his skin, he snaps awake.

Thom is watching him. In the darkness, his eyes look like amber. He says, “There are no wolves in the wood. So why do you dream it?”

“I don’t know,” Tom says. “It’s just a dream.”

He turns on his side and resumes his sleep. In the morning, when he wakes again, Thom is still talking. He goes on talking: not quite naturally, as though he is pruning the words from an overfull tree. When she hears him at the breakfast table, chatting carefully, Tom’s mother cracks her coffee cup. She sets the two
pieces on the table. But she says only, “Would you like some more sausages? Tom? Thom?”

Thom says, “Yes, please.”

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All the rest of that winter, Thom practises speaking. He has a strange way of speaking in stories. Perhaps he has absorbed it through the long nights of fables. Perhaps it is how his own people speak. If Tom says to him, “Look where that old crow is sitting! I bet I could strike him with a pebble from his tree,” Thom is apt to respond, “The old king Mark had a daughter. And she kept ravens: Wisdom, Sooth, and Harmony. So she called them. Each one would fly around the world and say to her exactly what it had seen. And if you said a wrong word to her ravens, or shook a weapon, and if her ravens hapt to see, then the daughter of King Mark would come to you at night.”

“And then?”

“Then she would curse you. So your heart would turn to a piece of seed, and one of her ravens would pluck it up.”

“Mum says there’s no such thing as curses,” Tom says, but all the same he throws no pebbles at the crow in the tree.

Another time they are trudging, as they often trudge, through the snow round Loch Leighin’s boundary. Winter is no bar to Thom. He likes the cold, and
carelessly will leave his coat and hat so that Tom’s mother runs after: “You’ll catch your death, what are you thinking?” Thom allows her to button him into his coat. But still he will lose his mittens or scarf, shedding them snowwards indifferently.

Tom doesn’t care for the cold. It causes his teeth to chatter. It hurts his bones. But he can’t admit so without wounding his infant bravery. So instead he walks along with Thom, by the shore of the woods and the icy lakeside. “In summer there are fishes,” he says to Thom. “In summer there are flowers. I carry my rod and catch the fish. I lie in the grass and count aeroplanes.”

“What is aeroplanes?” Thom asks him.

“Where you come from, don’t they have aeroplanes?”

He realizes that he has broken his promise. He is meant not to ask about where Thom comes from. That is an inhibition imparted daily by the general climate of chill round the topic. Tom ought not to have asked his question. He wishes the words back, feeling shame.

But Thom merely looks at him calmly. “The old king Thenn had a beautiful son. More beautiful than all the world was he. But sad, for there was nothing like himself, for nothing matched his beauty. So he sold his soul to the sorcerer Lopt, who gave him in trade a white sea-bird’s wings. Thenn’s son thought he would fly from this world. But it did not work. He was too heavy.”
“So what happened?”

“He fell to the earth and died. But the earth would not bury him, because of his beauty. So it gave him to the sea, but the sea would not bury him, because of his beauty. So it gave him to his father, the old king Thenn, who placed his son’s body in a wide open place where birds could eat it. So all the birds of the world came and ate him up, and were more beautiful for it.”

Tom says, “That’s a horrid story.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Can’t you see why it’s horrid?”

“No.”

Sometimes, Tom thinks, Thom seems much older than him. They are the same size; they have the same bedtime; often Tom will recognize an object—a lamp, a motorcar, a coal scuttle—and Thom will not know what it is. As though Thom is an infant, new in the world, where Tom is old and confident. And yet Thom will tell stories rife with corpses, with broken swords and madness. Thom’s stories have ghosts and gruesome trials, sad gods; they end in suffering. Sometimes they have no proper ending at all. They are not proper stories.

“When it’s summer,” Tom says, “we’ll stay outdoors forever. I’ll show you the aeroplanes then. You’ll see. They look like birds.”

“Summer,” Thom says.
He says the word in a way that suggests it’s foreign. Like wireless, petrol, telegraph, heat. Tom wants to ask: is there not summer where you come from? But it seems an absurd thing. Summer is not set to one location. There is summer in the woods and summer in Leynmouth; there is summer in the mountains to the north, even. Green islands surface in the seas of their hillsides. Gorse shows where the frost has been. There is nowhere on earth immune to summer.

That night, when he wakes from his wolf-dream, Thom asks him, “Why are there always wolves in your dreams?”

“I don’t know.” Tom hunches his shoulders inwards.

Thom says, “I don’t dream.” It sounds like a secret, something confided just to the air that their shared breath heats.

Tom asks tentatively, “Where you come from, do the people not dream?”

“We don’t sleep. Not like you do. We might sleep sometimes for a season, or for a whole century, maybe.”

“For a hundred years?” Tom cannot believe it.

“We get tired.” Thom’s eyes flicker. He looks tired suddenly.

“Do you miss the place that you came from?” Tom asks.

Thom tells him a story. “During the reign of the old king Thenn, the sorcerer Lopt was sent into exile. He was set in a boat made from dragons’ teeth, and the boat was ordered to steer away from any sight of man or beast. This was
...to prevent him doing magic. But at the end of the world, he will see his home again. So he looks forward to the end of the world, and waits to celebrate it.”

Silence hangs in the sill dark air. “I don’t understand,” Tom says.

Thom shrugs. He fingers the scar on his palm. “Sometimes I don’t understand things that you say.”

Tom senses it is not the same somehow. But he does not know how to say the difference between his descriptions of gas stoves and kettles and the strangeness of Thom’s stories. He says instead, “Do you not mind when I ask you about it?”

“Why would I mind?”

“Mum says I shouldn’t say. You might be sad. That’s what she thinks.”

Thom blinks slowly. His eyes are wide, bright, foreign. He says, “I’m sad anyways.”

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After that, they talk often about Thom’s homeland. They talk about it quietly, naturally—but in secret, so that Tom’s mother won’t hear them. She’s the one it would make sad, Tom thinks. This must be the logic to her prohibition. For Thom does not mind the talking-about-things. He will go on at length, lost in description. Tom learns that in the land where Tom lived, there is not bread, or
milk, or even bacon. There are not apples—“not the kind you have here, white when you bite them. Only gold ones that taste like cold sweet water.”

“That doesn’t sound very nice.”

“You haven’t tasted them.”

Even the water that runs through Thom’s homeland is different. It is white as snow, and very pure. “But cold,” Thom says. “Everything is cold there.” The nights last for thirteen or fourteen hours. Sometimes there are nights that go on for years, and no one can predict when they are coming. The sun does not rise, one day, in the east, and then you know that one of the long nights is here. The sun travels elsewhere. The birds stay sleeping. “We have in my home,” Thom says, “many birds. They sleep all through the long, long nights. But when the sun’s out, they sing in mortal words, and tell us our fortunes, and speak with our gods.”

He is astonished to learn that Tom thinks himself uncomprehended by birds. “You are just not singing to them right. Listen.” He whistles, low and complex. A dark winter bird, something close to a crow, echoes back from the branch of a crooked sapling. Tom tries, but he can’t make the same sort of bird-sound. He feels a hollow resentment grow.

There are times when Tom wonders if Thom’s being quite truthful. Tom’s mother has told him not to tell lies. The Devil is the breeder of lies, she tells him. He pictures the Devil: a beekeeper in a back garden, keeping and tending the
domes of his hives, while lies fly out in little black swarms, wild and venomous and alive. That is what a lie is like, in your belly. When you spit it out, it puts its sting in your tongue, poisons you as it takes flight. So he does not lie, if he can help it. But Thom, he thinks—Thom might lie. In Thom’s stories of his other homeland, there are always sweet apples and red grapes and wine; and milk, and tree-sap-coloured honey, and a kind of warm syrup that smells of pine. All of the men there feed on nectars. But Tom has seen Thom at supper, and knows that what he likes is to suck the marrow out of the beef-bones. He likes lamb shanks. He delights in the tenderest, pinkest part of the meat, almost bloody. He drinks the juices from his place. Tom can’t imagine him drinking wine, or eating fruit steeped in flower water. He remembers the carrion smell at his shoulder, when he stood at the woodpile that November night. That was the smell of a hawk or a vulture. A smell of the place where something has died. So when Thom describes the mild tastes of his homeland, Tom thinks to himself, *Are you lying?*

Once, when Thom has told him how each tree in the forest used to be a courtier under the old king Gawain, and each courtier in turn asked the kind for a gift, and that gift was the gift of never dying, and the old king Gawain made it so that they would not die, but would live forever in the bodies of trees… when Thom has finished telling this story, Tom turns to him and asks, “Are you making it up?”
“What do you mean?”

“Are you lying to me?”

Thom doesn’t blink. “And what if I was?”

“The Devil is the breeder of lies. You mustn’t tell them.”

Thom considers this statement. “Why not?”

Tom flounders. The conclusion ought to be obvious. Yet Thom appears not to see; he stares at Tom and waits for an answer.

“I don’t know why,” Tom says. “You just shouldn’t tell them.”

When no further answer is forthcoming, Thom turns. A bewildered pall settles on him. “Where I come from,” he says, “the Father of Lies is our favourite god. Every year there is a festival devoted to him. Everyone tells all the lies they can. They lies become more and more beautiful. At the end of the festival, the man who has told the most beautiful lies gets a gift.”

“What does he get?”

“His lies become true.” Thom scuffs his foot against a snow bank. He squints up to where the sky’s barraged by birds. The birds are black, and then they have left. The sky is white where the clouds blunder low. In that landscape, all other colour leaches. With his wild red hair and his wolf-like eyes, Thom alone stands out from the snow.

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By the time the snow starts melting, Leymouth shows a similar thaw in its attitude towards Tom’s brother. There are no longer always stones aimed at Thom’s head when he walks about, though the shopkeepers hold fast. Thom may press his face to the glass of their windows, when they’re not looking, but they will not let him in.

“Could you really,” Tom asks him, “curdle their milk? If you wanted to do it?”

“I don’t know,” Thom says. He appears uninterested in the subject.

“Could you crack the shells of their eggs?”

They are walking through town. Thom stops at a window. He leans forward. His breath clouds the glass. His boots scrape the pavement. It is the butcher’s shop, where the window dressing is several half-pigs. They hang, skinless, their bones exposed. The white fat on them glistens.

Tom swallows. He does not like the display. He does not like to look at the pigs. He thinks of the wolves tackling prey in the forest. He thinks of the things that older boys have said about what happened elsewhere in the war.

“Never mind,” he says. “Let’s go.”

Thom doesn’t move. He licks his lips. He is more than usually hungry, ever since winter began to shift. The new warmth seems to make him leaner. The
longer sunlight thins him down, makes his face look sharp, his arms like sticks.

“When the sorcerer Lopt was a child,” he starts.

“Never mind,” Tom says again. “I don’t want you to tell me a story.”

“I thought you liked my stories,” Thom says. For an instant, a look of heart-rending sadness touches his face, ends Tom’s impatience. Tom reaches out to touch his hand. He thinks to himself: *kin*. He feels the white scar that bands the palm there: *not kin*.

They walk home through the mud streets of Leynmouth. The snow-melt turns the fields into fens, sends cracks and splinters and shudders of rivers cutting the earth into segments.

That evening, when they are dressing for bed, Thom pulls from his pocket an unbroken egg. He has stolen it, Tom thinks, from the kitchen. It is quite an ordinary egg. Thom holds it flat, balanced in his palm. “It’s for you,” he says. “A gift.” He is whispering: this is a transaction between them, a secret answer to Tom’s questions.

In Thom’s palm, the egg begins to crack. First the fragile china-skin splits, like the crust of ice that lies on the lake when springtime comes up from under it. Thom holds his hand still and lets the egg shudder. A little gold beak comes out of it, and then the curve of a wing, pearl-coloured. A bird pushed out, bit by bit: not a dull plain bird, like a goose or a chicken, but something iridescent. Its eyes are
fierce and amber-gold. Its wing-tips, sharp and silver-gilt, glint. It is so small that it sits in Thom’s palm. Tom holds his breath; he is in awe of it. He watches its pinprick claws flex and curl.

“Oh,” he says. “Can I hold it?” He keeps his voice quiet, to not scare the bird.

Thom shifts the bird out of his reach. “Only I can handle it. If you were one of the folk of my country, then you could hatch it, and then you could have one of your own. In my country, the air is full of them.” The bird blinks and makes a cooing sound. Thom holds it close and strokes it.

“Can we keep it in a cage, then, there in the corner?”

Thom doesn’t answer. He carries the bird to the window. He undoes the latch that snicks the pane shut. A gust of raw wind billows through the window, smelling of places where the ice is still thick. Thom slips the bird out of the window. It clings to the ledge. He whispers to it, bending close. He whistles. It takes flight: white wings in the darkness, a shriek like the sound of a hunting bird.

“It’s too cold for birds,” Tom says. Resentment prickles. “And I wanted to keep it. Now it will die out in the forest.”

Thom says, “No. It will live.” He watches till the bird is a pale ghost shadow.

“Will it go back to your kin, to the people in the woods?”
“Yes. Or hunt in the dark places.”

“Will you go back to your own kin?”

Thom breathes out against the window. His breath laves the glass, leaving it frosted. He puts his pale hands there: paints warm empty prints. He says, “I can’t ever go back. I don’t know the way back in.”

“Back through the woods?”

“Yes. It’s a long, hard journey.”

“Will you stay here with us, then? Forever?”

Thom sighs and climbs into bed. “Forever?” he says. “Here is a story about forever. In the reign of the old king Eothred…”

Tom waits for his mother to bring their warm milk, and pull the blankets up over the bed. He does not listen to the thread of Thom’s story. Thom’s voice is hoarse. It sounds wasted. Tom watched, instead, as moths batter the gas lamp. Their wings are soft. The light makes them look red. They make a sound like birds in the darkness. Their shadows seem to covet him: reaching out, insubstantial and hungry. He shifts, very nervous, just for a moment. “That is what is meant by forever,” Thom says.

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Thom coughs a great deal through the end of winter, grows every more hungry. He is listless by the time spring begins. But he was pale before, and
always starving—always small in Tom’s cast-off clothing, always a little too thin. And anyways, this is the sickening season. Tom himself is ill, and then gets better. There isn’t a name for what ails him, just illness. So it is with Thom. Tom’s mother says, “He’ll come out of it.”

But Thom doesn’t. The days drag on. The air warms and the wind thickens, bringing rain up from the south, bringing mayflies that die on lamps. Thom is hot, often feverish. In the late blue-dyed evenings, he lies in bed. During the day, he tires very fast. He lies in the shade, his eyes slack-lidded.

“Is this summer?” he asks Tom once. They are out in the garden. In spite of the weather, the trees are still bare. Come a fortnight, they’ll cloud with blossom. Tom can see it on the branches, all the dark buds laid there.

“Not yet,” he says.

“It’s so warm here.” Thom lets his head drop back to the ground. They are both lying in the snow-weary grasses. Tom can smell spring pushing up through the earth, the growing heat that will back-break the winter. Birds are returning, too, from their travels: crowds and crowds of sparrows that chirp, and swallows that burst out in warbles of song. He wonders what Thom can make of their noise. From time to time an aeroplane soars past, larger and farther out than a bird, and Tom points it out. But he thinks to himself, *Thom does not really care.*
He resents Thom’s sleeping all the time. He does not like the worry with which his mother stares at Thom when she thinks that he is not looking. He has heard her on the phone to Leynmouth’s doctor. He has heard her crying in the other room. He regrets the sharp bursts of his bad-feeling. He wishes for an end to Thom’s illness.

“When summer comes,” he tells Thom, “we’ll go into the woods. We can find the place that you came from then.”

Thom doesn’t reply. He plucks at the grass. Where he closes his hand around it, the grass turns yellow and withers and dies. He seems oblivious to this.

“We would go now,” Tom says, “but I am frightened of wolves. They live in the winter.”

“There are no wolves,” Thom says. “Not here.”

“Do you really mean it when you say that?”

Thom looks at him, his gold eyes dark-flecked with amber. “Wolves live only in other places. Dark places. Here they’re a story to frighten you with.”

Tom wonders: Am I frightened? He is frightened, yes. But not of the wolves that run through the forest. He has shed his terror of them. When he cowers now, in his dreams, something else is frightening him. It is in the snow kicked up by the wolves. It is in the smell of them, the fierce warm glowering winter smell. He wants to reach for them, to know his hands in their thick grey
hair, to be carried forwards in mayhem through the unmelting parts of the forest.

And yet the thought spills dread in him.

He doesn’t want to tell Thom this. He asks instead, “Will you be happy
there? If we find the way back to your country? It won’t be as warm as it is here.”

Thom shifts. He stares up at the clouds that, pursued by sunlight, scud
through the air. “No,” he says. “It will be winter. It is always winter there.”

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Thom begins to cough in back racking coughs that unsettle his small body.
At night, his coughing shakes Tom awake. He sees Thom’s bright eyes right upon
waking, and wishes for moments to go back to sleep. Their bed is increasingly
filled with feathers: white feathers, soft as down. Tom is not sure what they mean.
He likes to think that the white bird Thom hatched comes back to visit while they
sleep, and breathes out the air of that other country where winter is everlasting.
He pictures its wings, speckled like eggshells. Its breast is frost-coloured, pure
and clean, and it sings a song like the wind on the mountains. It digs its claws into
the bedpost: its hard bone claws that have been hunting. Its song is also a hunter’s
song, and when Tom imagines it, he feels his heart seize. He thinks, *I have not
heard this song before. But I have waited all my life to hear such a thing.*

He suspects that in reality Thom coughs up the feathers. It is a part of his
sickening. Tom has never coughed up feathers whilst ill, but it seems a possibility
that this is how folk sicken, off in the wood, off in that other country. He says nothing. He sweeps up the feathers. Off they go: out the window, into the warmening breeze.

“Will Thom die?” he asks his mother. This, too, seems a possibility. He has a notion of dying. He has seen animals dead in the fields. Dying is what his father did, in the war. He wonders if men are like birds and sheep, so that, dying, the flesh goes off them till they are just bones you turn up in the weeds. Bones, white and rough and thin. He thinks that men cannot be like this. Men are men. They are not made of the same stuff as birds and sheep. There is something else to them.

His mother says, “I don’t know, my darling.” She does not reassure him. Neither does she remind him what he knows from legend: a changeling is not put in the world to live. They have not spoken of this before, though it hangs over them. Nor of why those folk did not take Thom. Why they left him. To speak the words is to invite superstition. Tom recalls the cold foul smell of breath; he thinks of feathers, black shed feathers, drifting past him.

Thom eats just bowlfuls of beef broth now. He is only bones and skin. He lies in bed and his breath is a rasp. Tom’s mother cleans the sweat from him. She collects the feathers that rise from his mouth, and she does not ask questions. Except: “Should I take you homewards?” she asks more than once. Mute, fretful,
Thom shakes his head. It is not clear that he knows what she’s asking. He mutters often to himself, but Tom cannot understand what he’s said.

“He does not know the way back where he came from,” Tom tells his mother. He feels important. Thom entrusted him with things that she doesn’t know: with stories, with secrets.

“Does he not? And what else has he told you?”

“About the sorcerer Lopt,” Tom says. “About a boy who put wings on his body and fell down dead. About the wolves that don’t live in the wood. He says they live in other places.”

His mother puts an arm around his shoulder. Her arm is warm, but so heavy, heavy as lead. “And what isn’t here cannot hurt you, can it? Wolves are only a legend.”

Tom stiffens. “Thom can curdle milk,” he points out. “That’s what the shopkeeper says. He can make the grass die. Is that a legend? He can crack the shell of an egg.”

“Yes.” His mother sighs, a drawn-out sound.

“Is Thom going to die because his folk did not take me?”

“Of course not. Did he tell you that?”

“Was he always going to die at winter’s end?”

“No.” His mother’s arm tightens on his shoulder.
“Do you not know, though? Did you not know then?”

It is the first time he has made his mother cry. He sees the tears move like ice that has melted. He feels cruel. He feels like proving a point. He squirms out from under her arm. “You did know. You did know. You tested him. You made him take hold of iron, and it burned him. How could you?” he asks. “I wanted him to be my brother. But he can’t be. The dead can’t be our kin.”

He runs from the room. He leaves Thom coughing, the small white feathers coronating his head. He runs from the cottage and he slams the door behind him. The night air is calm and cool and wet. Tom sits on the step of the little stone house. He watches the moon make inlets, there between clouds that hang in the sky. The land under them looks lifeless: a flat black sketch of trees and hills. A mess of earth. Dead. The air is so warm that his breath does not frost it. There is no sign he’s breathing.

He thinks about the wolves. Where are they, if they are not in the forest? Somewhere beyond, in the same dark place as Thom’s bird, in that other country? He pictures them: hunting-eyed, light-footed and lethal, those legends. Just a few feet from him is the start of the wood, and beyond it: them. He can hear the thrumming of their great paws. He can hear the drum of their heartbeats pounding, a low-down rhythm that he longs to feel in the cage of his chest. Their grave eyes search for him.
He stands. He starts forwards, not sure of himself. He goes towards a point he can dimly sense. Steadily now he picks up speed. Above him, the moon sleeps in darkness. He hears birds calling all around him. He listens for the single note he needs, the note he has never heard before, the solid note, unmelting. *I am here,* he wants to shout. *I am here, I am coming. Take me, take me.* Fear shuts his throat and closes his voice. But still his heart sings. Soon he is running swift as the wolves. The wood enfolds him, cold and hard. It hastens him towards his homecoming.
SEVEN SPELLS TO SEVER THE HEART

Samuel Crewe was the son of a witch. He was, in fact, the seventh son of a witch, who had herself been one of seven daughters. In fairy tales, this sort of lineage was meant to point to great strength, good fortune, and adventures. In fact, however, it was inconvenient being the smallest child in any large, unhappy family. To be the son of a witch was worse, setting one up for a life of mistrust, and to be the son of such a witch as Samuel’s mother was a tragic start in life. She died before he turned six: burned in Madagascar Gardens, a municipal execution, for a bit of necromancy that had turned unpleasant. Samuel remembered the garden air’s taste and texture—eau de almond blossoms and slightly oily, with a heavy sun-gloss and a dark, crisp burnt-hair scent—and the scraped-up sound of his mother screaming. It was the clearest memory that he had of his mother. He didn’t even know if she’d been light-haired or dark; she had left him with no photographs.

His eldest brother, too, had been burned at the stake. Samuel was not present for that. Benjamin—his brother—had been fanciful, reckless. He had never limited himself to legal magic, but instead upstaged himself with each new show of defiance: turning a double-decker bus into a vast birdcage, and its
travellers into larks and kites. He had intended, so he said, to turn them back, but had later become disinterested in the matter. He used dark witchcraft to summon a demon that he called Salamanca, which, in the shape of a large housecat, haunted the wealthy neighbourhood of West South Persia for seven weeks. When it was caught at last and banished by municipal enchanters, Salamanca proved to have in its possession twenty-three marbles, each made of a very pure hard glass. These were the small happinesses it had stolen from their owners: the sharp white delight of snow’s harbinger scent, the ability to taste raspberry jam, a favourite word (“fanfare,” perhaps, or “phosphorescence”) now plucked out of the language, so that the person in question could not quite recall it. Though Salamanca was sent back to the hell-country whence it had come, the happinesses remained glass, and could not be wholly returned to their owners. More than any of his other crimes, perhaps, Benjamin Crewe was burned for that.

Samuel could not argue with the sentence. Nor could he argue with that of his brother Jacoby, who’d been sent into exile. Jacoby was no demon-summoner. He hadn’t Benjamin’s taste for flamboyance. For years, the family had not thought he had more than a hint of witchcraft to him. This was not uncommon, even in families where witching ran strongly on one or both sides of the bloodline. Magic came to him at last when he was well out of adolescence, already a young man. He was at university, reading classics. He’d always been a
bit of a bookish type; he planned to be a lecturer in Latin. Then: Samuel was unclear on the exact nature of what happened. He knew only that Jacoby in some fashion summoned up, by accident, a Greco-Roman god. A girl was killed—some argued that Jacoby’d killed her, though Samuel did not believe that—and there was other damage. Queasy rumours mounted of blood-soaked clothes, appalling photographs. The court ruled Jacoby incompetent for trial, and he was promptly exiled to France.

After the case, Tam—Samuel’s third-from-eldest brother—said, “Bloody incompetent, all right. Better off out of it. Not fit for witchcraft.” And that was that: not a postcard or a letter, no presents at Christmas. Samuel, twelve at the time, felt rather lonely. He had loved Jacoby. He kept a little statuette that Jacoby had left him: a Greco-Roman god of magic, a minor god with bird’s wings in place of hands. As a teenager, he slept with it on his nightstand, and sometimes, on sleepless nights, he planned to pack up his clothes, slip from the house, and flee the city. He would buy a ticket, he imagined, for a southbound train from Buried Saint Station, then at the coast he’d stow away aboard a ship for France. He liked to think of reaching Le Havre on some rainy morning—the new damp smell of France making him elated, his back turned forever on the white cliffs of England, the clump of earth that housed his family’s remnants. Then his brother
Tam died, and the family sank once more into mourning. Samuel set aside his dreams of France.

Tam had broken every bone in his body in a long fall. It was a particularly gruesome death. He’d been travelling in the form of a bird over the moors of Yewshire, a common kind of enchantment. No one knew why the magic had misfired and he’d fallen. Perhaps a hawk or falcon had savaged him, and in his panic he’d forgotten how to stay a bird. He hadn’t been a very careful witch. Perhaps, though, people outside the family said, the Crewes were simply cursed, and that was all there was to it. Just think: There was the mother, and now these brothers, one of them exiled, two of them dead.

Nor was that the end, for, two months later, Samuel’s fourth-eldest brother, Ned, killed himself with an heirloom duelling pistol. The pain in my heart has gone to my head, he wrote in the brief note they found pinned to his body. He had a twin brother, Seb, who packed up all of their shared possessions soon afterwards and emigrated. He wrote letters from America, where he eventually settled. In America, he wrote, they have no ghosts. In America, the dead stay dead. It was true that in England the dead sometimes came back. Samuel saw the ghost of Ned at the top of the staircase at least twice a week. Ned carried a black flower, but there was no blood on him. He did not speak, but sometimes he touched Samuel
in passing: fondly, with affection. His touch was like a chip of ice lodged at the roof of your mouth. It made Samuel shudder. He found it unpleasant.

Patchett was the name of his last remaining brother, the last who lived in England. At twenty-one years old, Patchett was plump and nervous. He did not look much like Samuel, who was thin, and who had a concentrated, serious look that disquieted people around him. Patchett taught the history of magic at a local comprehensive. He was not a witch—or not a practising one; witchcraft, he said, was not something that he did. Samuel never asked if, in fact, he could do it. The topic made Patchett terribly skittish. Besides, Samuel—by now fifteen, and disdainful—found he was not particularly interested. He did not like Patchett, did not value his opinions. He thought of Tam saying, “Not fit.” It had not been true of Jacoby, who was gentle. It was true of Patchett.

The two of them lived still in the same large, empty house with their father, Owan—a small and crumpled, silent man: a recluse, not a witch. He had once been a bit of a firebrand, with his fox-coloured hair and his slim, handsome profile. A daring fellow, a journalist, a social crusader—that was what he had been. Now he rarely left the study, and Samuel trespassed upon his domain only to ask occasionally for money. He associated his father with doors shut fast, with grim pools of light on the floor of the study, dust on the shutters, someone sighing.
He was a lonely boy, Samuel. His schoolmates shunned him. They knew that he was the son of a witch, and that tragedy had somehow, indefinably, deformed him. This was like having a contagious illness. It left its mark as clearly as pocks or scars, so clearly that Samuel sometimes looked for it—scanning in the mirror for this visible sign, for where stitches stamped the torn-open part of him. He did not see it. Still he imagined the eyes of others picking it out on his skin. He took to wearing a baggy coat, one of Jacoby’s belongings. The sleeves of it sagged over his wrists. It smelt like Jacoby, austere and slightly Roman, dark and musty, an aroma of cedar and mint.

He practiced witchcraft in the evening hours, when school was done and the outside world ceased to exist. Alone in his bedroom, he paged through texts that had belonged to his mother. He’d learnt he was a witch at the age of fourteen, when birds began following him homewards and he found that he could speak to them—could speak to moths, as well, and mayflies, and wasps, to lantern beetles and to the spiders spinning cobwebs in the corners of his brothers’ rooms. He had not told his father. He had not known how to begin—nor how to start that conversation with pasty, irritable Patchett, who turned the wireless radio in the kitchen off whenever witches were mentioned. But, he thought later, perhaps he should not have been so hard on Patchett.
Absorbed in his private magical studies, Samuel learned to turn birds into small clay men who walked about and talked for more than an hour till they began spitting feathers and turned to birds again. He learned to make a common household mirror show any reflection: the shorelines of Oriental lakes, the glaciers of the Arctic Ocean. He learned how to breathe out ice and make fire spring from his fingers. But, preoccupied as he was with these matters, he could not see that Patchett was deeply unhappy: that a kind of melancholy, slow and seeping and listless, had taken hold of him. He knew that some nights there was nothing for dinner, nothing but half-rotted cheese and cans of lager in the fridge, and an uneasy feel to the house, as though the windows had all shattered and there was nothing to keep a storm from coming in. Some nights Samuel tiptoed round the house with a torch after his father had gone to bed, touching his hand against the panes of the windows, feeling for cracks, double-checking them.

So then, by the time Samuel turned seventeen years old, Patchett was dead: another suicide. Nothing so dramatic as a duelling pistol. A handful of pills, meticulously calibrated. He left no note, and did not return to haunt the house in which he had so miserably lived. Samuel made the funeral arrangements. He said to the undertaker, when asked his preference, “Just don’t burn him.” They did up the body in a wooden coffin, carted it to a peaceful churchyard, and buried it. The first Crewe to be buried in consecrated ground. He would have preferred it,
Samuel thought: a church funeral presided over by a vicar, perfect evidence that no one could prove he’d been a witch.

Afterwards, the smell of death stayed in the house. Not a rotting smell, not the falling-apart scent of meat gone sour, but something stranger. It reminded Samuel of old paint and leather, lemon furniture polish, rich and dense; attics left unopened and antiques in boxes. He took up the habit of chewing mints to shed the dark taste it left in his mouth. It was a witching thing, he thought; he had not smelt or tasted it before, when he had not yet learned magic. Now it was so strong that he could not go into Patchett’s bedroom, or bear to touch the books and ink pens Patchett had left unattended on the table in the kitchen.

He spent a lot of time at the top of the staircase, talking to the ghost of Ned. Ned’s ghost came more frequently to the house now, or perhaps Samuel just saw more of him. Despite his silence, he was a comforting presence. (No one knew if ghosts could talk, but they never did.) Ned fingered often the black flower he wore in his buttonhole, and looked sad, and sighed: a sound like leaves in the wind. He made no more attempts to touch Samuel on the shoulder or ruffle his hair. They sat on their separate ends of the landing: Samuel hunched morosely in Jacoby’s coat, Ned dapper in the suit they’d buried him in.

Samuel said, “I didn’t even know Benjamin—not really. I was too young. I suppose he was very good at witchcraft. He would have to have been. He used to
pinch me when I asked him for favours. But once he filled my closet up with fireflies, so no monsters could get in. I think maybe Mother influenced him a lot. Too much. I never missed her. But you—you did.”

He meant “you” generally—all of you, all of his brothers. Ned’s ghost nodded. He lifted his thin and half-transparent hand towards the sleeve of Samuel’s coat, then lowered it.

“Yes. It was Jacoby’s. He left it behind. I like it, but it’s too big. I thought I would grow into it, but I never have. I don’t mind.” The sleeves drooped over his hands. “I used to write letters to him. I would have liked to send them, but he didn’t leave an address. I wish I’d known witchcraft then.”

Ned blinked.

“I didn’t want to have to ask you. You always seemed so sad. Besides, I didn’t even know you were a witch till after you died. Seb had to tell me. We never really talked, you and me. I was just a kid.”

The ghost looked sadder. He flickered at the edges, going out of focus. Samuel had noticed that the ghost looked less like Ned as the years went on, as though time were copying him over and over again. Someday there might not be much of Ned left. Just an outline in the air where a figure had been.
“I know,” Samuel said. “You think I’m a kid still. But you weren’t much older when you did what you did. What did you think then—did you think your life was over?”

A black petal dripped from the flower in Ned’s jacket. Before it could touch the floor, it vanished. Ned, too, looked on the edge of disappearing. Sometimes he did this, and Samuel saw nothing of him for days on end.

“I always thought that Tam did it, too. He wasn’t that clumsy. He just looked down and couldn’t go back to land. I’ll never know, of course, but I can still hate him for it. He hadn’t even the guts to haunt the house he left. It was after he died that I first started thinking—what the best thing to do was; you know, how to protect myself from all of it.”

_All of you_, he almost said. Ned vanished. Samuel found himself sitting alone on the landing. He felt an incipient ache in his head. The smell of death rose from the dust on the stairs. He heard his father moving quietly in the kitchen, shuffling across the grey-green linoleum. It had been more than a week since they’d spoken. His father had come to the funeral, tossed earth on the coffin, yet now seemed not wholly aware that Patchett was dead.

Certainty struck Samuel in that moment, a force that pushed him towards what he’d do next. He felt it physically, flooding his body.
He remembered being twelve years old, and longing for France. This was the same, a similar feeling. Then, he had pasted above his bed a torn-out magazine picture of Provence, the sort of place where he imagined that Jacoby would live. Rosebushes brazened a wrought-iron railing. A stone Roman goddess benedicted plants. Samuel had begged Seb to show him, with witchcraft, more such pictures in their decrepit bathroom mirror, and Seb—lowering his eyelids with suppressed compassion—had: a scatter of crows over a golden wheat-field, the streaming sun in the distance, fat rivers flowing by the spine-shapes of cathedrals.

“I’m going to go there,” Samuel had confidently told him.

“When you’re older,” Seb had said with a laugh.

Then Seb himself had slipped on board a boat and not even looked backwards, Seb who got seasick even on short holidays out to the Isle of Man. Whatever he’d been hoping for, the short letters he sent suggested it had not happened in America. He’d sounded muted. Samuel had unfixed the photograph of France from over his bed. He had it still, in a box somewhere, neatly folded. But he did not think now that he would ever go to France. You could not simply go to another country. It was not enough. This had been demonstrated. Another, more drastic kind of action was called for.
Samuel had known the right spell the instant he saw it. He’d found it in one of the first magic books he’d read. The flyleaf of the book—Magellan’s *Difficulties of Magic*—was labelled in a loose, unfurling scribble that let him know it had been Benjamin’s. Later, when he’d dug his mother’s old books out of the attic, he found other variants in them, all centred around a similar, antiquated concept: *Spell to Absolve a Magician of his Heart pains, Spell to place the Witch’s Heart into her Hand; The Putting of the Heart into the Little Finger, Seven Spells to Sever the Heart*. The best of the seven spells of this last title was annotated in Benjamin’s cryptic, scrawling script; presumably he’d been the first to inherit the book from their mother. It made Samuel feel close to him.

He slept for a time with the book under his pillow, but found that when he did, he dreamt that smoke crept up through the floorboards of his room. The smoke was thin, sulphurous, acrid. Samuel often woke to find the ghost of Ned sitting in his desk chair, sad-eyed and watching him.

Though he’d settled on the spell so long before, he had hesitated when it came to actually executing the magic. He had little faith in his witching skills. He was self-taught, and did nothing more difficult on a daily basis than transfigure the glass of the windows to let more sun in. True, from time to time he took on harder projects—he had once bewitched a very small star, speeding towards Earth, so that it would spin northwards of its normal destination. Its new impact
was in the front garden of the Crewes’ house. It left a hole no larger than
Samuel’s fist, with a lump of black rock—smooth and heart-shaped—inside it. No
one had known it had been Samuel who’d done the magic. No one had said for
certain it was magic. Stars fell out of the sky in phenomenal numbers, so often
that, seeing one, you tagged it with a wish and then let it slip to the corner of your
mind. “A coincidence,” Samuel told the neighbours. They nodded warily, not
entirely convinced. He levelled dirt over the ruptured garden. He kept the star’s
hard rock in his pocket. He could not remember quite why he’d wanted to have it.
Its warmth took weeks to diminish.

So he was not unused to serious magic. But this was still more serious
than anything he had attempted before. If he did it badly, he might well die. With
this in mind, he had for years postponed it. He had thought he would wait until he
turned eighteen, came of age. Then the death of Patchett had altered his feelings
on the matter. The spell could not wait. He imagined another year—six months
even—without it. It would not do. He should have done it long before Patchett
died, in the lull between sorrows. Cowardice had stopped him. He’d not make that
mistake again.

Six weeks after the funeral, he gathered the ingredients for the spell. After
school, he went to the Witches’ Market: a matter-of-fact set of stalls with silver-
and-black awnings that sold herbs, and roots, and rare birds’ eggs. He was aware
of himself as an odd, thin figure, in his oversized coat. He wondered sometimes how others regarded him. He had the fine, dark, delicate features that all the Crewes shared, and from time to time he would be stopped by witches who’d say, “Excuse me, are you—sorry, you looked so familiar. For a moment I thought perhaps we had met.” He kept his head down and moved very quickly, trying to avoid this.

The preliminary arrangements for the spell took him some time. It was necessary to get a small steel knife from the kitchen and let it sit for seven days, crooked, on top of a mirror. Samuel kept returning from school in the afternoons to find the ghost of Ned attempting to straighten the blade of the knife. Ned’s fingers, insubstantial, passed straight through it.

On the seventh day, Samuel was awakened by a chill in the house, a cold dark ambience of November. Every room was filled with the smell of death. He walked from doorway to doorway, down every hall, disturbed by the wet, black ubiquity of the scent. The spellbook had not said that this would happen. Samuel’s suspicions dwelt with the ghost of Ned, but he was not certain whether ghosts could work witchcraft. Nor did he see Ned anywhere in the house.

Resolutely, once he had clearly established that no windows were open and—a moment of bleak and fearful conviction—that his father was not dead,
Samuel ignored it. He went on preparing himself for the magic. It was a process that required a kind of limbering-up of the focus, a limiting of the attention.

He had set aside, the night before, some rue and the sleek red peel of an apple, the former so brittle it broke at a touch, the latter waxy and slightly damp. Now he placed them in a silver bowl with the stub end of a candle and a Roman coin. The coin was irregular, tiny and rubbed. Hardship, over centuries, had left it black and mostly flattened. He struck a match and watched its flame flare up. The air filled with the sour white scent of sulphur—then, as he tossed the match into the bowl, the warm smell of wax and herbs burning.

There were words to be said over the bowl. He consulted the book. Benjamin’s handwriting had attained a smeared graphite look over the years. It was slowly vanishing. Samuel tried to bring an image of Benjamin himself into his mind, and could not. He looked down at the steady flame. It yellowed and widened hungrily. It husked the apple peel bit by bit. Splinters of rue bent, curving as though in agony. Everything looks skeletal when burning, he thought. The idea troubled him.

He read the words of the spell aloud. He tried to filter his thoughts. Smoke covered up the smell of death. It was a simple spell, really; old, from the days of fairy tales and fables. It had used to be standard for a witch to put his heart into a tree, or a rock, or a locket, or some kind of running water. Any place that you
could put a heart separately, so that it would not shudder and ache and cause you to suffer—so that it could not be suddenly pierced, so that it would not, one day, break. The habit had fallen somewhat out of fashion in the early part of this century, experiencing, at the time of the First World War, a momentary resurgence. (Samuel had learnt all this from Patchett, who, after all, had taught magical history.) Witches during the war did not put their hearts into objects. These might be lost, or even stolen: your heart in the hands of your worst enemy. Instead, a witch would put his heart into his little finger and cut it off. Thus it could be stored, remote and safe, and returned to your body after the armistice or at some other, later date. It was the best and most complete way to sever a heart, if you were willing to suffer the pain.

“So why does no one do it anymore?” Samuel had asked Patchett, when the topic arose.

Patchett had shrugged; as ever, he was tetchy. “Why don’t we wear top hats and frock coats? Ask me a real question, Sam.” But at last he had relented and given a real answer: “Life was harder then. You’re not talking about something little, a small spellcasting. Can you live without a heart? Of course, yes. But why would you want to, if you don’t have to? It’s not the same sort of life. It’s different.”

“Like ghosts,” Samuel had said.
“Like ghosts, I suppose.” Patchett had picked up his book again, readjusted his glasses, a sign that Samuel should leave him alone. Then paused. As an afterthought: “Not like ghosts,” he’d said.

But life was not harder then, Samuel thought. Life was life, from that age to this. If you were lucky, you scarcely noticed your heart; unlucky, and you were crippled by it.

He set the fallen star on top of his desk, and then placed next to it the Greco-Roman statuette that Jacoby had left him. The statuette had eyes like clean white sheets, empty and unclouded. “Watch this,” Samuel said aloud, almost defiant. He did not know why he said it.

The smoke from the silver bowl had settled all throughout the room. Samuel put his hand flat on the desk. He picked up the knife and touched its tip to his forehead. It burned. He felt hot. A kind of fever gripped him. Only a current of cool, sad air, strange and foreign against his skin, made him turn to see that Ned was sitting cross-legged on the floorboards: not interfering, just watching him.

Samuel crossed his heart with the blade of the knife. He felt it move inside his chest—an insubstantial, spiritual motion. It nauseated him. Something in the smoke caused his head to spin. He closed his eyes. For an instant he was flying over the grass-green mountains, bird-boned, a grey wisp of dust on the wind, and the wild sense of nothingness overwhelmed him. The raw air burned against his
face. Oh, Tam, he thought. He let the feeling go. He released it. His heart carved a path down under his skin.

He felt it settle at the tip of his finger, just under the nail, in the joint and in the flesh. It pulsed and hurt. It felt overlarge and ungainly, too heavy for the place that it was in. Samuel set the thin edge of the knife between his little finger and his palm. He drew a deep breath. He pushed the knife in.

It bled a lot, which for some reason surprised him. The bone broke into splinters, like bits of ice: ugly, jagged, and uneven. The pain swept through him in a huge and desultory wave. His body revolted, and he was sick. He found it hard to breathe through the nausea. Terror gripped him: a terror rooted in the raw animal form of the body, unphilosophical, unhuman. He grabbed the end of the desk and panted. The blood kept spilling out of him. Then at last the feeling abated in sharp bursts, the wound sealing as the witchcraft kicked in. His hand ceased to bleed. The finger was severed. His fever subsided. He felt the first curious sense of heartlessness.

It was cool, and dark, and restful: a cloud passing over a summer garden. It unsharpened the glare from the sun and the lamps. It dulled the sour, fruitful, burning scent of the smoke that rose from the silver bowl. Samuel looked at the items he’d set on the desk. The stone of the star was just a stone. It seemed lifeless to him now. He touched the face of the Greco-Roman god. The little
statuette reminded him of something he had loved once, in childhood, something he would never see or sense again, but he could not remember quite what it was, or why it had instilled such longing in him.

He heard a dry, rasping cough in the corner of the room. He turned and saw Ned—the ghost of Ned, standing and grasping his throat. He seemed as though he were trying to force something out of his chest, a sound, maybe, a word, although ghosts did not speak. No one knows if they can, Samuel thought. But they never did.

Samuel picked up the small, wan severed finger. He did not feel his heart in it. It was a strange, cold, curious object. He felt no attachment to it. The fire in the silver bowl was smouldering still. Tongues of flame licked upwards at the air. Samuel saw, as though in a dream, the natural sequence of events. He held the finger in his hand a moment longer, then set it down into the crater of the fire. He watched the flesh char and turn to ashes. The bone cracked and seemed to bend in the flame, arching forwards and backwards. It looked alive; it had still that force. But he held onto the thought—he had to believe—there was nothing truly living in it.
As a boy, Ellery had been proud of his angel. The idea had been impressed on him that it was an honour to have an angel, and that he ought to treasure it as though it were a kind of expensive possession. The experience was not new to him: he was the second son of Lord Litton-Stoppard, Marquess of Strangebury, and from the earliest part of his childhood, lavish gifts had formed a part of his natural landscape. Indeed, the house in which he lived—Candleston Hall, a country estate that was the seat of the Marquess—was itself a large and valuable object, more a museum than a place one could inhabit. The walls were of white stone, yellowed by aging. Hallways were hung with family portraits, the eyes looking blotted-out with shadow, old oils making blacks out of reds. It was said that the stones at the base of the house had been laid in the reign of King Aelfred. The windows that slipped light into Ellery’s bedroom were thin and oddly tilted, meant to shield archers from enemy eyesights. Ellery felt that the room was full of dead men: the men who had owned the tapestry hangings, the large and polished mahogany bed, the porcelain jug on the little side table. He imagined their hands on his whenever he touched these inherited items. He felt that nothing belonged to him.
The angel, however, was his alone. Angels had never been among the Stoppards’ gifts. It was rumoured that in the eleven hundreds, a Norman knight, an early Litton, had been visited at times by a fairy spirit—that being how they thought of angels then. But that knight had lost his angel in battle. This was a common feature in legend: the king or the knight or the heir or the duke who, granted an angel, let it slip away due to lack of virtue. Angels were very delicate. They might vanish if you killed a man, or broke your word of honour. There were people who had angels when they were children, but who could not seem to hold onto them as they turned older. Their angels slipped away from them. For a long time it was thought that Ellery would lose his angel in a similar manner to this. The specialist that his parents consulted when he was a child—a tall man with moustaches, who smelled of pipe smoke and peered at him through a wide array of seraphographic glasses—had drawn up his horoscope and said, “Very rare for infantile angels to tarry. I should think he’ll grow out of it.” This was both a great relief and a worry. A relief, because angels—though an honour—were not widely seen amongst aristocrats in those days. Indeed, there were in angels in no fashionable family of which the Marquess or his wife could think. They wondered about their elder son’s, Alantine’s, prospects, should the angel prove attached to Ellery; people might look a trifle askance at all members of a family known to be excessively spiritual, touched. And yet, the worry: for Ellery himself had no
accomplishments. He was small for his age, and rather sickly. He showed no aptitude for music or maths. He had not even learned to speak until he was almost four years old. He seemed unlikely to be good at sport, or particularly charming. So it was just as well, his parents thought, that he had an angel. It was a mark of some distinction, at least. As Ellery grew older, they waited with badly concealed apprehension for the coming time when the angel would leave.

Ellery became a thin, ginger youth with frail skin that freckled blotchily whenever he went out too long in the sun. He was not sent to prep school, as his brother had been, but tutored privately in small closed rooms along the length of the Hall, where the walls breathed dust and his tutors were free to sneak stray glances at the angel. It sat in the corner, never more than three or four feet from where Ellery was. It looked exactly as an angel should look like, round-faced and pale, like a painted scene from a Mediaeval icon or stained church window. It wore white robes, and had grey wings. It left tiny feathers on the carpet, and shadowy imprints of its bare feet. Sometimes the tutors asked Ellery about it: “Can you speak to it?” “What does it eat?” Ellery did not always answer these questions. At times he would blink owlishly and explain that angels did not eat at all, though they liked very much to watch people eat, and that he could and did speak to the angel, although there was no need. “Because,” he said, “it comprehends me. Only other people need so much explanation.” He did not
volunteer more than these brief glimpses of what life was like with an angel. His tutors, knowing their places, did not further press him—in spite of their own curiosity. Tutors: for no single tutor lasted more than six months. They claimed that the angel gave them bad dreams; or not bad, precisely, and yet somehow haunting. They hastened to add that in spite of this fact it was nothing to do with Ellery. Ellery accepted the changes, indifferent. The tutors, he thought, were more things that were not his. They were like the flower bushes that changed with the season. He had no power over them. They were part of the world where he moved like a shadow, the whole bewildering world of fathers, brothers, gentlemen. The world of forbears, of ancestors, owners. The world in which he was not really an agent.

He took his angel for walks in the garden on weeks in which there were no lessons. His angel liked to be outdoors in the winter, when hoarfrost glossed the spider webs and matted the bare black ends where cold had stripped branches to bones and thistles. Ellery had learned that his angel could mend the little frozen bodies of the birds that died in snowfall, and the plants that died from frost, and the rabbits, rust-red with their ravaged bellies open where the foxes had been at them. He would sometimes leave the gardens and hunt for dead things in the grounds, or for lame voles and muskrats and owls with bent wings. He would put them in the hands of the angel beside him and watch as they came back to life
quietly. Leaves would unfurl; bones would set, rabbits wiggle. Ellery would laugh and clap his hands delightedly. The angel would stare at him in admonition. Why the angel was so severe, Ellery could not think. This was what angels were made for, after all. It was known to be. Angels were the agents of miracles on earth. Yet miracles did not make the angel happy. It much preferred to sit in the Candleston garden for hours, amid the withered orangery, watching ice form on the face of the fountain as rooks struck strange poses in the espaliered trees. It would stay there and listen to Ellery talking, with every appearance of affection, attentively. But it would never—as his nursemaids did—put an arm around him. Not even when he fell from the hermitage wall and hurt his knee, and it was thought for a while that the joint might be damaged. The angel kept its distance. It did not touch him. In time, Ellery healed from the injury.

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It had been expected by the Marquess and his wife that Ellery’s angel would leave when Ellery was fifteen or sixteen years old—at the latest, when he was seventeen. This was the age at which angels were lost, on average. Yet Ellery did not change much as he grew older, and on his eighteenth birthday he woke to find the angel still sleeping beside him, its slight radiant body a few feet away. (The angel had started learning to sleep when Ellery was a child. It did not need to sleep at all, but found the seven or eight hours away from Ellery’s presence
difficult and upsetting. It always seemed to worry that, come morning, Ellery would not wake—or that he would wake but he would be different, altered in some way. Ellery did not quite understand the angel’s agitation. “I’m not gone. I’m just gone to sleep,” he tried to explain. The angel could not seem to accept this as an answer. Eventually it learned to sleep, which put an end to its unease. After that, they both slept in the ornate bed that had long sheltered Littons in its broad mahogany.)

Plans had been made for Ellery to attend Albridge before it was apparent that the angel would not leave. All young men of good breeding went to Albridge. It was unthinkable that Ellery should not go to university. Alantine had taken a first in Economics; the Marquess had thought that Ellery might like to study Latin, or Phantasmatics, for which the right college was really St Dives. The angel’s accompaniment would complicate matters. There were those at the university who would not like an angel in their classrooms, who would be unnerved by Ellery taking tea in college with his angel standing behind him, as it often did at home, its aloe-coloured eyes fixed keenly on the morsels of bread and fish and butter. (Sometimes it would make Ellery cups of tea, always adding four or five cubes of sugar, until the tea was almost too sweet to drink—although if Ellery did not drink it, the angel’s wings would flutter, a sure sign that it was feeling unease.) They would not like that kind of behaviour at Albridge. People
thought of angels as otherworldly beings, and preferred them to stay in seminaries and chapels, or confined to the legends of virtuous kings. Most people in the world had not met an angel. There were not so many of them around to meet. It made sense that an angel would provoke discomfort. But surely, encouraged by large donations, a small college like St Dives could get used to both Ellery and his angel—so the Marquess believed.

And so, come the end of a hot languid summer, when the first trees were curling their outermost leaves and chestnuts weighed heavily on the low branches, Ellery packed his trunks up to leave. There was not much that he wished to take with him. He collected his copies of Troyes and Bede, a prayer-book, a book into which he’d pressed flowers that his angel had shown him while walking. The angel had disapproved of his plucking the flowers. But he liked to look at them, liked to see the faint colourless trace of their former blossom and touch their skin-thin velveteen. They were too frail to touch in the wild. The petals fell off them. Pressed, they seemed even more fragile, but permanent. They were something that lasted, something he could keep.

He laid the book in with his shirts and his suit-coats. He was not sure what else he should pack, really. He looked across the top of the trunk to his angel. The angel was folding a red woollen jumper. It looked at him very resolutely, and placed the jumper on top of a blue worsted suit-coat. Sunlight came in through the
arrow-slit windows as mats of cloud were dismantled by breeze. Summer was losing its full rich force, fading to autumn already. “I expect the nights will be colder in Albridge.” Ellery said it aloud, even though he didn’t need to speak. The angel nodded. They had this understanding. The angel knew why he spoke without need. It helped him to pack up the rest of his clothing. A swarm of moths flew out from the wardrobe, enlivened by the angel’s touch accidentally. Their little dry corpses had lain there for months, or years. Now they lifted on paper wings, shaking the dust from their feather-soft bodies. The angel eyed them abashedly. It twisted its hands together, appalled.

“I think they’re beautiful,” Ellery said. “I like to see things living.”

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They took the Marquess’s motor car from Eanwood Well to Albridge. Ellery would have much preferred to make the trip by train. He did not like the motor car’s horn, or its habitual rattle. It did not help that his brother was driving, and drove as he did everything: at top speed. The woods flew by. The heavy harvest fields were soon left in the distance. Ellery pressed his face to the window, feeling queasy. He thought that the angel was even sicker, although it would not say so. In general, the angel did not like—he had found—any kind of machine. It even objected to the gramophone, which Ellery was fond of, though it would not leave the room while he listened, just sit there politely with a slightly
pained look on its elegant features. It was happier when Ellery played the piano, for it did like music, and it did not mind that Ellery was a fumbling, truly awful musician. (His hands felt awkward on the keys. His instructor, a concert pianist who performed recitals across Europe, always urged him: “Think of it like a kind of dancing.” “But I can’t dance,” Ellery said. None of his physical motions were graceful. He walked head-down, not naturally.)

“Do you think you could slow down a bit?” he asked his brother.

Alantine shouted, over the noise of the engine, “What’s the point of driving slowly?” But he put his foot down grudgingly on the brake pedal. The car slowed. Ellery’s queasiness did not cease. “Anyway,” Alantine said, “everybody drives fast at Albridge. They have races at the week-end, out in the country. Everybody, that is, whose father owns a motor car. That makes them sound nose-up, but they’re not really. You’ll see what I mean. There’s lots of all-right sorts. I wouldn’t worry too much about, you know, the old friend-making.” He patted Ellery very jovially on the shoulder.

“I’ll try not to worry,” said Ellery.

Alantine affected not to notice the angel. This had been his habit since before Ellery could remember, before Ellery had acquired the angel. The angel was not offended, but found it confusing. It seemed to believe that Alantine for some reason did not see it, and started to worry that it might somehow be
disappearing. When it was in a room with Alantine, it would tip over wine
glasses, toss books on the floor, make frantic signs at Ellery—all in an effort to
ensure it was present. It gestured now in much the same manner. It looked
nauseated.

“Yes, I see you,” said Ellery. He turned from the backseat, where the
angel was sitting. He said to Alantine, “Could we stop? My angel feels poorly.”

“Suit yourself. Though, you know, we’re almost at Albridge.” He jammed
on the brakes. The car skidded in mud.

When he climbed from the car, Ellery could see the town of Albridge
lying down in its valley. On the hillsides around it, grass was still green, not
swathed yet in the gold surcoat of autumn. The towers of the university looked
painted on, their tiny spires like needles. Time had turned their white stone to a
blotched ivory, or grey for the older, more blackened sections. Ellery was not
close enough yet to see any signs of life on the paths between buildings. Not even
bicycles or motor cars moving. He felt for a moment a light-headed peace, like the
feeling of holding his breath under water. He imagined a city emptied of others,
its hollow chapels and its libraries like the whorls of a shell that the sea had
smooth-polished and filled with the sound of its own echoing. That is where I
wish to live, he thought. Where the only living things are my angel and me. He
looked over his shoulder at the angel. It had climbed out of the car and now stood
at the roadside, toeing the wet grass with its bare feet. It had never been so far from home before. Nor had Ellery.

When the angel felt better, they drove down into the valley. Albridge up close proved more cluttered and less clean than it had appeared when seen from above. Wiry bicycles swooped through the streets. Undergraduates in green and grey flannel flapped here and there, gesticulating. Bells often rang out from various towers, in single chimes or cacophonies. The angel at first did not mind the bells, till it noticed that their noise caused Ellery to flinch. After that, the angel covered its ears whenever the bells began ringing.

It looked out of place, Ellery’s angel, when they began unloading bags at the St Dives College gate. A college scout came out to meet them, and yes, milord-ed at them for a moment, and took the bags away. The angel squinted up at the college. With the angel’s white robes against it, St Dives looked grey. The college scout returned, covertly staring, and soon several gardeners joined him at the gate. They pretended interest in the Marquess’s car, but the angel pulled their attention away—till Alantine said, “Oh, really!” in a temper, and shepherded the angel and Ellery into the college.

“Will you be all right?” he asked, when he had seen Ellery installed in a large set of rooms with gilt-framed windows. A fire licked at its grate. “I mean really, you know. It is a bit spare. You can always go home at week-ends, in a
pinch. I’ll be up for the hunting all through October. We’ll take the dogs out.”

Alantine loved hunting.

Ellery said, “I should think we’ll manage.” The angel was seated already in a large brocade chair by the lip of the fire. It looked weary. Its wings were drooping.

When Alantine had gone, Ellery sat beside it, cross-legged on the hearth-rug. “Will we manage, do you think?” he asked it. It gave him a look of affection. For a fleeting moment, Ellery wished it would touch him, just to ruffle his hair. He shivered a little. The light was dying, though the fire gave off a summer aura. The air was getting dark. In a while, Ellery would have to go round the rooms lighting the gas lamps. He looked towards the narrow bed and wondered where the angel would sleep. It seemed very tired already, now, more tired than he had ever seen it be. He had not thought it would be hard for the angel, his going to university. He had not thought much about the angel at all. He said out loud, “I’m sorry.” But the angel did not think that he ought to be sorry. It stretched out its bare feet towards the warm auburn light of the embered hearth fire, and attempted to be happy. It fell asleep like that some time later.

And to think you used to never need to sleep! Ellery thought, with a hint of fondness. He found a spare blanket in an airing cupboard, and covered the angel with it to keep out any chills that might affect an angel. He was not sure
what those chills might be. It was not draughts or ice that made his angel shiver, but shadows, and empty rooms, and electricity. He had known it sometimes be afraid of Bonfire Night rockets, of oboes, children’s picture books, boating trips on the lake. It seemed mostly immune to normal, mortal chills. But a blanket was the best that Ellery could offer. He crept off to his own bed some hours later, but—alone in the unfamiliar setting—could not sleep. The crescent moon traversed his bedroom window. He watched until he saw it touch the sea of dawn and sink.

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Those first few weeks in Albridge were full of impressions. Impressions—that was how they seemed to Ellery: a series of moments when the world seemed stamped in detail, a single image on paper, with all nature its ink. He thought he was seeing things the way the angel saw them. When the angel felt strongly, there was this kind of bleed. And the angel, in those days, often felt strongly. It did not like the town of Albridge, which was full of bicycling. (Though Ellery said, “You’d like a bicycle if you tried it. We could go for rides then, out in the country.”) He thought later that perhaps bicycles lost their appeal if you were, like the angel, capable of flying. He had never actually seen his angel fly. But he inferred that it had this ability. Its wings were quite large, and heavily feathered. They seemed able to bear the angel’s light body.) It did not like the college, where
students shouted, laughed, and jostled. At the week-ends, boys played cricket out on the lawns, and then at night they sprayed champagne from black bottles. The smell was filigreed and bitter. The angel did not like it. It never drank—not even water, or tea, or coffee, and certainly not champagne.

It brought Ellery plates of food while he studied. This was the scout’s job, but the scout did not complain. Most of the scouts were shy of Ellery. The angel seemed to scare them. Ellery himself they found merely strange. He did not really know how to talk to people. He was very used to being solitary, and though he saw the looks that scouts and students levelled at him—inquiring, respectful, rapt with curiosity—he was not ever quite sure how to respond. Too, he had to keep in mind the angel’s privacy. For most of the questions people were rather intimate and were about the angel, or about the angel and Ellery.

“Why have you not lost your angel?” one boy wanted to know. “My sister had an angel. It left when she was sixteen.” He eyed Ellery and the angel with an air of resentment. His name was Edward, and he came from Irish nobility. Later in the term, his sister came from Ireland to visit. Ellery met her. She seemed a sad, wasted thing. Her hands drooped like flowers cut off of a trellis. She would not look at the angel or at Ellery.

Other people had purely technical interests in the angel. Doctors of Phantasmatics from all over the university wanted to talk to Ellery about his
childhood. They asked him to recount his early memories; they seemed to expect that he might be some kind of genius. They seemed disappointed to find him so ordinary. At least, they wanted to know, had there been any miracles? Did he know what sort of miracles his angel might be capable of performing? (There had not been any large-scale miracles in England since the days of Henry XVII. It was thought by some that the virtue had gone out of England, and that, though there were angels remaining, these were only an echo of some greater lost era, a glorious Age of Virtue whose like would not again be seen.)

“No,” Ellery said. “There haven’t been any miracles.” He could taste the lie on the inside of his teeth. He thought of the little dead birds in his hands, the moths lifting out on their drowsy wings. The angel sent him its silent approval. It did not like this questioning. Ellery said, “I don’t think it’s that sort of angel. I don’t think most people expect any miracles from me.”

In the end, it all became so exhausting that it was easier if Ellery stayed in his rooms between classes, even when it was time for lunch and tea. The angel brought him food from the college kitchens. It always seemed to know when Ellery needed or wanted a glass of water, a packet of biscuits, a pot of coffee. It would sit and brush the crumbs from his books, watching him eat with a look that was half-loving, half-hungry.

Ellery tried to apply himself to his studies. He had decided to study, rather
than phantasmatics, philosophy. But it was all to do with questions of being and unbeing, and significant parts of the books were in Greek—a language with which Ellery was not very proficient. The angel could help him to translate the Greek, but it grew bored when it was asked to consider unbeing. It would wander the room with its wing-feathers trailing, restless and unhappy. It wanted to be out of the town, out of the college.

Ellery took it home to Candleston at the week-end in late autumn. But Alantine had brought along some friends from Sharpshire, and every morning they went hunting. The braces they brought in of gut-shot quail and rabbits, trailing feathers on the floor, made the angel unhappy. It did not like to see the little dead things on their cords, the bloodstained fur, the ears, legs, feathers lying limply. It fled out in the garden, and Ellery had to follow. “You could just resurrect them,” Ellery pointed out. The angel shook its head. It cradled its elbows. It looked at Ellery beseechingly. Ellery said, “I don’t know what you want!” He felt like the sky and hillsides, bleached of light by the rough approach of winter, saddened like ghost sedge out on the heath. His heart was grey-green, and moist, and rain-sodden. Only his skeletal parts were unleached. He said to the angel, “Stop feeling what you feel in my direction! Tell me what it is you want from me!” But the angel could not say. They sat in the garden for hours and hours, past supper, till Ellery’s teeth were chattering.
Alantine said, on that visit, “You know, your angel doesn’t look well.”

The observation was so unexpected that Ellery paused between mouthfuls of Yorkshire pudding. They were sitting at dinner, Alantine and he. He turned and looked to where the angel stood, listless, trailing its hands over a hanging tapestry. It was not even trying to gain Alantine’s attention. It appeared indifferent to Alantine and Ellery. It picked at the tapestry’s thin dark threads, where in the fourteenth century some Litton or Stoppard had loomed in red flowers. The flowers were shapeless, the thread worn thin. They looked like blood on the tapestry. Ellery put his dinner fork down. He felt the stutter of sudden unease.

Later that night, he inspected the angel. It was curled on his bed in a heavy sleep. It slept a lot now, more than before. The idea that it might be somehow unwell had not occurred to Ellery. He had not thought to wonder if angels could be unwell, as a general species. He watched the moonlight stripe its feathers. He could see, under its shut eyes, the blur of bruised veins, and a thin stretched look to its delicate features. “Are you ill?” he asked it, knowing that, sleeping, it could not answer. “If you’re ill, then why didn’t you tell me?”

He wondered if the angel would die. If it would leave him. This seemed a possibility.

He lay down beside it, on top of the bedcovers. It didn’t waken. He turned on his side and hugged his knees high up against his chest. He felt like a child.
The dark around him seemed suddenly a landscape of threat. He stared at the moon through the arrow-slit windows. He stayed like that all night, haunted by grief. His body ached and his heart became painful. He listened to the sound the angel made as it breathed.

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On Monday it rained. They took the train back to Albridge, the damp silent angel and Ellery. Ellery had insisted to Alantine that the train was better. And, though perhaps a motor car would have been worse, the train was not easy. It rattled and shifted, settling iron limbs, and loosed past the windows long jets of steam that rose and then sank in the grizzly air.

“It will be better this time,” Ellery said. “It will. You’ll see.” He mouthed the words to the cold pane of the window. His breath came out vapid and white as the steam. The angel, slumped on the other side of the carriage, could hear him. But it shook its fair head disconsolately. It dug its bare toes in the thin red train carpet. It wants to stay in one place, Ellery thought. It doesn’t like moving.

When at last the train came to Albridge, they disembarked very reluctantly and picked their way through the dark train-station crowd: brown caps and black hats, blue serge and grey tweed, the steel-coloured smoke of the train now sinking, suitcases leathered in tan and navy. Even men’s faces were dusted with darkness. Ellery trailed behind his angel. It crossed the platform radiantly, the
ruck of its white robe catching the light, its wings lifted now and again by the breeze that swept in from the rain-drizzled town. It cut through the drab and bustling ranks. It smelled of salt and earth and honey, sunlight soaking the long pale grass, clouds daubing the sky in spring. The angel did not cast a shadow. No angel did. But Ellery had often observed an obverse effect: a thin clear bright enlivening that came over those who stood close to the angel. Now, though it still emitted this light, it seemed slightly dimmed. It was tired. He could see. He wished that he could take its hand. He made a gesture towards it, noncommittally. But it flinched away. It did not want him to touch it. Hurt, he withdrew. “Fine,” he said curtly.

The angel turned its eyes on him. They were full of light, all the light that was left in its faded body. Ill as it evidently was, it was still full of beauty. It put the substance of the world to shame. Tears stung Ellery’s own tired, gritty eyes. He was too angry even to wipe them away. “I’d do anything,” he said. “Of course I would. You know that. You’re like another part of myself. There’s no difference at all between you and me.”

They walked out in the cold empty air. Autumn had coloured the town grey-green. A low early dusk hung over the rooftops. “I do mean it,” said Ellery. They stopped under a streetlamp. Its pale flame quavered, a premature lantern in twilight’s haze. The watered light was witchy. Bicyclists hissed past in the street.
Ellery’s hand on his suitcase was numb. He wondered: but do I mean it, really? He felt the angel asking him a question. He could not quite grasp its meaning. The obscurity troubled him: a veil drawn between them. They had never before thought so separately. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know. I’m sorry. I don’t understand what you’re telling me.”

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Winter arrived. Snow baffled the rooftops, in the low light of evening a pale bluish-grey, so still and so softly detailed, so translucent, that the dark earth below it seemed clumsily made. Stunned, Albridge slept through the long night-time hours and seemed to sleepwalk through its spare slice of day. Gas-lamps burned in the college classrooms by the time Ellery’s lectures were finishing, the little flames dancing like will-o’-the-wisps. He could barely make out his own handwriting.

The term adjourned at the end of December. He was meant to go home and celebrate: the end of Advent, the birth of a Saviour, the smell of cut pine saplings, the blue-white smell of plum pudding burning, licked all over by brandy. He loved his family’s home in the winter. Candleston Hall, in January, would still bear its garlands of hard bore-edged holly, its wide bold red ribbons, its long ivy strings. Alantine would ride his horse through the grounds, laughing voice broadly hallooing to call the dogs through the snow towards the foxes. Ellery and
his angel would watch from upstairs, from the tapestried warmth of the library, as
the large pack of dogs came heaving home, bloody-mouthed and happily barking.
The angel did not like to see blood on the dogs’ mouths, but even it agreed that
the sound of their animal joy at the hunt was a fond winter sound, pleasing. And
later they’d sit late into the night, the angel and Ellery, and think of the world that
lay stretched-out, frost-covered, like a lake that’s been stilled by its freezing. In
winter the human life of the world seemed somehow to cease, and this other life,
secret, came out of the cracks. They both liked to think of this secret life, of its
silence, wild, frail and empty.

But this year he feared so much for the angel that he thought they ought to
stay in one place. “We’ll make Christmas here, in our rooms,” he told it. The
angel did not look convinced. It seemed to feel as ill as it had done in autumn. It
slept in the daytime, when Ellery was at class. Sometimes it slept in his lectures,
seated beside him, the edge of a wing faintly brushing Ellery’s bootlaces each
time the angel breathed. And yet there were nights when Ellery woke in the dark
to find that the angel was not asleep, but was stooped beside the black pane of a
window. Its eyes were pressed shut. It was listening—listening, he thought, to the
sigh of the wind as that wind swept the shallow valley. He felt the sound cut a
cold channel through it. But he did not know what the sensation might mean. It
was closed to him, a private room in the house of his own making. In the house
they had made, he corrected himself. They: the angel and Ellery. He lay in his bed without making a sound and watched as a white tear inked the edge of the angel’s delicate cheekbone. It was not like a man’s tear. It was opaque, milky. The angel had not ever wept before. Ellery had not known angels could weep. He felt the angel’s sorrow inside him. It fitted there uncomfortably, too large for the brittle frame of his limbs. It pressed at his ribcage. He couldn’t breathe. In an instant he himself was violently weeping. “I’m sorry,” he said, over and over. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

The angel was always eager to console him. It seemed more distressed that Ellery should be suffering than by its own obscure heart-sickness. It sat at the side of the bed as Ellery wept, its hands making helpless, mid-air motions, its face a mask of misery. And yet the sadness welled between them, a wound that would not heal, unceasing.

In mid-December, some days before Christmas, with a certain reluctance, Ellery consulted a phantasmaticist—a doctor who dealt with supernatural things. He remembered the man he’d seen as a child, the specialist who’d gazed at him pityingly, and inspected him like an interesting newspaper, and told him that his angel would leave. This new man was younger, bolder, more modern. He was a fellow at St Crix College, had only recently taken his degree. “First class,” he told Ellery up-front, “in spite of the Old Relics. I’m sure you know what I mean. Most
of them are still living in the last epoch. It’s all parlour magic, witchcraft, and sorcery.” He adjusted his wire spectacles and laughed a little. “Who even believes in sorcery?”

Ellery’s thinking was: why not the modern approach? He was prepared to try anything that would make the angel more like itself, more like the way it had used to be. So he sat in the hard wooden chair in the office, answering the phantasmaticist’s questions uncomfortably. All the questions were to do with his father and mother: how did he feel towards them? Did he feel normally? Was it possible that he harboured unseen resentments? Then the phantasmaticist wanted to hear all his dreams. Ellery did not really dream very much. He told the man this. “Don’t dream?” the phantasmaticist said in amazement. “But surely you don’t mean it. You must be repressing.” Ellery did not think he was repressing, whatever that might mean. He said, “It’s something to do with the angel. I think that maybe angels don’t dream. We share most of the same characteristics.” Indeed, he was then sharing the angel’s impatience with these questions, its disinterest in phantasmatics generally.

Of course, the phantasmaticist asked about the angel. “What does it do?” he wanted to know, looking at Ellery as though the angel were not seated there in his office. “Has it a gift, a special purpose?” Feeling tired and rather put-out, Ellery answered, “It doesn’t do anything. It’s mine. That’s what it does.” A
silence fell in the office. At once Ellery perceived that this had not been the right answer to give. He avoided looking at the angel. He could feel it saddening. Even the phantasmaticist sensed a certain effect. He coughed, and straightened his spectacles. “Yes,” he said. “Well. That’s as it may be.”

In the end he escorted Ellery out of the office, the angel trailing behind them disconsolately. On the doorstep he took Ellery aside, bending his head towards Ellery’s as though to share some confidence in private. “It’s not really lack of virtue, you know,” he said without preamble. “That’s just what old housewives used to believe. There’s some science to it we don’t understand yet. I wish I could help, really I do, but the truth is… The truth is we haven’t quite figured out yet why it is that the angels leave.” He cleared his throat. “Well, you’re best left to it.” He would not quite look at Ellery.

Ellery and the angel walked home in silence. Snow feathered down on the navy wool sleeves of Ellery’s coat. He brushed it off. He could feel the wet flakes on his hands, melting. After a while, he spoke to the angel. “I thought I might get us a fig pudding from that little bakery—the one off the high street, by Laternary Crossing. That might be nice to eat.” He knew that the angel could eat none of it. He said, “But at least it would smell Christmassy.” A soft blue twilight had enveloped them. The snow had an otherworldly sheen. Ellery stopped at the next street corner. He stared straight ahead, to where he could not see, to where snow
was unblanched by the last breath of sun. The saturate night was black, unrevealing. Soon it would be in the streets of Albridge. It would come stealing in from the east country, and sleep for a while on the steeples and house-tops. He felt afraid of it suddenly.

The angel stepped till it was close-pressed beside him. He could feel the heat of its body. It had a heat, just like a human. He thought it had a heart, lungs, a circulatory system, all of the parts that make up a person. All of the bones, veins, and capillaries. But it had too this other part to itself. He watched lamplight play on the slope of its wings. Their feathers in this light looked ivory, ancient, bone objects from late antiquity. He wanted to touch them, but he didn’t reach out. He’d learned his lesson. “So leave me, then,” he said. His tone was fragile, defiant. “You’re not mine to keep. I made a mistake. So fly away, if you want to do it.”

The angel said nothing. It stood in the half-dark. It spread its wings out like a bird on a ledge, poised in the instant before it takes flight, tasting the wind, gathering it. Ellery felt his whole body tremble. He too was torn by the call of the wind. He could not bear to think of the instant when the angel would take this from him: the language the world spoke, wordless, beseeching, the landscape itself enlivened. He saw that the whole of creation around him was wide-eyed. It waited for an utterance. It waited for him to travel towards it, to some place that
he had never been. It had always been there, and always been waiting. It wanted him to touch it.

Stunned, he wept. The night descended. The angel folded its wings, silent. The feeling dwindled in Ellery’s heart. It withered to the size of a candle flame and went out with a trace of smoke behind it. A mark like a scar where its blue heat had been. “How can you bear it?” Ellery asked, when he could put words to his thoughts again. The angel shrugged—a human gesture. It assumed a shy posture and bent its head. There was something altogether boyish about it. “You should go,” Ellery said. It was not what he’d meant to say, somehow. His mouth formed words. He struggled to fit sound to them. He thought of the time before he could speak. (People said he should not remember, but he did.) The world had seemed formed of foreign speech. Only the angel had understood him. They had built another world between them, a world where they two could live, lighter and stronger than love or affection. I can’t lose it, he thought, but could not make himself say it. He stared at the angel in silence.

In the lamplight it looked so beautiful for a moment that it was wholly alien, a limpid form etched in feathers and bright eyes, and he could not bear to look at it. He blinked, and shielded his eyes from its beauty. Then it was his angel again. It brushed a half-inch of snow off its shoulders. It was cold; it wanted to go in. It thought that he must be getting hungry. They could still buy a pudding, if
they were quick. It would like to smell the ginger and cloves, the sweet note of the cinnamon. “Like Christmas,” Ellery said. “Christmas at home.” Yes; that was the scent.

They moved out from under the wavering streetlamp, onto the pavement. The darkness around them, arrived from the east, was vast and blue-dark and immanent.

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The day after Christmas was sharp and bright. The air was light and shallow and crisp. Ellery and the angel went out walking. They walked through the woods southwest of Albridge, where snow had left the land looking wild. For miles around, you could hear only branches stirring and breaking in the wind. Sometimes birds hopped in the higher-up treetops, and let loose their birdsong, and cocked their heads to stare down with interest at these strange intruders. Their feathers were dark, shiny, well-kept. Ellery wondered if they were returning from the places they had been, early arrivals, impatient with winter, eager to get back to England again—or if they had not migrated yet. Perhaps they were waiting for the right moment. They would know when the call in their blood rose up, when it overtook them with homesickness. Sickness for a home they might not even really remember, but a home that pulled them towards it. Could you call that a home? he thought to himself. This was the place where they truly lived. This wood, where
the snow fell calmly in spatters from the upper fronds of the fir-trees’ pins. The angel frowned and wrinkled its nose as a stray gust of snow sanded it. Ellery smiled. He shut his eyes. He heard the sighing of the wind. It carried a message through the tree branches, something he could not interpret. He knew the angel heard it also, but they did not regard it; they resisted its hollow, formless echo. Not yet, Ellery thought to himself. Not yet.
THE TWELVE GIFTS

It was a fact widely known amongst the higher rungs of Lud society that Sebastian Marsh, youngest son of the second Duke of Samphire, had been stolen by gypsies. Not recently, of course: oh, no; nowadays, Lord Sebastian was very nice, very correct. He had gone off to Friswith College, Albridge, two terms back, and was reported to be reading anatomy. You could see him bicycling amongst the stony lanes there sometimes, like any student, his legs grey-flannelled, his silver-white Saxon hair immaculately cut and flapping in the breeze. And besides, the gypsies did not anymore steal children— if indeed there were still gypsies. In the years since the War they had largely vanished, bright caravans rattling along the long moors to Scotland and – to where? Dispersed amongst the brackish islands? Dissolved into the raucous, seal-studded sea? No trace of them remained up or down the country, where once in vacant outskirts of the forest, hollowed-out half-feral clearings, their fires had fed off split black oak, sending white smoke in towers, and their Oriental tents had blazed amid the good green moss and gawky weeds. It used to be that you could glimpse these campsites in the morning, when the fires were spitting embers and the sleepy dogs barking, and wonder at the hint of gold thread caught in tent-cloth, the low wander of a man’s voice through the
landscape of another language, a dense and spicy aromatic, darkly foreign and sweet. Or at a village horse fair see men walking, stooped and careful, as though their finely clothed bodies might split at the seams, and women whose wrists and shoulders shivered with light from long looped strands of jewellery. They sold horses and smoked cigarettes and kept forges, and other things: told fortunes that were not fictions, that filled you with unease; peddled bits of saints’ relics, tiny finger bones, and skin like leather, and bits of hair clippings; stole men’s children. This last was no mere threat, set upon sullen infants by their nannies, but something known, and talked-about, and troubling. Children vanished, and everyone knew where they went. The gypsies, if confronted, would shrug, murmur discomfort, feign incomprehension. Frantic searches of their campsites would find nothing: charred circlets where the fire had been set, and skeletal remains of chickens, deer, and songbirds done to dinner, gnawed down and then buried. The panic would pass; people would move on, and then one morning the gypsies would not be there. Deep tracks suggested they had roved on to another place. And sometimes the lost children would turn up later, little strangers, in a far-off city, dressed as gypsies, bearing their same names but no longer speaking their own language, with new crafts and skills, a new skittishness, a new fluency and foreignness. And sometimes they did not turn up, ever. This happened.
And then the war came: with all its cutting-down of children in the trenches, young men who went to France uncomprehending and came back more ghost than human, or did not come back and were ploughed down in the earth of Continental meadows, bodies broken up en masse among the sandbags, metal, mustard gas, the constant rainfall, wet clay and wire and rats, the poisoned water, the pluvial land. Somewhere in the midst of this an exodus began: the gypsies’ passing. And elsewhere, in the last years of the war, in Lentenshire, a sojourn found its end: for Sebastian Marsh, eighteen years old, returned to his family’s manor house. He had been twelve years away. He arrived on the eighteenth of December: a ragged boy hiking up the ice-slick lane, his fair hair turned to straw and spikes, his raw feet clad in leather boots laced up with string. This was all, later, described in the lower sort of Lud paper – luridly, before the Duke exercised the upper class’s full power, and forced discretion. There were reports of the boy’s initial condition (starving, hypothermic) and how, for some months afterwards, he refused to speak. Further details were not forthcoming. Photographs were arranged, once he’d been subject to a barber and a tailor. He looked sallow in the sharp bicolour photos, sickly, stripped clean by change. He held one hand a few inches above his narrow face, squinting away from the camera, as though seared by the slow light, as though assaulted. The sense these
photographs gave was of a trapped animal, sedated and frightened, a certain wildness kept barely at bay.

Eventually there was a loss of public interest in the story. His family sent him to the Continent, to Corva, following the Truce of Amalfi, so that he might see a specialist in the emerging field of psychoanalytics. By the time he returned, the whole sordid tale had mostly been forgotten. He sailed from Le Havre on the first day of summer: thin, stoop-shouldered, shy, and shaky, his skin still white from wintering amongst the lightless, night-limned spires of Corva – but now capable of speech as a general categorization. He had developed a nervous impediment to this speech: not a stutter or a stammer but a marked hesitance, a strange half-beat before each utterance. He was, however, deemed fluent enough for university. So off he went to Albridge, and what a relief, all society’s gossips said, for the Duke and Duchess of Samphire to think that at last they might put the incident behind them, see life turned back a page: the gypsies vanished and their son restored, so that they could paint over the chipped and violent pockmarks of tragedy.

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It was not at Albridge that Briar met Sebastian Marsh – or not technically. To be exact, their encounter took place out on the moor, some miles from either town or university. Briar in those days was much given to leaving the confines of
his college and cycling long distances, sometimes for days, so that he was forced to kip by the roadside, or in stables atop autumnal thatches of hay. Most of his fellow undergraduates found this strange; the remainder thought it artfully Bohemian, an affectation. This was not the case. He had not a Bohemian bone in his body. He was a small, plain, tough boy, his face patched ruddy with that wintry flush perpetually raised by a childhood in cold climates, with little sun and a superfluence of rain. In Briar’s case the climate had been Langor, a small city in Wales on the Hibernian Sea, whence his speech still bore an accent. It was an accent that did not often crowd the air east of Angelsea, and certainly not at Albridge. It did not communicate any element of aesthetery. It caused the listener to think of coal pits and the fish-wharves stunk with grimy catches. This was fair, Briar thought, but not entirely: his hard hands reminded him of childhood days spent bearing ropes up from those very boats out as they sank upon that dirty sea, but surfacing, this memory came towing up desire in catches. He had dreamed about these things, the angular docks and plumes of coal-smoke rising in widening ranks from boxy factories. Had dreamed about them in the trenches, while rats scuttled round his feet and flares lit up like reversed stars falling through the bitter night, while he was breathing mud and shuddering. But when he left the war – when the war had ceased – he had found that he could not bring himself to go back to that narrow valley. He felt it vanished; he did not believe
that it would be waiting, and he could not bear to see the barren landscape that the train would pull through instead, on and on, without end. What would it be like, this new landscape? Featureless, and without habitation, devoid even of the ruins where human settlement had been. On the strength of this strange fear he settled in Lud, then won a place at Albridge on the strength of some memoirs of combat he had published in the *Strand*. He had always seen himself as a bookish type, but when actually at Albridge he discovered that he could not stand their omnipresence: the books and bricks and loaded, fly-buzz haze of Southern accents, all of scholarship’s leaden, tombstone weight. Thus the bicycle: to draw the free air from the moor-lanes into his lungs, and get quite dizzy with it. He slept by the roadside as he had never slept in all his days – blankly and softly, an animal sleep that overwhelmed him and erased from him all his dreams, so that he woke aching and rested into a slow joy, feeling his heart between his teeth. He might have called this feeling happiness until he met Sebastian.

It was sunny that day, the warmth stealing over the hillsides. Only an afterthought of summer remained, but in its place autumn had yawned and woken, displaying its small and tawny teeth. Trees turned burnt and shone like metal, showing leaves in all colours of currency. Foxes here and there curled their bright bodies through the gorse grass, along the edges of lakes. Briar paused at one such lake in early evening, thinking to wash the dull sheen of sweat from his face. He
had, all day, been riding. His short hair stuck flat against his skin. He approached the stirred dark bank with its army of reeds — but saw, as he did, that there was a man stood in the shallows: a young man, slightly younger than him, with ice-fair hair and a fixed expression which he trained on the dark lake water round his feet. His shirt cuffs were damp and fastened with silver emblems. His trousers were cut from expensive linen, and rolled to just above the knee. He was so still he might not have breathed but for the butterfly trace of pulse beating below his jaw, a fine wet repetition where a line of sweat ran riverine. Briar was unsure what he was witnessing. He thought to raise his voice, to warn— but then the boy moved, quick as a snake, sculling his hand into the quiet water and coming up with something writhing, dark, and sleek. A carp, or other lake fish. He held it in his grasp quite naturally while it scoured the air with showers from its formless twisting. Its visible, wide eye rolled frantically. The boy’s own light eyes, hawk-like, gleamed, and he looked up at Briar. Loud and clearly he said, “What do you think?”

Briar started. He felt imprisoned by the scene. It was a raw, quiet tableau that held his rapt attention: the sunlight gnawing at the young man’s slender shoulders, the slow gasping death of the black carp that bowed its backbone painfully; the embrous light in the boy’s empty eyes, and the way the water lapped at his white ankles, like little tongues, ragged with greed. Desire began to form inside Briar’s chest. He too wanted to put his mouth upon those ankles. In
his mind he touched his own tongue to the skin there. His heart leaked. Its heat suffused him. He found it suddenly difficult to breathe. “What?” he said.

“I said, you know – what do you think?” The boy gestured with his free hand at the carp, which strained and beat. “Shall I snap its neck, or what? Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” Briar said without thinking, and then: “No. I mean –”

“You needn’t worry about cooking. If you haven’t a lucifer, I mean. I’m awfully good with sticks and straw brush. I set fires like anything.”

*I just bet you do,* Briar thought. He didn’t say anything. The boy’s accent was rounded, posh, precise and clean, but there was this period of anticipation each time he opened his mouth. His speech lagged, as though elsewhere his mind was still caught up in translating.


“Yes,” Briar said. He took the hand. A scale glittered upon it. He touched his fingers to the palm. Under the bones and flesh, he felt that fast pulse beat.

“How did you know my name?”

Sebastian smiled ignored the question. He said, “Shall we eat?”
So they ate. It seemed the thing; it seemed a natural progression. Briar sat upon the wind-pressed whorls of grass on the bank and watched Sebastian heap some thorny twigs into a small tight bundle and breathe on them until the flames would leap and sparks crawled up from the muddy base like stars that dwindled, bright-spotting the heath. The fire took. Wood smoke sighed forth, and wrote its ruddy scent upon the landscape. Briar’s legs, abused by cycling, felt weak. He stretched them out. The muscles tightened, clenched, released. To his left, Sebastian was a searing presence. He produced a small knife from his pocket and slit the fish. The wet guts spilled out. The knife’s blade gleamed in the golden excess of the ebbing sunlight. The sun itself, a sleepy creature, curled up and burrowed deep below the world’s rim. The smell of cooking nosed about and shadows, numberless, softened the sharp cut of the hillsides. There was a sense of hearth and homestead. Briar briefly dreamed. Then woke, for Sebastian was prodding his shoulder with one finger, saying, “Wake up, wake up, come and eat.”

The flesh of the fish was charred on top and tasted sweet. They ate it with their bare fingers, in silence, companionably. Night draped itself dramatic around them. Sebastian hummed a tune under his breath. The fire muted itself, smoked hotly. The tune became a melody, sung in a soft dark other language. Briar listened. He lit a cigarette from the embers. He lifted himself up to his elbows,
feeling the chilly earth soak through his sleeves. Sebastian’s singing was all around him, like the blue smoke, cloudy and unsettling. “Who are you?” Briar asked abruptly.

The singing broke off. “I’ve told you.” Sebastian squinted at him. “Did you not believe me?”

“No, but –”

“Ah. I see.” Sebastian rested his head against the tops of his knees. He was still barefoot, his white feet black with silt-smears. A dampness clung about him, a shivery feeling. He said, “I thought that, since you’re an undergraduate, you’d know all the story.”

“No.”

“Do people not talk?”

“No – at least, not in my presence.”

“That is unexpectedly generous.”

Briar said, an admission, “It’s more that I don’t keep much company.”

He felt Sebastian’s eyes fingering at his face. Sebastian said, “I did know that. There is a story. Would you like to hear it?”

Briar paused. He felt some vast unsteady substance rested on a knife’s edge, its stark weight wildly shifting. In a moment it would come clean in balance, or slip from the knife instead, and be lost in darkness. He wanted to hold
it on that mirror-ledge. He looked at Sebastian: the fair hair slipping forward across his forehead, the firelight’s red colour where it touched his cheekbones and chin. The sharp line of his white shirt collar where it cut his neck. The skin there seemed cool. Shadows filled its hollows. Briar moistened his lips. They bore a taste of stagnant water, something slippery and poisonous, like dread. Upon reflection he knew the taste; it was the taste of the trenches: the chemical smoke and sweat sordid on another man’s skin when you put your mouth to it; the omnipresent decomposition. That was it, the living and the dead that lived together in those Lethic places. He said, “Whatever you tell me, I will listen.”

Sebastian smiled. “Good,” he said. “That’s very good. An excellent answer, Briar. So then. Shall you come over here and kiss me?”

Briar did. He did not think, but reacted wildly, crawling across the wet grass to place his hands against that clever face, to tangle his fists in colourless hair and press his lips against Sebastian’s mouth, autumnal-tasting. He pressed Sebastian flat against the earth and stripped his shirt back, and saw the epaulets of white raised scars marked across his clavicle and ribs, and did not imagine for a moment any question, but dragged his mouth over the wrecked architecture of Sebastian’s body, bruising new patches, revelling in the shift of bone and muscle under the marred and tarnished skin. Sebastian made no sound, but he clenched his fists into the surface of the earth, raking up clods of soil and cobweb roots and
earthworms. His pulse stuttered. His breath grew harsh and thin. Briar said his name: “Sebastian.” And then again, over and over. The name meant nothing to him. He knew nothing more about Sebastian. It had a spiritual force, the incantation. It charged him until he felt unbearable, electric. Sebastian shivered and clawed at him, knotting hands in his dark hair. There would be dirt there later. And prints of dirt all along his back and shoulders, and pinprick marks where fingernails had broken the skin. And none of it was enough in that moment. He wanted more, more of Sebastian. His desire ravened. He moved restlessly. He looked down and saw the pupils of Sebastian’s eyes blown black, like a cat’s eyes in darkness, large and remote, fervid and strange. He had a sudden sense of things coming unhinged: a sliding, gasping loss of structure, all the solid blocks of world minusculely fracturing. “Please,” he said to Sebastian. “Please don’t – Please – ”

Afterwards he drowsed upon the rucked-up heath. The night air had a new cold in it, an oncoming weight of winter. Sebastian did not sleep, but sat beside the fire till morning, feeding it gorse twigs and rawly scented leaves. When Briar woke, dawn had washed the sky above him and the wind was clean. He looked. Sebastian’s eyes were on him. They were a source of warmth. He basked in their heat.

“Ask me a question,” Sebastian said.

“Pardon?”
“Or don’t. But the offer stands.”

Briar did not know what to think. He tipped his head back on the grass. The boundary-less expanse of sky echoed in him. There was no framework to it. Clouds scudded, brief and effortless, dizzying. “I don’t know,” he said. “I can’t imagine. Will you come back to Albridge with me?”

Sebastian wore a curious expression. “Is that your question?”

“I suppose so.”

“I haven’t a bicycle.”

“That doesn’t matter to me.”

So they walked the long way, Briar’s bicycle wandering between them. Autumn yawned and breathed out a mysterious day, with waves of colour that rippled loose on the hillsides: the dying grass like tawny leather-hide, the dull and muted thistle-violet, sea-green herbs and milkweeds, and over all the luscious, broad, and depthless sky, so blue it seemed you could sink your hands into it and come up dyed.

Every fourteenth or sixteenth second Briar would look at Sebastian and feel a smile start upwards like a silent reflex, the way your body flinches when a gun is fired. It had been a long time since he had laid his hands upon another person. Since the war, since the time outside of Lourdes in the rain, when he had worn out his French, shy and desirous, on a young lieutenant. He did not
remember this happiness. It seemed a thing one would retain – the knowledge that
at last you were enacting the motion for which you were made, your whole body
singing, sharp, exultant. He wondered if Sebastian felt the same. The other man
was very silent as they walked. Perhaps it was a habitual silence, arising from his
halting speech. His face did not betray either happiness or unhappiness, but some
emotion that was harder to name. As they neared Albridge, there were signs of
apprehension. He shifted and darted haunting little looks at Briar, then away. The
spires of Albridge generated on the green horizon. Sebastian stared at them with a
crease in his brow. He waited till they were off the moor and almost to the gate of
Swordsworth College, and then said very fast to Briar, “You must not mind what
other people tell you. I mean, what they tell you about me.”

“Why not? What will they say?”

“You must not listen. You must let me tell you.”

He spoke with the urgency of someone begging for his life. It was unclear
what he thought was at stake. Slowly Briar said, “All right. I will not listen. But I
can’t stop people talking.”

Sebastian smiled. Briar’s answer seemed enough to sate him. His sudden
nervousness withdrew. He placed his hand against Briar’s wrist. The brief touch
sent Briar’s breath askew. “You’ll do very well,” Sebastian said. “I knew I could
trust you.” Then he turned, as though he were about to leave.
“Wait,” Briar said. “How will I find you? I mean, what’s your college?”

Sebastian shrugged, careless. “You’ll find me. So, it doesn’t matter. Or else, don’t worry, I’ll find you.”

“What does that mean?” Briar asked. But Sebastian’s back was to him, and he was leaving. “Wait. When will I see you?”

The sun – now afternoon sun, purring and elated – tripped upon Sebastian’s shoulders. He kept up his pace. He left light footmarks on the crushed college gravel, then meandered off the path and hopped a low stone wall, forging his own way through clipped neat grass and through someone’s garden: dark tendrils clinging to his trouser-legs from late season plantings, and the leaves of high and heart-shaped ivy. He never once looked over his shoulder. Briar, watching, felt himself fade into a bit of bleak and passive stonework. A piece of college statuary. He wanted to run; some part of him wanted to give chase, but he felt that this was pointless. From the instant that Sebastian left him, it had been too late. There was his world, and then this other world, towards which he was forever racing. The first he carried with him. He was its only citizen. The second he had lost some time ago, in the trenches. He had closed his eyes and it had slipped from him. He had come to in a colourless place and known the brighter days to be beyond him, a separate realm, unsolitary and light and escaping. Items went to this other world when they vanished from view. A cherished book, a
silver photograph of Snowdon; a garden he had once loved at St Nicht’s, in Lud City, where a spring they called miraculous ran ceaseless from the mud. Once gone they could not be revisited. You went, and found their aspect altered, unpleasing. There was an echo to it of what you loved, but the thing itself fled onwards. Sebastian would be like this also, he thought. There would be a second encounter, but it would not be so epiphanic, would not spark with the sinister fusing of a flare lit out on a darkened battlefield. The night and then the sucked-breath crackle, the eerie glow of white flame on face – all of this would fade. He did not want that. He wanted to stay with the feral figure he’d seen outlined by sunlight, who had raked up with his fingertips the ragged earth where he’d lain.

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Briar didn’t see Sebastian after that for six long days. Over the course of the week he learnt all the gossip of which Sebastian had seemed afraid. From a college scout he learnt, for instance, Sebastian’s full name: that he was a lord, his father a duke, the family possessed of a grant old pile in Lents. From his Latin tutor he learnt that Sebastian was at Friswith, and doing anatomy. From the tutor’s idle brother, up from Lud for the weekend and well-versed in various scandals of the aristocracy, he learnt that there was more to learn – and yet no one would say it. “Not my place, old boy,” said the tutor’s brother. “All a rather rowdy business.” He went off looking sadly about the rowdy business, and shaking his
head. Briar found himself without a resource. He went to the library instead, and for a profitable afternoon talked old war stories with the clerk behind the reference desk, who had lost three fingers out at Souvres in the early days. The clerk was keen to know the circumstances of Briar’s service, and they spoke about the imperfect silence of nights in the trenches, the uncanny – in comparison – quiet of evening at Albridge. When Briar quite casually mentioned Sebastian’s name, the clerk looked troubled. “They say he’s not quite the same,” he said. “He seems all right – I mean, you’d take him for another student. But still, since he came back, they say…” Briar asked for further clarification. “Since he came back, you know, from the gypsies.”

At first Briar did not believe him. He had thought it a myth, that stolen children came back, or at the very least a rarity; as he dug at the depths of his mind he could recall an exhibit down in Covenant Garden: a gaudy tent, a sidewalk display advertising a half-savage child, lately returned from captivity, who could read your palm, or your stars, or your heart-strings for a penny. This last had seemed a curious turn of phrase. No doubt it was metaphorically meant, but it left Briar with an image of the child anatomizing a human chest, like a surgeon, the white ribs glistening. As he walked quickly past he had caught a glimpse in the tent of white eyes, clouded. The child was blind – unkempt and small-boned, perhaps twelve or thirteen. A low fire had breathed smoke into the
darkness. Birds had stuttered on a post, their stem-like claws secured there by a silver chain. The child’s shaggy head had swung to watch as Briar moved past. He had blinked, his whole-moon eyes eclipsing slowly. The encounter had left Briar with an uncomfortable feeling. He did not reel it out when others spoke of cursed encounters, when his messmates described creeping out as children with a sense of danger to watch the gypsies’ camp by a crossroads or clearing.

“It’s true, you know,” the reference clerk said, enjoying his discomfit. He lit a cigarette. He was a dark-haired, wholesome man in a clean shirt and waistcoat. He leant forwards. Briar looked in fascination at his snub-nosed fingers, the smooth foreshortened tissue where further bone had been. “Twelve years he was gone with them. God knows where. No place where we would go. No place for honest men.”

“No,” Briar agreed. There was a nervous, desultory look in the clerk’s eyes. Briar recognised it, and fled. He did not want to spend the night drinking and talking of nothing but the trenches, re-digging with obsessive fervour each dwelling-place, each barbed-wire fence. Let the dead bury the dead, he thought, and once they’ve been buried, don’t go back to dig them up again.

Instead, he went to Friswith. He told himself he was not actively seeking after Sebastian. It was late, and the low sun was sending long fingers of light between the spire-topped buildings. Shadows straggled through the distraut trees.
The lawns were green, their colour gem-like, ornamental, as though painted with one brush-stroke. Friswith was an affluent college, and its students added by some artist. They sauntered on paths, looking lightweight and clean. Briar was conscious of his shabby coat and torn shoelaces. His hands kept smoothing his hair of their own accord. He set his teeth, and kept walking. He did not like to be reminded of his poverty.

He walked until he was past the chapel, past the library and the large stone halls where students lived. The lawns spread out into grassland, less kempt and sparser. To his left the river inched through it. It was a wide line of darkness drawn on the landscape; the sun skipped it and went on parsing the grass into broad grey hollows and bursts of radiance. Briar sat on a wrecked stone wall and watched the night hove in around him. He could see farmhouses in the distance. They were hunkered down, sending up smoke signals, sentinels against some half-sensed thing that hovered at the evening’s edges. Briar found himself searching for this hostile presence, scanning the horizon, hackles raised. But there was only the rough-stitched dusk of autumn settling down, and smells of hearth-sides carried on the wind.

“Hello,” Sebastian said from beside him.

Briar turned, but was not startled. Sebastian seemed a piece of the darkness even now slipping in. He sat cross-legged on the stonework: his shirt
cuffs unfastened, collar loose, bare-footed. He did not look a reputable member of the college. His pale hair stood up in languid tufts.


“Ah. You have been talking to other people about me.”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t listen.”

Sebastian seemed to weigh something against this statement. He looked at Briar intently – then smiled, and touched Briar’s face. There was something on his fingertips, a dark wet trace of wine or other liquid. “I know,” he said. “If you had done, I wouldn’t be here. You would look, but you wouldn’t see me again.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Briar said. He grasped at Sebastian’s hand, clumsily, as though to hold him in place. The night was growing cooler, but the skin he touched still ran with heat.

“No,” Sebastian said. “You’re not meant to, really. I’ve got rooms in town, but I don’t like to use them. I go out on the moors until it rains, and sometimes when it rains I stay for hours. I like to feel cold. I like the wetness on my face. But we can go there, if you’d prefer to. You were cold for a long time once and you might not want to be again.”

“Is it going to rain?” Briar asked, looking outwards. The sky was crowded with clouds, but a storm did not seem likely.

“Of course.”
“How can you –”

“I can smell it.” Delicately, Sebastian withdrew his hand. “So, what do you think?”

“Yes, all right.” Briar frowned at him, his eyes unfocussed. He tried to find some fragrance of rain in the dense dry air around him, with its overtones of desiccated leaves. He was distracted by the frisson of want he felt when he looked at Sebastian: not a want that strained towards an object, but a hollowed-out sensation, a heavy loss, as though some visceral part of him had drained away. The hole remained. It was a hemorrhagic feeling. He wanted to bed Sebastian because no other act was the right shape and weight to fill the gap left by this vague perdition. He could not think about it too closely. He had not the space inside his head. He stood, and touched Sebastian’s shoulder. His hand was shaking slightly. He said, “Shall we, then?”

Sebastian’s rooms in town turned out to be a small ground-floor apartment. From the outside the flat seemed quite standard – curtains drawn, silver doorplate polished, but when he entered Briar saw that all the furnishings had been stripped from it. There was no bed, no desk, no dining table; a carpet of straw-and-herb dried rushes distilled the air to a Mediaeval scent. A witching darkness spread its webs in all the corners. Sebastian struck a match and lit a waxy candle. The light wavered, revealing crude paintings done in ink and
charcoal on the walls: dark figures hunched and crouching, Roman sigils and horse-headed men, images of birds and something written in a foreign language, neither Greek nor Latin. Elsewhere a kettle hung upon a tripod, clearly used for cooking. There were ashes mixed in with the rushes on the floor.

“Where do you sleep?” Briar asked, still stood at the door. “Is your bedroom like this?”

Sebastian was shrugging his shirt off his shoulders. He tossed it carelessly onto the floor, and started on his trousers. He said, “I can’t stand the common lifestyle. Too many things.”

“Yes, but – ” Briar gestured to the general wreckage. A scrap of silk hung from the bedroom door’s bare lintel, cerulean blue and somehow saddening. In the swelling shadows from the candle, the men on the walls seem to lengthen. They were beautiful, in an odd way, their black forms superimposed upon the wallpaper’s ivory ribbons and rambling roses, the blankness of its pastoral scenes.

Sebastian was semi-naked now. He came close to Briar and kissed him, the cool weight of his hands in Briar’s hair for a moment. “Do you mind dreadfully? Do you not like it? We can light a fire if you want; there is a grate.”

Privately, Briar thought that fire might prove a hazard. He was uneasy even about the candle flame. But he said only, “It’s fine,” very indistinctly, as he pressed forward and bore Sebastian back against the strange inked wall, hands
scouring across his angular shoulder blades. Bird-boned, he thought; people said it but did not mean it; but Sebastian was so sharp-built and lightweight. His bones showed in odd and graceful places. His collarbone curved like a lyre-shell. The keys of his spine were countable and straight. The scars on his chest were hard and raised, like a second skeleton. Sebastian choked when Briar ran his tongue along one. It tasted of smoke. The candlelight played in the folds of the window-curtains. The wind sent them upraised, and outside the sounds of life were perceptible, like a dull symphony imperfectly played.

There were blankets in the bedroom, rough horse blankets outlaid upon the wooden floorboards. The room was dark. A tawny sheen of lamplight came in from the street, enough to fumble a way in and under these blankets, enough to make out the stains – too shaped and black for water – that clotted their weave. Briar closed his eyes against the thought, against the implications. Sebastian moved soundlessly under him, drawing him in. There was a scent of sweat and death, of something mouldering, of damp and the sour things that grew in the damp, and then just the raw and unsweet smell of Sebastian. It was a smell he felt he’d always been seeking, and in measured starving breaths he drank it in.

When the act itself was over, Briar rested his head against Sebastian’s shoulder for a brief moment, before Sebastian pulled away from him. Restlessly,
Sebastian kicked at the blankets. He climbed to his feet and went to the window. Without turning to look behind him, he said, “Go on, then. Ask me a question.”

Briar stared at the ceiling. It occurred to him that he did not understand the situation. As his insistent pulse faded, so did his sense of exaltation. The waterstains on the ceiling took on hazy shapes, troubling. He asked, “Were you really kidnapped by gypsies?” It seemed a broad, general place to start at.


“I didn’t.” Briar stretched out his limbs. He felt unaccountably lonely. “What was it like, then, living with the gypsies? I’ve never thought about it.”

Sebastian turned. He was wearing Briar’s shirt, for some reason, unbuttoned. The lamplight through the open window made it, moon-like, bleed. “You’re very strange, you know,” he said. His voice had a note of vulnerability. “Am I?”

“You don’t ask as if you really want to know it.”

Briar said, “I don’t want to know it. You talk like it’s something outside of your body.”

“Isn’t it?” Sebastian looked lost. He said, “That is how it seems to me. You have to understand, when I was a child – ” He sat on the floor, cross-legged. His hands came up, expressive, as though he were storytelling. “We used to walk before the caravans, the other boys and me, through the fields, with the long grass
twitching at our feet, ringing bells, to ward off demons. We had strings of bells round our wrists, and at our knees, and we carried others. Little brass bells. We would walk like that for hours. We knew a lot of songs to sing.”

It was the most that Briar could recall hearing Sebastian speak. His hesitation faded, the sentences slipping into a fluid order, following one on another naturally. Briar sat very still and listened. A wet wind blew into the room from off the street.

“At night we jumped the fires to cure the demons that might have got up on our backs and learned to cling, and afterwards there was a thing to drink, a cool clear kind of water, with herbs in it; I cannot think how to say its name in English. And we would lie beside the fire on bearskin rugs and sleep. In the night was when they did their fortunes. I heard the coins rattle, the cards scratch on tables. When I slept I had very complete dreams.”

“Where did you go?” Briar asked. He was rapt, fascinated.

Sebastian shrugged. “Places that you’ve been. Over the moors, on the heath. We like bare rock and gorse bush. We don’t like to be seen, not while walking, not with the horses. It is a superstitious thing. We ware off from the motorcars and carriage tracks.”

“I’ve never really seen a gypsy.” Briar hadn’t, not other than the child in the tent.
“No. We don’t travel where you’re from, so close to the sea. And there are not so many, now; they are – ” He stopped, hesitated. He spread his hand lightly in the air, like a magician in the midst of a trick. “Vanishing.”

“Why, though? Where are they going?”

Sebastian’s expression grew closed: elusive. He said, “You’ve already asked me three questions. This is one question too many.”

It was an end to the conversation. They slept on the floor, their bodies twisted in the blankets. Sometime in the night Briar woke and heard rain falling: dark drumming on the rooftops, cool rhythmic couplets dripping in the eaves. He listened, drowsy with wonder. Waves of thunder broke the wet noise into segments. Sebastian shifted and moaned in his sleep. His eyes flickered. His hands formed defensive gestures, flinching mute and minutely.

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In the morning the storm had gone. Dawn was new, damp, and clean. Briar woke in the hour after sunrise. Sebastian was still asleep. The sea-like sound of his insensate breathing swelled and filled the little room. Briar stretched, and stood, and struggled to find some articles of his clothing. He dressed as best he could. Light revealed the bedroom to be empty, apart from the blankets and their two bodies. The walls were blank and thinly painted. Curious, Briar wandered into the central room of the flat. In the different aspect of daytime it had a forlorn,
childish look: cave paintings etched on wallpaper and straw underfoot; the black kettle like some item from a Boy’s Own Adventure. But on the wall beside the door, where he had not seen them, where twelve cast-iron hooks with knives hanging on them, knives of varying sizes, arrayed from smallest to largest. Each was set with a dark gem in the handle and each had a sloping foreign blade, kept sharp but with some nicks and scratches. They were hunting knives, Briar thought, and had seen use in the purpose for which they had been made. He considered the stains on the blankets under which he had slept and shuddered slightly. The smell of the herbs in the straw seemed to rise up at him, unhomelike, aromatic of spellcraft, sinister as a softly rustling wood. There was an instant in which everything took on an unwelcoming flavour; an aura of violence crept into the room. Briar fought back a rush of panic. He fumbled clumsily at the door, wanting the cool steady air of town in his lungs – then heard Sebastian stirring, and his sleepy voice from the bedroom saying, “Jeremy? What – ”

“In here,” Briar said. He spoke quickly, before he could think about it.

Sebastian leant against the doorframe. Morning had unravelled all his phantom, vicious edges, and left him merely slight and fey. He was half-dressed in the past day’s rumpled clothing. He scrubbed at his face. “I woke and you weren’t there. What hour is it?”

Briar checked his watch. “Half seven.”
“Dreadful, absolutely dreadful. I’ve a tutorial as well, today.”

And just like that the balance shifted back. The blackness in the air dissolved; a measure of apprehension melted away. Sebastian resembled any other student. He scrabbled for his anatomy books amid the untidy rushes, doing up the buttons of his shirt with one hand and talking non-stop about the perils of his tutor, a rather ancient man whose chief contribution to Sebastian’s education was to condemn his general uncleanliness, his lack of discipline. “Though what he expected,” Sebastian said, straightening his collar, “given my aristocratic past, not to mention my outrageous reputation…”

“Have you really a reputation?” Briar asked. “I mean, apart from the obvious.” He found himself grinning.

“Oh, yes.” Sebastian darted a dark look at him. “People will say anything. I suppose it did not help—with my tutor, I mean – when he kept turning up things in my notebooks. Moths and beetles; other sorts of things. I told him it was accidental, but I really think he did not give credence to me.”

Briar laughed. “Accidental? Anyway, what do you mean, other sorts of things?”

“Oh…” Sebastian’s eyes went flat for an instant. He smiled strangely. “Bones and feathers. You know. The bits that get left over.”

“Left over from what?”
Sebastian shook his head, and looked away.

They left the flat together. Sebastian locked the door with a key which he then weighed in his hand as though fitting it for something. He offered it to Briar in an abrupt gesture. “Here,” he said.

Briar took it. It was solid brass, tarnished, depending from a cotton string.

“I can’t take this,” he said. “Surely you’ll need it.”

“No. I told you; I’m not here much.” He cupped Briar’s hand, closing it around the key. A spasm of heat passed between them. Sebastian’s eyes closed briefly. Briar’s eyes traced out the emblem of his lashes, fluttering palely against his cheeks. For an instant the image appeared in his head of the boy who’d come back from the gypsies, the boy he had seen in Covenant Garden who swung his dead-like eyes through the darkness, navigating by some secret sense, unseeing. Briar held his breath till Sebastian’s eyes re-opened, then pressed a kiss to his forehead in a kind of relief.

“All right,” he said. “Does this mean I can come see you?”

“When the time’s right,” Sebastian said.

“Can’t you feel it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what you mean.”
“Like rain in the air. Or death, when it’s a taste on your lips every time you look at a person, so that you know they’re dying, and then you can put a date to it.”

“That’s not something I can do,” Briar said.

“Isn’t it? Not even the rain?” Sebastian seemed disappointed. His face turned vague. “Oh, very well. I suppose I can teach you. Ask me about it next time. Now I really must be off or else my tutor – ”

They were out in the street now, in St Lachrymose Lane, running just west of Albridge’s high street. The shop windows were opening like morning flowers towards day, men on bicycles shuttling past along the pavements, ripe red tomatoes in baskets waiting to be carted away. Night’s rain was still in the gutters. It mirrored up the grey September sky. The whole world seemed mined with silver veins. Briar caught Sebastian’s sleeve as they were walking – Sebastian walking more rapidly, so that he would soon be out of reach.

“Wait,” Briar said. “Promise that you’ll see me. Promise me that you won’t just leave.”

Sebastian paused. The grey serge of his suit coat rubbed against Briar’s fingers. Sebastian said, “You’re holding onto me, Jeremy.”

“Yes.” Briar liked to hear his Christian name spoken in that soft, posh, stammering accent. He wanted Sebastian to say it again.
“I don’t like it.”

Briar released him. Sebastian strode off. His shoulders were hunched, slightly defensive. He straightened as he got further away. A dry wind scoured his figure, throwing his hair in disarray; it was a cold wind, and there were leaves on it. Briar shivered once, very violently, like someone had walked over his grave. That was the expression people used. He had used to imagine a literal grave, a spot of earth damp and soft enough for footmarks, exactly his size and shape, as though the earth itself was clairvoyant and knew itself to be his resting place. As though there existed a connection: the man and the earth, the earth and the grave. Later, in France, he had understood the reference to be spiritual in nature. Otherwise, they would have spent their hours shaking: all those boys with bayonets, their tin hats clinking under the onslaught of rain, as they themselves and all the men around them trod over and over and over their graves. Still – the sense of it remained, the superstitious impression that somewhere the dirt was recoiling, churning, that if he could find the place there would be those footmarks, pressed down in the grass and muddy clay. He shook the feeling off and watched Sebastian walking. He thought a lot about death since meeting Sebastian, he reflected. He had noticed this, but did not mind. He had not thought so much about death since leaving the trenches of Aix-en-Cle, not in a long time, and it made him feel warm: almost slightly fevered. His hands and feet pricked with
blood-rush. At times his head began to swim. He was buoyed up by these morbid thoughts, and by the memory at the heart of them of Sebastian’s body moving under his own. The living heartbeat and its vessel body, the sweat that cooled on labouring skin. In his mind he saw this. But when he closed his eyes the picture was gone. There were only the usual small banks of explosions, incendiaries burning out upon his eyelids.

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Briar freed the key that Sebastian had given him from its bit of string, and hung it on a silver watch-chain. He kept it in his pocket. He would touch it sometimes, in passing, during lectures or as he walked from place to place. He learnt its lacquered curves, its contours, its allotment of space. He did not go to the house in St Lachrymose Lane to test it; he felt superstitious. He was waiting for some change in season. He did not know what it would be.

Days passed, and autumn descended in earnest. Briar took his bicycle out on the heath and watched the grass turn burnt-looking, dour. There was frost on the low shrub branches, some days. The lakes had turned to cool flat coins of darkness, and many of the birds had gone away. Still at times he would hear a single mournful call of some owl or eagle, hunting. He pedalled towards these noises. And at night, out on the moor or in his college rooms at Albridge, he lay
unsleeping and listened for a signal. He closed his fist around the key. He left his windows open. The white eye of the moon kept him awake.

It was not that Sebastian left his life – quite the contrary. He sulked like a ghost in the unseen part of conversations. Briar, encountering a likely individual – some aristocrat, or else a student of anatomy, would quite casually say, “Oh, do you know Sebastian Marsh, then?” Most often, the person did not, but would manage a polite impression: “He’s done so well, and with his history – poor thing.” Those who did know Sebastian shied away. They had one and all a look of spooked determination. Their mouths were sewn up against what they might say. All the same, Briar collected items of information. In the archives of the library he found a page from a newspaper, dated some three years prior. On the page was preserved a picture of Sebastian, looking gaunt and younger. Briar clipped it carefully and kept it. He was a thief, but he felt that his heart would excuse it.

And then, day by day, there were signs that made him think of Sebastian. Out on the moors early one morning, with hoarfrost hallowing the grounds into a bright and frigid state, he saw far-off a wood fire burning and a hunched figure by it, solitary. The smoke rose up in gusts and billows, like the white breath of day. Briar stood and stared. The black silhouette was unshifting. Briar could not make out its features. He thought of hiking up the stony hillside on a strange whim – just to see – but something in the air stopped him. Instead he turned and started
the wheels of his bicycle skating down the lane. He could not shed the scene entirely. He imagined Sebastian’s bare feet on the earth beside the campfire as he crouched low, heating his hands over the flame-licks or cracking charred bones with his teeth. Did he hunt, Sebastian, out on the moors? Not as gentlemen hunted, with hounds and horses, but with a honed animal silence and the curved knives Briar had glimpsed in his flat. That would be how Sebastian hunted. Briar shuddered. He looked over his shoulder. The fire could not be seen, but the smoke above was on the rise still, like a haunting.

By the doorstep of his hall in college he would lately find all kinds of things: stone bits of seashell all lined up, little echoes of an ancient age when all the earth around them had been covered in water, or Roman coins and chipped spearheads, and once a Viking brooch of extraordinary beauty with clay still wet between the lines of silver interlacing. It had been dug up from some barrow, this last; perhaps a grave. It bore a finely linked trefoil pattern. It ought, Briar thought, to be a museum piece. But he washed the clay from it and kept it with the other gifts. He had not owned so many nice things, not ever. He had a medal from the war, a minor decoration which he kept on the mantelpiece; after some contemplation he moved the medal next to it. The evenings were growing darker, and in the low light from the hearth fire the bronze and silver gleamed.
Towards the end of October, the gifts grew quite other in nature. There were heaps of flowers, ripped damp moor-land flowers on their long stems, bristling with leaves, and a butterfly left in a bell jar at his window, and a mourning dove, its wings bound up by a bright red fairground ribbon so that it could not flee. The bird pecked at Briar’s fingers when he tried to release it. Blood ran between his knuckles in slow streams, making hard to work at the rasping knot of the ribbon. Sebastian would have had only to whisper to it, he thought, to see it sink into a lulled state. This was a type of sorcery attributed to gypsies. They were snake charmers, horse handlers, bewitchers of livestock; they knew the language of animals. Surely that was how Sebastian had tied up the bird’s wings (for he had little doubt that it came, with the other gifts, from Sebastian). But Briar did not like to see it so bound. Something twitched in its frantic eyes that made him uneasy. When he freed it at last, it lumbered through the air: a loose projectile, struggling on unsteady wings. He watched as it regained its grace in measures. But it was mangled, somehow, subtly; it did not make it back to its former manner. It bobbed and weaved and tumbled on the breeze.

One morning he awoke to find the windows gleamed with ice, their panes all whitely frosted over. The fire had gone out in his room while he slept and the cold come mewling in. His knees and ankles were stiff. They recalled the hard days of the trenches, running, dodging over no-man’s-land, the fast twists that did
your muscles in. He raked the coals, re-lit the fire, and felt the heat start spilling outwards, loosening him inside his own skin. He sat at the edge of his bed and held a scrap of dream up, curiously turning at it to try and make it fit. It had not been a complex dream, from what he could remember. He had been digging in a wet grey patch of earth, a slimy sort of clay – digging with both hands, till his forearms were streaked and then covered. What he was digging for he could not say, only that he wanted it very badly. Desire for it itched up and down the back of his neck, needled his arms and legs. What came up from the earth was a torrent of salt water. At first it was a trickle, but then it fountained up, as though there were a sea just under everything around him, as though the land were a thin crust that he had dug through with his bare hands. In the dream he had drunk the water, salt though it was. Now, waking, the taste of it – icy, sharp, and mournful – stayed with him. He licked his lips. Yes, he could taste the sea, and something under, a blunt note of iron, a black stab of melancholy.

There was no gift on the doorstep. He walked to the library through a light fall of freezing rain and felt bereft. The key in his pocket was leaden. It felt inert, emptied of its certain magic, almost as though it had changed shape. The dead atmosphere of the day seeped into him, and he wanted to escape: to be some other place, dry and sweet and faintly foreign, a late-summer, laughing kind of place where he would lie with Sebastian on the heat-holding ground and feel amnesiac,
weightless and safe. Instead, the leaves that he trod on mulched into a solid substance underfoot, and his clothes grew heavy with the rain.

Sunk deep into this state, he did not expect to see a lithe figure perched atop the library rooftop, lightly iced and yet barefoot, lacking a coat, and looking down at him. It was Sebastian: too colourless for a crow and yet bird-like. His heart swelling, Briar called up to him, “What are you doing, you idiot? You’ll catch your death!”

Sebastian shinnied downwards, grasping effortlessly at hidden footholds in the stonework. He landed soundless on the grass and gazed into Briar’s startled face. He looked whittled-down, as though his bones were nearer to the surface. Frost clotted his fringe. He said, “Catch my death? Do you think so? That is not quite what I’m running after.”

Briar stripped his own coat off and settled it over Sebastian’s cold shoulders. It was heavy with wet, but woollen and warm. Briar’s hands wandered up and down the sleeves, checking that Sebastian’s arms were within them; he wrapped the broad folds more firmly about his narrow body. “You may think not,” he said. “But then I’m sure I don’t know what it is you’re running after.”

Sebastian looked at him hard. “No. I really don’t think that you do,” he said.

“So. Where have you been at? What have you been doing?”
“Questions, questions.”

“I missed you,” Briar said. He wondered if that remark were wholly accurate. It felt wrung from him. But it seemed now, looking back, that he had known Sebastian was not absent – that Sebastian was never very far from him.

“And did you sense it? The coming shift, the change in season?” Sebastian sounded eager. There was snow now mixed amid the rain; it stuck to his face like little stars, small perfect ornaments. Briar did not brush it away.

“No,” he admitted. “But I’m here, aren’t I? I’m here; I haven’t a thing to do that’s important; we can go away. Wherever you like. Just take me with you.”

Sebastian’s face shone with a satisfied light. He said, “I know just the place.”

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They trekked for miles over the moorland. The steady rainfall did not cease, though at times the air hissed between its teeth and spat forth ice instead of water. Broad-bellied clouds hugged close about the gorse and heather, and Briar found sometimes that he had walked through them without seeing that they were clouds at all. Up close they were a thick grey mist; only from far off could you see the cloud-shape.

He was wet and he was cold, so cold that his hands were clumsy and for long stretches he did not feel the rain on his numb face. His body was slowed, so
that his teeth did not chatter. But he followed Sebastian, who darted on ahead through the dull brown burn of the foliage, the autumn thicket of umber and red. Sometimes Sebastian scrambled on his hands and knees up hillsides. His eyes were bright. He saw no need for rest. When at last he stopped, there were lake-coloured mud-stains all up and down his body, as though he had been digging himself out of the earth.

They were stood in the hollow of a gradient valley. Great spills of stone cropped up from the ground around them, unformed and sombre. Sebastian pointed to an opening in the hillside: a narrow round of darkness, not quite Briar’s own height. Briar followed the gesture, not quite understanding.

“Go on,” Sebastian said. “Go inside.”

Briar eyed the gap.

Seeing his hesitation, Sebastian himself slid inside. His whole body vanished. His voice came out of some unseen cavern, expanded by echoes: “See, it’s all right! I promise.”

He sounded exultant. Briar stepped out of the storm-light and into a pitch-black substance, clammy and cool, a different kind of air. It stopped him breathing for a moment. He fought the sensation. His lungs fist ed. After a drawn-out, drowning caesura, he sucked in further air and found it sufficiently clean. The
panic passed. Ahead of him, Sebastian struck a light and set it to some flammable substance. The fire flared up and watered the walls with reddish tint.

They were in the anteroom of a tremendous cave. From this place, other passages sank out into shadow. A fire pit, circled with stones, had been laid far back, where Sebastian was standing. All around it, the slick walls were daubed with paint: the same crude and antiquated tracings of ochre men and horse-headed figures that Briar had seen in Sebastian’s lodgings. In places, silk cloths had been slung across them like curtains, in varying shades of vermilion and orange, azure and red. On the floor lay rolled some Oriental carpets, threadbare but darkly patterned with foreign vines and emblems. Sebastian had knelt and was spreading loose one of these carpets. He ran his hand across it, quick and desirous, smoothing out the rich folds of embroidery. He looked up at Briar. “Well?” he said.

Briar said slowly, “You’ve brought me to a gypsy place.”

“We camped here. Yes. For centuries.”

Briar walked the length of the wall. It appeared to be moving; the fire made nervous moues of darkness upon everything. The painted men twitched and lifted their feet. Lines of water ran from some unseen source, colourless and silent, as though the wall itself were weeping. He touched his fingers to the stone. It felt like living flesh, soft and slightly sweating. He wiped his hand on his
trousers and turned. Sebastian had shed his damp clothing and was laying his shirt out by the fireside. Shadows climbed across his body like leaves, vines and tendrils. Briar found that he was shivering. Cold and desire commingled in him. With shaky hands he unfastened his shirt buttons, stripped off his own clothes, and stood close to the fire, collecting heat. There was something in the smoke, the scent of an herb, high, dry, and foreign. He had smelt it before, in Sebastian’s flat, amongst the rushes. He closed his eyes and let it cleanse him.

He had Sebastian on the Oriental carpet, exquisite stitches rubbing at his skin till every move was almost painful. Sebastian made sounds that he had not expected, small reckless hitches of pleasure every time he gasped in, and Briar thought he wanted to hear that sound forever: a private kind of speaking, interpretable only to him, a language of savage jolts, all in the tongue and fingertips and nerve endings. He would like, he thought, to keep Sebastian on the brink of silence, with only his body communicating: no stammer in his speech, no shadow in his voice, just his scraping cries and the hard tide of his breath rushing out and in.

But too soon they were separate. Briar wished for the chance to lie there a while with his hands wandering the landscape of Sebastian’s skin. There were the livid scars he bore, but also general escarpments, valleys, skeletal places where bones curved and ended. He wanted to learn them. Sebastian was so impatient: on
his feet before his breath had slowed, even, pacing the cave whilst Briar fought
back sleep. The air now was hot, damp and soporific. He felt stupefied. He heard
Sebastian say, “So. Ask me a question.”

Briar pushed himself up to an elbow. “Why is that always what you say?”

“What should I say?”

“I don’t know. Come over here and lie down.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Of course it is.”

Sebastian obeyed. He stretched himself out beside Briar, atop the
embroidery. His arms and legs were locked with tension. Briar touched him
gingerly: just a slow hand on his shoulder, thumb gently stroking at a taut curl of
muscle. From this angle he could see a dark cloud-like shape where he had
pressed his mouth to Sebastian’s collarbone, collapsed the blood vessels, claimed
his minor injury. Under it the strange expanse of those scars was displayed. Some
were long and thin, like whip-marks, curving into filigree. Others were short and
ugly, surely the work of branding irons. Briar said, “Do you mind if I ask you – ”

“What?”

“How you got those scars.”

“It’s not important.”
Briar laughed, his breath huffing against Sebastian’s skin. “What on earth do you mean, it’s not important? It must have hurt. I can’t imagine – ”

“Can you not?” Sebastian turned to face him. His eyes, large and dilate in the firelight, commanded honesty.

“No; that isn’t true, I suppose. I was in the war. But you knew that.”

“Yes.” Sebastian was silent for a moment. He said, “You saw some things.”

“I don’t like to think of it.”

Sebastian took his hand unexpectedly, lacing his long fingers among Briar’s. “That is not entirely true,” he said. “But you have no scars. Your body is free.”

It was true. Briar bore no shrapnel down in the bone, like some soldiers; he had not been gassed, though his lungs in general were weak. He had no limp, had not lost the use of arms or fingers; unlike several of his company, he had not gone mad with shellshock or simple nervous strain, which was its own kind of scar, a visible damage. And he was not dead – could not leave that off the list – he was not dead, his body left for the white worms of France to unravel. He said, “You know so much about me.”

“Sometimes.”

“But you don’t tell me – well, anything. Only little pieces.”
Sebastian smiled. A soundless gesture, sweet. “Perhaps there are only pieces.”

“To you? Or do you mean, generally?”

“Or perhaps you fail to ask the right questions.”

Briar felt trapped. He asked, “So what are the right questions?”

But Sebastian had lowered his eyelids lazily, as though in half-sleep. “Do you see, there,” he said, lifting his finger upwards, “on the roof. We painted birds to watch us while we sleep. The gypsies think that birds are men who’ve died, but not quite died – they keep close, like saints. But not so good as saints; just close, and super-natural.”

Briar looked. The black shadows from the fire were dense and cloudy. But he could make out on the roof the outlines of birds: crows, ravens, hawks, and sparrows, hand-printed and preserved. The cave suddenly felt crowded. He said, “And what happens when the birds die?”

Sebastian said sleepily, “Some of them become other birds. And some of them go on. And some become demons. The world is full of demons, Jeremy.”

“Do you really think so?”

There was no response, just quiet breathing.

Briar shook Sebastian’s shoulder. “Please don’t sleep.”

Sebastian’s eyes flickered. “Why; are you frightened of the dark?”
“No.”

“Pity. I am, you know. It’s inconvenient. So what?”

“I want you to stay with me.”

Sebastian stretched and yawned, cat-like, showing his teeth. “Of course I will. Look, here I am. I am not leaving. Do you want me to say I’ll never leave?”

“No. I mean, that would be silly.” Briar looked down at him, at the slim desirable curve of his body. It did not feel silly. Sometimes when he was with Sebastian, odd dark thoughts presented in him. He wanted to shove his mouth against Sebastian’s and hold it there till neither of them could breathe. He wanted to press his hands against Sebastian’s chest and hear the bones cracking. He could not bear these thoughts. He did not know their source. He was gentle with Sebastian, so gentle; even when most greedy with want, his whole body hungry and hard to leash, he took care not to harm him. But still there was this sun-flash impulse: I’ll make it so that you cannot leave.

Sebastian was gazing at him. He no longer looked sleepy. He licked his lips, fast and restless, and asked, “What are you thinking?”

“About you.”

“Well, obviously.” He pressed a kiss to Briar’s forehead, tucked a lock of hair behind his ear. He said, “Go to sleep. When you wake, the storm will be gone. If you like, I’ll tell you a story.”
Briar was more weary than he had imagined. He found it hard to follow Sebastian’s foreign story, which had to do with a king who kept songbirds in cages, hundreds of songbirds, searching for the single measure of birdsong that would prove the key to a magic box the court sorcerer had given him. Inside the box was the sorcerer’s heart, or perhaps the king’s; it was not clear. Sebastian did not tell stories well. He left out things, and sometimes said words in another language before correcting himself. But his voice, with its halting cadence, was hypnotizing. Soon enough, Briar drifted to sleep.

When he woke, he found the fire gone down to embers. Sebastian had left. It was cold in the cave; he was alone, and shivering. Night gnawed against the outside entrance. Darkness settled on the moors, as far as he could see; not a candle cradled in a window to hint at human habitation; no white-steaming farmhouse; nothing. The rain had passed, as Sebastian had foreseen, but its remains had set into a bitter, solid mass of ice. It was no use going out. Briar raked the fire’s embers, and desolately fed it kindling. He dressed, and wrapped an ornate rug about his shoulders. Warmth returned: his fingers regained feeling. He thought to wonder what hour it was, and if he had been missed at the university. But Albridge seemed remote, somehow—its black robes and bicycle bells. Here, the ruddy stretch of light within the cavern was the only real and living thing. The fire snapped and threw off sparks that leapt and twisted; Briar’s
eye was drawn to the birds on the ceiling. Behind the clouds of smoke, they seemed to shift and cluster. They looked down on him inhumanly. He wanted to leave, but the night outside did not allow this. It was empty, whispering, sightless, eerie; he could not go out in it. He heard Sebastian’s echo: *The world is full of demons, Jeremy.* He did not think so; or had not, previously. Now his eye darted about the cavern. He eyed the passages leading off, further down into the earth, where he could not see. He hunched close to the fire. He could hear the whole world breathe.

It was hours before Sebastian returned. At first he was a rustling, a blacker spot within the blackness, a sickening noise of ice cracking. Then he appeared at the mouth of the cavern. He was wearing Briar’s coat, now spattered with mud and fine brown feathers. He held a knife between his teeth and a quail hen in each hand. He dropped these at the fireside. He said, “I thought you might be hungry.”

Briar stared at him. His mind was slow with lateness, but he felt somehow he ought to be protesting. This was not what people did, surely; if they were hungry they called a scout for cups of milk and thick brown bread; they did not hunt out on the moors in mid of night, killing hens. Besides: “I thought you were afraid of the dark,” he said.
Sebastian grinned: white teeth flashing. He was pulling fistfuls of feathers out of the hens; the air filled with the smell of them singeing as they drew too near the fire. “I am,” he said. “Mortally. But so are you afraid of death.”

“I don’t see your point.”

“You think about it constantly.”

“I do not!” The accusation stung. Briar looked away angrily. This was a thing that people said about soldiers: that they came back infected with death, like a disease that could not be cured and made you unclean. It hovered round you, they thought: the men you had killed and the men you might have killed, the men who might have killed you and the killing ambience, all of it, haunting. So he thought about death – it was in his landscape, like a shop window you walk past every week and think, Well, someday I will go in there, but not yet. “Anyway,” he said, “I don’t see what it has to do with being afraid of the dark.”

“I know you don’t,” Sebastian replied. He had stripped the two birds very rapidly and was spitting them on sticks: two skewers, which he laid over the fire, of blood-slick, dark red meat. Briar felt slightly repulsed, but ravenously hungry. Sebastian licked his fingers.

“Besides,” Briar said, hearing petulance in his voice, “why did you leave me?

“You were asleep.”
“You ought to have woken me up.”

“Oh, but – Jeremy, you look so beloved when you sleep.” Sebastian had lowered his voice; it was sweet now, and seductive. “I always wonder what you’re dreaming of. I can see your eyes move. Your mouth opens, as though you’d like to say things. Sometimes you scream.”

“I do not.”

Sebastian had moved very close. Briar fought the urge to kiss him, to topple him onto the tattered, calloused rug and wrench his clothes off him, to hold his hand at the edge of the fire and watch blisters swell along the skin, new scars for Briar himself to mouth at later –

Sebastian said, “I don’t mind when you scream. I mean, it doesn’t startle me. I like it. I still can’t tell what you are dreaming, but I know it’s something dreadful. Something scarring.”

“And you like that, do you?”

“Very much,” Sebastian breathed.

“I don’t think about death,” Briar said, but it was no use lying. Sebastian could taste the truth on him, he knew, when they met in a fierce untidy mess of tongues and teeth; could pick out all his secrets like they were set in his anatomy. He lay back against the bare and rocky surface and let Sebastian kiss him, not languidly, but with a hard and fierce fixation. Fingernails scraping along the

He could not maintain this line of thinking. It slid out from him in a long hot line of pleasure, and his mind turned greedy. He managed to grasp Sebastian’s wrists and hold him still for a moment. “Wait,” he said. He groped for words. “Can’t you talk to me, tell me something?”

Sebastian flexed thin tendons against Briar’s grip: testing. He did not try very hard to escape. He pressed into Briar’s body, eager, all edges and angles. “Ask,” he murmured. His voice seemed stopped in his throat. It stuttered. “Ask; ask me.”

Briar did not know what to ask. Thoughts staved through his defences: of digging his fingertips so hard into Sebastian’s skin that it would split and the blood divert out of his body like struck oil, wild and fluent. Of touching the white bone he could see if he did this, the hint of wet skeletal substance, the ghost that lived below the skin. He shut his eyes. His desire had not gone. It had grown in size. He released Sebastian’s arms. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, wretched.

“Oh, Jeremy,” Sebastian said. He rubbed his wrists. “Why do you lie to me?” There would be bruises, Briar thought. They stood out already, flushed finger-marks. They were not hard to see.

He let his head drop back. He said, “I should leave.”
“Don’t be silly. It’s not yet dawn. You’ll lose your way.”

“What will happen if I stay here?” The heat of the fire affected him recklessly. He felt dizzy of a sudden from the smoke, its high and bittersweet smell of herbs burning; he had to clear his head. The corners of the cavern had turned to gilt and tarnish, blurred, liquid, muttering. He scrubbed at his eyes. The black birds on the ceiling fluttered. They gathered their wings. He got to his feet, staggering a little.

“Jeremy, where are you going?”

“I have to get out. I’m sorry.”

He rushed for the cave’s exit. Outside the night was breaking into smaller and smaller pieces, like ice atop a lake in late spring, till it became translucent. Soon it would thin so much that the sun could be seen. For now he clambered in the unlit dawn, sometimes on his hands and knees, across the hard cold frozen grassland. He moved towards the stronger light in the east. He found to his surprise that he possessed a homing instinct, a kind of hard compass in his heart that turned him in correct directions. He did not remember having it before. In the past, he thought, he had gone very far off course.

There were things that he had seen in France, things that he did not like to say. They came to him in the half-cocked darkness. He had walked there, too, and never by day: in the cool unfriendly evenings, deceitfully scented with lavender
and sage – a ghost of a scent, as though everything on earth had a ghost. A bayonet, a brick, a field of flowers. A uniform coat, stained with blood – brass buttons and the coarse cloth bluish-grey. In France, in the trenches, they had all sometimes dreamt that they saw the ghosts of things rising. They skimmed the landscape. They did not look like their former bodies. They had a dim and bird-like shape. No soldier was tempted to call them angels. Their aspect was quite different. They drifted, bright and vaporous, over the trenches, and preyed upon you till you felt your breath fall backwards. In the morning when you woke up, you were riddled with frost and filled with sadness, and death had put its hand inside your ribs. It was possible to see the marks of this spread out, like blisters. They wept a thin clear liquid over your skin. When he had got clean of all that and was back in England, he had started to scrub free of this belief. The cold world here was not so haunted. Its handprints came from hard and fast, physical things. He’d thought there was no lasting damage. Surely ghosts could not affect you in such ways. There was the natural world, with its rules and facts, and there was this other plane of existence; the two did not interact, could not transgress upon each other in this way. In France, perhaps, there had been a rearrangement. An incomplete delineation. There, the boundaries of the earth had gone astray. He could not think back on that place without a lurch of confusion. His memories bled into each other. Something down in the undercurrents seethed. He recalled
seeing rats gnaw the interior of a rotted body, the visible intestines florid with a mould that turned them blue-green, and in his memory the eyes of the body shifted behind their shut lids as though to show that their owner were very deep in a dream. Surely this had not happened. And he had not seen one laughing soldier turn on another and tear the white bones out of his body, and then start on him with his teeth – or bodies crawling out of the earth, with wildflowers between their crushing fingers. This was France, where the world twisted, sweated, suffered in its fever-sleep. Elsewhere, life was better sorted. There was no such thing as ghosts, he could confidently say.

But he gradually began to feel that he had surrendered something to these fever-ghosts. Some inner part of him, a bone or organ, had gone missing. He had come back to England comprising less mass; his body had no longer the same weight. His balance was re-centred. He had to learn to bicycle anew. He found that he was clumsy, often, and slightly lopsided. He bumped into tables, tripped on pavements, broke wine glasses and champagne flutes.

For a time he tried to calculate what could have been taken. He thought back to those nights when stars needled all the white light out of heaven in pinpoints so small you could not map them. The sky lit up in busy, shrapnel-like clusters. Those nights when things scuttled in the darkness that you did not describe, that you did not dare, and he tested the edge of his bayonet against his
palm as a compulsion. If he had shifted by a hair, it would have cut. But he did not. He had no scars, as Sebastian said, none that he could bare. The bare and lobbing trail of a flare sent shivers up his brass cuff buttons. Something stirred in the air that was more than his breath. Barbed wire rattled. The teeming earth roiled with its dead. Bare electric bulbs shuddered in their sockets, in bunkers. In a half-inch of water, he laid down his head. And this was it: he could get no further than the wet and stagnant odour, the muttering of soon-to-be-dying men. The mystery remained: a seed kernel absence at the heart of him.

That was what he steered against on the moors: that distant, confusion. He walked till he could see the towers of his college on the horizon, and in the brightening yawn of morning’s at-last incipience he reached his own stair, and climbed the creaking steps up to the long hall, and lay down upon his bed. He slept without emptying his pockets, and when he woke in the evening, a fistful of silver coins had spread themselves over the duvet cover. They were warm where he had lain against them. And there, too, was Sebastian’s key: radiant with an unnatural heat, a coiled mass of metal locked to its watch chain.

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For a time then he did not see Sebastian. Out on the moors, autumn met its red end and winter sorted through the bones and ashes. The world turned grey. Some days there were still gifts left upon his windowsill. It took Briar’s breath
away to see a red apple perched there in the snow-melt – or something more jewel-like even, a plum the colour of contusions, or a violet cluster of grapes.

Once he plucked what he thought was a fruit up from the still ice and found that it was an emerald the size of an apricot, uncut and shapeless, dense and opaque. It was the most beautiful object ever to be put in his possession. To cut it would have reduced it; in this state it retained some earthy, unbenevolent power. It was worth thousands of pounds – Briar had it appraised, and then regretted the action, for it was not what Sebastian would have wanted. Sebastian, he felt certain, was indifferent to cost, expense, value; he could of course afford to be indifferent, but there was more to it than an aristocratic disingenuousness. Briar was certain that Sebastian thought the emerald essentially the same as a plum, an apple, a stone seashell. He thanked the jeweller who had appraised it and took the stone back unchanged. He tucked it on a shelf amongst the woollen sweaters in his armoire, and sometimes drew it out again to see the dark green light that shone there in the depths of it, like the eye of a drowned thing blinking under the sea.

He was not indifferent to Sebastian’s absence. On the contrary, he felt it like a kick to the heart, not the short sharp blow that army medics delivered when they were restarting things, but meant to hurt and badly aimed. You did this, he told himself, and he could not explain his behaviour in the cavern. There had existed no reason for him to be afraid. Memory leached most of the terror from
the moment, so that it became vague and troubling to look back on. Why had he panicked? What had he not wanted, in that room? In lecture halls where the coal was rationed and ice extended its curious patterns across chalkboards and book leaves, he sat and dreamed of Sebastian’s narrow fire-lit shoulders. He saw the sharp silks like sad carnival remnants colouring the limestone, and the Oriental carpets with their burnished reds and greens. All violence disappeared in the remembering, and instead he felt a funereal quality stir him. Sebastian, with his various scars and his too-skinny body, seemed the only mourner of some lost world—not animal, as Briar had briefly seen him, but only lonely.

Increasingly, Briar was convinced that he ought to make amends. To that end he visited Sebastian’s Albridge flat in late November. There was hard ice stood cold on the street. Few people were out, and those swathed in winter mufflers; a workhorse blew coarse white steam and shuddered to throw plates of frost off its broad body. Briar’s own breath clouded the window when he peered in at the house on St Lachrymose Lane. He scraped it wetly away. But still he could not see anything. Sebastian’s front room, with its odd décor and its floor full of hay, was shrouded in darkness and seemed empty.

He hesitated to enter. But, after all, Sebastian had given him the key. To give a key was as good as an agreement: this door, at least, will be locked to you
no longer. With trepidation he slid the key into the lock. He felt the tumblers fall into place, and he went in.

The room had been neatly swept and painted over. No trace of the previous, primitive habitation remained. It had the sense of a room to let: holes carefully patched and cracks filled with plaster. There was no furniture, nor any hint that it was a place in which someone lived.

Briar ran his hand over the paintwork. He was checking—he did not know for what. He inspected the floor for char-marks. Nothing; there was nothing. Only when he turned towards the door to leave did he catch the glint of silver and see the small knives still hanging on the wall there—not twelve, as there had been, but only three, and the other iron hooks void of cargo. Those remaining were, he thought, the smallest three: their blades measuring perhaps two, three, and five inches where the others had been longer. He touched one with a sense of unease. Its blade was as sharp as he had remembered. Blood formed atop his fingertip in beads. Before he could think too much about it, he was stripping the knives from the wall. He slid them into his coat pocket and left in a hurry, stopping only to collect the key. He walked down the street with his head bent. He felt like a thief. And yet an aura of ownership had hung over the knives when he beheld them—as though they were familiar to his body; as though, through some obscure act of rendition, they belonged to him already.
At any rate, Briar thought, if they had not been meant for him to find and keep, Sebastian himself would have to come and collect them. The idea made him walk faster. His breath came hard and white, like the workhorse’s. His shoes clicked hard on the cobblestone streets.

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He set the knives upon the mantelpiece beside the Viking pin and his wartime decoration. In the evenings, when he sat and wrote by the firelight, his eyes were drawn to them. Their crude shape and chipped sharp edges, their hilts’ dark gems, hinted at a manufacture he could not imagine. His mind ran relentlessly over the means by which he had gotten them. He could not think why Sebastian would have left his town rooms and left the knives within—but then, so much of Sebastian was unthinkable. Briar’s ability to sort out reasons for what he did was interrupted by images of Sebastian, loose-limbed and sleepy-eyed, speaking in his halting inflection while outside rain ran in lines like embroidery thread and the shadows moved, liquid, haunting, desirous, touching him with their small inhuman hands.

Sometimes he dreamt that Sebastian lay beside him in bed and curled his hands covetously around Briar’s body. And sometimes he dreamt that Sebastian knelt above him, holding one of the small curved knives in his hand. And sometimes he dreamt that it was he who knelt, with Sebastian beneath him, his
knees on either side of Sebastian’s narrow chest. In that dream he held the knife in his hand: felt its cool weight. Anticipation kindled. His breath quickened. Sebastian’s mouth moved, silent, swollen and tender, forming words in a language he could not understand.

The date came that was set aside as Remembrance Day. There were supposed to be red poppies to put on soldiers’ graves. But nothing grew out on the moors, or in town gardens. There was a general air of withering. Briar donned a grey serge coat to go to the Remembrance ceremony. He did not particularly want to go; he did not want to be seen. He stood for a while at the door of his room, and after a moment’s hesitating, slipped Sebastian’s knives into his coat pocket. The action seemed, for a reason he could not decipher, very fitting. Thus arrayed, with their talismanic weight on his body, he went out. The sky was ministerial above him, a white like whey, like linen. Birds cawed in the branches as he walked to the chapel. On the way, he picked a bit of milk thistle from a spare patch of grass. He pinned it to his coat’s lapel. He felt ragged but certain.

They stood in the churchyard: Albridge dons, men in dress uniform, war widows with eyes like chips of flint. The chaplain read out a service. Briar did not listen. Midway through it, the snow began falling. In flakes, at first, and then a latticework of little eddies, whorls and currents. He closed his eyes and heard bells, not the steady step-turn tolling of the church’s steeple, but a multitude:
smaller, lighter and more varied. Bells that might varnish a child’s toy or horse’s bridle. He thought that probably they were only in his head. But they sent a shiver down him. They made him think of the dead twitching in their graves, the dimly envisioned dance of the last resurrection, when those who had been buried would burst forth. The great return from death; what would it look like? He did not really believe, but the sound of the bells summoned something. He thrust his hands into his pockets and thought of fishermen’s superstitions: little wind-catchers made of oyster shells, and a tendency to throw salt in the salt-already water, and the belief that at a certain time of night, one night annually, a barge came rolling out of the grey inlets: a funeral barge, carrying a great king, and any man who saw it would have luck for one brief cycle before being dragged down into the depths of that same sea. As a child, he had seen these as the realities of life. He had looked for that barge, hoping to see its red sails and the crown set upon the head of the king, and the saints who stood as wind-swept mourners. He had wanted it, wanted to feel the blood thrum through him as he beheld the foreign power of the thing; hat wanted to feel the fringe of death on his horizon like a slow-growing weed. In the trenches death had not had that quality. It had been swift, unsubtle, noisome, not clean. Where they fell, the corpses had stayed for days, sullenly expanding. It was no secret that these bodies would not be seen at the final resurrection. They would collapse into wet scraps of flesh, and the crows and rats would come and eat
them. No wonder the battlefield had been home to ghosts, if ghosts were truly what those half-formed shapes had been. The homelessness of the soul troubled soldiers who had seen that wreck of bones and skin.

He shivered forwards from this reverie. Snow covered him in white wet patches. The chaplain crossed himself, hand swinging. A woman cast a sole red flower on a grave. On the horizon, Briar saw another flash of colour. A brightly similar autumn, burnt umber shade. He started towards it without thinking. He shielded his eyes and blinked the snow away. No one at the memorial would notice his absence, he thought. Their attention was fixed upon the graves.

The colour came again. It was a flag of some kind. No—a scarf, or a raw sheaf of silk, shuddering and lightweight, with the light running through it. It waved from the grasp of a figure stood halfway up the far hillside. Sebastian, Briar thought—Sebastian. He hastened his pace. And it was Sebastian: a loose suit coat hung over his shoulders, his hair in disarray, the tattered silk scarf dripping from his fingers. There were bells sewn to the brown-red silk. Copper bells: they tintinnabulated, making the music that Briar had heard at the service. Sebastian looked away as Briar came closer. He did not say anything.

“Hello,” Briar ventured as he came to a stop a few feet from him. He stared directly at Sebastian. He wanted to drink in this image of him with the wet
grey sky behind him, the belled silk like a bold aurora spilling out of him. He watched Sebastian’s restless fingers pick at the silk. Briar said, “I got the gifts.”

“Did you.”

“Yes. You shouldn’t have—” He stopped. He had thought of the rocky emerald, but now he remembered the small sharp knives. His hand went to his pocket. He caressed a blade. “You shouldn’t have,” he said again.

The bells on the length of silk rustled. Sebastian bent his head. His hair was close to as fair as the snow falling around it. Briar’s fingers itched to be buried there. Sebastian shifted his shoulders. Diffident, he said, “You didn’t have to take them.”

“Yes,” Briar said. “Yes, I did.”

He stepped closer then and caught hold of the silk, pulling it towards him. Sebastian came with it. Briar placed his hands on Sebastian’s shoulders, then up under his suit coat, over the line of his ribs. Sebastian smelled like sleep and wood smoke, bracken, branches, ice forming in the upper air. Briar put his head against the curve between Sebastian’s cheek and collar. In a moment, Sebastian’s arms came up over his back. Briar’s heart would not stop beating.

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They walked the roads at the edge of the moor. Briar did not ask where they were going. He held Sebastian’s hand in his. They were both shivering.
Despite this, his skin felt sun-blasted. As though he had stood too close to a fire, and caught the contagion of its heat. Sebastian wore the silk wrapped round his throat. He walked with a jingling. Every basic movement was music. It made Briar knot his fingers round Sebastian’s wrist.

Sebastian pointed out long lists of winter’s alterations, which only he could easily see. A light gold hawk that dived into a meadow. A dark red berry flowering on a tree. Frail strings of ice that glazed the small flat rivers where water rushed too fast to solid-freeze. The thinness of crows that sat on signposts, shutting and opening their skeletal beaks. Briar and Sebastian stopped so Sebastian could lever up the dirt in hitches, hard blocks that did not lose their bare consistency. He sifted through the soil to show where seeds and bulbs were buried—the seeds like little bits of sand, the bulbs like human hearts: which was disturbing. Briar held one such bulb in the palm of his hand. It had little weight. It felt desiccant, hollow. He wondered where the life in it was located. Sebastian took the bulb from him and slipped it into a pocket.

“I’ll show you how to grow it,” he said.

The other seeds he swept into the ground and covered over. He leant on the earth, tamping it down with both his hands.

“Yes.” Sebastian studied the sun. He brushed the dirt from his trousers—or no, Briar realized; he was grinding it in. Dust stained the grey wool. “I didn’t feel at home there anymore. I had to find a new way of living.”

“And so, what?”

“So I went off into the wild, to make a decision.”

“What decision? A decision about me?” Having asked this question, Briar felt foolish. He shifted uncomfortably. “I’m sorry for how I behaved, before. I’m sorry for leaving in such a hurry. I was frightened. I get frightened.”

“Yes, I know,” Sebastian said.

“Before, I wasn’t frightened. In the war. Among the dead. Not really, I mean. Not like this.” Absently he touched Sebastian’s wrist. There was a scar there that he had somehow missed, that he had not ever seen: a white semi-circle. He traced it with his fingertip. “Look at you,” he said. “For instance. You’re so fragile. Anything could hurt you. It has done. It did.”

“So?”

“So, I want to protect you.” This was not what he meant. He searched for some more precise set of words. But the cold in the air made it hard to think.
Sebastian waited, and then did not wait any longer. He tugged at Briar’s hand. “Anyways, why must it matter? Come walk for a while in the wild with me.”

So they left the road and walked out into the moorland. The snow was falling more thickly. It that season when night came early, in stages, and Briar could see it curling over the low hills, a storm-cloud colour. The wind clawed at his cheeks. He said to Sebastian, “Aren’t you cold, dressed like that?”

“Not especially.” Sebastian tossed his fair hair. His cheeks had flushed red, but the look on his face was haughty. “Cold is such a small thing. You forget that winter is the hunting season.”

Briar did not know what this might mean. He said uncertainly, “You mean for wolves and foxes and owls?”

“And for people like me.”

Sebastian strayed to the left, past a crowberry shrub whose leaves were still green despite the weight of snow that was on them. Breaking free of Briar’s hand, he skipped over the bleached grass and scampered nimbly up a long ridge of silver-brown rock. He climbed with his hands and his feet, like a fox. When he reached the edge he called out, “Come on, quicker!”

Briar followed him, but not so fast, and clumsy. The stone was slick and his shoes scraped against it. He felt unsteady. When he stood at last at the top of
the slope, he could barely see the landscape below. It was smoked by clouds, each field snow-parcelled. He could not see anything moving in it, apart from where wind pushed the snow from one side to the next: eastwards, westwards. And the snow, light and glittering, would go.

Sebastian had his eyes fixed on something. His eyes were narrowed. He froze in one lithe and graceful position. Not even the bells on his scarf struck a note. Then softly he turned to Briar. “Look,” he whispered.

Briar looked, and did not see at first what Sebastian had picked out. Then a curl of smoke became darkly visible, articulating itself amidst the snow and evergreens—one wavering line that seemed to rise from nowhere.

Sebastian cocked his head and inhaled deeply. Briar fancied too that he could smell the scent: not the warm fragrance of wood, but something stronger, foreign; the scent whose dried and spicy echo he’d so often smelt on Sebastian’s skin. He shivered. A spike of desire went through him. Yet at the same time he tasted dread at the back of his throat, a physical flavour, as though something he’d swallowed once was now poisoning him.

“What is that?” he asked. “Where is that fire?”

Sebastian said, “You won’t see it; only the smoke. The fire is not in a place that you can look.”

“It’s a gypsy thing, isn’t it?”
Sebastian did not answer. He stared down through the snow. Briar could see the hunger in him. He felt in his bones a hot stab of rage, just for an instant. He envisioned himself seizing Sebastian’s shoulders, pressing bruises the size of his fingertips into the flesh on the narrow bones there, biting into Sebastian’s lip. He swallowed a sound he had almost made. He said, “I thought that the gypsies had left.”

“Some have. And some of us are still leaving.”

Briar looked back out over the landscape. Despite what Sebastian had said, he tried to see past the thread of the smoke, to the fire at its end. He saw nothing. The smoke itself was like charcoal, and he was reminded of the sketches of birds on the roof of the gypsy cavern, the rough black crows and ravens. “Will you go down to them?” he asked.

“No.”

“But do you want to?”

Sebastian tilted his head and looked at him. “What do you think I would do there, Jeremy?”

“You would—you would be with them.” Briar could not explain what he meant by this phrase. He knew only that his hands had clenched into fists at the thought of Sebastian leaving his side for the gypsy encampment. He had no idea of what that encampment would be like; he did not even know the gypsies’
language—only that it was a secret language, which Sebastian spoke, but which
Sebastian could never speak to him. The knowledge of this was unbearable. He
wanted to tear the language out of Sebastian, word by hidden word, till all that
remained was the flat speech of English. He said, his voice shaking, “You would
go off on the moors with your bells and your songs, and I would never see you
again.”

Sebastian’s eyes were wide and his mouth was open. He breathed in white
hot bursts. He looked avid. His whole bird-frame was poised on the tip of the
rock. His black coat billowed out around him. “And what if I said, Yes, I want
that? What would you do to prevent it?”

Briar put his hand on Sebastian’s arm. He said to Sebastian, not able to
keep his voice even, “Please don’t do this.” He could feel Sebastian’s pulse
jerking in his body, the fugitive blood soaring through him. He dug his fingers
into muscle, as he had imagined doing, more than hard enough to mark the skin.
Sebastian made no noise of protest, but breathed harder. Briar pulled him away
from the ridge; forced him down to the earth. The motion was awkward. The
slight incline of the ground meant that they rolled through the snow, angling
against hard stone. Snowflakes damped and beglittered both of their heads. Briar
pressed down hard on Sebastian’s shoulders. Pressing him against the white-gold
grass, the dead leaves and the little roots not quite killed yet; watching him lick
the snow from his mouth with a little flick that showed where he had bitten his
tongue in the struggle. Briar kissed him and tasted blood, like a red bit of the
ocean. He thought perhaps it had always been part of the taste of Sebastian. “Tell
me,” he said. “Tell me you won’t go. I couldn’t stand it when you left. I dreamt
about you. I dreamt we were together. You can’t ever leave again.”

Sebastian pushed back against his hands: half-resistance, half-enticement
A lazy smile hooked the corner of his mouth. His lips were very red. The smell of
the smoke in the distance rose, sweet and dusty, raked by uneasy winds. All at
once the air was redolent, heady. Briar pressed his face to the woundable skin at
Sebastian’s throat, to the fatal hollow where bone gave way to tendons. He tore at
the red silk length of belled scarf. The bells rang out in forlorn concert. He wanted
to make that wild smell cease. Briar thrust the scarf away, and the wind took it,
and he saw it twist in a bright red streak: a cut of blood against the sky, a
ceremonial carving.

Sebastian said dreamily, “Do you think they’ll hear the bells, from around
their campsite? They might sing and clap their hands, because no one has carried
such bells in a long time, because there are so few of us left…”

Briar struck him across the face. He did not mean to do it. He felt
Sebastian’s body shudder briefly under him. He clenched his hands in Sebastian’s
hair, full of remorse. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he said. But he did not feel
sorry. He put his lips to where Sebastian’s cheek was speckle-marked with red, where under the skin he was bleeding. He wanted to taste the salt of that fluence. He wanted to know the curve of the bone. There should be, he thought, no part of Sebastian where he could not go, no part that was secret. Each fragile wrist was an incognita that he was urgent to expose. He wanted to see the dark place behind Sebastian’s tongue, at the back of his throat, where his speech froze in sudden voiceless limitations—to learn at last all those words left unuttered, trapped, untranslatable into prose. He would look for the heart, the violent heart, an organ no larger than his fist. He would dig in the red wet sea of the chest. He would spread the wings of Sebastian’s ribs.

“Briar,” Sebastian said. His voice was a whisper. His eyes looked exultant.

Briar was crying. He felt the tears on his face. He tasted them. “Yes,” he said.

“There is another country. A different country. Not like this. I’ve seen them going there, with their wagons and their horses. They said I could come someday. It was meant to be a secret. I’m telling you so that you’ll know where I’ve gone. It’s a gift.”

He touched Briar’s face with one cold hand.

Briar closed his eyes.

Sebastian said again, “It’s a gift.”
The longest of the knives came easy to Briar’s hand. He was not aware of drawing it from his pocket. He sank the blade into Sebastian’s stomach, just below the ribs, and shoved it upwards, through muscle and sinew. The blood fountained at first, then ran more sluggish. The smell of gore was bright and foreign. A bird landed, bright-eyed, drawn by the carnage. Sebastian made a sound, then did not.

Briar wept.

For a long time he lay by Sebastian’s body. There was blood in his hair; on his coat, his hands. The snow had long since stopped falling. Night had crept like a predator over the land. More birds had gathered in the low shrubs and on the line of the limestone ridge. Their eyes gleamed in the darkness. Briar could hear the noise of their claw feet and feathers. He was not capable of movement.

He thought about what Sebastian had said, that the gypsies believed birds to be men who had died but not died. It seemed to him a possibility. He wondered if it would be better like that. There would be only song, and never speech. There would be a new form, a brand-new body, a perfect mechanism, more complete. Surely when you died, your wounds died with you. You did not carry them on; there was a forgiveness. Your faults and your injuries did not repeat. So much violence could not be contained in some other form. You would have to be freed.
He watched the birds draw nearer and nearer. In his damp pocket, the knives were a heat. He could feel them through the layers of cloth. There were two remaining. He remembered their dark gems, darker than blood, so small that they might be seeds. He pressed his face to the earth; tasted iron and snow and salt and nothing, nothing growing. He breathed and tried to gather his strength. The birds eyed him with pity of animals: like saints in the night, and very silently.
They had been three weeks upon the expedition. Gris woke now in the night, just before dawn, some days, and watched the red line of the sun on the horizon, and could not remember rain upon his face, nor the faience blue of the sea where it touched the raw coast of his green-drenched home in the Indies.

It had rained on the day that they left Laada: a fey, light, and glittering rain that glazed the rooftops and stood out like sweat on their bodies. Meo had turned the cuff back from his wrist and held his arm out—then put his mouth to his skin, tasting the water. Gris had watched him. Meo had said, “I can taste the desert in this.” He’d licked his lips, a quick animal flicker of tongue. Since then, rain had ceased to exist. There was only the eggshell dome of the sky, bleached like a bone that sun has scavenged.

There were four of them: Gris and Meo, and the two native men whose language Gris did not speak and Meo spoke a little. The men wore white cloth and carried rifles. They eyed Gris and Meo contumulously. In the evenings they prayed, bent close to the sand, their bodies nearly prostrate. Their form of prayer had a particular cadence, rising and falling, which Meo would sometimes imitate when he and Gris were lagging behind. He fitted his own syllables to the
recitation, and Gris could not tell if they had meaning. He understood that what Meo did was not mocking, but he was troubled by the mimicry. He said, “Don’t. I don’t like it. You don’t know what you’re summoning.” Meo glanced at him from under solemn dark lashes; lowered his gaze. He whistled a cryptic phrase of music. The air of the desert muted it fast. After a moment he whistled it again.

Meo had the olive skin and the high, dark features of someone born to hot climates. The sun did not burn him, or rarely. He wore his white shemagh like a native. In Laada, he had sometimes been mistaken for a native. Men and women would stop him on the street and speak to him in their liquid, circling language. He would spread his hands and say a phrase that meant (he told Gris), “Go more slowly, please” or, “I am a stranger.” These men and women would not talk to Gris, who was pale and had hair the color of fox fur. If pressed to pay him some attention, they would preface their remarks to him with a covering of the eyes: a gesture, Meo told him, that protected against mal de ojo. Gris said, “I don’t know what that means.” Meo laughed, and muttered something in Spanish. Later he showed Meo, in the deserted courtyard of a restaurant, a dead white tree into which some unknown hand had carved the shape of an eye. Pieces of Laadi money were tied to the branches of the tree with ribbons, and blue glass amulets hung, pendulous, in the breeze. “Mal de ojo,” Meo said. “Evil eye.” Gris
examined the carving, touched the tree. The trunk was smooth and hollow, withered. The cuts were deep.

The fever revisited Gris on the twenty-fourth night of their journey. At first he thought that it was only sunstroke, which he had very often suffered in the early part of the expedition, but as the night progressed he began to sweat. Perspiration dampened the skin of his hands so that his palms left black prints on the blanket. He turned from one side to the other, paralyzed by fear, afraid to sleep. The episodes of fever often presented with dreams of disorientating clarity. Colors in these dreams were oddly heightened. Smells haunted him for days after waking. At home in the Indies, in the first fits of sickness, he had once dreamed that he was standing in a garden, beside a single fountain that had ceased to flow. Lichen made the surface into an island, matted and startlingly green. To his left was a lemon tree. Its branches were drooping. He could smell the leaves, bruised and sweet, as though after a thunderstorm. Thirsty, he dipped his hand into the fountain, hoping to find clean water to drink. Instead he felt something move against his fingertips, down under the green lichen, where he could not see. The horror of this dream stayed with him. For a long time, he felt physically sick each time he smelled or tasted lemons. He had overcome the reflex by the time he came to Laada, with its superfluence of citrus trees. But the scent of them that hung in the city gave him headaches.
Now his shuddering woke Meo, sleeping some feet from him. Meo sat up. In the firelight, his eyes gleamed. "¿Enfermo?" he asked, before he had quite adjusted. English was not the language in which Meo dreamed. Then: “Are you ill?” He shifted his blankets, and crept along the sand till he could cup Gris’ face. The sweat ran at Gris’ forehead like water. His hair was soaked with it. A heat rose off him that seemed inhuman. He wondered how Meo did not flinch. But Meo merely sat in the sand cross-legged and stripped off his shirt, applying it as a compress. It felt mercifully cold. The cloth smelled of Meo, clean and faintly musky. Gris closed his eyes. He heard Meo sigh. “The sweating will be gone soon. It will be morning. The stars are moving. In the desert you can see them all. I will tell you their names,” Meo said. He began to outline the constellations, not ones with which Gris was familiar. There were the Dhow and the Dromon, low ships that sailed towards the horizon. There were the Dark-eyed Girl and the Singing Imam, names that Meo would not further explain. The sound of Meo speaking was a current that Gris let carry him to the frontier of sleep—but no further, so that when dawn came, he was still listening.

Meo had sat with him many times before, through such fevers. “Fevers,” though they were all children of the same fever: a sickness that he carried in the blood, in his body, from place to place. He had got it in the Indies—a surfeit of damp air in childhood, claimed one doctor. Another blamed the quantity and
nature of his dreams. A third doctor spoke of insects that thronged against the windows of Indian houses nightly: lustrous and winged, darkly writhing, the bearers of disease. Gris had been bled by all of these doctors, dosed with mercury and quinine. He had visited shamans in villages on his native island who had led him into the jungle and bade him to drink strongly spiced, vegetal-smelling decoctions while they danced around him in a cacophony of bells and hollow wooden clappers. They mimed pulling a demon out of him: hand over hand, as you would reel a fish from the sea. Lastly they coaxed a bird down from the forest, out of the tar-black canopy: a fist-sized bird with blind white eyes that blinked rapidly. Gris lay perfectly still. The bird alighted on his chest. He felt its small feet like the scratch of writing, like a sharp nib against a sheet. The bird wandered to the left part of his ribcage. It stopped above his heart, and began to drive its beak into the skin. Blood welled up, or perhaps Gris had dreamt this. Later his chest was unmarked, but he did not quite believe it. He remembered the bird’s eyes, smooth and blind, twitching back and forth as though searching.

It had been Meo who suggested travelling to the spring. He had come across a reference to it in some antique book. Or had he encountered its mythology on some previous visit to Laada? It was difficult to recall. They had been living in Ludminster at the time, Meo working as a translator, Gris a recent migrant from the Indies. Gris remembered the day: a cool and rainy morning,
maps spread out across the breakfast table, pictures of minarets and the moon above sand-dune mountains. Meo spoke about the desert reverently: “A strong wind will erase your footsteps as though they had never been, so that those who live there believe you must have a guiding spirit, a private jinn, the purpose of which is just to take you where you are going. Every person, they think, possesses this. It is the only way to resist losing one’s way in the desert.” Meo purported to know a great deal about these things, but he did not let on if he believed them. He pointed out names on the map and translated their meaning: the Plain of a Thousand Ghosts, the Grave of the Almond Khalif, the Red Gate of Ravenous Men. There were stories behind each that Meo did not tell him. Laada, Meo said, meant “the shell-like city.” When he said it, Gris did not think of damp seashells, but of paper locust skins.

On the twenty-fifth day, they resumed the expedition. Gris’ fever had gone from him. This was in the nature of the sickness: it came at night and then went in the day, repeating the cycle, sometimes for weeks. Gris would awaken exhausted, wrung-out and sore, and want to sleep till sundown, when the shivering began. Now he did not yet feel it much. He was able to keep pace with Meo, if not with the native men. He etched his spindly stride across the high dunes. He did not turn to see the wind efface it. He continued walking till sometime after noon, when one of the native men called out: a curt word to one of his fellows. “What is it?”
Gris asked. Meo, looking ahead, said, “It is nothing. They are seeing mirages.”

Gris crested the dune and cupped his hands above his eyes, his feet sinking in the sand as he did so. The light was like a cloud that hung over the desert. The line of the horizon moved. It crawled, a slow serpent, a long, sinister, living thing. One of the Laadi men gestured to Gris; he pointed and said a word, trying to make Gris understand. Gris looked back again and saw an almond tree growing in the infertile sand. The tree was in blossom, green fruit just beginning to bear down each black-barked, whippy branch. White-pink flowers, pale and skin-colored, persisted. As he watched, a slow wind stirred through it. Cool shadows patterned the ground, inviting him. Without thinking, he stepped toward it. Meo stopped him. “It is a mirage,” he said. “The desert makes them.” Gris glanced back. Meo asked, “What do you see?” Gris described the tree, its dark branches. Meo said, “Some men see the minarets of cities, some see oases guarded by angels; still others think that they see the sea.” His eyes were fixed on the space where Gris had been looking. He shifted the weight of his pack and said, “One can distinguish a fantasy. For instance, it is not the right season for almonds.” As he moved on, the sun stretched his shadow till it was a narrow path of darkness on the desert’s surface, unfolding like a wing.

On the twenty-sixth day, they reached the area where Gris had seen the almond tree—or such was his estimate. It was evening, the black edge of the earth
bisecting the sun. In the place where the tree would have been was a pile of rocks, weathered clean, each about the size of a grown man’s skull. There were in total perhaps twelve or thirteen. Gris hefted one. It was hot to the touch, which surprised him. A whisper went up between the two Laadi natives. Meo said, “They say this is a grave, the place where a dead man is sleeping.” Gris placed the stone back hastily. “Don’t worry. You can’t give offence,” Meo told him. “They think you are like a dead man already. You are unclean.” “Can’t you explain to them?” Gris asked, his voice rising a little. He was disturbed. He felt that the superstition in some way changed, affected him. He was marooned by his own lack of understanding. The men looked at him constantly from the corners of their eyes, as though he were someone they pitied. They would not eat with him, nor share his water. They would not even tell him their names. *Mal de ojo,* he thought. Meo said, “It is beyond my fluency.”

They camped that night beside the grave. The Laadi men would sleep no nearer than several meters. Their separate fire made Gris uneasy. He would see it stir at the periphery of his vision and mistake it for a ghost, a jackal, a jinn, and his heart would jump even as he was comprehending that it was only the wind. Meo said, “You are getting superstitious. Perhaps you would rather sleep like them, out in the desert.” In fact, Gris had thought to suggest it, but he did not now want to give credence to this teasing. Instead he set his bedroll down beside
Meo’s and lay in it. The long light of the fire reddened his eyelids. He felt Meo lie down beside him. Meo said, “When you’re with me, there is nothing for you to be afraid of.” He curled his arm over Gris’ shoulder possessively.

Gris slept, and in a fever dream, saw one of the many bathhouses of Laada where men in wooden shoes slipped in and out of hallways through clouds of fragrant steam. For a price, a bathhouse attendant would take a cedar switch and beat you clean, the cut fronds streaming lukewarm water. In the languid heat, Gris could doze and imagine the liquid noises he heard were those of his home in the Indies. Yet here was Meo, coming to shake him awake and lead him through the tiled corridors to a room he had not seen. Meo was barefoot, leaving faint, high-arched prints against the stone flooring. He wore a towel wrapped twice around his waist. His upper body was bare, and Gris noticed for the first time a forest of white scars covering his skin. They were fine as filaments, visible on both the chest and back—sometimes straight as though from a whip-stroke, sometimes coiled like a dense cursive script. Gris stopped. He gently touched Meo’s shoulder, tracing one knotted cicatrice. He felt nauseous, uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure what to do. The blind, white scar tissue sickened him. The wounds spoke of some stained past, painful and violent; the sort of past that sears and deforms, the sort that bleeds. Abruptly, the wet air of the bathhouse was oppressive. He wanted very much to leave. But Meo said, “No, we are not there
yet.” He seemed oblivious to Gris’ horror. He turned and smiled, lowering his long dark lashes. For a second he was so desirable that Gris could scarcely breathe. “You’ll like where we’re going,” he said. “I promise. You’ll see.”

Gris woke chased by an echo of nausea from the dream. He leaned over and retched emptily. His blankets were soaked with sweat. Beside him, Meo was still sleeping. Dawn prowled the outskirts of the dark air; from the far camp he heard one of the men speaking. His hushed voice shivered in the silence. Gris strained to hear, but stayed uncomprehending. Meo moved, pressing his face into the bedroll, drowsily protesting. For a moment Gris watched him. Without letting himself think, he reached out and drew back Meo’s shirttail. He trailed his fingers down the smooth whole skin beneath it. He closed his eyes; saw phantom scars. He let his hand rest on Meo’s ribcage.

The spring was now three days distant, if their maps were to be believed. Neither the native men nor Meo would commit to this figure. The spring was not a city, it was not a caravanserai; both of these were locations more or less fixed. The spring, on the other hand, was supernatural in nature. It might go where it pleased. Gris was troubled by this response. Meo shrugged and said equanimously, “It isn’t as though we are in a hurry. We have supplies, and no particular need to return.” “Yes, but...” Gris found it difficult to pinpoint his distress, the sense that this idea seemed unreasonable. He felt groggy and sun-sick. He said, “I will be
glad when we leave the desert.” Leaving was a thing he could not imagine. He associated it with the touch of rain, the feathery sound of the sea.

In Ludminster, Meo had locating the spring on a sequence of maps: some showing topographic features, others political boundaries. “So far is it within the desert, they say, that a man may die without reaching it. But he who drinks from it will forever after be free of all disease.” Gris was dubious. Despite his upbringing in the myth-thick Indies, he had an erratic sort of faith, indifferent on the topic of miracles. He believed in luck and superstition, but miracles he found difficult to believe. “Where I come from,” Meo said, “we have such places. We do not speak about them. Shrines where saints have died, where bones of saints are buried. I have personally seen a bird descended from that flock of San Cuervo. Do you know the story? It is a misteria, the story of a martyr. The man was murdered in Beget at the behest of a kalif. The kalif wished San Cuervo’s heart to be cut from his body and pierced by a staff, a warning to Christians. His soldiers split the ribs, searched in the bloody part of the chest, down in the chest cavity, but when they pulled out what they thought was the heart, it spread little wings. It was a bird that slipped their bloody hands. Again they searched—gore up to their elbows—and produced a second heart, red, warm, and wet, and again it sprouted wings. You can imagine how this continued: till there was a flock of birds, all smelling of flesh, filling the rafters.” Meo’s fingers fluttered briefly outwards. He had
exceedingly beautiful hands, Gris had often thought, long and expressive. It was distressing to think of them wet and blood-covered, like the birds’ wings. “These birds,” Meo said, “are reputed to have power. They live forever, and have great force of healing.” Gris asked, skeptical, “Are you supposed to ask the bird to heal you?” Meo looked as though he were stupid. He said, “You kill the bird and clean its bones. Keep them in a little box. A . . . how do you call it? A reliquary.” Gris felt slightly sickened. He looked at Meo’s hands, closed now in fists. He thought of how easy it must be to kill a bird, barehanded. Imagined the beating of its heart against his fingers, the frantic scratching of its little feet.

It had seemed then that Meo had some secret knowledge, some source of power—savage and innate—that Gris was required to trust without real apprehension. Meo had been insistent: “We must go to the spring. You will not ever be well without it. You’ve seen the doctors; they have nothing to tell you. The fevers will not cease.” And Meo had plotted their course—from Ludminster to Le Havre, and thence overland, through the Levant, passing Cappadocia and Greece. Meo had previously visited all of these places. He possessed a store of knowledge about each. The correct sites to cash checks or change money, the quiet cafes, the stylish hotels, the chapels where you could see Old Masters if you asked the priest. In Venice they had rented a boat, and Meo poled between the buildings, down silent alleys of water where the city seemed asleep. Then,
abruptly, he would tie the boat to a stop, and lead Gris up stairways half-sunk in grimy water into arcane palazzos forgotten, apparently, by all other explorers. There was a strong drowned smell in each of these places, and in one palazzo, Gris had found watermarks on the wallpaper as high as his head. “Marvelous, isn’t it?” Meo had asked, as they stood in a courtyard of an eighteenth century mansion. Gris had trailed his fingers along the rim of a fountain. Some five or seven carp troubled the water within. The water was brackish. The fish blindly sought the surface with eyes the same white-gold color as their skin.

In Laada, it was traditionally believed—or so Meo said, without attributing a source for this assurance—that water was the province of ghosts and jinn. Superstition attached itself to rare summer rainstorms, even to the dripping of a sink. The latter was a sign that ghosts were entering your house. It indicated flaws in your spiritual fortifications. There was an ancient belief that angels were attracted to wells and would wait beside them, disguised as travelers, until offered a sip of water. At this point they revealed their splendor and vanished. Their purpose was the will of God, and therefore cryptic. Perhaps, Gris said, they just wanted a drink.

It was true, he would admit, that the Laadis fought wars over wells, and believed in blessing oneself before touching water. Their bathhouses hummed with incantation. These were the preoccupations of a drought-bred people. He
didn’t accept there was any great secret to the thing. “Think of all the water, even in the desert,” he’d said to Meo. “It can’t all of it be haunted, or even cursed. You’d be overrun by ghosts, every day.” Meo had looked at him with suppressed amusement. “Spoken like a person who comes from the sea.” Gris had wished to point out that he’d not lived in the midst of the ocean, on an atoll or a reef. A sudden image had come to him of the Indian coast: the blue waves clawing landwards, the tangle of rot and green where mold coalesced on every surface. When the fever took him in the desert, the salt taste of sweat made him think of the sea. He said to Meo upon waking, “I miss the ocean.” Meo stared into the flat horizon, unblinking. He said, “They say that in the heart of every desert is a well that goes to heaven. The water drawn from it is pure; its source cannot be seen. Superstitious men, or those damned by sin, used to dive into it, hoping to reach paradise.” “And what happened?” Gris asked. “They drowned and the well was poisoned by their bodies. Imagine, the stench.” Meo stood. He said, “That is one way ghosts get in the water.” He did not enumerate the other ways.

On the twenty-eighth day, they reached the last well on their maps. The terrain from here out was a mystery. This well, it was communicated to Gris by Meo, belonged to no clan or tribe. No one would claim it. Clay bricks, mud-baked, denoted its border. The outline of an eye was etched roughly into each. Meo pried loose one of the bricks from its mortar. He held it in two hands,
thoughtfully. One of the native guides spoke to him with force. Gris watched, not comprehending. Meo replied in the same language. Gris asked, “What did he say?” Meo said, “He recommends that we not drink the water.” The man spoke again, gesturing to Gris. “You may drink the water,” Meo corrected. “You are already unclean.” Gris said, “I wish you would not say that.” He walked to the edge of the well and peered in. The well was narrow and dark. He could not see its terminus. He said, “Hand me a water skin. I’ll lower it.” Meo uncapped a water skin and gave it over to Gris’ outstretched hand. Gris inched it downwards on the well’s long rope. He felt rather than heard when touched the rim of the water: the sudden weight, the skin’s expansion. He waited, letting the water fully fill it. The sun beat down upon him. The native men backed off from the well. They were talking to each other, their tone uneasy. Gris did not like the way they looked at him, as though he were bleeding from the nose and mouth, or suffering from snakebite. As though he were already dead. He lifted the water skin up from the well. It was heavy. He took the skin in his hands and drank straight from it. The water was cold and tasted ancient. He tried not to think how deep the well must be. He swallowed. Then again, wiping his mouth. When he offered the skin to Meo, Meo backed away. He still held the clay brick, its black eye staring upwards. Meo said, “You drink. I’m not thirsty.”
That night, the sky was clotted with stars. Gris said, “Tell me a story. To stop me feeling cold. To stop me getting ill.” Meo thought and said, “Have I told you the story of the homa bird and the king who caught it?” “No,” Gris said. Meo said, “There was a king. He went out hunting, and he struck a homa bird. This is a holy bird, which has no feet, which from its inception is air-bound, never touching the earth. The king caught the bird as it fell, and saw that it was dying. The arrow had pierced its heart, just—” he gestured to his own heart, “here. The wound would not be undone. The king saw that it was holy. He fell to his knees, crying, *O God, if it be written, let me take the place of the bird.* Upon which the breath of God moved him, and he took up his sword, and severed his own feet. Then he was like the bird.” Meo stared at the ground. His expression was shadowed. “He became a holy man. Peace be upon him.” Gris asked, “And the bird?” “It died,” Meo said. “What do you think happened?” The thought seemed to distress him. His ember eyes burned.

They slept some distance from the fire, after Gris complained of its heat. It was incandescent, its force increasing in waves that beat against his sanded skin. Yet later, he begged to be thrown in the fire. His teeth chattered. He shuddered. Meo, with all the strength in his slight body, held him back. It seemed to Gris that Meo spoke to him for a long time in Spanish, and then in another language that Gris did not speak, and told him a wandering, incoherent story about a dying bird.
and a white birch tree. Still, later: “Do you remember?” Meo asked him, “when we met? What you said to me?” Gris thought. They had met some years back, by Gris’ large and ramshackle house in the Indies. It had been summer, and so hot that flowers wilted on their branches, birds had fled to the jungle, and the air was seeping. By the water pump in the garden—a bulky, antiquated object—Gris had seen Meo squinting at the sun, carrying a canvas rucksack. He had run short of water out in the forest; he’d been sightseeing. “Could I use your well?” he’d asked. He had smiled, disarming. His dark hair had been flat with sweat; he was filthy, and a faint accent had colored his speech. “It’s only an old water pump,” Gris had said. “Let me get you something to drink.” He said it now, repeating it, though he had forgotten Meo’s question. Toward morning he slept a little, fitfully, and woke to find Meo tracing his face with one finger. Gris flinched. For a second, he thought he was dreaming. Meo said, “Tranquilo. Cálmate.” Tired, Gris let his head drop back. He said, drowsily, “You’ve been crying.” He could see salt tracks on Meo’s face.

When dawn came, he woke alone to find Meo waiting. Their bags were already packed. Their guides were not to be seen. “They’ve gone in the night,” Meo said. “They were superstitious.” Troubled, Gris looked for the men’s footprints, as though it were not too late to trace them. He said, “But how will we make our way back? With just the maps—” Meo cut him short. He said, “Don’t
worry about these things.” Then, as Gris tried to stand and faltered: “Let me help you. We’re not far from the spring.” Gris let Meo help him up. Then, while Meo folded and stowed the blankets, he forced down a mouthful of water from the skin. The water tasted different now, as though mixed with ashes. He saw mineral flakes in it when he poured some in his hand. Meo said, “We must leave, to make it by sundown.” He eyed the water skin, but did not drink.

They walked without speaking. The sun wore on. Narrow hills rose here and there like pillars. Their rock was dark and red, and offered little shade. Nevertheless, Gris and Meo stopped just below one in the later part of the day. Gris sat in the cool, small spot of darkness. Meo seemed impatient. He shielded his eyes, looked towards the horizon. Gris swallowed water and felt weak, chilly. He asked, “Can you see the spring from here?” “Yes,” Meo said. But Gris saw nothing when he stood to look. He shouldered his pack and started walking. Meo followed, a pace delayed. “Tell me the story of the spring,” Gris said. “It will pass the time till we reach it.” “There is no story to the spring,” Meo said. He was looking straight ahead. “No saints?” Gris asked. “No birds? No kalifs?” “No,” Meo said.

Just before dusk, Gris heard a high fluting: a note of music in the air. He touched Meo’s arm. He said, “Listen.” “Yes, I know,” Meo said. They rounded one of the red rock hills. There, in the desert, was a stooped white tree. Its trunk was dry and smooth and knotted. Gris could not identify the species. It bore no
leaves, but onto its branches someone had tied small objects: bronze coins, some centuries old by their look, and patterned cloth, and clay beads. The fluting Gris had heard came from bones, whittled down so the wind whistled emptily in them. He touched one of the bones. It might have come from a jackal, or a bird; he could not tell if it was human. He said on impulse, “We ought to leave something.” Meo considered. “Yes,” he agreed. “Give me your pocket knife.” Gris did so. Meo reached out and touched his hair lightly. He brought the knife to the side of Gris’ head and severed a lock of red hair. He took a string from his pocket and tied Gris’ hair to the tree. He was still holding the knife in one hand, careless, and after a moment Gris said, “You’re bleeding.” “Am I?” Meo checked his hand. A long cut ran down the length of his palm. The cut was not deep. Meo pressed his hand against his mouth, just for a moment. When he moved it there was blood on his lip, on his teeth. “A slip of the knife,” he said. Gris did not like the sight of blood, and suddenly he did not like the tree, with its bowed and twisted trunk, its bone ornaments, his own fox-colored hair bright red against the branch. “Please,” he said, “let’s leave.” Meo looked at him in surprise. “But we’re here,” he said. “We’re here. This is the spring.”

Gris looked. He saw a large red rock about three meters from the tree. It was sickle-shaped and cleft in two by the water that ran from it in a dark stream. The water appeared to well directly from the rock. It was this water that fed the
tree. There was no sign of a shrine. The sand was not disturbed. He and Meo might have been the first to set foot there, were it not for the offerings left on the tree. He said, uncertainly, “Are you sure?” But, compelled by the ceaseless line of water, he was stepping forward already. He had not been cognizant of his thirst. Now it opened like a wound within him, and all at once he longed to drink.

Behind him Meo stirred, and reached out to touch him. Gris brushed him off. He could think only of thirst. He knelt down by the spring, extending his hand to catch the water as it snaked across the rock. The water was cold against him. He bent his head to drink. Behind him, Meo said, “I’m so sorry.” His voice was pitched low with nervous despair, a kind of suffering. Gris turned to look at him.

Sun rent the thin white curtains of sky. Meo stood amid it. The sunlight silhouetted him with luciferous splendor; a kind of glory so searing that Gris could barely locate him. He saw the bright ambit of Meo’s body, bordering darkness. His thirst displaced all other thoughts. Once again, he turned towards the spring. Its winding dark line cut a word in the sand, a word he wished he could read. The smell of water rose up and overwhelmed him. Desire rose up inside him, spread its wings.
The first thing Haversham said was, “Hire an exorcist.”

Haversham was Ravat’s closest friend. Ravat had told him about the ghost in confidence. It was half past midnight; they were sitting at the bar in the Safrut Inn. Darkness unscoured the corners and countertops. Outside, in downtown Shalayim, the streetlamps were lit, and city buses swam between their lily-like blazons. In the bar, late-night radio had a string-and-tin-can sound, alternating with bursts of static. Some fluke of the wiring, or—Ravat winced—his ghost getting into the electrics. They did that, ghosts: made light bulbs go dim or brighten till their filaments exploded. Sometimes TVs showed black-and-white pictures in a ghost’s presence. Telefax machines would spit paper and spin. This sort of effect was how he’d first noticed the ghost—though now, of course, there were other symptoms.

He stared down at his vodka and water. The cubes of ice were losing their shape. He could smell the liquor, like medicine. They said that you could drink a ghost away, like drenching poison from the body, like surgeons used to sterilize a wound. Ravat wasn’t sure he believed it. Ghosts were hard to shake. And what would be left, when the ghost had gone? The open wound would remain.
Haversham, ignored, said, “Fine. Don’t take my advice.”

“It seems like a rather drastic step.”

“That’s what they always say. But then, thirteenth months down the line—hell, say thirteen weeks—” Haversham scratched his ginger hair and frowned expressively. He was wearing a trench coat. It made him look like a detective.

“So you’ve known other people who’ve had ghosts, is what you’re claiming.”

“Maybe. Anyways, I read.”

“You haven’t actually known anyone with a ghost, have you?”

“It’s not as common as the newspapers would have you believe.”

There was, as it happened, a newspaper on the counter. Ravat’s fingers prowled its surface restlessly. It had coastered beer bottles and soaked up condensation. The newsprint was pulped, its type hard to read. On the front page was the image of a rocket attack in Tel Shahid; under it, an account of a Shalayim high-rise haunting. Alleged haunting. The whole building, it seemed, had been affected. Get ghosts together, and they would cluster. They would breed. The story said that all lifts in the building had stopped working—ghosts in the electrics, cables heavy with ghosts, straining. On the forty-second floor, the walls had dripped blood. The fiftieth floor had been beset by fits of weeping. An anonymous resident had found the source of the problem: a police officer who’d
failed to perform the proper ablutions when leaving a particularly violent double murder scene. He had dragged two ghosts in, and they’d siren-songed others: like magnets drawing iron filings. The policeman had not commented on these charges. The paper did not say what had become of him. Nor did it give information about his ghosts. The original ones, the ones who’d started it. Had they been lovers, murdered together? A child and its mother? Ravat was conscious of his morbid curiosity. He unfolded the wet sheets of the paper.

Haversham said, “Are you even listening to me?”

“Yes. Sorry. Always.”

Haversham’s hair looked wild and flame-like. He gesticulated with his drink. “I know a very good exorcist. You have to call him.”

“Let me guess: you haven’t met him personally.”

“No, but I’ve heard all about him. They say he used to be a hermit in the desert.”

“That doesn’t sound very likely.”

Haversham reached out and touched Ravat’s wrist. That was surprising. The corners of his eyes crinkled in unpractised fervour. “Ravat,” he said. “This is really serious. Please tell me you’ll take it seriously.”

Ravat looked past him. “Give me the number,” he said. “I’ll call the guy. I promise.”
Haversham searched in his wallet for a battered business card, and scribbled something on a bit of napkin.

In the mirror that backed the bar, Ravat saw an instant of movement. A shadow flinched violently. A puff of breath frost-whitened the surface. The hairs on the back of his neck writhed. His instinct was to rapidly leave. It’s only a ghost, he reminded himself. The thought wasn’t comforting.

He stood, and took the napkin from Haversham. Haversham seemed uneager to release it. Behind his thick glasses, his eyes looked envious. He said, “Nothing ever happens to me.”

“Be happy,” Ravat said. He could not understand the complaint. But Haversham had no notion of what it was to be haunted—the cold sweats and misplaced objects, the clanks and rattles in the night and the cryptic dreams, the dark surges of love, desire, and hunger that came upon you like mood swings. The aversion shown by dogs, lizards, cats, and birds—by all manner of living things. He shut his eyes. He felt so tired of it. “I have to go,” he said. “I just have to leave.”

“You have to tell me what happens,” Haversham insisted. An order—or a plea.

“I will.” He was stumbling backwards now. The soaked, smoky air of the bar made him dizzy. He pushed out of the door into a spitting desert rain. The
streetlamp straight above him flared phoenically before subsiding into sullen
darkness. He clenched his fists and shoved them in his pockets. He kept his head
down and paced the street. Each light, as he passed it, pulsed like a heartbeat. His
lungs felt heavy, like a sharav had settled, like he was inhaling sand. His chest
hurt. You are the one, he thought to his ghost, causing all this trouble. But I am
the one who has to stand it and still breathe.

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You were supposed to know where you had picked up a ghost. That was
how it worked on TV: the easy review of all suspect moments in your life, the
confident detective saying, “But what about this incident in your army service?”
Or, “Have you forgotten when you witnessed that tragic car bombing?” Or,
“When your little daughter died, how did you feel then; how powerful, exactly,
was your grief?” Fear and grief were the principal haunting emotions. And
sadness, and a diffuse melancholy. There were cases of melancholics who
attracted ghosts simply by being alone in old buildings. Plagues of ghosts had
beset the children of earlier-generation émigrés, who had arrived from Europe
overset by sadness. They had communicated the susceptibility. New research said
that would-be suicides had to beware ghosts, even after recovery. This was all in
the phantasmatic literature, even if it did not make for good TV.
But Ravat had never been afflicted by extremes of melancholy. He had always thought himself a contented person, if not exactly happy. His parents were happy, and lived in the house they had owned for ten years outside of Tel Shahid. They called him on the telephone twice a week, to talk about their gardening. He was loved, he knew, though it seemed an abstract notion. There was no violence in his past—well, the army, but even his years of army service had been bland and incident-free. Now he worked as a night guard in a botanic garden located in the east end of Ir Zvi. He patrolled its paths from sun-down to sun-up, checking the little hothouses to see that only wind moved the leaves of the orchids that turned their mooning faces down towards the roots of their lithe bodies. He did not mind the job. He liked flowers, and had missed them in the desert, where he’d been stationed with the army.

In short, it made no sense that he would have a ghost—and so he had resisted seeing the pattern in the strange incidents that had dogged him. When the lights in the stairwell of his block of flats began to flicker every time he passed beneath, he said to himself, *It’s summer. The heat is rising. Rolling blackouts are de rigueur in such a heat.* For it had been summer, the hottest summer that anyone could remember in Shalayim or in Tel Shahid. The sun went unblotted, like an eye of judgement, rolling lazily from one end of the sky into the other, and each new, bruising night came as a relief. Drought meant bathing with sponges in
the kitchen, as Ravat had learned to do when he was in the army. He bathed at night, before going to work. The air was still warm. Yet no sooner had he steeped his large rough sponge in the lukewarm water than it was freezing: literally, a thin sheet of ice forming on the surface of the water. The sponge in his hand shed drops of ice like beads.

He had known the truth then, at least on some level. The same thing had happened night after night. He had stood out on his balcony one evening towards the end of August. It was more of a ledge than a balcony; he could just stand with both feet upon it and feel the dying pulse of heat. The night smelled of hyssop and hot food cooking: white onions melting down into meat, and the scrubbed clean scent of yellow lemons. All the smells of living. City lights mosaicked the sides of buildings, making vast, encrypted letters in the dusk. For a moment, Ravat could read all of Shalayim, spread out before him, and felt the ghost breathing—or not breathing, but whatever ghosts did to sustain their presence in this world when they no longer needed to breathe. It was standing, he thought, right behind him. Like a char-mark where something had burned right through the earth, a charcoal smudge, warm, dark, and dusty. He did not move. He did not want to dispel it. He did not fear it, exactly.

The feeling passed. The ghost dispersed. After that evening, the incidents of haunting grew clearer: stronger. The tiles in his kitchen cracked in half, and
water welled up from between the two halves—a cold, clear, pure spring water.
The plumbers he called had never seen a worse case. One of them left him a blue Turkish hamsa, pressing it into his hand with fumbling ceremony, saying, “May it draw the eye of the Lord and protect you.” Ravat hung the painted glass bead on the front of his door, but did not feel any comfort. Later that very same week, he woke to find the floor of his bedroom buried under sand, as though a sharav had blown through while he’d been asleep. It was a hard, rough, uneven sand: from the desert. Entombed in it were shards of pottery that looked two thousand years old. They bore images of lilies. They retained a fragile, turquoise sheen.

He’d swept the flat. He’d begun, by then, having the sequence of blurred, saddening dreams that he would later think of as belonging to the ghost. He could remember from these dreams only the smallest, least salient details—the drab blue dark of early dawn, the indistinct sounds of birds chorusing, rough bark scraping under his fingers. Perhaps, he thought, he was climbing. Climbing a tree that he did not remember, scenting thyme on the dry wind of morning. He did not know why this would fill him with such sorrow that when he woke, half the time, he was weeping. Sometimes, with the same result, he simply dreamed of Shalayim: dreamed he was cycling through the city streets, cool rubber coasting on flat tarmac, joyous, and he could smell old men roasting their coffee beans in the little
cafes he passed, hear an imam calling, his voice light as hollow as the touch of a stray sun beam.

These dreams were not Ravat’s. They had a foreign sense, like someone else’s fingerprints on his body. He felt he was sleeping with the ghost beside him, closer than beside him. He understood why people described ghosts as seeping: seeping under your skin, in your bloodstream. The old folk cure for suspected ghosts—washing the whole body in wine, and oil, and special water blessed by a rabbi or priest—seemed logical now, but not nearly strong enough. *It might have worked*, he thought, *but it’s too late for me.*

So he’d called Haversham. He had trained with Haversham when they’d both been in the army. They had complemented each other: Haversham brash and Ravat quiet. Ravat’s life was small and domestic. Haversham had lived abroad, wore pricey jackets, was—in a word—worldly.

Haversham’s advice, Ravat thought, would be uprooted from superstition. Haversham would analyze the matter rationally. So when Haversham said, “Hire an exorcist,” Ravat was inclined to take the counsel seriously.

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The paper napkin read simply, “Ask for Yochanan: 54-20-013.”

Ravat hesitated before dialling the number. He was standing barefoot in the kitchen of his flat. There was a strong smell of the sea. This was because the
wallpaper was warped with saltwater. Salt was crusted on the stovetop burners, on the refrigerator handle—on everything. Crescent footprints marked the dust where salt had dried on the floor. Not all of the footprints matched Ravat’s feet.

His neighbour, elderly Mrs Maier, had knocked on his door early in the morning. “I just wanted to make sure everything was all right,” she’d said. “I could hear you all night, crying. Broken heart, I thought. And you such a nice boy.”

“Death in the family,” Ravat had said. He’d thanked her and shut the door before she could see in. The last thing he wanted was to start a rumour that he might be haunted. Then any other ghosts that got in the building would be blamed on him. It was possible to bring civil charges in such cases—though the experts said, We still don’t know how the ghosts get in.

So he had caved, after two weeks, and dug for the number. Now, spooked, he thought through it. What sort of trouble would an exorcist bring? What rituals were involved? It was a service much fictionalized, but the reality was often cloaked in private layers. The haunted talked at length about their ghosts, but did not talk about getting their ghosts to leave.

He touched his fingertips to the table. Salt was caked on the formica. It looked like snow, which he had never seen. He could taste it in the air. It was
ambient, all over. It made his eyes sting. He thought of the cost, the repairs. He dialled the number.

Someone picked up on the first ring. A woman’s voice, with a foreign accent. “Allo?”

“Hello,” Ravat said. “Sorry. I think I may have the wrong number?”

“Who it is you are calling, please?”

“I was told to ask for someone called Yochanan.”

“Yes, you will wait, it is several moment.”

He heard a hard click: the noise of her dropping the phone, presumably. Then a burst of chatter in some European language. Three or more voices, as though there were a party. She had sounded like his grandmother, Ravat thought, precise and haughty—her cultured exterior subtly belied by her chaotic immigrant’s speech. When his grandmother had spoken, she’d been impassioned; voluble, but ungrammatically. He remembered following the thread of her thoughts like the thread of smoke that cavorted wonderfully in the air above her dense Polish cigarettes.

A different voice, a man’s voice, on the phone: “Yes? For whom you are waiting?”

Ravat said, “I wanted to speak to Yochanan?”

“Yes, yes. Minute, minute.”
Again the click. Ravat shifted, uneasy.

Then at last, an unaccented voice, speaking steadily: “Sorry; so sorry. This is Yochanan.” He sounded young, younger than Ravat had expected. The volume of the other voices fell in the background. They continued to murmur unintelligibly.

“Hi,” Ravat said. “I—a friend of mine gave me your number. I’m sorry; did I call at a bad time? Are you in the middle of something?”

“No, not at all. Please continue.”

“I’m looking—” He hesitated, then rushed ahead. “For an exorcist.”

“Yes?” A rustle of papers. “Yes. I didn’t get your name.”

“Ravat. But—listen, are you really an exorcist?”

“Yes,” Yochanan said. He sounded tired of being asked the question. “I specialize in taking ghosts away. How many ghosts do you have?”

“Just one, that I know of.”

“You’d know. If there were more, I mean.” He had adopted a professional tone now. “Do you know the source of the haunting?”

“No. I’ve tried to think back, but really I’m not the sort of person who gets haunted.”

“And you’re sure it’s not just the building? Where did you say you lived?”

“In Kiryat Ka, in a block of flats. But it’s not just the building.”
He saw before his eyes in bright remembrance the terrible evening when he had gone into work (well-rested, for once, even-tempered from seven nights without haunting) to find that every place he entered—the payroll office, the little kitchen where the kettle and coffee cups sat, and the many greenhouses that he patrolled with their legions of lilies, orchids, tulips—turned warm at once and began writhing with new vines working up through the carpet, through the panels of glass, through the cracks between tiles. Some vines flowered; the flowers swelled into melons. The melons split, and littered the floor with seeds. The ripe odour of fruit rotting forced its way throughout the garden, from greenhouse to greenhouse, carried on a sticky breeze; and still the vines continued to flower. By the end of the night they had all withered. The moon-white melons had dried to husks. All that was left, apart from these husks, was a number of dark and paper-thin leaves. Ravat had swept away the remainders. There had been no evidence of the haunting. But on his way home, he saw vines still unfurling: from the pavement, over shop windows, up the trunks of ornamental trees. He had walked fast, till he was almost fleeing.

He told Yochanan the story, trying to sound disaffected. “So,” he said, finishing, “you see, I don’t think it can be the building I live in. I think it has to just be me.”
They arranged to meet the following morning at a small café down the street. It was difficult for Ravat to give Yochanan the address. The tumult where Yochanan was rose briefly, and several times Yochanan had to turn away from the phone to shush the clamouring voices. Ravat started to ask, then did not have the nerve to—Where are you? he wondered. Who was that woman speaking? Her voice had left him with the lingering scent of tobacco, as though the aroma had seeped out of his memory.

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By the time he left his flat to meet Yochanan, he had managed to clean most of the salt away. It had taken him hours of steady scrubbing, and still a cracked skin stuck here and there in patches. A sticky taste, a residue remained. Ravat left his windows open to clear out the smell, hoping that his neighbours would notice nothing.

It was a hot day. Shalayim didn’t have much of an autumn. The sky looked flat: a painted curtain draped over the tips of minarets, over the burnt brick tops of lower buildings. The city had a fatalistic, sun-scorched air. Soon it would enter a half-hearted winter, an era of lesser light and dreaming of dark places where the sun didn’t touch, places only distant ancestors had seen. Sometimes it did snow, right among those same brick rooftops, said those who had been resident here for generations. But this was a notion in which Ravat did not quite
believe. Nothing changes, he thought—not in Shalayim. The heat comes and goes like a heartbeat; from time to time someone sets off a bomb, or a rainstorm blows in from over the mountains, and the rest of the time we sit and tell each other ghost stories.

He was careful not to give an impression of nervousness as he sauntered down the street. He had combed his hair. He was wearing a neat pressed linen shirt. He did not want to seem like a man in search of an exorcism, a man afflicted by haunting.

When he reached the café, he picked Yochanan out at once. He was seated at a table just by the door: a gawky, long-limbed, hunched-over man with large eyes and a restless, sharp-planed face. He did not look old enough to be an exorcist. He did not look much above Ravat’s own age. Still—you must put aside your reservations, Ravat reminded himself. Someone trusted him enough to pass along his name. He marched up to the table and held out his hand. “You’re Yochanan,” he said—then thought to wonder how he had so easily matched the name to the face.

“Don’t worry,” Yochanan said, apparently reading his expression.

“Everyone knows me when they see me. And I’m older than I look. Have a seat, please. I ordered coffee.”

It came, smelling of burnt spice, velvet with silt. Gratefully, Ravat drank.
“So,” Yochanan said. “Shall you tell me your story?” He had curious eyes, very light and watchful, the colour of a dove’s plumage, pale grey.

Ravat told him: the light in the stairwell, the sand and the salt, the aura of sadness that sedimented his dreams. The flowers that grew and the flowers that withered, the ice in the water, that shadow that fallowed the air behind him, his fits of sourceless fear and grief. All of the stories, like sand carried by a storm out of the desert, came spilling out onto the café table. The silt melted in the little coffee cup. Mid-morning sun mantled his shoulders. When he came to the end, to the present-day part of the story, he simply stopped: no conclusion could be made. He looked at Yochanan.

Yochanan tipped his chair back from the table. He gazed up at the cloudless sky, his expression immobile. He appeared to be thinking intently. “I’ll need a flat fee,” he said. “Ahead of the issue. Plus extra for complications arising.”

“Are there likely to be complications?”

“You would know that more than me.”

“But I don’t know,” Ravat said. He felt almost tearful. “I don’t understand about any of this. I thought you would know, I thought you could tell me why this is happening to me.”
Yochanan had a surprised look, as though Ravat’s outburst had been unexpected—something utterly novel, unforeseen. He lowered his chair cautiously to the pavement. “It will be all right,” he said. “Do you want me to promise? I don’t like to make promises that I can’t keep.”

“Then—before I hire you, just tell me straight. You have done this before? You know what you’re doing? You can make the ghost leave?”

Yochanan looked troubled. He toyed with his coffee cup. “Yes,” he said. “In a manner of speaking.”

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From the café, they walked the short distance back to Ravat’s apartment. The wind had picked up a little—there was a breeze blowing in from the desert, its clean scent undiffused by the city. Ravat closed his eyes and inhaled it. It smelled of raw stone, sabra cactus, ruined things. He said to Yochanan, “You haven’t said where you come from. I don’t know where someone learns exorcism. Certainly not in school, or the army. I suppose you’re from somewhere out there—in the desert.” He gestured vaguely.

“No. Is that what you think? That the desert’s haunted?” Yochanan looked amused. His mouth curved cryptically. “The desert is less haunted than any place I can imagine. And I am not from there, though I have visited it. I found it very…” he paused. “Very empty.”
“Are you from Shalayim?”

“Yes. Is this your address?”

They had stopped at the entrance to Ravat’s building. Yochanan laid his hands against the stone that formed a frame around the doorway. It was an old building, with an old façade from which bits were often crumbling.

“Yes,” Ravat said. “How did you know that?”

“If I didn’t know, why would you be paying me?”

They went inside. Ravat led the way: up the narrow stairs. The overhead light in its tawny shell flickered dangerously. Shadows shuddered up the musty walls. Twin moths that had been cloistered near the light bulb launched themselves on furtive wings. Ravat said, apologetic, “It’s normally a bit brighter. That makes it look clean.”

Yochanan was trailing his hand along the wall. He said, “Interesting.” The sputtering light turned his face stark, like a Coptic painting.

“I’m just up here. On the third floor.”

Despite the force of his earlier efforts, a little flurry of salt rained down on them as Ravat opened the door. The strong sea-smell remained throughout the flat, as though an ocean were leaking very slowly, unseen, from under the floor tiles and down through the windows. The walls showed evidence of water-
warping. In the kitchen, a single tile had cracked once more, and water in a minute stream traced its way like a snake across the floor.

“That water’s fresh,” Ravat said, resigned. “The other—well, you can tell: salty. The neighbours will know soon that something’s wrong.”

“You ought to tell them,” Yochanan said. “I thought there was a city ordinance, some kind of decree. It’s not like the old days, one house haunted and the next untouched. It goes in the water, and in the wiring, and from one wall to another. It spreads fast. Like a disease.”

“You would know.”

“I do. I’ve been to so many buildings.” He had removed the leather sandals he was wearing. He walked back and forth across the wet kitchen in his bare feet. He had an abstracted, concentrating look.

Ravat crossed his arms. “What are you doing? Can you fix it at once? I’ll pay you right now—I’ll write you a cheque, if you tell me what you’re going to charge me.”

Yochanan said, “It’s not like replacing a light bulb.”

“But you still think you can do it, right?” Ravat could feel his heart rate rising. He swallowed nervously. He half-expected that Yochanan would tell him:

No, I’m sorry; you are just afflicted. I was wrong. You will have to live this way.
He imagined the exorcist turning and leaving. The door clicking shut. Himself, left with that singular shadow: the charring sadness of the ghost’s embrace.

“Oh, of course I can do it,” Yochanan said. He rubbed his hands together, licked one long finger, tested the air. “But it will take some effort. I assume you’re prepared.”

“I don’t really know what’s involved. I’ve never seen an exorcism, or anything.”

“Clearly.” Yochanan continued to pace.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You wouldn’t have let it get this far. You’re lucky there’s still only one ghost; they get, you know, lonely…”

Losing his temper a little, Ravat said, “I’m sorry I’m so inexperienced; somehow no one ever warned me I’d have to deal with hauntings!”

Yochanan merely looked at him, his face a patient mask.

He took a deep breath. “Sorry.” And he was; he repented the burst of anger. I don’t recognize myself, he thought. “I haven’t been getting much sleep.”

“The dream?”

“I don’t want to have them. It would be easy if they were nightmares.”
“I understand.” Yochanan paused. “I’ll stay here through the night, and see what I can achieve. I’ll send you out to the store to buy some supplies. Basic stuff—candles, garlic, lemons, olive oil, and coffee…”

“Coffee?” His mind drew a blank.

A flicker of a smile. ‘Clearly we have different kinds of mornings.’

“Oh. Yes. And you’ll just… stay here, will you?” He could not decide if he was comfortable with the idea. He watched Yochanan draw a glass of water from the sink, as casually as if he were in his own house. He dipped a finger in it, tasting—then upended the glass onto the floor, kneeling to watch the tributaries split and meet.

Yochanan said, without looking up, “Don’t you trust me?”

“I suppose so.”

“You’ll have to.” He rested his elbows on the tops of his knees, still staring down at the path of the water. Then, in the same conversational voice:

“Don’t be surprised if the telephone rings. It’s probably for me. I get a lot of phone calls. There are a lot of people trying to get a hold of me. It’s better just to let them talk. That’s what they need. But I wouldn’t want you to think that I was neglecting your ghost.”

“All right.” Ravat wasn’t sure what to think. He stared at Yochanan: a strange and somehow mournful figure, crouched penitently on the cracked and
salt-stained tiles of the kitchen. Water was still gushing in a hairline trickle from that ghostly, sourceless spring. The whole scene seemed beyond interpretation.

Uncertainly, Ravat asked, “Should I go now? Should I go ahead and leave?”

As he said it, the windows rattled. Frost ran up their panes in leaves and vines; the taps on the sink turned violently, loosing a torrent of ice-cold water.

Adrenaline spiked in Ravat’s veins; he breathed heavily.

Yochanan tilted his head to one side. He seemed undisturbed. “Yes,” he said. “Probably best if you leave. Just for a little while. Bring back plenty of lemons.”

On the wall, the telephone started to ring. Yochanan looked tired. He ran a hand through his hair. He climbed to his feet.

Ravat, as he was leaving, heard Yochanan answer the phone. “Hello? Yes, of course it’s me. Calm down. Calm down, I haven’t even been gone three hours. I told you where I was going…”

The conversation sounded private. Ravat tried to be quiet as he closed the door, stepped across the landing, descended the stairs downwards to the street.

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When he returned, carrying a brown paper bag loaded with lemons and olive oil, candles, and more than a pound of Turkish coffee, it was past noon. Not a witching hour. The sun beat straight down, an unremitting stroke—less a
beating, in actuality, than the steady, patient torque of men who make wine, compressing the flesh out of the grape. Distilling it to a substance without body or seed. Sun-crushed, he found it hard to envision ghosts anywhere in the city. Taxis wheeled around street corners. Car horns honked. A stereo wailed mizrahi music. The sound of the desert: not haunted at all, but garish and comforting.

Sweat was breaking out on the backs of his shoulders as he climbed the stairs. He wished for a lift, but at least the light did not flicker. No water dripped from the ceiling. He could hear voices somewhere above him. He had an impulse to knock on his own door and, indeed, stood hesitantly outside for a moment, like an exile, before fumbling for his key.

Inside, he found Yochanan cleaning the countertops, scrubbing meticulously at traces of salt and something else—something that Ravat could not remember seeing. It looked like blood, but then again it didn’t. He had not seen a lot of blood, not even in the army. Yochanan was humming under his breath, a song that sounded sad and faintly familiar.

Ravat dropped the bag onto the table. “Hello,” he said. “I got what you asked for. It’s warmer in here. I guess that’s good. And the floor isn’t leaking.”

For the upspring of water from the broken tile had stopped. The windows were now frost-free. Apart from the blood, everything appeared to be in order. A casual observer might suppose there was no haunting.
Yochanan tossed him a happy look over his shoulder. He appeared to like cleaning. He was wearing bright yellow gloves. He must have brought them; Ravat, who had a distaste for housework, owned no such thing. “Yes,” he said.

“We had only one small tantrum. The ghost wants to go with you every time you leave. But they have a lot of inertia, ghosts. They have to gather up momentum. So sometimes it won’t leave. Just stay here and sulk, like a spoiled pet.”

He unpacked the bag that Ravat had brought, examining the lemons critically: “Not so ripe, but what can you do, at this season.” And the candles: “I suppose we’ll get two, three hours from them, at most.” He was content with the coffee; he started a pot on the stovetop at once. He made it like a soldier or a war reporter would, adding the grounds before the water was boiling. It was the habit of a man with no time to waste.

Ravat asked him, “How long were you in the army?”

Yochanan’s expression went polite and vacant. “What, because I make bunker coffee? I admit it’s not as good as you would get in a bistro… I did my service. It didn’t make me like I am, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No.” Ravat sensed he had stepped too far. Trying to make up the distance, he said, “It seems like if you have a ghost, everyone thinks, Oh, he must have seen something awful, he must have done something awful in the army. Or:
Oh, maybe his lover died in a bombing. They think you must be shell-shocked, traumatized. Or else—I don’t know what they think.”

“And in fact you’re not at all shell-shocked.”

“No. I didn’t do anything in the army,” Ravat said. “I lived in a fort out in the desert. I checkpointed old men on donkeys. For three years, one desert fort to another. I only fired my gun in training. I suppose they didn’t trust me to do more. I’m not the army type, really. Too quiet. That makes me lucky, right? Supposedly.”

“But lucky is not how you feel,” Yochanan said.

Ravat shrugged. “Three years later, here I am, with my quiet life—a life with no terror, no stories. And yet I’m the one, out of everyone, who’s haunted. Is that lucky? What did I do wrong? What was my mistake? Maybe I should have done something.”

The coffee was boiling on the stove. Speckled foam formed like stormclouds sped from nothing. The dark scent stained the air. Yochanan stirred it slowly. “There is nothing,” he said at last, “to shake off the ghosts. They are all around us, these days. That is what I think. All of us, now, are in one building, and the walls are thin. The logic—the research: made-up explanations. I know a man who was in a bombing. On a bus, one day, and then—” He made a gesture with his hands: like a starburst. “Twenty-three people, and one survived. One—
that was him. Imagine all those souls, the instants of departure. A carnival of ghosts. The chaos of them, and him in the midst, his living heart pushing the blood in and out of him. That makes him a magnet for all of these ghosts. That’s what it is to them. Inertia: like a bombardment of stars shooting past in the night, getting dragged in. Because death is weightless, but life has mass. It’s just physics.” He fell silent. The subject seemed to disturb him.

Ravat said tentatively, “And then?”

In a fluid motion, Yochanan shrugged. “And then. Not a single ghost hung around him. That was it. All the doctors said, Some of the dead will certainly haunt you. But they didn’t. The man just walked away—eventually, of course. It’s not that he wasn’t wounded. And from that day forwards, he never was haunted. Not by anyone. In the end, there is no logic to it. You see.”

Ravat found he was holding his breath. He was not stupid. He knew the question that hung in the air: Was it you, the man in your story? He could not think how to phrase such a question.

At last he was saved by the sound of the phone ringing. Yochanan picked it up on its third chorus. “Yes, hello? Freydele, I’ve told you not to worry. Who else is there? Is Haskel there? Avi?” He cradled the phone close to his face, turning his back.
Ravat poured himself a cup of coffee. It tasted cold and black. He recalled suddenly, vividly, an image from his past: the deep, starry night of the desert. It had lain like a sticky, viscous substance over everything. It was lightless, and wild. It had blinded and scared him. It had seemed predatory. He had told himself at the time this was because he could not see in the dark. There is nothing sinister out there, he’d thought—not really. Even ghosts, after all, were not really evil, though they made your life a misery. They were just bits of the dark that followed you about. The night getting in everything.

Yochanan said, more loudly, “I have to work now! Tell Josef I said you should have a little sleep!” He slammed the phone down on its hook with more force than was necessary, then turned to face Ravat with a placating smile. “So sorry. Oh, no, look: the coffee’s gone wrong.”

Puzzled, Ravat started to ask, “What do you mean?” But stopped halfway through the sentence. It was clear what Yochanan meant: the coffee on the stove had turned to a black and congealed mass on which mould was growing. Fascinated, Ravat watched the mould spread in patterns: like frost reaching rapidly over wet earth, or white foam on the sea.

Yochanan frowned down at the pot. “That’s very annoying. I’m not sure, you know, that I like your ghost.”

“Nothing like that has happened to me.”
Yochanan sighed. “I suppose it’s a sign. I should just set to work.” He eyed Ravat’s half-drunk coffee. “That is another thing about ghosts: they don’t like whatever you’re enjoying… It’s not spiteful; at least, I don’t think so. It’s just, I guess, that ghosts have a lot of needs. Like a plant that always wants to be watered. If you grew it in the right climate, it wouldn’t need watering. But once it’s been uprooted from its right soil and set in some foreign country, it can’t ever quite seem to grow as it should. It demands tending.”

He was unpacking, as he spoke, a number of items from his satchel. Ravat watched with interest. Everyone had, when it came to exorcism, a healthy curiosity. Ravat in this regard was no exception. You could not trust what you saw on TV, where it was all chanting, and the invocation of angels, and mystic whirlwinds springing up in the middle of modern cities. There was nothing in Yochanan’s bag that looked so dramatic. Just salt cellars, a flashlight, and a paperback novel whose cover was too water-swollen to read. It looked like all the ingredients for an outing at the beach.

“What are you going to do?” Ravat asked him.

“I’m going to slice some lemons and wait for the sun to start going down. That’s the best time for exorcizing. I’ll need to fill some saucepans with salt water. You bought garlic? Good. Garlic and salt is best. You can call in sick to work, and then you can go to sleep.”
Ravat fetched him a knife to cut the lemons, and a long stalk of garlic. It made him think of vampires, rather ludicrously.

With one practiced stroke, Yochanan halved a lemon. Its prickling scent filled the air, and seeds slid out onto the counter. He reached for another. The phone began ringing. “Ignore it,” he said. “I’ve told them not to call here. They can wait for an hour, or two, or three.”

So Ravat waited till the phone had stopped ringing, then went to call his manager at the garden. Despite the peculiar situation, he didn’t quite think it was right to ask about Yochanan’s friends, or his relations, family—whoever it was that called on the phone. The subject plainly distressed Yochanan. His face turned closed, vulnerable, defensive. This much Ravat could see. He remembered the woman and the man with whom he’d spoken briefly when he called Yochanan’s number the day before. Their foreignness and faint air of confusion. The distant clamour of further, demanding voices. Family, he thought: family. It fit, and once he had resolved the question in his mind, he didn’t pay it any more heed.

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He managed to convince the staff at the botanic garden that he was suffering from some malarial disease. And indeed, by the time he hung up the phone, the air around him had grown hot and sticky: like the air in a dream when you have a fever. He half-expected chills. His head felt fuzzy.
In the kitchen, Yochanan had thrown open the windows. The smell of lemons suffused the air. There were undertones of garlic and of salt. Ravat found it difficult to breathe. He looked around the kitchen: in the time the phone call had taken, Yochanan had filled all the saucepans with water in which garlic and salt was now steeping. He was standing in one of the saucepans, eating a lemon.

“What,” Ravat said flatly, “on earth are you doing?”

Yochanan looked at him with an aura of distraction, as though he could not be bothered to explain the scene. His sleeves were rolled up, his collar askew; water had soaked the hems of his jeans. “I’m trying to get rid of your ghost,” he said. “I’m preparing. Do you really want me to explain the science?”

“Is there a science?”

“In a manner of speaking.” He resumed peeling and eating the lemon. His mouth pursed. He spit, delicately, a seed.

Ravat sat down at the table. He rested his head in his hands. The air was still stifling.

“You don’t really trust me,” Yochanan theorized behind him.

“You think not?”

“You think it should be easy. Like this.” He snapped his long and bony fingers. “Like a door closing. That’s not the way it works, but people think that.”

“Maybe they just think you’re mad.”
“Yes, that too.” Yochanan seemed unoffended. “A ghost comes to you gradually, so gradually is how you have to remove it. Like coaxing something out of hiding.”

“Like a pet, again. You must like animals.”

“Very much so.”

“Not me.” He wanted to laugh at the conversation. It came to him that he was exhausted. The hot, damp air pressed against him. Raucous sounds drifted up through the window. He exhaled shakily. “You said I should sleep—that you needed me to?”

“Yes. I need you to dream. Not your own dreams, I mean, but the ghost’s dreams, that you’ve been dreaming. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Would it matter if I did?” Ravat watched the curtains flutter. He tried to tell himself that it was just the ghost behind this weariness. That happened, sometimes, and he slept for ten hours, too tired even to stagger into the kitchen for a drink of water. He dreamed the ghost’s dreams in all those instances, but could rarely remember anything substantial. The dreams slipped through him like sand through water, unsalvageable and dispersing. He was only a conducting matter: they were the current; and he felt charged, afterwards, with their electricity. Just as the light bulbs showered down sparks, split filaments—so it is, he thought, with
me. Someday the filament of me will split. “I have to trust you,” he said. “There is no other option for me.”

Yochanan held his gaze for an intimate moment. “Good,” he said mildly. “Get some sleep. I’ll wake you before the dream becomes dangerous, if you have not woken already.”

Ravat was unsettled. He rubbed his arms. His skin was prickling. He wanted to ask how a dream could be dangerous. But though he could not have said what Yochanan meant, the practical, the exorcistic theory, he comprehended already, deep within him, the dangerousness of his dreams.

He walked towards his room. As he passed Yochanan, Yochanan clasped his shoulder for an instant: compassionately. Ravat thought, I don’t believe you when you say you’ve never been haunted. But after all, he recalled, it was not really clear if Yochanan had quite said such a thing.

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He slept, and slipped through dreams clogged with emotion, like foreign matter swept into swept into a river, running deep. The dark leaves and detritus of someone else’s dreaming. The smell of lemons from the kitchen got mixed up in the dreams. He saw a courtyard: curtains arising from the window, white curtains that looked like shrouds. A clear fountain ran. Clay pots held lemon trees. Wind rippled over the face of the fountain’s water. They were a shade Ravat had seen
the turquoise colour of the porcelain pots that had turned to shards and surfaced in his bedroom. In the dream, too, he knew the colour. It cooled his heart, filled him with comfort. He dipped his hands under the water, revelling in the wet sheen of water falling over water. Water in cold fistfuls, quenching his thirst. The spray of water darkening the skin of lemon trees.

   Behind the curtains, in the mud brick house, someone was laughing. A woman, he thought. He heard her loud, rapid, foreign speech. She had a husky voice. He knew and loved it. He wanted to go running through the dark door, out of the shadowless sun of the courtyard. He had done this so many times before. Then that woman would scoop him in her arms, so his feet would not touch the shabby floor, and he would sit on the green-flecked calm of the broad formica table. He would watch the black-and-white broadcast of grainy news from foreign shores.

   He awoke softly, to the sound of water dripping. He could hear Yochanan’s voice through the open doorway of the bedroom. Yochanan was talking in a low voice—not on the phone, Ravat thought. His interlocutor was actually in the kitchen. A chill ran through Ravat. He pushed himself onto his elbows. It was half-dark in the room; outside, the sun had melted down into the evenings’ dark blue colours. Twilight turned the world waxy and sullen.
“Hello?” he said aloud. It seemed to him for a moment, in the confusion that so often followed the ghost’s dreams, that he had not awoken—that he had, instead, entered the room that lay beyond the darkened door of the dream. There had been another dream in that room, a dream into which he—Ravat, the ghost, or something in between—had stumbled. And now he would rise and go into another room, another dream…

Which he did, rising soundlessly and stepping from his bedroom to the kitchen. He could hear Yochanan’s voice still speaking softly. When Ravat got close, he saw that Yochanan had lit candles, and was seated on the kitchen floor. Water was running up through the tiles again. The walls seeped salt once more. Ravat thought he saw vines growing on the ceiling, in the shadows. They might have been dark shapes thrown by the candlelight. But he could smell something growing, a green scent in the flat of roots taking hold in soil. The strong sense came back to him that he was dreaming.

Yochanan raised his head. He looked startlingly exhausted. There were tracks on his face where tears might have been. “You’re awake,” he said. “I’ve been talking to your ghost.”

“You can actually see him?”

“Yes, of course; in a manner of speaking. I can feel his presence. I know he can hear. He didn’t like what I was saying—you can see for yourself.” He
gestured ruefully to the state of the room. “They often don’t. They take convincing.”

Ravat felt an unexpected surge of emotion, a cold grey note of jealousy. To quell it, he studied Yochanan’s appearance: the tremors in his hands, the sweat-darkness of his hair. “It’s hard,” he said. “I didn’t expect that.”

“Hard. Yes.” Yochanan yawned. “I was just about to wake you. Now that I’ve seen your ghost’s dreams, I think that you ought not to go back to sleep.”

Ravat’s eyes strayed to the shadow-vines that crept along the roof and overwebbed the ceiling. They seemed to sway nauseously in the wind. His stomach twisted; his heart paced. He set his hands on the kitchen counter and breathed hard. A heaviness was in him. He had a sudden longing to be asleep. I could go on sleeping, he thought, forever. Forever and forever and again... In the world where I sleep, nothing bad seems to happen. It is summer there, and the birds are in the trees; the curtains are lifting; in the clay house a woman sings aloud in Yiddish, and she combs her hair. I could enter that house. I could stay there forever.

He felt, more than saw, Yochanan’s mournful stare. “I know,” Yochanan said quietly, “what you are thinking. This is the ghost, in and outside you. Believe me when I say you could not stay there.”
Ravat pushed himself away from the counter. Angrily, “What do you know about it? You don’t know what’s inside my head. You don’t know my ghost, or me.”

“No. Of course not,” Yochanan said meekly.

“You’ve never even been haunted, have you? You didn’t say it earlier, not exactly. But that’s what you mean. You mean it’s you who’s never been haunted.”

There was a pinched, hollow look to Yochanan’s face. He said, “I haven’t been haunted. You’re right. I can’t be. That’s what makes a good exorcist; you have to be separate from the ghosts. A magnet, but reverse-charged. Always a little repelling. So that you can live with them and still be lonely.”

The phone rang. The candles flickered at the sound.

“Are you going to get that?” Ravat demanded.

Yochanan sighed. “Will you please believe me? You said that you would trust me. Don’t go to sleep now. I know that you feel very badly that you want to sleep.”

The phone kept ringing. It rubbed Ravat’s nerves. “What happens if I sleep?”

Yochanan shrugged: a quick, tense motion. “You become like an anchor for your ghost. You are the soil in which the seed is growing… you see already, where he is putting down roots.” He pointed to the wall, to the root-like shadows.
They were not shadows, Ravat could now clearly see, but actually roots: white tendrils, fine as hairs, stretching down across the wall: web-like, spidery, blind, and intrusive. Ravat shuddered slightly at the sight. He could not think how he’d not seen them. At the tops of the walls, they were already flowering. Pale, frost-coloured flowers, like the flowers that had grown in the garden where he worked, that had swelled to fruit and rotted down to seeds. He did not like their pallor. It made him think of worms moving, flesh turning dead-white and moulded, sightless fish preserved in the night-depths of the sea. His skin crawled. He said, “How long have they been growing?”

“How long have they been growing?”

“Inside the walls? Who knows. For months, maybe.”

“Have I really been haunted for so long?” A note of anguish shivered his voice. He did not know why he asked the question, when he knew—had always known—had felt it creeping into his life, but had not wanted to believe.

Yochanan said, “It is moving very fast now. I should not have let you sleep. I thought—” His eyes restlessly fluttered. “Stupid. Stupid. We have to act quickly.”

“It’s just that I’m so tired,” Ravat said. He felt like crying. All the saucepans in the room rattled. Vines sprouted around them like limbs reaching. Flowers bloomed on the stovetop, ice-fair, their petals thin as snakeskin. An inch of water had collected on the floor. An empty breeze, redolent of deserts, blew in.
He remembered a certain terror of the desert: the fear that he would not see his home again, not because he would die from mortar fire, from bombardment, but rather because when he left the desert at last, he would find that the cities—Tel Shahid, Shalayim—receded before him as he approached him, like the vast and shining date palm mirages that the desert daily showed to him. He would drive until his petrol ran out. He would walk, after that, till dehydration shackled him to the patch of sand where he had fallen. And he would know then that he had never had a home, that all he imagined—the neon signs that shocked the sky on top of devout buildings, the little golden courtyards and their scent of lemons, the coffee his mother spiked with cardamom and sugar, the hush-hush of the ceiling fan in the house where he’d once lived… the house where he still, bearing sweet wine, came to visit: sun setting through the lace of the back garden, the ripe, sultana taste of that sweet wine on his lips—all of this was only the play of light on wasteland. An illusion gardened by the desert in him.

Tears were freezing on his face now. The candles fluttered their distress in the darkness all around him. “I can’t. I’m sorry. I can’t,” he said. He closed his eyes. All that was real in the world was in him, under his own skin. The real world was the world of the ghost. He wanted to sleep, to relive, to remember.

Instead, a torrent of water drenched his head. It was not the cold, spectral, fresh water that seeped up from the tiles. It was bitter, and vivid with salt and
garlic. It burned his eyes and his mouth. He shouted. He felt Yochanan press a lemon into his hand: sticky and peeled, bleeding juice and fragrance.

“Eat,” Yochanan said. His countenance was calm, but his voice was trembling. “Eat it. It’s sour, it tastes of the world that you live in.”

Ravat shook his head, but Yochanan compelled him. He bit down, into the lemon. Its flat, tart, sunny flavour flooded his mouth. He gagged; he spit. He doubled over on the floor. His body was shaking. His hair was wet. He was soaked to the skin. He felt so cold; he couldn’t stand it. He wanted to get out into the warmth of the world. It was autumn, autumn in Shalayim; it ought to be warm. Even at night, the sun did not depart. It merely slipped under the bark of trees, the hard rind of stones; everywhere you went, you could feel the sun sleeping. It curled in the neon bed of lights. He longed to get out and see the dark colours of night holding the sun in its body.

“Tell it. Tell it to go!” Yochanan said.

No, he thought. Yet he said, “Go. Please go!” He stammered it once more, louder.

Yochanan’s hands gripped his shoulders. “And again.”

He said it in desperation three times more. He could hear Yochanan murmuring something other, gentler, coaxing, inviting. He could not make out what it was he said. He was aware only of the ghost departing. It felt like a slow
dying-off within him, an absence where some ambient beauty had been. The world grew less strange. The air lost its richness. The vines shrank. The flowers closed and vanished. Warmth surged through the flat, all around him. He felt the heaviness in his body disperse. Waves of sadness came and went. The door slammed; glasses shattered in their cabinets. The phone rang again and again.

And that was it. He went limp under Yochanan’s hands. He was exhausted. He was no longer haunted. He could feel it.

After a moment, Yochanan stood up. He coughed. He sounded hoarse when he said, “Congratulations. That was easier than I expected.”

He didn’t say much more. With a weary stiffness, as though he were carrying something large and painful in his body, he began emptying the saucepans. He flipped the overhead light switch, and warm soft glow flooded the kitchen. It was steady: domestic. It didn’t flicker. It was a round clean circle.

Ravat lay on his back and stared at it.

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The following week, he met Haversham for dinner. Haversham had bought a brand-new leather jacket. It didn’t look as though it really fitted him. He was thinking about moving abroad for good, he said—maybe to England. Shalayim was too quiet: the side road of the world. He ate as he talked, loudly and with evident relish.
“And what about you?” Haversham asked. “Were you really haunted? Whatever happened with the exorcist?”

Ravat toyed with his fork. He wasn’t hungry. “Oh. You know,” he said.

“I don’t, though. What was he like? Was he a priest? Were there angels and explosions?”


He woke these days alone in his bed. He dreamed about nothing much, nothing to speak of. The haunting had left him with a strange propensity for weeping. He wept a lot. In restaurants, while walking through supermarkets. He had broken down in the shuk while looking at carpets. It wasn’t distress—just an unbearable sense that their colours were so green, so red. He wondered when this would stop happening to him. It made him feel superstitious, like a child. Children who cried too much were always told by their mothers, “Hush! The ghosts will get in.” He wanted to know if the ghosts were supposed to ride that wave of sadness, if that was the way those mothers thought the ghosts would get in. He thought about it most of the time: how did the ghosts find you? And if they found you, if they reached you once, would they do it again? He kept looking backwards over his shoulder, where once his own ghost’s shadow had been.

He had tried to call Yochanan once, after the exorcism. The other man had left the flat so fast. He’d stayed only to tidy up a little, and to get his cheque. He
had seemed peculiar: his expression strained and lost. Ravat had thought him merely exhausted.

The phone had rung four times before anyone picked up. The first thing Ravat heard was the clamour he remembered, the rowdy, confusing crush of voices talking over one another. “Hello?” the clearest, closest voice said. It was a young man. His voice sounded husky and raw.

“Hello. Yes. I was hoping to speak to Yochanan?”

“He’s not here,” the young man said.

“Oh. Sorry. Could you give him a message?”

“Hello? Can you hear me?” The voice cut out and faded: then returned.

“I’m here,” Ravat said.

There was something familiar about the young man’s voice, a faint lilt or accent he had heard before. He could not identify where it came from. He liked it. He felt as though he knew the young man—or had known him years before, and then forgotten.

“Hello?” the young man said. “Are you still there? Don’t hang up.”

“I’m here,” Ravat said. “Can you take a message?”

The noise of all the voices grew louder, like a flock of birds that leaps in the sky to soar as one body. Ravat found himself weeping: again, without obvious emotion. Tears ran down his face. He pressed his forehead against the
whitewashed wall of his flat, where the vines had been. *When does it end?* he thought to himself.

“Don’t hang up,” the young man, his voice frightened, begged again.
THE HOUSE OF REJOICING

The excavation site was on the shores of the river Emi, at the city of Bet Said; that is to say, “the house of rejoicing,” which perhaps the city had once been, in a previous era, before conquerors came out of the desert: army on army, century on century. Now the city was lost, overset by the long slow silt of the Emi. Sometimes a child, playing in the reeds, would pull from the sucking earth a fine gold earring or a faience bead; or a fisherman drifting on the night currents (for men still fished by lamplight in the villages bordering the Emi) would pull from the river his spun linen line and find affixed to it a bit of statuary, a lapis dove or eyeless angel; and there were stories told by other fishermen who swung their lamps far out over the water and saw beneath them minarets still standing, black fish clouding the windows of stone houses, the unformed shapes of amphorae lodged in the cloying river sand.

These stories – the stories of the sunken city – Eretz did not believe, nor did the leader of his archaeological team, a Russian Hungarian called Krisztian. Krisztian was an expert on ancient civilisations of the Emi, as well as – by virtue of long acquaintance – modern life in the Levant. It was he who had collected Eretz from the airport when he arrived, pale and blinking, from England, only
weeks out Ludminster University; and then, commandeering traffic in a cream-coloured automobile with a rattling clutch and brakes that screamed, transported him to the central souk in the city of Laada. There he induced Eretz to drink a large amount of dense, mud-like coffee, and later a dark tea that tasted of mint leaves, as he smoked redolent cigarettes and watched from across their café table the loud, bright, constant scuffle of the street. He translated the shouts of the market vendors for Eretz, who did not speak Laadi, and offered commentary on the quality of the coffee, the rising cost of petrol in the city, recent violence on the outskirts of the nation. “The problem,” Krisztian said, “is the heat. Zhar, we say in Russian. When you describe a thing: hot, zharkiy. Like a shark, yes? Something with black eyes and sharp teeth, that pursues you. It would like you for to eat.” Eretz, who after his travel felt faintly stunned and queasy, did not trust himself to respond. The call to prayer saved him the necessity: wavering across the souk from an unseen minaret. Krisztian said, “It is midday.” He smiled, a bleak taut bend in his bearded face. “From here, the sun finally decreases. What do you think, anglichanin? Will you pray?”

Eretz liked Krisztian, or rather learned to crave his company. When they came at last to the site at Bet Said – some hundred kilometres south, a rattling trip during which Krisztian kept the windows of his car low and smoked out the window, the dirty scent mingling with the marjoram smell of the desert, which
was clean – Krisztian took him straight down to the side of the river. He waded in, ankle deep, the dark stain of the water spreading up his khaki trousers. “Come,” he said to Eretz. “I will show you a thing.” He gestured: *come, come*, insistently. Eretz shed his shoes and socks, rolling up his trouser legs. The dark blue water was colder than he had expected, and he could feel the living forms of fish brush past his feet. He shivered, but was not quite sure why. Krisztian wore a broad grin. He bent down and grasped something under the water: pulled it free. He lifted it up. It was a white stone hand, trailing knotted river weeds. Two of the fingers were raised in a gesture of benediction; the other had rotted away. Krisztian said, “It is not from our Bet Said. Too late, of course. The laters, the cultists, the Christians, would here come and throw this to the river.” He let Eretz hold the hand. It was a smooth cold weight, too heavy to mistake for human. Eretz said, “Is it an idol?” “An angel,” Krisztian said. “We find them, big and smell, and figures of birds which is the same, a same thing. The workers, they dislike it. They are superstitious.” Lightly, Eretz said, “And me.” He had not known it until that moment. There had been no source for superstition, at Ludminster University. He had paced lawns between stone awnings on which moss grew verdurous and civil. The needle-nosed rain was soft and smelled of old books. Every leaden event seemed centuries ordained. But here, with the smell of the river, rich and primitive in his nostrils, the alien sun that interred him with light, and the hand
itself, frozen in its sacred chereme, a sense of terror gripped him. A religious feeling. He was certain that Krisztian had orchestrated the event, but he did not resent it. He was profoundly grateful. “I too,” Krisztian said, looking at him thoughtfully. Then, laughing, he took the hand from Eretz and sent it arcing away, into the deepest part of the river. It disappeared without a trace. “Now we have too our sacrifice,” he said, brushing from his palms the last of the black river weeds. He spoke light-heartedly, but Eretz understood that it was not a joke; that Krisztian comprehended some true and secret nature in what was happening at Bet Said. From that moment he treated Krisztian not only as a colleague – as someone upon whom he could rely for discussions of crane imagery in twelfth dynasty clay art, and as someone who could interpret the language and customs of the Laadis – but also as a sort of priest. Krisztian, he thought, had answers; or would obtain them, eventually.

This impression was not lessened when, two weeks after joining the expedition, Eretz suffered through his first episode of malaria, which the natives called lamp fever. This name stemmed from the belief that the disease was contracted by men when they were night-fishing, out on the river; the sickness itself was associated with the city of Bet Said, with the native belief that the city as intact under the water. Whether the sickness was presumed to be a curse laid upon the area by the ancients or was more like a foul vapour that emanated from
the city was not clear to Eretz. He did not have an opportunity to learn it before he
was felled by the disease. For three days and nights he lay sweating in his bed,
and dreamed that the black insects that buzzed and clustered around the open
lamp flame were bad spirits. Their shadows, cool and dark against the walls of the
tent, were enormous. They hinted at some hidden substance, a size unseen. A
lizard scuttling before the lamp was amplified to monstrous dimension. As it
neared the flame, a moth’s wings grew. Into this haunted landscape entered
Krisztian, solid and smelling of cigarettes. He collected the felted wool blanket
that Eretz had thrown off and covered him, then sat at the edge of the bed. “I will
tell you,” he said, “there is a remedy. It is a thing of superstition. Magicheskaya
vyesch, a witchcraft thing. The villagers know. It is secret. They have shown it to
me.” Eretz, feverish, watched as he picked an insect of the lamp’s base: cleanly,
by its glassy wings. Krisztian said, “If you want, we will go soon, before the
cranes stop sleeping.” Eretz nodded, giving his consent. He could not quite
remember if he had meant to consent; if he had been clear on the terms of the
agreement. He felt sick, and the wet air swam around him, smelling of the river;
the walls of the tent seemed to writhe nauseously.

Krisztian ordered him laid on a litter of cotton sheets and, speaking to
several of the site’s day labourers in his fast and liquid Laadi, convinced two men
to carry this litter some ways down river. The men were patient and very solemn.
They lifted Eretz just as though he were another bit of statuary. Krisztian carried a lantern, and they proceeded from the site southwards, to a place where the river thinned and gave way to a marsh of tall white cattails and reeds. The men set the litter on the ground beside the marsh. Eretz could see from his vantage the light of the lantern move like a slow ghost into the reeds as Krisztian advanced, navigating the shallow waters stealthily. Then: a great commotion of hollow, high-pitched cries and wings. Silver birds came shuttling out of the marshes, long and slender necks outstretched, legs extruding. They skimmed the surface of the river before settling onto the far shore, where Eretz could hardly see them: slim grey sketches in the dim light, darkly congregating. Krisztian returned from the marsh. His lantern dangled from one bony wrist. In his arms he held a struggling crane. He had bent its neck so that it could not flail at him; with his other hand he constrained its feet. The crane, it was clear, felt itself cruelly imprisoned. But Krisztian was gentle. He stroked its neck and spoke to it in quiet Laadi. Eretz watched, passive, as Krisztian drew near the litter. The man who had carried him shifted and muttered amongst themselves, making plain their unease. Krisztian said, “It is a deep belief, an old belief, in the bird. In old days, dead men were eaten by birds. Same as being eaten by angels. You get eaten, you go home to God. Now, other superstitions.” He sat on his heels, holding the crane close to his chest. The heels of his boots sank in the damp riverbank. The crane had stopped
struggling. It was still, its black eyes unblinking. Eretz, all of a sudden, felt very afraid. He was aware of the faint chill in the night air; the moon like something coiled and dangerous, poised for motion; the sound of the river slipping past, unseen. The cranes on the far shore had ceased their calling. They still fluttered, pale spectres, in his periphery. He said, “What will you do?” His voice was hoarse. Krisztian said, “We must put your sickness into the bird.” He peeled back the blankets swathing Eretz’s thin frame and placed the bird where they had been, atop Eretz’s chest. Eretz recoiled violently. The bird was a hot weight against him, humid, suffocating. Krisztian held it there relentlessly. Eretz could feel the bird’s heartbeat, sharp and fast. He turned his head to avoid its nervous, inhuman gaze. His fever spiked; his head pulsed with agony; he understood that the bird was sickening him. He struggled to free himself, flailing upwards, but Krisztian put a heavy hand on his shoulder: bearing him back down again. “Hush,” Krisztian said. “You frighten the bird.” When Eretz thought that he could stand it no more, the steady weight abruptly lifted. He breathed in gasps, sucking in the alluvial air. To his left there was a splash; then a furious beating of wings. He let his head loll. Krisztian had carried the crane to the place where marsh ran into river, and there was drowning it. Enervated, Eretz watched the struggles of the crane slow until the surface of the water was tranquil. Soon the bird was dead. Krisztian loosed the limp body. He continued to kneel as the current bore it
outwards and away. When he stood, river mud marked his trousers. He brushed a few pale feathers from his hand. He said, “From here, to the thing that is in the river. What sends the sickness up to man.”

At that time, Eretz did not know the nature of the thing that was in the river. Neither Krisztian nor the villagers had confided in him. Nevertheless, from that night no sickness troubled him. When he woke in the afternoon of the following day, feeling hale and well-rested, Krisztian did not speak to him about what had happened in the marsh. He said merely, “Maybe you will wash in the river. There is coffee, and we will begin work for the day.” Eretz went down to the bank of the Emi, staying close to the village, a long way from the marshland. He knelt beside the river and scooped water from it, drenching his face and neck. The day was hot and the water was cold. A shiver ran through him. He unbuttoned his shirt and shed it, then leant further out to splash water against his shoulders and chest. His reflection swam on the surface of the river. He regarded it uneasily. Then, below it, glinting in the murky depths, something caught his attention. A small object, no larger than his hand. He reached down and pried it loose from its mooring in the silty riverbed. Brought up to the light, stripped of its lingering sand, it proved to be a clay bird: very small and light, possibly hollow. There was gold inlay in the outlines of its feathers, the source of the glint that he had seen. When he turned it he saw that the bird’s breast was pierced by an arrow.
Red ochre marked where its blood had dripped. Its painted eyes had a pained look, as though its suffering had not abated in the centuries since it had been made. So fragile was it, so small and finely created, that Eretz marvelled it could have survived so long in the water. Its gilt was not even dulled with age. He balanced it on his palm thoughtfully. The hand of superstition touched him. His heart tightened. Farther down the river he saw a white crane, picking its way through rushes. It bent its head low, looking as though it were bowing. Clumsily, Eretz inclined his own head: towards the crane or towards the river. He wrapped the clay bird in the cloth of his shirt and carried it back to camp. He would not, he thought, describe it in the log of the expedition. It was a gift, direct and intimate – no mere detritus of a dead city.

He showed the bird to Krisztian that night, after dark, when the long flames of the oil lamps had been lit and the workmen were praying. “I found it in the river,” he said. “I couldn’t tell the age.” Krisztian held the bird up to the lamplight, examining it, scratching at the gilt with the nail of one finger. He weighed it in the palm of his hand. “Hollow,” he said. “Perhaps a votive object. Not later than seventh century.” He looked at Eretz, his eyes narrowed. “In the river, you found this?” Eretz said, “One of the sacrifices you told me about. Some superstitious peasant chucked it in there, I suppose.” A pause. Eretz eyed Krisztian, expecting him to dismiss this theory. Krisztian sighed and unknotted
his keffiyeh. He scrubbed at the dirt a day’s work had ingrained in the lines of his skin. “Do you know,” Krisztian asked, “what it is lives in the river? So the villagers believe.” Eretz said, “I thought it was the city – Bet Said.” By way of answer Krisztian walked to the flap of the tent and opened it, letting in the smell of cooking fires from across the camp and the sound of the men’s prayers, a low murmur so close to the hum of the river as to be indistinct. Krisztian stood facing outwards, into the black dusk. He lit a cigarette. The flame on its match shivered. He extinguished it and said, “These stories, of the drowned city – they are of course absurd. There is not city but what we dig up piece by piece. The Assyrians, Romans did not leave cities so, intact, for drowning. So, you see. But afterwards, after there is no city, a story starts: that there was in this Bet Said a certain tomb, where was set a spirit, a thing, magicheskaya vyesch. This thing. The Christians say: this is to mean an angel.” He shrugged, a small quick gesture. “Before, there were not so many angels. But this is what they have said. So now, the thinking: down in the Emi a tomb, and in it an angel.” Eretz asked curiously, “Is it alive, or dead? I mean, is it supposed to be?” Krisztian laughed: a sharp bark into the darkness. He said, “It is there. That is all. To throw your statues to, to be afraid of. Chtoby my ispgalis, so that we were being afraid.” Eretz was seated, still; he looked at the clay bird where Krisztian had laid it by the base of the lamp. The feathers, with their gold relief, shone in the littlest light. The eyes of the bird were
jet, not painted. They gleamed as though wet. As though tears had welled up, as though the bird were weeping. He asked Krisztian, “Do you believe this?” Krisztian said, “I believe nothing. Only, neither do I say, this is not a thing.” This was not the answer Eretz had wanted. Krisztian’s weary tolerance, his urbane amusement, disbelief would have dispelled some portion of the dread that seemed now to swell within the room. It pushed out from the bird, a living force. Krisztian, too, felt it. He paused and turned. His black eyes sought Eretz’s own. He gestured, as if to say, See what you have done, what you have brought among us. Ash floated from his cigarette in small flakes. Eretz could smell it, a strong smell of burning. For a fleeting instant he thought of smashing the clay bird. The bird was brittle; he could easily break it. But he did not think that this would make the dread abate.

Krisztian was cautious with him at the dig the next day. They were excavating the eastern area of the city, which lay on the riverbank. Eretz had so far found little of interest. He was engaged in cleared the frontispiece of a sepulchre, one of several they had found in Bet Said. All but the entablature had been buried. Now inch by inch he eased the sand from its pilasters, which were fluted, carved, Corinthian. It was not easy work. He had discovered very early that the sun here scorched him. His fair skin burned with astonishing ease; to avoid this he was forced to wear shirts with wrist-length sleeves, and a keffiyeh
wrapped round his head. In consequence he was hot most of the time, even in the early mornings, and often weary. It was usual for Krisztian to treat him brusquely, telling him improving anecdotes about great desert explorers: Gertrude Bell, T. E. Lawrence, and Viktor Zhuravlei – a Russian soldier who, according to Krisztian, became convinced that he was the incarnation of a prophet, and wandered in the Negev for forty days. “And he was like you!” Krisztian had said. “That is, of your colour.” Exhausted, Eretz had leant against a mound of earth and said, “What, did he die of a melanoma?” “No,” Krisztian said. “The heat sickness came to him, and he saw a huge lake, in the middle desert, and around it hundreds of cranes. The cranes could drink from the lake. For them, cool water. But for him, only sand: soon as he tasted. These cranes, you see, all were the souls of the dead, dead men he killed in First War. This is how the dead come to us. They are not after all anymore men.” Eretz had not had the energy to ask how the story finished; whether Zhuravlei had died in the desert, or left convinced of his saintliness. It seemed irrelevant, in the end.

Now, though, Krisztian did not seem so determined to toughen him. He brought Eretz coffee and mineral water and, in the whitest part of the day, when the workmen were again at prayers, sat beside him in the shadow of a fortification. Anciently, this had marked the eastern boundary of the city. Now it rose shallowly out of the sand bank, abrupt and purposeless, useful only for shade.
Krisztian asked, “How is it with thee?” – A paraphrase of the curious, formal native greeting. Eretz answered tiredly, “I am well if you are well.” “Well,” Krisztian said, indeterminately. He glanced out towards the river, where on the lapis surface of the water a lateen sail was visible: a single fishing boat, an unusual sight during the day. After a long silence he said, “When first I came to this place, I was much the same. The superstition; we do not see it so clearly before we come here. Here – ” he tapped the cracked clay on which they were seated – “it is plain. Five years I have here worked. Pyat lyet, in Bet Said. Before this I think nothing of angels. Of things. Before, I was once a soldier. Death to me, it was not a thing.” He stopped. He seemed to be on the verge of an admission. The moment passed. He turned his head and said, “You, anglichanin, will leave the place, go to England, learn not to be afraid. Yes?” “I don’t know,” Eretz said. He considered. Submerged in the stone’s grey shadow, watching as the far-off fishermen steered their boat along the opposite bank, he felt passive. He could not imagine England, Ludminster, leaving. The heat stripped him of agency. Lethargic, he stretched. The sun touched his fingertips: searing. Krisztian gave him a searching look: something shocking, desperate in his gaze. “Yes,” he said, almost to himself. “You will leave.” At that moment a shout went up amongst the thobe-clad men on the felucca. They waved, attempting to catch
Krisztian’s attention. He peered over the water, shading his eyes with one hand.

“That God should spare us,” he muttered under his breath. Like a plea.

The fishermen steered their small craft near to where Krisztian and Eretz were standing. Krisztian waded out into the shallows. The water was a dense dark blue, reflecting the colour of the cloudless sky. From the felucca the fishermen had cast a woven net; now it dangled from the side of the boat, partially brought in. Knotted in its folds was something smooth and large, painted: a box, made of old wood or reed bark. Krisztian produced from his belt a pocket knife and cut the net, over the fishermen’s voluble protests. He lifted the box – it was almost too large for him to carry – and brought it to shore. He set it heavily at Eretz’s feet. It was coffin-shaped, almost certainly a funerary container. Blue and black ochre outlined artwork on the lid. The impenetrable calligraphs of Laadi writing covered much of the surface, but at the widest point, about where Eretz would have expected the chest to be, four sets of wings had been rendered. They had been inked with care, the feathers distinguished beautifully. Three pairs rose up like a staircase, one after another; the fourth were folded across the front of the coffin. Rising above the arch of these central wings was a dark stone, set into the surface of the box, as big as a fist and vermilion. Curious, Eretz reached for it. “Don’t touch it,” Krisztian said. “It’s a ruby.” Eretz looked up. Krisztian was standing over the box, his soaked clothes dripping water, the small knife still in his hand.
He stared at the coffin with a displeased look. One of the fishermen, leaning over the bow of the boat, said something to him in a nervous tone of voice. The rising inflection suggested inquiry. Krisztian said, “He wants to know if his boat is cursed, that it brings up such things.” The man spoke again. “Because if it is curse, he must quickly act. The curse will worsen,” Krisztian translated. He was looking at Eretz as he said this: thoughtful, taking a measure. Uncomfortable, Eretz said, “I don’t know why you’re telling me this. I’m not an expert on curses.”

“No,” Krisztian said. He spoke to the fisherman tersely. He did not relate to Eretz what he was saying. Then, kneeling down in the sand, he bestowed upon the box a closer examination: peering at the careful scrollwork, the coloured lines of the wings. “The water will have gotten in,” Eretz said. Krisztian said, “Do you think so?” With his pocket knife he found the split between casket and lid, and forced it open. The damp wood did not, as Eretz half-expected, disintegrate at the motion. The box opened quite normally, as though it were new and not some thousand or more years’ ancient. Inside: the strong smell of clove oil and frankincense. The water had not got in. A ragged length of white cloth, quite dry, lay wrapped as though it had recently held a body. Upon it were the watermark-like impressions of decay. But when Krisztian used the blade of his knife to separate the folds of cloth, there proved to be no bones within it: only a number of feathers, and a few grains of dust too fine to be sand. Exposed to the wind, one of the feathers floated
upwards. Eretz caught it in his hands. It was small, downy, of a dun colour. It had perhaps come from a sparrow or some other, ordinary bird. Animal burial – the interment of cats, ichneumons, falcons alongside their human masters – had been present in the contemporary cities of Bet Said. But Krisztian was regarding the dust and feathers with a look of apprehension. Abruptly he let the lid fall and stalked a few paces away. He lit a cigarette, his eyes closed, his lips moving. Feeling trapped, uncertain of what to do, Eretz opened his hands. The feather skidded past his fingertips and hung suspended, shining, weightless in the air. Then it was gone, with one concentrated gust of wind, blown to some other earthly quadrant. Eretz brushed his hands against his chest, suffused with unease.

They carried the casket to the tent where were kept the smaller artefacts of the expedition: the coins, rings, rhytons, the votive objects made from ivory or clay. Eretz, eyeing the ruby set into the casket’s lid, said, “Are you sure it’s safe to leave it here? The men – ” Krisztian said brusquely, “Not one of them would touch it. Not for more wealth, twice wealth; there is no sum of money.” He himself did not seem comfortable handling the casket. He did so minimally. When it was secured on a table in the tent, Krisztian said, “We shall work. There is hours remaining.” And, indeed, there was light left in the day. Eretz lingered by the casket for a moment; he was reluctant to leave it, for a reason he could not explain. “Will you come?” Krisztian asked sharply, from the doorway of the tent.
Then, relenting, a kinder expression crossing his face: “I will work with you. I will help you with your tomb, this thing.”

So they worked side by side into the afternoon. A storm was coming up from the south; its low, swollen clouds could be seen in the distance. Harbinger winds turned the air damp and cool. It was a relief, after the long heat. When the rain started they erected a makeshift shelter above the frontispiece of the tomb and continued their excavation. They did not speak much, for hours on end. Eretz found a number of glazed tiles, cerulean blue, each with the image of a bird upon it. Every bird was distinctive: one slender-necked, with a long fan of tail feathers; one spindly-legged; one ghostly white. This provoked some brief conversation; it seemed to make Krisztian uneasy. Only when Eretz uncovered the last of the tiles did he comprehend the feeling. The bird on this tile, the most beautiful, was dark in colour and pierced by many arrows. Its feet were not a bird’s feet, but human: bare and high-arched. It wore an expression of patient suffering. “A homa bird,” Krisztian said. Eretz waited for his explanation, but it appeared the discussion was at an end. It was not until darkness began falling and spikes of lightning could be seen crawling up the southern alluvial plains that Krisztian lit a cigarette and spoke again. “We have in Russian,” he said, “a story. About a soldier who goes very far away.” “All your stories are about soldiers,” Eretz said. “Yes. So. He goes to a country, he is very young then, and his job, it is to shoot for execution.
Bakh! Up against a wall. Town after town he does this. In the first town a dog starts to follow him. A stray dog. He says, you know, *Uidi otsyuda!* That is, Go away! But to the next town the dog follows. It does not eat or sleep, only it all the time watches. Then in the next town, a fox. Also it follows him. And this continues. A bird, a hare, a snake, and then another. Soon there is this, how do you say, menagerie. Our soldier, he cannot sleep. He sees all night their eyes, like bad stars around him. He thinks, I will go crazy! So, to a priest, with all the things – thus, thus, thus – behind him: the dog, the fox, the bird, the hare. He says, Father, help me: why do these animals not leave me? The priest says, What are you talking about, animals? I see no animals, only the dead men behind you. Look, see where they are still bleeding. As soon as he says this the dog, the fox, the bird, the hare give a shriek and begin bleeding from here – ” Krisztian tapped his chest, and then his forehead – “and here. Where he had shot them, in execution.” Eretz provided the coda himself: “And then they disappeared?” Krisztian looked surprised. “No, they did not disappear. They follow the soldier the rest of his life, the dog, the fox, the bird, the hare. All others. Always bleeding. Leaving tracks, little animal tracks, in blood.” Eretz said, taken aback, “So what is the moral of this story? That you shouldn’t kill other men?” “There is no moral,” Krisztian said. “There is message: what is dead is not dead always. What is dead does not look like the dead.” Eretz was dubious. He studied the
earth where he was working. The sand had got between his fingers. It was gritty, damp. He said, “I think you made that story up.” Again, Krisztian displayed surprise. Then he grinned. It was a hard expression, feral. He said, “And if I did, still it would be a warning. Watch yourself, anglichanin.”

The storm broke upon them in earnest. Lightning severed date palms from the sand. They taped tarpaulins over the excavation site to shield it from the wind, and retired to their tents in the false night of the storm-dark. Eretz’s guttering lamp would not stay lit. He lay on his cot, listening to the rain lash against the canvas, his hands folded across his chest. After a while, fitfully, he slept, and dreamt of England. English rain, fragile, glassy and familiar, falling amidst the grey Ludminster streets. The rain became a flood; the flood rose above the lintels of the buildings. It did not surge, but was fast, serene. Eretz floated upon the surface of the water, watching as old oak furniture, agas, paperback novels, volumes of Greek histories all swept past, intermingling with tar shingles, wet leaves, shattered branches. He was interested, empty of emotion: quite at peace. Thunder rattled. Something moved in the water. He felt rather than saw it. It brushed past him: something living, something sentient, further down, deep. He knew that in a moment it would have him in its hard grasp; it would drag him under. Into the flood, where he could not breathe. Fear froze him. He jerked forward, out of sleep.
It was night, and the rain falling now was softer. Eretz sat, shivering – for the night had come with its customary coldness, so different to the day’s white sun. He groped for his canvas overcoat in the darkness. He felt drugged, strange, as though he had slept for far more than a matter of hours; as though he had slept for days. Not finding the coat, he draped his blanket around his shoulders. It did not provide much heat. He searched for the sounds of other people stirring in the camp – the slap-slap of sandaled feet against wet earth, the low murmur of men speaking Laadi – but there was nothing. Only the rain and the river rushing high, fast and greedy. He went out of his tent. The air was black and dense, with little moonlight to leaven it. He had to squint to make his way through the camp, and twice he trod in small lakes. His boots were soaked by the time he reached the artefact tent. He unlaced and removed them, leaving them by the door, and entered barefoot. He had not known that this was the place to which he was walking, but now it seemed perfectly clear. He hesitated before opening the casket only because he was wary of exposing its contents to the wet air. He need not have worried. The winding sheet within was sturdy, undamaged. He lifted it out of the casket and studied it in the dim light, touching the stains upon it. The fabric was linen, a rough, early weave. More feathers floated loose from the sheet and fell around him, coming to rest in indeterminate patterns at his feet. He thought he could make out, in the unclear marks that blood and other bodily fluids had left on
the white fabric, the faint but perceptible imprint of wings. He spread the sheet out flat against the lid of the casket, struggling, in the bad light, to better see.

Frustrated, he reached beside the door, for the lantern that was typically left hanging. It was not there. He heard Krisztian’s voice behind him: “You do not need light, for what you are wanting to see.” Eretz turned. Krisztian was standing in the darkness, his face a cipher. He moved suddenly, dangerously; Eretz flinched. But the motion was only towards a carton of matches laid on the table.

Krisztian struck one. The smell of sulphur flooded the room. The light flared up, searing. There was a cigarette in Krisztian’s hand, but he did not at once ignite it. He held the match still, staring at Eretz steadily. At last he touched the end to his cigarette and extinguished the flame between two fingers. The dark slipped between them again. “Have you been spying on me?” Eretz asked. His heard was pounding, unaccountably. Krisztian said, “Ought I to be?” “I haven’t done anything,” Eretz said. “I don’t know what you’re afraid of.” “No,” Krisztian said. “And yet you also are afraid of it.” He exhaled smoke, a loose white haze. Eretz was reminded of incense in a church, the long censers swinging. He wondered for the first time if Krisztian smoked to keep something at bay. He said, “I wanted to check that the storm hadn’t done any damage. That’s all. Can I go?” Krisztian said curtly, “I am not stopping you.” But then, as Eretz stepped past him, towards the tent flap: “Go far. For you, I am saying this. Uidi otsyuda. Go far from here.”
Outside, it was dawn. Eretz crouched beside the tent, lacing up his boots. He blinked rapidly to stave off the tears that kept rising. He felt that Krisztian’s injunction was unfair. He, Eretz, was not the source of this superstition. He did not command it; he had not summoned it in some way. Surely the more culpable was Krisztian if anyone; Krisztian, with his elaborate fables and proscriptions, his rituals and his constant fear. Yet it was true that Eretz was not immune to this fear. Even now, he realized, his hands were shaking. He could hardly get his boots laced. When he stood at least and started out towards his tent he saw, pressed into the liquid mud, a line of animal marks that were distinctive: the clear steady tracks of a bird. The prints were too large for a crane or a heron. They had come from something other, something larger. He shuddered, and it came over him then: a long cold sinking. He understood that Krisztian had been right, right in some aspects and woefully incorrect in others. It was too late for him to leave. There was more he had to do.

He went to his tent. The rain had stopped falling. The sun was rising, strange behind what clouds remained. Underneath the cot that served as his bed was the bird he had found in the river, wrapped in a spare linen shirt to preserve it. Eretz took it in his hands, unwinding the shirt, touching the bare object: the smooth gold lines that tipped its feathers, the little black eyes looking out from its head. He stroked it as he would have stroked an animal to soothe it. To comfort it.
He held it close against his chest and left his tent, walking towards the Emi. The storm had changed its banks, its contours; the river ran high. Far off he saw the last of the lamp fishers steering home, towards the village, boats slow and stately on the water, globes of light suspended above their bow waves. Eretz could not see the men in the boats; only the lanterns, like low moons moving in the blue air of early morning. He stood for a while and watched until the fleet had disappeared. Then he stepped forward, to the edge of the river. He knelt and touched the water with one hand. It had a rich, silty texture. Its colour was unclear. Carefully he set the small clay bird upon the river’s surface and, with some regret, released it. It sank into the sedimented water. Eretz said aloud, “I’m sorry. Please take it back. I can’t accept it.” He waited for a sense that his words had been heard, that there was something present with the capacity to hear. After a while he bowed his head. He could feel, on the back of his neck, the sun’s ascent: another brutal morning. Then – when some time had passed – the touch of a hand.

He looked up. Krisztian was standing beside him. “What have you done?” Krisztian said. His tone was not one of accusation, but of profound and lasting sorrow, a grief too large to give a name. Eretz followed his gaze to a point some seven feet out, where a body was drifting facedown in the turbid water. Only the soles of its feet were visible, and its black hair. The rest of the body was
enwrapped in weeds, algae, and feathers. Nothing of the hands or face could be seen. Eretz uttered a great shout, wordless, that he did not recognize as belonging to him. He waded into the river, his hands stretched forward, reaching, even as the water closed over his head. He took great gasps of air as he surfaced, and groped blindly: touching a cold ankle, the slope of a calf, a knee. He grasped the body to him. It was lifeless, unresisting. As he struggled back towards the shore again he heard Krisztian calling: but he spoke in another language, or else Eretz could not make out the words. Coughing, spitting, Eretz pushed the body up out of the water, and, weakened, crawled after it. He said hoarsely, “Did I save it?”

Despair cut its way across Krisztian’s face. He rocked back and forth like a mourner, arms folded across his chest. Eretz remembered him carrying the crane, arms closing similarly to cage it. The gentleness with which he had held it, stroking its white feathers, before the end. “What have you done?” Krisztian said brokenly, again. Eretz turned from him and looked at the body. It was, he saw now, a young man: very beautiful, with fine, antique features and black lashes that lay heavy on his face. He was not breathing. Eretz looked for a pulse at his neck and at his wrist. There was none. He parted the young man’s lips and pressed his own against them, breathing, feeling the hot swell of his breath come back to him. He smelled the wet ferment of the river and something older, stranger: cloves and frankincense. He recognized the scent from the grave wrapping in the casket.
Dread – indissoluble, nauseous – drenched him. Yet he continued breathing. Out, and then in. He waited for the cold body beneath him to shiver. He knew, with a sudden sharp conviction, what would happen when it did: the jet eyes opening, inhuman and effulgent, the broad white wings spreading and rising. His breath came harder, faster. With his hands he covered the eyes of the angel below him.

*Pray*, he said to himself in a harsh, votive whisper. *Pray.*
THE BLAKE VARIATION

This is Blake: ten years old. He runs into the garden. The air is storming. For six days there has been a fog upon the city, a sick gold no-man-has-seen-its-like sour fog, so that the horses panted in the streets, or else fell down by their hansoms with white water coming from their mouths. Blake has touched such a horse and felt its sides heave, its wet flesh full of heartbeats. And he has seen later the knackers cart it from the cobbles, this thing that was not a horse no longer, this breathless lump of bones and fly-buzzed meat, and his father then said to him, It is the miasm that takes them, and at that time Blake did not know what that word might mean, but now he knows; he has looked it up in the large black dictionary; he knows that the air itself spells death, that death goes about smelling of stagnant water, raw nightsoil, and gin. Men also die from the air, not just horses. It is the shared animal in them. The air, he imagines, gets into the caverns of their bodies. What it does there he cannot think. But he keeps his mouth closed against the intrusion till he is light-headed, quite, and the sky rains sparks around him like a celebration, white sparks from the clouds, God setting off rockets for Guy Fawkes’ Day. He inhales through his nose when his hands are on the apple tree and he is climbing through the limbs, the air thin sharp and sweetish. The storm is
coming. He can taste it in the wind. Electricity, in the spaces that the apples have not printed with their scent. He grips hold of the hard bark and hears death disperse around him as the miasm dissolves, as the clouds roll in, shape on dark shape, overfilling the dome of the sky, crammed and distended, and then the rain comes at last, a few fat droplets; the storm settles; its gears and levers get set into place. Thunder grinds and there is lightning, like the thousand sparks he saw from lack of breath. Blake clings on under the onslaught of water. He thinks of the Flood and feels exalted. He can see St. Nicht’s Cathedral, bowed white against the sky’s contusion, bone-coloured; the apple leaves rattle in this lesser flood. It is benighted, that is what his parents say, this city of Lud; they are Dissenters. They believe in hellfire. They believe in hard work and the baptism of souls, and not in saints or angels. This is different to what their son believes. Blake believes that saints live in their chapels, like houses; that the Devil is a miasm; that on the other hand the Devil is a spring-heeled man who walks in the streets of the city of Lud; that it is possible to summon a saint as you would call a carthorse; that angels are like birds, but larger, with songs more intelligible and more sweet. He cannot account for the source of these stories. The city has impressed him with them, set them in his mind like the map he also carries of Greater Nightjar and Whitefriars Courtyard, of Five Fields Junction and Claphands Heath, all those literal city places where he is prone to wander. That is the map you learn by walking, and
this, this is something else, the map that the miasm whispers, that the gas lanterns whisper, and the cold green spring air. His parents cannot seal him up against it. He is a small boy in the benighted city. He locks his hands round the raw rough branches and breathes in Lud.

Later he will puzzle over this next happening. The purpled sky spreads wide and blisters; speeds forwards and backwards, so that he can see the shape of things: clouds forming and unforming, furrows spinning out and furling in again. A strong rustling starts up all around him, not the rain, but something moving amidst the branches, a living sound, lively, conscious, a breathing. He hears a noise like a bird, but larger. He wants to turn but he cannot. A bright hand touches against his shoulder; a wing’s end brushes his face. He looks up and sees that the apple tree is full of angels. They mutter softly to themselves. They lade the upper limbs. They have eyes like birds’, full dark and beady; they do not see him. They watch the storm, their white wings undulating like sails abaft the wind of a high sea. The rain does not wet them. They are such shining things. Blake reaches up, pleading – he wants to touch one, just to touch the opal arches of its feet. His hand meets leaves: black, soaked, and crinkled. He tries and fails to touch the angels again. He gropes through this wilderness of twigs and fruit and flying water, flailing upwards through a shower of sweet late blossom, through bark and brambles, till his hand are scraped and his linen shirt is blood-stained. The rain
runs in his mouth. It tastes of earth, sodden and sour; of sudden desperation. He spits it out and inhales, exhales, loud and clumsily. This is not the way an angel breathes. They are cool and noiseless, apart from their speech; isolate, elegant, immaculately conceived. How he wants to seize upon one, to haul himself among them and see the long lines of lightning as they might see, see God writ out amongst the silence and in the thunder, near and electric, approaching. But he cannot. He reaches the top of the tree. His strawy head outstrips the branches. There is no place left to go and, when he looks down, there is nothing to see. The angels have departed. The lantern wings no longer wave. No more locust-murmur of speech, no more light from their bodies. The tree is dark and witchy with its wet snapped branches. There is everywhere a strong smell of green: not the ozone smell of storms that spells out burnt things, but an odour verdant, lustrous, and dizzying.

When it is noted that he is missing, then a man will come out from the house into stormed yard to search for him. Not his father, but his father’s old apprentice, Tom Dane, a solid West Country man who will take him by the shoulders and look full on at his wild face and say, “Why, hark there, William, what has frightened thee?” But Blake cannot answer, not then. Indeed, for many days, more than two weeks afterwards, he does not speak: not even about the simplest things, to say what he would like for breakfast, to protest when his elder
brother pokes him with a pin. He moves his tongue inside his mouth but cannot make the speech. His voice lies farther down, locked up inside his vital parts, his belly. He feels it there: in the fluency of his heartbeats. It is not dead but sleeping. What will his speech be like, he wonders, when once more he can speak? He thinks of it day by day while mute he transits the muddy streets and ditches, while he wends his way over the black river blown like a pupil with the swelling of the rain. When crouched at home he labours at engraving, incising inch by inch some scattered flora into silver plate or flattened steel, he listens for the thrashing, flooded sound that marks his heart: upseizing and releasing. Clenched like a fist, then free again. The fire flutters. The shadows alter. His heart beats faster. He feels the metal flow beneath his fingers, hot and sinuous, like something liquid. Letters swarm in his mouth like bees. He wants to spit the syllables out, but he swallows. He tastes them, the little winged things.

His parents, the Dissenters, take him to a doctor: as though some sickness had closed his mouth up. Blake thinks, You should take me to a priest. He has an idea that priests are like Roman augurs, men who can read wings, and that at the end of their rites they wash God off of them with holy water, which in his case would be just the thing. The doctor to whom he goes has a square black coat and silver buckles. His face is sober and dim; it is plain that his mind does not admit angels. He bleeds Blake with a silver fleam that severs the skin sharp and quick.
over and into the vein. Blood revolts and courses in long, sinuous streams. Blake stares in fascination. It feels cold against him, a foreign river. It collects in a small stone bowl. The doctor measures. “You will feel a little light-headed,” he says, and stops up the wound when the cup’s wet just to the brim. Still some blood seeps to the surface. Blake watches it bloom against the white cloth that covers his skin. It is a spreading stain, a slow occurrence, a holy well welling up from him. His thoughts have not the force to gather; he is weak. But he thinks, A priest would read some meaning in this. The doctor sends him homewards, still not speaking. His parents say, “This is some stubbornness, or else a fit.” They take from him his spinning top and tin toy soldiers. They say, “Let him ask for them back; that will teach him.” Thus deprived, Blake sits silent in the garden and digs rivulets where the rain can run when it comes again. He envisions a delta, an alluvial plain, the haunt of dragonflies in season, and of lantern beetles, whose bodies light up with flames within. He sketches with sticks the course and depth of these patterns. The dry runnels look like letters cut into the earth: not English writing, but some other. He draws and draws, but the sticks get stuck in the shallow dirt, the cracks will not deepen, and still the rainstorm that has touched him does not return.

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When he comes at last to speak again it is at Easter, which is not a feast about which Dissenters make much din. Dara, who is his father’s younger apprentice, says, “Your da knows Christ died for us in torment, but sure he does not seem to think he rose again.” Dara is a Catholic, and all through Lent he has starved himself in some semblance of mourning. This is what mourners do, they do not eat, nor do they partake of small beer, and they are forbidden to shout or dance. It is very severe. Dara is anyway a starved-looking person, from the north of Ireland, with dirt to his nails and spectacles on his pinched face. He has seen a man killed, and a giant rising out of seawater off the coast of the County Antrim. He has told Blake these things, not bragging, but as a matter of fact, as he peered at a cut cloth’s edge or folded a pair of hose to sew the hem. The day before Easter he says to Blake, spying a glance at him over his spectacles’ brim, “I know why it is you do not speak.” Sat by the drowsy fireside, half-asleep, Blake sits up. He has longed for someone to tell this to him, but he cannot think how Dara knows it. “There is no physic,” Dara says, “that can cure it. Sure it was simple foolish to bleed you, and no matter yon surgeon said. Things there just are that steal a man’s voice, and else replace it with some thing separate. A lamb’s voice, or a lark; some kind of creature. I have seen it. I have seen all kinds of things. You’d best be wary.” He takes a needle from the table and points it at Blake, a shining dart of silver, a pinprick, like the surgeon’s fleam. “Wary,” he says once
again. “Wary of what sound comes out of you.” Blake wonders if it is a threat; a threat of what? He is uneasy. He reads in his books that Catholics are a dirty, violent people who daub themselves with ashes, which he has seen Dara do, and pray in tongues, and go barefoot into their churches. It is possible that they work witchcraft. He has seen Dara, too, twist his fingers to ward off evil, pin straw dolls against the windows, strew the floor with holly leaves and yew. But Dara says, “Sure, you need not look so feared. Was not Our Lord put into this world to save us? Tomorrow is the Resurrection, and you may yet be resurrected, too.”

The Catholics on Easter Day eat rice and eggs, and sugar, too, and hot rolls, buttered, with sultanas. On Wyndham Street the smell comes up in hot sweet waves from where the Irish make their houses. In the morning Blake wanders past, hands in his pockets. It is a cold wet day. He wants to go inside the pillared church, amongst the black pews and painted statues, and pray, but he does not know the words, and anyway he is a Dissenter, by rank of birth. Little, querulous, and plain. Instead he stands inside the garden, where a white Virgin is on view. She stretches out her hands; her eyes are blinded. They have no iris; they cannot see you. Around her feet some early flowers push smooth fingers up from the earth. The church bell rings. A fine mist gathers, a fog from off the river, alabaster in colour, which some lingering dawn turns slight blue. Blake shivers and draws his coat around him. He wonders if what Dara says is true, if his voice
has been stolen; could he know the difference if what he felt inside was something other? Experimentally he clears his throat: summons the sound from within. It dies before his mouth; a huff of breath escapes him. It does not taste different. And yet, and yet perhaps the thing was clever, that took his voice. It might have made an item almost the same, so that Blake would never notice, the way that thieves make paste-gems, or one artist forges another artist’s look. But all the time a darkness would creep into his sayings, drop by drop, stealing like night all through him. Then he would become a strange wild creature. They would not have him in the Dissenting Church after that; they would strip his salvation away.

He flees back home, to the kitchen, where Mama is baking. Bread rolls, for the whitewood table. He sets out milk for Sunday luncheon. He breathes the wholesome scent in. When that they are all gathered, all brothers and sisters, they bow their heads. Grace begins: a solemn English setting-forth of household thankfulness. Blake cannot quite hold in impatience. It itches at his skin. He does not get to say for what he’s grateful. They skip over him, anticipating silence. The silence builds in him. His hands are folded, palm on palm, a perfect picture. There is about the place a poor and puritan symmetry: white plates again white table, the cups’ glazed clay, his siblings’ freckled faces (mouths pursed to mutter thoughts to God), the brown bird roast upon a steely tray. Blake tips his chair back and
forth on two legs, grinding floor beneath it. His father says, “Christ died, and rose for us this day.”

Dara is right, Blake thinks, Dara who is now away, bathed in cool coronal light-stains at the church’s nave where he takes into his mouth certain breadcrumbs that, Blake is reliably assured, turn to human body ere they melt away. Dara who had said he must be cautious. Dara who had explained the state of things at the tomb of Christ, in hot Judaea, when that the women had come to roll the stone away. “They thought, you see,” Dara said, “that they would find a body. A dead man, all mouldering in his grave. But sure instead they found an angel.” “Down in the grave?” Blake asked, all believing. “Yes, wrapped in the winding cloths, with no sign of decay. And the angel then arose and shone upon them sharply. They cowered down and they covered their faces and the angel said, Get up, you are not standing at a grave.” “And were they not?” “No, for Christ had not died. You know so much. You’re not a pagan.” “No.” “The angel said, He is gone, gone to another country. But he will visit you again.” “And did he visit?” “Not yet.” “And is it the country of the angels he has gone to?” “Some say.” Dara’s eyes drifted. He was thinking. He said, “It is a strange place the angels live in. They do not live like men, in houses. They do not speak like men, in voices.” Blake knew so much, or had guessed already. He asked, “Is it far away, then, this other country?” Dara: “You cannot go there as you’d go to
Hollumstead. Death, death is the only way. That is what they mean by resurrection. A kind of travelling.”

Blake had never thought of angels as dead creatures. But now the image comes to him of angels laid in graves: a thousand angels set out in stone sarcophaguses, or in wooden coffins, or the simple, soft, dark mulch of cemeteries. He thinks of their birds’ eyes black and open, awaiting the day when they will rise and split their silly boxes and shed their bright sharp light on everyone, like shattered glass from broken vases, bursting windows, shined cold slivers, sufficient unto that day. It makes him shiver, this thought of resurrecting. He sees how his father, heavy and stolid, might prefer to think of such things put into their graves. But now he has the thought, Blake cannot shake it. Something at the centre of him stutters: starts to life: stirs to breathe. He sees cold coalesce on cups and milk jugs, the water they are sweating. It comes to him that he can scent in the air a nascent storm, the rain as yet unseen. It curdles his hand upon the silver cutlery. He holds fast to a knife and fork, suspended between breaths. It seems to him that he can see a grace ungainly and descending, a fog of grace upon the family scene. It is a white grace, bitter and clean, surely a breath that God breathes out, not the amber miasm of the streets. It smells of earth, like unto the air the angels left him, studded with mica, damp, glittering, and green. Blake opens his mouth to taste it. He says, “May I have some milk, please.”
His mother drops the jug. It fractures in clay pieces. Blake’s father says, “Praise be!” and lifts his eyes up, as though towards a heaven in which he does not quite wholly, literally believe. The milk is on the floor in lakes and rivers, the dinner room a delta. Blake wants to bend his head and drink. All at once he has this thirst, though he had not felt it previously. He shuts his lips tightly together. He had not meant, he thinks, to speak. He ducks his head and stares down at the white stains spreading, opaque against the dull wood planks. A pain begins inside him, down inside his belly, where in past days he had felt his thefted voice slow-moving. He feels the hunger of the fasting and the hazed glut when finally the fasters feed.

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From this time they treat him with caution, his mother and father and all his siblings. There is a sense that he is fragile; this is the belief. His wits might still, at any moment, wander. Blake himself cannot describe what he has seen – the reason for his long episode of silence. The words have not yet entered into his speech. He utters only ordinary things at first, some small sparse statements. “Yes,” and “No,” and “More, please,” and “Mama, may I go out” – this latter when he wants leave to enter the yard and sit below the apple tree. There he plucks the plump full fruit, not to eat, but to toss from hand to hand whilst thinking. The rise-and-falling rhythm, the heft and weight, quells his spirit into

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silence. From the bruised flesh an odour rises, sweet. He likes to hear the leaves above him rustle. He does not look for angels in the branches. They, like the rain, will not return, or not unchanged. They will not twice alight upon this tree. He cannot say whence comes this certainty. He knows things now not previously part of his ken, since he began again to speak. Sometimes in the house a thing goes missing: a needle, a spindle, a teaspoon, a pin, and he can point to it: can lead its owner to the object. He has strong feelings. They steer him. His father calls it witching, but looks only doubtful, not afeard of the Devil’s presence. The Dissenters’ Devil is a black principle, a moral idea; they do not hold as Catholics do with superstition. Magic is not quite evil, for it is not meant to be. And so it is to Dara that Blake goes for wisdom, inevitably, his speech still not quite fluent; or rather, for Dara that he sits under the tree and waits: for Dara to emerge from the house, hands in his trouser pockets or sailor’s pipe in hand, tamping down the dark tobacco and striking a match that flares even in the absence of a dim. Sometimes Dara comes to crouch beside him, his breath in the shadows a smoke-choked slow blue stream; and sometimes he stands straight up to the tree-trunk, leaning his back against it. In spite of that he’s not so much older than Blake, he has a graveness to him, like someone aged; to his skinny frame there is a spiritual weight. He says, “So tell me then, boyo, what have you learnt today?” And Blake stammers out an explanation in the simple words that are allowed him: “I felt a
lost boot pull me towards it when I touched its mate;” “my brother hid all of my little tin men, and then dared me him to find them. I did not know what to do.” “And did you find them?” Blake says, “Yes.” He could not but see their traces, the fine threads of them like spiders spinning silk across his eyes’ view. He had needled them out amongst the straw rushes where brother Michael had put them to rot and rusten. He had washed them at the pump and returned them, colder, cleaner, to his room. He says, “Why is it I can find things?” Dara shrugs and breathes a cloud into existence. The smoke hangs on them both, darkly blue. “When you speak,” he says at last, “does it sound like you?” Blake too shrugs. He clasps his thin hands round his elbows. “Don’t know,” he says. “I don’t remember.” Dara darts a glance at him as though he’s lying, dissembling to keep dark some information. “Does it matter?” Blake asks. “No,” Dara says; “true.” But his hand knots about his pipe with some new tension, and with his other hand he digs, restless, at the earth. He says, “There was a boy. That boy had a voice. This was in Ireland. He went down the dark waterside, to do some fishing. A crane came close to him and said, Sure I will show you the secret place for fish if you will lend me something. What shall I lend you? the boy said. Your voice, said the crane, so I can speak like a man. The boy said, You can have my voice. So the crane led him a long ways down wolf-haunted slopes, through the dismal wood, to where a cold lake stood under finger-branches. There, said the crane, there you
may fish, for there is a lake that has no ground. And the boy fished in that bottomless water, and he brought out seven fishes, since there were many that swam about there. White and blind they were, fish that knew the black water. And the boy said, You have kept your true word, and you may have my voice. But if you are good you will return it, for how else might I be about on this earth? So the crane reached in with his long long beak, right down that boy’s throat, and plucked his voice out. And for some months that boy had no speech or laughter. But one day he came to that fishing ground, to that joyless lake, and there where he stood, that same crane came and said, Have your voice back—for where I am going it will be no good. Where are you going, the boy asked, that you will need no voice? And the crane said, you will learn.

And with his long long beak he reached out then, and then the boy’s voice was returned. And the crane dove straight down into the water, and was seen no more. The boy could speak then. But when he did, he heard voices whisper in tongues of fire, and he could not understand them, but he dreamed that he could. And he sickened up, for this was a longing to him. Sure, he wished he was a bird, and had this language, and could go away with the other birds, to the country that the crane had gone to. “And did he die?” Blake asks. “In the end. But what happened next, I wish I knew.” Blake considers. He sets his hand upon the earth where split green grass is slightly growing. He says, “But it was just a bird.” “Do
you think so?” “And what if it were some thing else? A bird apart from other
birds?” Blake cannot prise the word quite past his lips, the word he wants. It sits
there in his mouth, a molten item that will not be spit. Again Dara looks at him:
eyes heavy with suspicion. The smoke, his private miasm, sears the air it
redolents. He says, “You cannot speak it.” Blake coughs. His throat feels dry. He
shakes his head. Dara asks him, “And is it holy?” There is no answer. Blake looks
up into the apple tree. The leaves there cut the light in pieces. It patters down in
dry bright sparks, its native form dispersed, unseen. Dara starts, “For if it were not
holy…” But the rest of the sentence he leaves. Blake can well imagine. This is the
obverse side of superstition. The burning men, the Devil abroad in the streets. He
cannot but be mute, in the face of such things. In his head he hears the Devil’s
spring-heeled footsteps, hard on the cobbles of the city. That dark breath pours
forth out him, smelling of the river, of death and sewage, rank and yellow. Blake
shuts his eyes, thinks of his angels. They must be, he thinks, they must be holy.

He starts to find objects about the house. Some few dried flowers, failed
petals strewing the floors in their wake. A bough of holly, out of season. A worn
saint’s medal strung across the window. Iron nails ornament the doorway. He
knows that Dara does the ornamenting – or this is what he thinks at least. He sees
the looks laid on him by the apprentice in odd moments. They pin him with their
superstition. He is singled out, and ill at ease. His family does not treat him in this
manner. Nor does Tom Dane. It is just only Dara who sees him in this manner, who levels stares into his self and is displeased. Blake starts to go beyond the garden, out into the city, to escape such notice. He wanders down to St Crix borough, past Altargate, towards Worship Street. If he walks and walks he can reach the river and spend the day at Lambent Bridge, watching gulls collide in midair sweeps and struggles, and white sails wing-like upon the Dimms. He rests his elbows on the stone bridge-side and listens to the din of sailors’ shouts and costermongers and the running current of river underlying it. There is always in this city water mumbling somewhere, a constant hasty hurrying stumble, an endless repetition, as of a monk at prayer. In the old days you could hire a monk to pray for your sins. Perhaps the Catholics still did so. And that was all the monk did, for months on end, running the stones of his prayer beads, rivering out your sin. The city would need a stable of monks, a number larger than there is. To contradict the noisy crowds, the black mills churning, the solemn beggars with their legs like sticks. The sickened dogs and horses’ sewage clustered in the street by storms of quick-flies, living, iridescent. Round the ends of Kingisholt Cemetery the unconsecrated earth and the pauper’s graves, loosely sanded over but sometimes with sole hands protruding so that, visible, the sallow flesh first rotted and then peeled away. The sailor he had seen push up against a woman at the dockside, a painted woman, which Mama said was indecent, the woman’s skin
fine-sheened with sweat and powder, her shut inked eyes that intimated pain, hands poised mid-air above the sailor’s soldiers, fingers curled as though to clasp some thing, a shining thing that she only could see. The sailor moved. A hard gasp. Her hands faltered, and then seized. Blake saw her small fists; was then rushed onwards. He wanted to know if she had held on, while the sailor shook and pressed her, and what she had been holding, and why he could not see. How much prayer, he thinks, for that one moment – for the rough contortions and her little hands grasping? Surely the city cannot summon it up, the necessary murmur, the sum of belief. It is hard to think of what would suffice. It stretches his mental strength. A whole chorus, he thinks. A choir of angels. Is that what he had seen? He cannot quite make himself believe it. Angels sing not for mankind, but just for angels; for God almighty, who himself cannot sing. Furthermore that high and hollow hum had not been sin-effacing. It had been something else, akin to a grave-song, the lament that is pulled out of those who grieve. The great voice of loss that gives proof to the blood that troubles the flesh of the living. Sometimes with words, and sometimes without; that is how it is; that is how angels sing.

He strives to summon it now, that singular sound, in tone and in pitch. He opens his mouth. He feels it on his tongue. His hair is wind-lifted. A sound comes, but it is not what he expected. It is not melody—no rise and fall of matins song—but like some foreign speech. The syllables muscle past his lips; he himself
can’t comprehend them. There ought to be some pattern to the language; that is what language means; a sequence of letters, clearly ordered thoughts, which one might look up in a dictionary, turning the softly rustling pages that fall one-on-one like pounded leaves. These are not words in that respect, but senseless blots that he spits into the benighted city. This is what the Apostles did, he thinks, this is the gift of Pentecost—in which the Dissenters do not overmuch believe, or do not believe that it can now be given.

Blake sees the shape of the city laid out before him. He feels a great surge of love and pity. He staggers up; he scrapes his hand along the stone rail. Blood springs to his skin’s surface, runs freely. He sees in its red ink echoes of that river running under, running under everything. The roar of it comes up in his ears. A curtain cuts through his eyes, closes off his vision. He curls up on the cold flagstones. His limbs go limp. He sleeps and sleeps.

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When he wakes it is night. Gas lamps burn thick with sickly flame-spiders. The miasm mutes their light to a gold dead thing. Blake can hear horses moving in the darkness, far off, steering hansoms on either side of the river. He hears their shunting breath, their heavy feet. His own breath pains his chest. His throat feels raw. The residue lingers still of the words he shouted, the long living stream. He picks himself up and sees that someone has scattered coins around his body. Some
passer-by, thinking him an abram-man or beggar? He looks about for the source, but there is no one on the bridge now. He gathers the coins in his fist and shakes them, making them sing. There is not much: one shilling, some pennies. A few flatter pieces that turn on inspection to be Roman items, or Mediaeval, scribed in Latin where he rubs them clean. He tosses one into the river to see it skim the water before sinking. The other coins he tucks into the lining of his jacket. They jingle as he treads across the bridge and out through the street.

He feels his way south through the borough. He is navigating by the cathedral: not the white dome of St Nicht’s on the far side of the river, but the nearer point of St Mars-le-Frigide. In centuries past it had been a Catholic place, till the Civil War came and burnt it, and tore the saints from their rootings. Now in calmer days the saints have been replaced, but some have broken fingers. Others stare at you one-eyed or with a gouged and battered face. It is easy to believe these saints are doing battle with some demon, but are they winning or losing? It is hard to say. The patron saint, St Mars-le-Frigide, gained his name when on command of Roman soldiers he was stripped naked and staked out in some Saxon plain in dead of winter, with snow falling. His eyes went filmed in his sockets and his skin turned hard and bluish-grey, but still he lived, for all his constant praying. After threescore days the soldiers bound him down, seeing that he was claimed by God and blessed, and they all converted. So he lived on, to
give God praise, but he was never quite the same; he did not warm again. He stayed white-eyed, frozen, for all the rest of his days. So says Dara, and he should know, and Blake believes him. This is the God who haunts the streets with saints: not the clean and whitewood God of plainsong and Dissenters’ claims, but someone colder and lapse-minded, distracted and with morbid taste. Ghostmaker, Blake thinks, I don’t believe you mean us to be saved. He stares at the cathedral spike pinning the night. The spider-thread of home is tugging now, showing him the way, as though the house itself is lost. A lost object, abandoned to decay.

The wind rises sour from off the river. Blake feels hot with fever. His head aches. He wants to rest inside his parents’ house, between the plastered walls, where it is cool within, where leaded glass keeps out the glare of nightly ghosts, and no wild unsightly thing may enter in. Only the crisp incising line of a God who watches but does not lament.

So he walks, and he walks, but when he reaches that house he finds he cannot go in. Inside voices raise; a weird bright lamp is lit still, its light under the shutters a damp guttering gaze. He halts outside the door. Touches fingers to the latch-knob. The step is wet as though with rain. He feels for the thread that has pulled him homewards. But it does not lead him to this place. It points him out: out, into the darkness. He cannot enter here, he thinks. He turns from the house below the moon’s open eye. He turns towards the garden and hops the fence;
treads mud towards the apple tree (laden with shadow). He can hear a whispering in the leaves: no unearthly sound, but just air stirring. A hot wet wind that comes in gusts and heaves. From the open-windowed house he can hear his mother’s voice. But he cannot interpret her languaging. He feels he is far beyond her love.

He squints at his fingers: dirty, grey. A boy’s hands, a boy’s fingers. There is no hint of his transformation. He thinks of the angel lying in Christ’s grave. Did it look like Christ? Did it have the same face? Was that other just a form it shed as locusts shed in summer, turning prior skins to paper that dusts and crumbles away? Within all of us, he thinks, there might well be an angel; and then something punches through you, a wound, and it leaks out; you cannot pent it up no longer; it will escape. Is that fanciful? He thinks of Christ crucified, and all the blank-faced, hobbled saints. God made them for to suffer; He made them for this; that is it; that is the resurrection, a metamorphosis, a long slow stripping away.

He fists his hands into the earth: spreading wide his fingers, like spider-roots. He feels the worms roll past in slow repulsing loops. Overhead there is a path that birds may travel: somewhere they fly footless, far away. Underneath him, past Lud rots, its wreckage gone to coins and silver, all the glories of an older age. And he too will rot, and all who stay here—will rot in dark and narrow graves. But still he digs his hands in deeper, through the earth that will gnaw against those graves. It is cold and soft. It cares for nothing. Bones curdle within
its packed-hard clay. He thinks he can see them. Further down. But he blinks, and only filaments fracture his gaze: the fine threads of all the lost things he can feel, all the lost things that form his cage. White and slender. A web of sadness. He holds very still and knows his place. He thinks: will they go on being lost forever? An answer comes, an unutterable answer, and he holds it inside him. He does not speak. He waits for the answer to change.
THE BIRD COUNTRY

Childer killed the boy during the night, quietly, on the bed’s Egyptian cotton sheets. On sheets as white as sun lining the back of the Nile, he knelt atop the boy, knees on either side of his chest, and held a pillow over his face until he ceased to breathe. Childer had to check, afterwards, the breath. He checked it with a hand mirror: the Victorian way. If some small exhalation smeared the glass, then Childer would have to cover the face again. It felt sullied the second time around, profane. The path from life to death should be direct and steady. There shouldn’t be any detours along the way.

The boy’s name was Finn, and he was fair-haired. Sixteen years old. Childer had taken him out for a walk in the fields. The fields fallow this close to winter, stripped of their hay. Finn’s breath came in pale coiled bursts against the frosted air. In the warm molting color of autumn his hair seemed light, his skin translucent. He wore a woollen scarf. His family were Irish, and it was in his manner of speaking, his long soft vowels as he said, “In the old days, of course, people knew what winter meant. Not just a season, but the killing season. When the light and heat go out of things. How do we know we’ll get them back? That’s a lot of Christian faith, right there.”
In the house between night and dawn, as Finn’s body cooled beside him on the cotton sheets and the country wind came cold through the cracks in the glass pane, Childer thought about the boy’s voice saying these things. He liked its lilt—the foreign liveliness that reminded him of birds moving upwards and downwards in the sky. His own voice was without accent. It troubled him, this absence of a quality others seemed so effortlessly to achieve. He touched Finn’s thin white throat, then his bruised-looking lips. The muscles that moved to make sound leave the body were still. Childer closed his eyes, but was unable to sleep. When the light turned a first fragile blue, he rose and donned his work boots. He set a pot of coffee brewing in the kitchen and went to the back garden to dig a grave.

The ground was hard, stiffening already in anticipation of the frost to come. Where his shovel struck no worms curled from the earth; no beetles scurried from lairs disturbed. The soil was dark but slightly chalky. Flecks of mica glittered. It felt dead. He’d tried to tend plants in the garden at first. But he hadn’t the gift. Vines withered to slim straw stalks under his hand; roses rotted on the bush and in time were overtaken by thorns. Some part of Childer had thought, had hoped that if he buried the boys among the rose bushes a spark, a transfer of life might occur. But the same knots of thorns remained by the rocky earth of the first two graves. Now he was digging farther off, among the herb beds. Dill and
rosemary ran wild, interspersed with weeds. Their scents mingled strangely in the morning air.

Childer hollowed the grave out to three feet and no farther—he didn’t see the point of a deep grave. The dead didn’t have to live in exile. He hefted a stray clod of dirt. He could feel a cold sweat under his clothes, the kind that hard work in winter produces. The day was just beginning. The sun was rising, a white circle, very far away. He wiped the dirt from his hands.

It was then that he saw the angel. It stood by the tool shed. It did not descend in a cloud, nor announce itself with voices singing. But an angular light seemed to haunt it, a stray white echo of that early sun. It went barefoot. It wore a hooded sweatshirt and ragged jeans. Childer identified it at once as an angel, though he could not have explained this understanding. There was no shadow to it, not even the shortest stretch of darkness. It didn’t speak to him.

After a while, Childer leaned the shovel against the back steps and went inside. In the bedroom Finn’s body still rested amongst the rumpled cotton sheets. His t-shirt bore the faded legend of a rugby club and a knotted emblem in the shape of a cross. Bruises had flowered on his upper arm, like blurred footprints, a violet shade. Childer lifted the dead boy in his arms. He was not a large man, but Finn had been lightly built. Childer could carry him with ease through the warm
kitchen now rich with the smell of coffee, out to the back garden and his grave. Finn fit easily into the space Childer had made for him.

The angel watched inscrutably as Childer took up the shovel and buried the boy. Childer was able to ignore the angel’s presence. He concentrated instead on packing the soil in tightly, like he’d been taught to do whilst planting. Seeds displace less soil, though, and no matter how closely he pressed in the dirt there was always a heap left over, a small sad excess hill.

When he had tamped down as evenly as possible the earth over Finn’s grave, he found that the angel was still waiting. The time was perhaps eight o’clock by then. Where the angel stood, small green threads were starting to snarl the surface of the earth. New shoots growing fast and thick. From the angel’s bare and high-arched feet they hove outwards.

Childer leant the shovel against the back wall and went in to breakfast. The coffee had started to scald slightly. It tasted burnt, which he liked, like something had been boiled out of it, some impurity, and now it was clean. When he looked back over his shoulder he could see the angel in the garden. He grew used to it quickly. Soon he stopped checking to see if it had gone away.

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He dreamed of abstract and ordinary things. He dreamed of himself as a child, throwing rocks at crows to scare them away. He dreamed of other birds, starlings.
A crowd of them was called a murmuration, after the sound of their wings. When he was a child great clouds of them would gather going into winter, shrouding the sun with their dark bodies, blotting the light like beads in a kaleidoscope tray. Now the climate had changed and the winters were colder. The birds went elsewhere.

Childer dreamt of where the birds might go: a country warmer and brighter, where children went running under the trees. They left little footprints amongst the tall grasses and the air was filled with the sound of their laughter. Starlings sat on their shoulders and made nests out of their fine light hair. It was always winter in this other country, but the winter was not cold. The weather was equanimous. Seeds in the soil stayed dormant. The birds were never moved to migrate away.

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The next day, Thursday, he proceeded into town. The morning air was thin and mountainous, suggesting frost. He weighted the bed of his pick-up so it wouldn’t skid or flip on bad patches. The best weights for this purpose were worn-out books. Childer used an elderly set of encyclopedias, browned by basement flooding and brittle-leaved. They contained the names of every bird known to man by the books’ date of printing, as well as notes of their special markings and migratory diagrams. There were other items in the encyclopedias:
information on areas of the world unvisited by Childer, illustrations of plants that he had never seen. A man in one photograph held his hand beside a flower to show the great size of each petal. Palm outwards, fingers rigid and straight. On another page the aurora cut across a northern sky. There had once been such a sunstorm that men could see the aurora where Childer lived, and further south. Prospectors asleep by rivers in the Rocky Mountains awoke to a pale sky and thought it was day. Childer read this account and failed to understand their mistake. He felt sure that the aurora would prove different to the sun’s staid dawn. He studied the photograph. The aurora bent like smoke sinking towards the earth instead of rising. Their shapes ringed the landscape in lucent display.

The engine of the pick-up shook at first when he started it, then settled into a steady rhythm. He steered out onto the gravel road. There were fifteen miles between his house and the town, flat and inhabited mostly by birds. This early the neighboring fields were colorless. The scrub by the side of the road was a ghost grass, bleached bluish-gray. He stopped for a kolache at the edge of town. The night boy at the bakery was still on shift. He handed Childer the paper sack, pastry warm within it. Childer paid in coins so he could put them in the boy’s slightly sticky hand. He sat by the front window and watched the boy lift pecan buns from the oven on large flat trays. There was flour smeared across the boy’s sweatshirt. He wore a baseball cap.
pulled low over his forehead. Sleeplessness blued the skin under his eyes. Childer wanted to place his hands on the boy’s narrow shoulders. He wanted to lower his head to the boy’s neck and smell the sweat and powdered sugar there. He bit into the kolache. Seeds from the raspberry filling stuck in his teeth.

He drove next to the co-op. He was running low on coffee, flour, fruit, and meat. As a precaution he purchased several boxes of plastic trash bags to protect the garden against a later freeze. Sheets and blankets were best to keep the frost out in the dead of winter, their corners weighted with stones or cinder blocks. But in autumn they wetted come dawn and smelled of must and decay. With plastic he could shake the water off. He loaded also a case of beer into the bed of the truck. He liked, come the long winter nights, to sit on the back porch and look out over the tangle of the garden, drinking. The colder it got the cleaner he felt. When sensation ceased in his feet and hands he would go inside, but not before. Then back in the heat he would be clumsy. His fingers, mercifully severed for a moment, forced to re-learn how to feel.

The cashier at the co-op asked him, “Getting ready for the first big freeze?” “Oh, yeah,” Childer answered. “Got to start settling in for the winter.”

The cashier wore a nametag that said Daniel. He had black hair and a blue tattoo of a star on his wrist, bisected by his sleeve. The ink of the tattoo had faded. It was the color of a summer storm cloud. Childer watched as Daniel bagged the
groceries: holding, briefly, each red apple in his careful hands. The blue star flashed as he lifted the bags to Childer. Idly, the boy tugged at his shirt to cover it. Childer found it difficult to move away. In the pick-up, he dissociated the apples from the other groceries. He had not yet decided if he would eat them. He placed them in the passenger seat and from time to time, whilst driving, would touch them as though for reassurance. They had acquired a kind of radiance, visible only to him.

When he arrived home it was after midday. He loaded a few beers into the icebox and stored the rest of the groceries away. The apples he lined up on the kitchen counter. Then, as an afterthought, he took one in his hand and went out to the garden. The angel slept, curled like an animal on the earth. The new greenery formed a pillow under its head. Elsewhere vines had begun touching at the walls of the house with tentative fingers. Childer considered whether he should pry them off, but let them be. He went over to where the angel slept and set the apple beside it. It occurred to him—an impulse quickly stifled—to describe aloud to the angel where the apple had been. Instead he returned to the house. He tore a lined sheet of paper from a spiral notebook and sketched on it in ballpoint pen a star. He had no clear idea what to do with the drawing once it was finished. He folded it twice and tucked it in his pocket. All the rest of the day he was aware of it, reverent, somehow, of what he carried with him. In the grip of the superstition he
caught himself minding his words, careful of his actions. He wanted obscurely to
prove himself worthy of the star.

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Come the next morning, the apple he had left for the angel was gone. Gray
clouds gathered overhead, threatening rain. The angel sat cross-legged and gazed
up at the sky. The clouds were fast-moving. They seemed to swell close to the
earth and then recede. Childer made coffee and took a cup of it out to the back
porch. The wind was high, the coffee hot and sweet. A brown bird perched on the
packed earth in the garden. Childer could tell it was a mockingbird when it took
flight; the fine white bars that marked its feathers stood out against the sullen sky.
It seemed to rise and rise, till Childer could not see it. It loosed a single, insensible
cry.

“Should be moving on for the winter, anyway,” Childer said aloud. He
glanced at the angel. “If I built a coop I could keep some, maybe through any
season. Have to get a manual on it for next year.”

The angel said nothing. It inclined its head. Its eyes were a light shade
almost like seawater, suspended between blue and gray. The cashier’s tattoo had
been that color. Like a bruise in the shape of a star.

“Hard to keep them warm, though,” Childer said. “Same with the plants. I
try all the tricks they say on the radio. Garden shows. Still lose a few come that
first freeze or a hard storm. Some people’ve got a knack for it, I guess, that I don’t have.”

The angel blinked. The vines it had produced were climbing the wall. They bore large, dark, insistent leaves. They clutched at the garden fence as well. On the ground, small white flowers had sprung up in clusters like weeds. They grew even over the graves of the boys, where the soil was loose and new. The angel seemed unaware of the effect it was having.

“Reckon we’ll see what makes it through the winter,” Childer said. He returned to the kitchen, placed his coffee cup in the sink. In the base of the cup some fine slough of sugar remained. He tilted the cup; the sugar took on a shape. Continent-like, a mass of land. In his mind he mapped the contours of it. A private country. A moment later he twisted the tap and washed the whole of it away.

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The week went. Once or twice Childer left food for the angel: half a sandwich, a soft-boiled egg. Later, the food had always gone. He assumed the angel ate. On Sunday he drove to the bakery, intending to bring back a box of doughnuts or a coffee cake. The boy from the night shift wasn’t working; a teenaged girl had replaced him. Childer found that his appetite waned. He wondered where the boy was, if he were sleeping. He envisioned him buried under a comforter and cotton sheets. His bedroom perhaps smelling sweetly of the
bakery. The boy’s mouth slightly agape. Childer could not bring himself to buy anything from the girl who manned the counter. He stopped at the filling station for a coffee instead. On the long road home he was tense and restless. The sky overhead seemed to expand. Its goal was to shake him loose from the earth, to lose him. He would drift into it and never see the boy again. It was his memories of each of the boys, his anamnesis of their bodies that formed an anchor of sufficient weight. He worked to recall the night shift boy’s short hair curling at the nape of his neck. That warm place which one hand could cover, fingers resting against the back part of the skull. But it had been days since Childer had seen the boy and he could not resolve the image. In his mind the boy’s eyes hovered between blue and gray.

When he reached the house he headed to the garden. He felt somehow that he needed to explain. He had wanted to bring the angel an offering, something the boy at the bakery had held in his hands. Instead he had nothing. But when he met the angel’s eyes, squinting tenderly against the broad light of day, he knew in an instant that it understood his failure, by instinct, as though they were of one body. It beheld him kindly. For the first time, it extended a hand to him. Childer was reluctant to touch it. When he did, he held his breath. It seemed to him that as long as he was not breathing he could briefly absent himself from the physical plane. Something other than his clumsy flesh would touch the angel’s fingers. But
if he breathed he called an end to the whole charade. If he could have caused his heart not to beat it would have been better. But his nervous pulse betrayed him.

The angel’s hand was cool and slightly gritty. Dirt gathered under the short nails and in the lines of its skin. Childer was overcome by a strong desire to raise the angel’s palm to his mouth and taste it. It would taste, he thought, like wet earth after a rain. He folded the angel’s fingers into a fist and released it.

“It’s getting cold,” he said. “You should come inside.”

The angel smiled at him and did not reply. Childer stood ineffectually for a moment. He wanted to inspire the angel to movement. What if an ice storm comes, he thought. What if it freezes. On the wall of the house, a stiff wind stirred the ivy as though it were not winter at all. Elsewhere, other plants were pushing up from the dark earth. The rosemary had doubled its radius. There was a desert smell of its spiny leaves.

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For the first time, Childer dreamed of Finn. In the dream they were pressed up close against each other, underground, in a grave. The earth was warm and smelled sweet. Childer tasted cedar mulch, wet leaves. His hand, heavy and hot, rested against Finn’s ribcage. Childer could feel the faint heart beating beneath. Finn raised a finger to his lips: a secret. His eyes were black, the pupils blown and strange.
Finn touched Childer’s mouth with the same cool finger. Soil clotted his fine pale hair. Childer could feel his breath hot against the boy’s hand. He was ashamed at his own animal mechanics. Finn’s body had a different architecture. He did not need to breathe. When he moved his lips it was not a human voice that came out, foreign-accented and made of air and thin, but the low warble of birdsong. Black and liquid. Based in the throat. Childer closed his eyes and covered the boy’s mouth. He could not stand to hear it. He was consumed by envy by fear of the sin he had committed, the creature that he had made.

A hard freeze came, finally, when the week was halfway through. Childer woke to find long fingers of ice on all the windows. When he walked outside a layer of frost broke under his work boots. He had covered the garden as a precaution but left the area the angel inhabited bare. Now when he went to lift the trash bags he had weighted over the herb beds, he saw that the new growth surrounding the angel was untouched. No frost matted the dark leaves. The angel itself huddled by the tool shed, its hands pulled up against its body. It watched without comment as Childer inspected the garden. There was no ice damage; the plants were vivid and green. Even over the graves of the three boys, wildflowers were thriving. Childer stopped and knelt beside the third grave. When he breathed, his breath hung in the air as though reluctant to leave him. He thought of Finn’s breath whitening the mirror. He looked away.
The angel was shivering. “If you’re so cold,” Childer said, “why don’t you just fly away?” For the first time he considered the angel’s shoulders, narrow beneath the aged sweatshirt. “Have you not got any wings?”

It made a sad, curious gesture, neither confirmation nor denial. It dug its toes into the hard-packed dirt. Its feet looked bruised, blackened by dust. Abruptly Childer wanted to wash them. He imagined rinsing the angel’s worn body clean.

“Come inside,” he offered again. “I can make you some breakfast. You don’t have to stay out in the cold.”

He waited for the angel to answer. Slowly it dawned on him that this was its answer— that it would not enter the house. Resigned, he got to his feet and left the garden. In the kitchen, he cracked three eggs into a frying pan. He cooked them till they were coherent, each yolk a solid globe of sun. He had meant to divide them between himself and the angel, but by the time they were done he found he was no longer hungry. He slid the eggs onto a plastic plate. He thought of making toast, and did so. And bacon. Then added salt and pepper to the eggs. He searched the kitchen for something else he could feed the angel. The last of the apples, turned slightly withered. Half a grapefruit. A hunk of cheese. He carried the crowded plate outside, the eggs still slightly steaming. The angel did not look at him. Childer set the plate on the grass and stepped away. A hollow had opened somewhere within him, in a part of his body that had no name. He felt in
his pocket for the star he had drawn. The crumpled paper. It seemed to him not a common five-pointed emblem but a colossal, luminous thing. Large enough to fill the hole, or at least patch it. He pressed it, trembling, into the palm of his hand.

He woke the next day to snow outside his window, thin light flakes barely feathering the breeze. His chest ached, a familiar feeling. The heat had gone out in the night, and the cold was a physical form that pressed against him. Needy, insistent. Nudging him with its icy nose. He drew his arms around himself and regarded, through the window, the descent of the snow. The small flakes died on the fields and road. The earth was not frozen enough to accept them. It would be in another few days.

Outside the sun seemed weak and screened through water. White clouds moved swiftly overhead. He brushed ice from the books weighting the bed of the pick-up; scraped the windscreen clean. The engine heaved when started, like an animal roughly awakened. Childer directed the truck down the road and away.

At sixty or seventy miles per hour he sometimes felt he was no longer limited to his body that other things contained him instead. The long fences with barbed wire starry between their pillars, the animals gut-split by the side of the road. The low grass that clung to the bad soil by the shoulder, the vultures aloft and eyeing their prey. Then the sight of something beautiful would rise up out of the landscape and reduce him. That had been Finn: a hitchhiker, slightly sunburnt
at the roadside. Childer’s human desire had stirred. Now he increased his speed, hungry for the sense of exaltation. But the world around him played dead.

When he reached the bakery, the night shift boy was still working. Relief swept him like a strong wind, leaving him shaky on his feet. He stood in the warm sweet air of the shop and watched the boy arrange pastries on wax paper. The sleeves of his sweatshirt were pushed up past his elbows, putting the thin bones of his wrists on display. The sweatshirt was hooded and worn, just like the angel’s.

The boy looked up. “What can I get for you today?”

“Just a cup of coffee,” Childer said. He didn’t want the coffee, but he wanted to see the boy make it. Raising the carafe, careful with the hot and fragrant steam. The boy’s hands wrapped around the cup, leaving fingerprints, traces. Childer’s gaze travelled from the cup to the boy’s face. His eyes were gray, his hair wheat-colored. A silver chain cut across the hollow of his throat, where his pulse was beating. Childer could not see what depended from the chain. He wanted to press his thumb there till the pulse slowed and stilled. Till the heart ceded its function, surrendered, abstained.

He had thought to stay and offer the boy a ride home when his shift ended. But indecision gripped him. He felt restless in his own skin. He remembered the angel waiting in the garden. He wondered how he would explain the presence of the boy. The new body the inevitable grave. The earth was hard and to break it
would take hours. The angel would watch him, unspeaking. Flowers would crawl from where the boy’s body was laid. Chider measured his want against the wan horror of this image: the flowers seething inexorably upwards, pity printed on the angel’s luminous face. When he pictured it he could feel his hands raw where they would grip the shovel. The red pain reminding him of what he couldn’t bear.

He walked rapidly from the bakery and came to rest with his forehead pressed against the truck’s front window. Snow wasn’t falling any longer, but the glass was cold, so cold he couldn’t feel it. It was a relief. He closed his eyes and pictured birds flying, dozens of them and then thousands, so many he could count them only by the sound of their wings. They flashed before his eyes, dark forms, bound for a new country. He wanted to follow them, but they had no set direction. They moved according to a tropic pull, like plants that navigate towards sunlight, their secret course whispered to them in germination, destination obscure yet somehow plain.

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For hours after leaving the bakery he drove without aim. Out in the cropped fields nothing stirred amongst the blunted rows of corn or cotton. The sunlight was closer to silver than gold. He tasted snow on the wind. Once or twice the tires of his truck skidded. He imagined leaving the tarmac, the truck’s body
flipping, his head snapping against the windscreen before coming to rest. He had weighted the pick-up bed against such an accident, but now he found he wanted it.

When the sun had passed its summit he pulled off on the shoulder and parked the truck. He took the encyclopedias from the pick-up bed and began to tear out their pages in fistfuls, as many pages as he could seize in his hand. They were so thin under his fingers that he was reminded of the shells cicadas left in the summer, clinging like living creatures to the bark of trees. Wind lifted the pages and carried them over the fields until Childer could no longer see them. The photographs of aurora, gone forever; the diagrams of birds and all their migrancies. Floating like foreign snow over distant farms and townships, coming to nest in the bare trees. As each book emptied, he dropped the binding. His hands ached where the paper had cut him, but the cuts were not deep enough to bleed.

The angel was sleeping in the garden. Childer stood over it for a long while, watching. Its unconscious hands gripped at the roots of the plants that grew around it, milkweed and paintbrush and the dark ivy that had now overtaken the house’s wall. There was no sign in the garden that snow had fallen. Flowers were blooming, thick and lavish. Their scent intoxicated him. The leaves of the ivy stirred. Childer heard in the sound something that was almost language: a half-speech, subtle and inhuman. He bent and touched the angel’s face. Its skin was cold. It didn’t waken. He stroked its hair, like he would a child’s; covered its
mouth, like he had done to Finn in his dream. An edge of sunlight stayed with it, despite the approach of winter. It was the most beautiful thing Childer had seen.

“Why did you come here?” he asked it. His voice cracked on the question.

He could not bring himself to imagine the days to come: ivy overgrowing the doors and windows, rye grass creeping gradually through the cracks in the floor. The scent of summer from the garden, like a ghost of what had gone away. And the angel, lambent in its mercy, like a star whose brightness he could not contain.

He lifted the angel in his arms. Its body was very light. He carried it inside the house, through the kitchen, to the bedroom, where he laid it on the cotton sheets. Tenderly, Childer knelt above it, his knees on either side of its narrow body. He placed a hand against its neck, finding the pulse point.

The angel opened its eyes. It was still slow with sleep. It smiled and tried to raise itself on the bed. Childer prevented it. He applied pressure where he gripped its throat. The angel’s smile disappeared. Still it did not struggle. Could it die? Childer wasn’t sure. He no longer operated according to logic. Another instinct dictated the actions of his hands. He bore down on the body beneath him. The angel smelled like bruised grass, growing things. Its arms moved convulsively against him, then were still. For a moment Childer saw wings spread out against the Egyptian cotton, wings of a whiteness that put the Nile
sun to shame. He turned his head; he couldn’t bear their radiance. They were large enough to carry a man away. He pressed his own forehead to the angel’s. A ragged sob escaped him. He felt the angel’s arms enfold him gently. There would be no release.
Peter had been in the ground for six months when the birds began pushing up out of the earth. Small ones, at first, with brown feathers: sparrows, spitting out topsoil, their black eyes alert. They shook and stretched their wings in the sunlight. Soon they were pecking the juniper berries, and perching on rooftops, just like other birds. They were small, fat, and soft; Elyse wanted to hold them. But they were not tame, and they would not come to her.

The next birds were larger: larks and grackles. They crawled their way not just out of the dirt round Elyse’s own house, the old Devereaux homestead, but farther out west, towards the town of St. Auburn. When Elyse drove down for her week’s worth of groceries, she could see the holes by the sides of the fields, the raw earth scuffed up and still teeming with worm-life. The birds picked at the worms for their meals, pulling them like long threads from a sweater, unweaving their bodies’ hard wet work. Sometimes the corn had died in patterns close to the holes, like it had been burned.

Elyse thought that the town’s new sheriff would notice, and he turned up just as the grackles gave way to magpies. His old police cruiser ground in the driveway, wheels spinning on rock, a sound that she knew, and she went out on
the front porch to meet him. She was barefoot. She did not like to wear shoes. An old superstition; she had not outgrown it.

“Sheriff,” she said.

He squinted through sunlight. Did not approach her. “Miss Mayhew.”

“Is there something I can help you with?”

She was aware of the way she must look to his eye: her black hair tangled, autumn skin sunburned, the backs of her hands and her wrists cross-hatched where she’d scraped them rooting through cedar and yew. She would have put on a whiter dress, she thought, something less hedge-witching than wine-colored cotton—but no, let him see it, the darker stains on it.

“Some strange reports,” he said. “What you might call violations.”

A magpie took flight over his head: black-and-white plumage precise and foreign. The sheriff raised his hand in a gesture to ward off ill luck—then caught himself. Still, he tracked the bird on the skyline.

“One for sorrow,” Elyse said.

“Hell of a lot more than one in town. If you’ll excuse my saying.”

She held his gaze, thought about staring him down. She couldn’t, though, summon up the anger. She toed the peeling paint of the porch. “It’s not my work,” she said. “You know that. And he’s under the dirt.”

“Still,” he said. He had keen eyes, blue eyes. Hair the sandy color of birch
when you’d stripped all of the pale skin off it. And he gave her that same kind of
stripped-plain look. “It’d be best if you scared the birds off.”

They both looked up, to the gabled rooftop. The brown slates of it were
covered in birds, a shifting mass of dappled feathers. The house looked alive.
Elyse heard a burst of song—a lark, she thought—and then another bird singing,
and another bird, but none of the songs seemed quite complete. They quit mid-
pitch, fell off too soon, as though the birds had not learned the notes yet; as
though no one, in the places they had come from, had ever been able to teach
them the tune.

“They’re birds,” Elyse said. She crossed her arms: final. “They’re not my
creatures. They’ll do what birds do.”

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But larger birds began to surface: a turkey vulture, a hawk or two. There
was talk in St. Auburn about a condor. A farmer in Woodbine shot a goose, and
turned up on Elyse’s doorstep.

“Cut it open,” he said, “to clean out the soft parts. For cooking. Found a
letter addressed to you.” He held out the letter: blood-stained and wrinkled. It
hadn’t been opened.

Elyse looked down and knew what spindly hand had written that address.
She touched the paper, dry as the rue she kept hanging over her kitchen counters.
It was a special kind of lacewing dryness. It made her think of insects that moved in the summer night, all wings and shadows. They might have been ten thousand years in the tomb by the time she found them, all lifeless. Just tinder. She swept them off of the porch with a broom, thinking how they had been wet with life once.

The farmer said, “Do you want the feathers?”

Startled, she looked up.

“The bones and feathers. I saved the most of the bird for you.”

He was a shy man, with that shut country look to his face, and she took the bones and feathers because she didn’t know what else to do. All of it fit in one plastic bag: a mass of down and sinew, so light now that the meat was not on it.

She waved goodbye to the farmer’s truck. It bounced down towards the two-line blacktop. She could see black birds circle over the cornfields. The bright of the sun turned their wings to fishhooks. She could not say if they were crows or vultures. The wind sighed; dust stirred, and the corn moved.

Later she sat and read the letter. The lamp in the kitchen wrote a curve on the whitewood top of the breakfast table. The letter, when she held it up to the light, was marked with blood through and through. She could still read the writing, crooked and narrow.

*My dear Elyse,*
I write from the ocean. I cannot know what messages have reached you. Perhaps you do not know that there is an ocean. I mean the ocean that there is here, not the Atlantic or the Pacific or any such body. The body here is not seawater. It is dark in your hand, and the double moons cast no kind of reflection on it.

Sometimes I can see fish in the water, or some things that look like fish, the color of fish if you peeled the skin off them, but they move so fast that they drop from view.

I am never hungry here, and I don’t drink the water. I lie in the well of the boat to sleep, but it seems that sleep is not of this country. I watch the stars. They still turn in a wheel, the strange stars that I wrote you about. And sometimes I sail past the shapes of islands, and see lanterns on them—are they lanterns? is that the word?— and I hear voices, but not any human voices. The lanterns scatter when I come near.

I think about you, the stroke of an eyebrow, the shell of an ear, the map of your hairline. That long uncharted archipelago you make with all the parts of your spine. There is nothing I forget about you.

Peter
When she was done, she folded the page back in segments. She poured herself a finger of whiskey and drank it just out of the lamplight. Dusk had gone and darkness was settled. Insects were pocking their bodies on glass, trying to come in out of the night. Peter’s work boots were still in the corner. She had not moved them in his absence. The mud on them had long since dried. Flakes had cracked off of the leather like skin. Tomorrow, she thought, she would put them outside; out on the porch, maybe clean the soles. Prise the mud off with a pocketknife.

She slept sitting up, in the velvet armchair. Her mother had told her that when witches died, in the old days, no one who’d seen or known them would sleep in a straight-bed for a fort-night, for fear that the witch would sit on their chest and steal the breath from them. Elyse had tried to picture this: the witch pressing his ghost against the a body, trying to get what was inside. She had thought, I just want to press my body against another body, when I’m a witch and I die. But she knew that bodies did not work like this; had known it already, when she was a child.

***

In the morning, the sheriff was on her porch step. His hat was in his hands. He stood up fast when he heard the door open. “Miss Mayhew,” he said.

She was wearing a gray cotton dress with flowers. The weight of her long
black hair was wet. She still felt scrubbed-clean, unshelled by the shower. She didn’t want to face a man like that. She put Peter’s boots down on the porch boards, rested a hand on her hip. “Sheriff,” she said. “Have you come to arrest me?”

“No, ma’am.” He put his hat back on his head; went around to his car and opened the trunk. He came back with a white swan in his hands. It was dead: there was blood still on its chest-feathers, gone dark now, not that living red. She could see the place where the bullet was in it. Its wings and its lithe neck drooped in death.

She reached out and put one hand on a wing. Lightly, only: the brush of her fingers. She didn’t want to trouble it.

“Fellow out in Marsdale brought it down. I figured you’d know what to do with it.” The sheriff fixed her with his gaze. His face was very patient.

“It’s not mine.”

“Never said it was. A letter, though, once it’s sent…”

Elyse said, “You spend too much time talking to farmers.” But she took the swan from him. It felt like a child, the weight in her arms. Cradling was what you called the motion. There was no other way to carry it.

She didn’t want the law in her house. There was lead and gunpowder lining the threshold, cloves over the door to guard against it. But she asked the
sheriff, “Have you got a name?”

He paused halfway to turning. “Linden.”

“You’ll bring the birds?”

“When I find them.”

“Did you shoot this one down?” She hefted the swan a little.

He looked at her with those August sky eyes, like she was confusing to him. “No, ma’am. I never had much time for hunting birds.”

Elyse said, “Only men.”

Later sShe watched him drive off, the lone car on the road. It was early, still, and the air was cold. Autumn had started moving in: setting the first of its furniture up in the room that summer had not vacated.

There was no point to putting off unpleasant tasks. She set the swan on a broad cutting board and went to work dismantling it. The feathers went first, in matted handfuls, because she could make some use of them. Then she took the butchering knife and carved a space between the ribs. She had to snap the breastbone first. It was hard, the bone slippery in her grip. Even birds had such tough bones, bodies built for survival. She marveled at it. But when she got into the soft meat of organs, she found the letter almost at once, feeling for it with her fingertips. The same envelope, sealed and dirty; the same precise and crooked address.
She opened it and read it with the blood still on her hands.

_Elyse,_

_I worry that time doesn’t pass for you the way it does here. I worry that I’ll get out of sync before I find you, before I find my way back. I told you about the birds in the forest, how they seemed to migrate so fast, so that one moment there were summer birds, then just starlings. And moss seemed to cover the bark of trees as I walked past. Like everything was living in motion. I saw a flower open and close. A fox get carried apart by ants, till all that was left was the bones of it. I want to date these letters somehow, but don’t think I can._

_I am following the railroad out towards the ocean. There are no trains ever, only tracks. I see animals, but no other people. Sometimes lights very far in the distance, lights that look like cars in the dusk, driving on highways, out to the west. If there are train tracks, why not cars? But it makes me so sad to see them._

_I miss our own quiet country road. I miss the unmarked settler graves you found along it, that summer that we went bone-hunting. You were the one who could find the dead where the ground hid them under its skin. You are a better witch than I was. I_
admit it. I miss the way you smelled of witchcraft. Soot on your fingertips, sage and hyssop, sweet dock and cedar tips. Even in the thick of the forest, nothing here has a scent.

Be safe and know I am trying to reach you.

Peter

Elyse put the letter beside its cousin, in a box she had once kept recipes in. She finished stripping the swan of feathers, and set them aside. The meat and bones and skin she took outside, and laid in the garden, hoping wolves would come to eat at it—the skinny wolves that haunted the fields, gray interlopers. Being a witch, Elyse had nothing to fear from their presence. The townsfolk objected, were frightened of them. But Peter had had the gift of wolf-speaking, and when Elyse saw their black shapes in the night, the glint of their eyes, she thought of him.

Out in the yard, she saw new hollows, places where birds were still breaking the surface. The roof of her house was thick and busy. A crane landed on it for a moment, ghostly white legs crooked and graceful, then flourished its wings and was flying again. Elyse could not think why the sheriff had spared her. By rights, she should have been taken in; the birds were evidence of witching, and this was the place they had marked as their home. Men had been put in the ground for less; she would know. She would know.
She cleaned off the cutting board in the kitchen; made a sandwich, cut it in two. The whole house smelled of blood and magic. She could hear the birds on the roof. For a long time, when Peter went into the ground, she had not eaten. It had been hard to swallow, hard to chew; hard even to take the knives from their drawers, to knead the bread, measure coffee to brew. This was not a widow’s grief, or not all of it; green onions, when she touched them, sprouted anew, and eggs cracked, and the yolks crawled out on the counter. Potatoes sent out new roots. A leg of lamb once pulsed with blood. She feared what her hands might do, while something in her reached for resurrection. It was easier not to touch food.

The wolves left rabbits out on her doorstep. A whole deer once, its eyes still dark, its dun skin soft and smooth. Wolves, she thought, had simple thoughts. Hunger, not-hunger, and sometimes the moon.

The sheriff—newly appointed—had brought a casserole. From the ladies down at Mission Valley, he said. Then another day: from the ladies at St. Jude’s. Elyse had thought they came from the same kitchen.

“Charity,” she’d said: scornful in her anger.

He’d shrugged: awkward in the new uniform. “It’s just food.”

Now she ate in hard little bites. A hummingbird floated at the window, all dark green chest and nose like a needle. It was too small to carry a letter, she thought. Maybe just the tiniest rune, written down on a thin strip of paper,
wrapped round its heart. Or the very same rune, cut into the fluttering muscle.

Carved in one motion: a word, a wound.

***

She drove into town. The neighbors were watching. She wore her best
dress: bright red, with a plume of flowers that spread up across her chest. Her hair
was unbrushed; it frayed like a spume of water just breaking off the ocean. She’d
thought for a moment of going barefoot; instead, wore Peter’s old work boots.
She shopped through the aisles of the little co-op, ignoring the whispers. Her feet
were heavy, and she liked it; felt knobbly and wild, substantial, good.

In frozen foods, a woman stared: somebody’s mother or grandmother, in a
lime-green-colored cardigan and laced white tennis shoes. The cashier, through
heavy eyelashes, kept sneaking furtive looks. She didn’t want to touch Elyse’s
money, not at first; then grabbed it in one rushed fistful and shoved it under the
register’s hooks, breathing out in one heavy exhale.

Outside, Elyse leant against the store and ate an apple. Scattered birds
came and sat at her feet. The wind, when it blew, had a charred spark to it: the
scent of autumn or witching or both, embers blossoming, ashy and new. She
licked her lips. The apple was still green, sour.

A car pulled up, dust-covered: the sheriff. He rolled down his window.

“Miss Mayhew.”
“Linden,” she said.

“You have an audience.” He nodded at the birds.

“Everywhere.”

He rummaged in the passenger seat for a moment; came back with a bundle of letters that he held out in the air. “Got something for you.”

She stepped forward to take it. There were five or six letters, she thought. Hard to tell. Her fingers were sticky from the apple. Her hand brushed the sheriff’s. She glanced at him.

“Told folks to bring in what they find. They ought to pay me for delivering your mail,” he said.

Elyse didn’t know what to say. She said, “I appreciate the gesture.”

The sheriff shrugged. “Any idea when this might end?”

“The letters?”

“The birds. The whole damn uncanny.”

She moved back, minding her feet round the birds. Some rose in a rush; one perched on her shoulder. “I’m not doing it,” she said.

“I know that. Just hunting around for some insight.” He started to roll up his window, then paused. “Got a cider tree in my backyard, been giving up apples early. If you like them. I don’t have much use for so many.”

Elyse looked down at the core in her hand. She could see her own
teethmarks in the white flesh. “I’d like that,” she said.

“I’ll bring some around with the next batch of letters.”

He left. Elyse watched. The bird on her shoulder toyed with an uncoiled strand of her hair. She brushed it aside, harsh and impatient. Witches had to be careful with hair, with toenails and blood, with bones and eyelashes; leave any part of yourself, unaware, and someone, somewhere, would set it against you.

Burn what you shed: that was the lesson. She combed her thick hair back with her fingers, feeling its mass, its thousand snares.

At dusk, she lit a lamp with witch-fire and sat on the porch. Moths came crawling through still air, and clicking junebugs with hard little bodies. A few fireflies made themselves signal flares. Elyse sipped wine from a solid glass jam jar; unfolded the letters.

Beloved Elyse,

There is a road that leads down to the sea. I have to believe that it’s the way out, the one. I have to believe.

Seagulls keep circling as I walk. It’s winter here already.

But things keep pushing up through the snow; not plants, exactly. I can’t ever seem to get warmer or colder, but I feel it in objects: the ice, the heat. I never thought I would miss the chill, but I do; I think of when I would run alongside the wolves, in December or
January, and come home to find the house full of warmth. You at the kitchen sink: peeling rosemary leaves from the stalk, slicing ginger, the smell prickling.

I never see another person. I wonder where they all must be? No ferrymen, even; no toll-takers. Only me. I write these letters to keep words alive. It gets strange when I don’t speak. I forgot the name for an arum lily the other day; couldn’t think of it, just couldn’t—think. Then I worried I’d get like the wolves. There’d be a wilderness that I couldn’t come in from. You’d be inside a warm scented house. I’d come to the window; I’d press my cheek just there, against the pane of glass. But you wouldn’t ever let me inside. By then I’d be just claws and teeth.

Don’t lock me out, O arum lily. O rose of Sharon, don’t forget me.

Peter

She put that letter to one side. She didn’t want to go on with the rest. She didn’t know if she had the strength. A moth batted up against her hand. She nudged it away gently. The witch-fire burned with a red-moon light inside its lamp, wavering. Out in the dark, a nightingale called. There was no answer. The silence waited; went on waiting.
At last she stood and gathered the letters. She would read them, she thought, when she was in bed. She doused the lamp and went indoors. The air was sticky: the end of summer. It promised no easy sleep.

***

_Elyse,_

_I cannot remember the names of colors. I put my ear to the railroad tracks and hear a rumbling. Something moves under the earth, a light or a dark thing. Do you think that if I die in this place, I’ll go in the ground and find another country, just a little bit dimmer and stranger than this one? I don’t want to die again, Elyse._

_At night here the stars are very thick, and I think that none of the animals sleep. I hear them moving out in the forest. Pacing, clawing; the stir of air when they breathe..._  

***

_Distant, silent, surly, beautiful, so-dream-like Elyse,_

_Sometimes I think I could walk on this water. The world here is flat and like a dream. I walked on water once before—you remember—the old mill pond—handspan insects—Spanish moss drooping—soaking our socks right up to the ankles. It smelled like_

But how could I make the spell last so long here? You’re far from me; I see how far. It just stretches on, the sea. Sea, is what we used to call it.

I see catamarans out on the horizon. Catamarans: is that the word I mean? Something floating, something with sails. It looked like a cut lily. Then I was homesick, crying for you, but I can’t cry in this country. I make the motion but no tears come.

What is the name for that kind of motion? It isn’t a color. It tastes of salt. It’s like and not like breathing. I know you’ll remember the word for it...

***

Elyse,

I woke in the dark green wild of a forest, filled with birds,

all migrating...

***

It rained for a week, and the birds started dying. The sky up over the fields was blue—not the cloudless blue of an arid August, but a peat-smoke color. Peter’s blue. His eyes had once been almost that color. Elyse waited to feel melancholy.
The rain was a steady, scouring fall. It turned dirt to muck and washed out seeds that Elyse had planted in the herb garden. She went out to eye the ongoing damage. Her blouse and skirt plastered flat under siege; her hair stuck to her face and shoulders. She wiped the water out of her eyes and saw two dead birds: a crow and a starling. They were lying feet-up by the lemon verbena. Rain had distorted the shape of their wings.

Elyse scraped them into a cardboard shoebox and brought them inside. They did not smell like anything: not particularly of death, nor even of herb beds. No worms or beetle-marks could be seen. When she touched them, Elyse could feel the echo of witchcraft under their feathers, very faintly. She resisted the urge to cut them open, to check for letters. If every bird had a letter, she thought—all the sparrows and larks, the nightingales, all the geese, every bird that had crawled its way up... She imagined the envelopes moldering in boxes, more than she could ever read.

The next day she found three more birds in the front yard: three grackles, dead, with storm-battered wings. She picked them up, carried them to the porch by the hooks of their little clawed feet. Over yonder the crust of the earth was upset, by the root of a live oak tree, where another bird was scrabbling to surface. Its curved beak poked up. A kestrel, she thought, or some kind of hawk.

It was still raining.
The sheriff came by one morning, early, when Elyse was still asleep. Later she woke and went out on the porch. A milk crate of apples was waiting, and a grocery sack filled with water-stained letters. The apples were small and hard, but sweet-smelling. She rolled one in the palm of her hand. Broke its skin with her teeth. It tasted like autumn, red and familiar. A note on the crate said:

*Hope didn’t wake you. Harvest good. Need to talk re: plague of birds. Will swing by later this wk.*

She smiled, and was mystified by the motion. She touched her hand to her lips, her cheek. The smile remained. She finished the apple, bemused, watching the branches of wide trees bow in the rain. She could see now on them the tips of autumn, leaves beginning to shine like copper. Soon the whole would be ablaze.

She carried the apples indoors to the kitchen, thought of pie-making. The letters she left in their bag on the porch. They could hardly get more battered or wet. She left the door open to smell the rain. Clouds shifted on the far horizon. The light got darker, then lighter again. She went barefoot all day, enjoying the feeling, the thrill of the first cold starting to set.

Nineteen birds died in the garden that week. She picked them up and stowed them in boxes; set them on the porch with the rest.

***

It was dusk when the sheriff drove up the gravel. The clouds had cleared,
but the twilight was heavy: damp and filled with swollen scents. Elyse sat on the edge of the porch. There was mud on the narrow crests of her ankles. She drank cider cold from a jar in her hand.

The sheriff approached. He said, “Storm’s broken.”

“Not much of a storm.”

“You say that, and yet I got a river over in Woodbine’s been flooding. Water up all the way to the town line. Carrying off houses. Power’s down.”

“Is it.” She’d never had much use for that kind of power.

“Funny thing: lot of dead birds in that flood. Not just river birds. Eagles. Cactus wrens. Your fair number of sparrows, seeing as lately we’re overrun.” His eyes strayed to the back of the porch, where the bodies of all the dead birds sat. Elyse had not bothered to cover them over. She had found that the wolves and the foxes and vultures were not interested in them, not unless she took out the heart, took the witchcraft and made them just birds again. They took up a lot of room on the porch. She’d stopped counting them.

“Seems you have a problem yourself,” the sheriff said.

Elyse took a sip of murky cider. “Why don’t you sit down,” she said.

He did: settling long legs on the porch stoop. She offered him the mason jar. He drank from it and grimaced. “Are those my apples?”

“Put to good use.”
“I remember them having less of a kick.”

They sat in silence for a while. Moths moved in the early darkness. A mourning dove uttered a short sad cry and plunged to its death, pale gray and not particularly graceful. Neither Elyse nor the sheriff paid much mind to it.

“They’ll all die eventually,” Elyse said. “It’s in their nature.”

“And then? They die, but they don’t go away. Can’t seem to burn or bury ‘em.”

She didn’t know how to answer that statement.

He sighed. “I was real sorry about what happened to your husband.”

“It’s the law. He knew the risk he ran.”

“And you?”

“The witch woman of Auburn County?” She laughed. The sound rasped her throat. “If you’ve come for repenting—”

“No.” He drank again from the jar. “I was there that day at the station. You know.”

“I knew you might have been.”

“I should have done something. I wanted to.”

Elyse pushed one bare toe down in the dirt. The rain had left it rich and wet. “They planted quick-tree—witchbane—all around his grave so witches can’t come near. Standard procedure. Can’t even visit.”
“They don’t want him coming back.”

“He’s not coming back,” Elyse said. She covered her mouth.

“No,” the sheriff said.

She felt his hand on her hand in the dark. Just a touch, nothing more or less.

She asked, “So what the hell do I do with all these birds?”

He laughed: a low and gentle sound. “Have you considered witchcraft?”

“It’s against the law.”

“I promise not to look.”

He stood up and turned his back, placing his broad hands over his eyes. A joke.

“No,” Elyse said. “Look. I want you to look.”

It was almost night by then, but she could still see his face. He leveled his curious eyes on her. She walked out in the yard and picked up the dove. It was still slightly warm, like a stone in summer, ghosting with heat when the sun has gone down. She could feel the magic inside it, inert.

“I can’t bring them to life,” she said. “Not in a way you would want. The witchcraft doesn’t work like that. I don’t think they were real birds to start with, you know. Just other things made into flesh.”

“Sure seem real enough when they’re eating the sweet corn. They’ve got
bones and blood, don’t they?”

“Lots of things have that.” She thought of Peter, lost somewhere on his ocean, long underground. For a moment she felt his lips on her neck, his breath against her collarbone. But he was not really Peter anymore. He was speaking a language, a kind of wolf-language, that she had not learned yet.

She held the dove up close to her heart. A white glow started between her hands. There was no heat to it, no smell and no texture. Still, it made her flinch. She forced herself to hold very steady. She felt the dove fold up like paper. The weight of it lessened. When she opened her hands, there was nothing in them up pale gray ashes. Fistfuls of ashes, and bits of burned paper. She could see the ink on some of them. She let the wind take them out towards the cornfields. She wiped her hands against the skirt. The air smelled of witching, a mournful scent.

“There,” she said. “Just wishes and paper. Nothing to it.”

She looked at the sheriff. She thought he’d been crying. The magic sometimes took them like that. She affected not to see his expression. Men got odd. She leaned against the porch railing.

“I’ll have to do all of them, one by one. Better to get it done fast,” she said.

“You want to make a night of it?” His look was not very readable.

Elyse tilted her head. “You won’t be needed.”
“I know,” he said.

After a moment’s pause, she said, “It’ll be a long night, so you’d better come in, then. Have something to eat, find a place to set down.”

The doorway was still guarded by gunpowder. She broke the line of it as she passed. Later she could take down the cloves, unmark the lead; redo the witching, to keep out what needed keeping out, and keep in what needed keeping in.

***

_Elyse_,

_It stretches so far, this scentless water. Every day I forget and forget. I wave to the flowers that drift in the distance. What is their name again? There was something I promised not to lose. I locked it in the cage of my chest. I can feel it there, like a bright-winged bird. But the bird is restless…_

***

_Elyse_


***

Sometimes a bird still struggles through to the surface, breath coming in unsteady gasps—even in the dead of winter. Elyse finds and carries them in her
bare hands to the reed birdcage at the back of the house. They don’t live long. But she feeds raw seed to them, coaxing the life in them while she can. At night they sing (they are all songbirds) and when she wakes, she feels she can almost finish it: the last line of the song they are singing. She feels it in her bones, that coming warmth, the completeness.