

## THE DOOR

“If you see any hallucinations, ignore them.”

So the surgeon had told him before sending him off unbandaged, free to wander the city streets and spy on people behind him with a fresh set of eyes, still swollen in the back of his skull from the insertion and the anesthesia. This was half the reason why he got them: his unease at how people see him without his catching their stare, how they might know something about him that he didn't—a post-it note, a bug on his neck—and he reasoned that in an earlier age people would sew matia into their shirtbacks for fear of the evil eye.

He did not ponder how sin breeds sin, how his second sight was its own form of spying as his new eyes were invisible.

But the crowd thinned as his wandering took him in his usual habit towards the abandoned parts of the city and the wall of a familiar alley, where takeout wrappers fluttered along the dusty curb and fire escapes tempted him within jumping-distance. He opened and closed his back eyes slowly now, marveling at the blur of their watercolor scene, like the sounds of a baby before it learns to speak. Only the colors were familiar:

the luminous grey of every autumn sky, the muted red of the opposite wall, the black hole that gaped in the middle of it.

He turned to look with his inborn eyes. There was nothing there, just the wall's own brickwork, which he confirmed by going and touching it, pressing hard on the grit as if some secret passage would open, and nothing happened. So he turned again, craning his face skyward to look down with his new eyes. It was still there. Not a hole but a black wooden door embedded into the wall with no step and no frame.

Several more times he checked with both sets of eyes, switching perspectives, fearful that around the corner there was some TV crew or police enforcer who was putting him up to a test. Who knew something he didn't. But once he had satisfied himself that this aberration was, truly, a secret of his own, he stood again with his back to the wall, looked down with the back of his head, twisted his palm uncomfortably, and turned the knob.

In the quiet darkness there were copper-green lights that began at foot level and stretched ahead, guiding him unsteadily along a staircase which he descended in backwards steps with one hand against the tunnel's cold wall. After a while, there was a turn in the stairs, always to the left, again and again and shorter each time. He never opened his front eyes for fear of challenging the reality of an unreal place. Somehow he knew that he was on the spiral path of a quarry. The ramp of an inverted pyramid. And when he finally looked up, at the bottom, he was spellbound by the algae bloom of all of those lights downward-facing and viewed together.

There was a wisp of shadow at the center of the space which hung vertical and swaying. He turned away from it to see it better, reached a hand behind to feel whether it was carving or was carved by the light, and noticed how it shrank away. It was alive and therefore real.

So he turned and opened his true eyes upon it and saw a plinth in harsh white light, a statue with its face missing, and felt himself thigh-deep in piled heads, and screamed.

They streaked matted blood across his pants as he waded and punted toward the stairs. Falling, he caught himself with tufts of hair in both his hands, caked against the necrotic cheeks of a face that squelched loosely against its skull as he put his weight on it. The stench of rot and iron followed him in his flight which he ended, panting, face-down on the stairs that now had no lights at all.

The heads bobbed up and down. All of them stared, with blank eyes or with the two ragged holes torn out of the back of every one of them. Cursing his stupidity, he closed his first eyes and opened his second.

He felt the sound before he noticed that the stench was gone and the old lights were visible again. It was the hollow crack of bones on rock arranged in complex bursts and scales, and he knew through its vibrations the size of the thing which stood, on legs of nails and wire, halfway up the stairs with its carapace bathed in green.

He turned, opened his first eyes, and saw—as expected—the empty staircase. Even as he vomited, he could not tear his vision away from the air above the steps, the empty air that

attested to the possibility of escape. One step and another. A ledge too dark to see tripped him and sent him falling, eyes shutting reflexively, back ones opening for a moment to see the creature lunge to take its chance before he remembered to shut them again. Bruised elbows and another step. With each flight and each turn, the air lightened, the white light grew more distant, and the stalking thing was seen less and less as he learned to keep his blinks short.

The last flight of stairs was the coldest. Here he sprinted to the top and put his hand to the place where the doorknob should have been. There was only hard concrete. The wall surrounded him on three sides.

It was with a kind of graceful, trembling irony that he finally embraced the logic of that place and resigned himself to it, opening his second eyes, groping for the knob he knew would be there, wrenching it open as he watched the creature sink a talon into his back and out through his chest, tumbling together intertwined, the one landing on a mouthful of dust, the other disintegrating in the golden hour of a beautiful autumn day.

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He rolled and felt, along his chest and back, first the untorn fabric of his shirt and then the unbroken skin. He held his breath and checked his pulse. It was faint. Opening his second eyes again, he saw with sickening physicality the long white spike that extended out of his ribcage and ended in a wicked point. It came loose from pulling, and he cringed at the ugly

suction of a wound reopened. The surface was smooth. His blood made rivulets down the asphalt, pooled at the curb, and evaporated. He felt around the hole and sensed no pain in his punctured heart which had begun to heal around his probing finger. Soon he stood unbleeding in both worlds, testing his eyes while holding that strange and benign spike, watching it pop into and out of existence.

Life went on. Nobody noticed the second sense that he seemed to acquire for when his boss was peering over his shoulder. It gave him time, between assignments, to scour the internet for similar experiences which is how he got back in touch with a friend from when he had still been involved in art. Face to face for the first time in years, tucked in a booth far away from the game on the big screens, they shifted their glasses and wondered how to begin.

"You know," offered his friend, "it wasn't the vision itself which blew me away, but the colors. Made me wish I had been a painter."

"You could have. Still can."

"No."

"Serious. Your school projects were better than my works."

"Not when you chose such beautiful subjects," replied his friend, putting his wrists together to mock a pose he held once, with his hands bound in a bicycle chain and a jester cap cutting shadows across his narrow face, a powerful statement on the environment, as they had argued in a paper that neither of them could remember.

"Then it's a shame you can't sculpt yourself. Or can you?"

Do sculptors do self-portraits?"

"If I had a second set of eyes, I could."

"But ... you do."

"Listen, I told you I was having hallucinations, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'd see this moon in the sky, always in the same place, always dark. New. Even when it was night I could still make it out. I thought to myself, it's cutting-edge technology, there's gonna some quirks. It's not so weird to see a moon."

"I couldn't agree more."

"But one day I was coming home from the studio, and that black disk looked just a little bit bigger. Closer, really. I stood there—middle of the street—and said, John, it is a splotch on an optic nerve that shouldn't even exist in your brain, you are not going to freak out about this."

"So you went home?"

"No, I went straight to the clinic and—and told them that I was seeing things, and they put me under and took it out."

"Why the hell would you do that?"

"You don't—I was standing there, you know, staring at that thing. I kept my back eyes open, wide open. I told myself I was gonna stare it away. I was gonna win the staring contest."

"..."

"And then it blinked."

Despite the terror that he had experienced, it was perhaps true that his introduction was a gentler one. He chose to enter the door. A moon was something else. Unreachable. Celestial. He could not bear to imagine what it was like to be

hated by the sky itself.

And how much should he tell John? He knew from long familiarity that his friend was not scared of anyone else's horror but his own, so he ended up sharing everything, even the fact that he had brought the spike home with him.

Four drinks in, they had said all that they wanted to say, and the bill was brought by a waitress who sensed that she should keep her distance from these two until they fell silent. He stood to leave, blinked from the light of the big screens, and dropped his wallet on the floor.

"You all right?" came John's voice.

But what he saw was not his friend's face. Where the head should have been was a lumpy stone, and over it crept a mat of cheek flesh like lichen swallowing a boulder, incompletely. The eyes and the nose were the missing parts, where the stone's texture showed itself behind a cross-shaped rupture. He exhaled. Three bent nails pinned the bundle to his friend's shoulders, one through the collarbone, and one trailed loose down the back of his neck.

"Do you see something?" Tendons snapped in open air as John turned his head to look behind.

"I see ... you."

"..."

"They did something very bad to you."

John patted at the back of his head and his fingers fell on a capillary mesh that wove across the stone, which he neither saw nor felt.

"I think I can fix it."

They stood in his apartment, both facing the floor mirror, as he twisted his arms behind to touch John's head. Carefully, he peeled the nerves and veins away from the surface, using the tip of the spike to cut the skin that wrapped around the stone, remembering the strange painlessness of his impalement. In the same way, he whittled at the bones which held the nails in place. How much of this would the creature have done to him, he wondered, if he had closed his eyes longer in that underground room?

Now his friend's face was hanging in shreds all down his broken shoulders. He took the stone in both his hands and pulled, cringing as the wounds sucked against the nails and the flat bottom. Blood poured and seemed to flow down into nowhere. He gathered up the stringy flesh and watched it restitch itself into something resembling a human face, with no features whatsoever.

"Do you see anything?"

"Yeah. You cupping my face romantically like you'd kiss it if you grew a mouth on the back of your head."

He laughed. "I meant, do you have second sight again?"

"No, they took it out, remember? What's going on?"

"Watch."

He set the tip of the spike to John's forehead and began carving. It was easy, like dragging a pencil down an apple's skin, but it had been a long time since he sculpted anything. He did the pupil first, then the sunburst web of the iris, and finally—laboriously—the rest of the vertical eye. Two lids he carved from the surrounding flesh whose hanging excess he



teased into fine lashes and glands.

“Do you see anything now?”

John tried for a moment. The iris contracted imperceptibly. The eye wet itself and began to turn in its socket.

“Close your real eyes.”

Reflected in the floor mirror, John raised his hands, trembling. “Where’s my face? Please—What did you do to my face?”

“They took your entire head. Sent you home as a rock instead.” He showed him the stone with its bloody nails. “You didn’t know because you couldn’t see it.”

“And what the hell are you doing?”

“I was gonna do the rest of your face but it’s hard working behind my back.”

“...”

“Can you make me a front eye too?”

His friend took the spike and began with the same expert touch that, as always, took him out of his body and its stubborn fears. The first puncture made him chuckle.

“It’s like scooping a melon isn’t it?”

“You’re so right,” replied John.

“I want my eye to be nice and big and pretty.”

Another laugh. “Is this a thing or something?”

“Just gotta take advantage of the talent you know?”

The eye opened. He saw his friend in both views now, his ordinary face somehow superposed within the tall featureless lump now crowned by a single eye that was wide with fear and novelty. Taking back the spike, he carefully shaved the flesh

down to his friend's narrow cheeks, the aquiline nose, the eyes closed in patient terror, as if excavating a bust. Every wrinkle came to life. It was almost shameful to set his clumsy art school hands upon as renowned a sculptor as John, but such was the difference between life and technique that he did not need any real artist's skill to capture, in perfect unimaginative detail, the pulse beneath his friend's unbroken skin.

"Woah," said John, testing his eyes, "it's hard to look at you."

"Thanks. Do you *want* me to make you uglier?"

"No, I mean—It's hard to focus both views on you at the same time. Like you're out of sync."

His friend was right. The mirror showed his two bodies offset slightly, like two frames of an anaglyph print. It must have happened when the creature impaled him. Unable to think of any way to fix it, he decided instead to embrace the separation. Sitting down on the floor, he handed the spike to his friend, looked him in his new third eye, and asked him to break his heart.

He was reassured as the stabs came, first tentatively and then with a friendly determination, that John's timidity was limited to his own body. His heartstrings snapped, rejoined, and snapped again. He saw his friend in two copies, crossed and leaning like the hands of a clock, attaining perpendicularity at the moment when he felt the bloodsoaked carpet and rested his head against the vertical floor. His own body was in view, too, lifeless or sleeping. John seemed to be enjoying himself. Maybe it was the exhilaration of violence without

consequence. Maybe it was the vulnerability with which he lay there, drawing breath from his exposed lungs, a cloud creeping across his pale face as he whispered to ask if he could have a few more eyes on his new frame.

“Are you sure this isn’t a thing?”

“... please ...”

So his friend knelt down and worked for hours until the first traces of sunlight were lapped up by dozens of pupils focusing as their lids opened against the lethargy that ran down his arms. Holding John’s shoulder, he limped on still-numb legs toward his original body and saw it, for the first time, as something outside of himself. The opposite of a mirror, which extends your awareness into a body that is not your own. The wrinkles around those closed eyes. The tension in the jaw. The agitation of the heart even in sleep. The tattered thing that he had been so eager to cast off now drove him to weep from every artificial eye which looked upon it from all angles as something that had been wronged. His friend must have left at some point. There was a blanket over him and himself. He held it close, whispered his gratitude and lonely apologies, and the watery sun was a kaleidoscope down his back and legs, stilling into a portrait of the secret geometry of the room which left his memory as he fell asleep.

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He spent the last of his vacation days learning how to puppet his old body. How to wear it like a jumpsuit and make the arms and legs move again. How to walk. How to flex the

throat and give voice to an internal monologue that came to him as a second language half-remembered. How to ride a bicycle. “Physical therapy following complications from elective surgery,” he told his boss, changing the topic to his backlog of projects, forestalling the prying questions hidden inside his well-wishes and condolences. He did ultimately return on time to the same faces resolving the same old problems. There the ceiling lights shimmered in the panoramic gaze of the eyes which he hid beneath the barrier of his first-world flesh, as he typed with fingers that weren’t his own. Work was work simulator now.

At the end of the week, tired of the game, he qwopped his way to the fourth floor break room, always deserted on a Friday afternoon, and poured some coffee grounds. The tile floor squeaked.

“Oh! Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you.”

“No, you’re good,” he replied.

“I’ll be honest, I never see people here on Friday.”

“Same. Not even myself. But I was dying without coffee.”

“I knooow.”

“I park in the north lot so the other room’s usually closer when I’m getting in.”

“The north lot? Doesn’t the construction bother you?”

“What construction?”

“You know, the backhoe that’s always moving dirt around.”

She let her eyelids droop a little and so did he.

“That’s literally just Bob’s car.”

“It’s not actually—”

"Nope. He drives it to work. I've seen him get into it on his lunch break. I bet it's a therapist's idea."

"The idea of what? Getting people's cars dusty?" Their eyes were half-closed now, and neither one remarked on it.

"He helped me out of a ditch in winter once."

"You're so right! Why doesn't he help the snowplows?"

"That sounds fun actually. Maybe I should get a backhoe too. We can be buddies."

At this moment, they let their eyes fully close, and each saw the other hiding inside their own skin. Her laughter cascaded down the dozens of spikes embedded along the curve of her spine, forming a kind of skeletal dorsal fin.

"So ... do you have a *thing* for eyes, or?"

"Oh please, not you too." Their second voices were different, liquid and somehow unspoken.

"I hope you never told a lady she's the apple of your eye."

"And who's talking? Did you go back for seconds because getting stabbed once wasn't enough?"

"Hey, I had a little trouble at the door."

"Generally, you turn the knob to open it."

"Well, no, I mean—the statue was too fast, and—"

All his eyes widened.

"It wasn't the same for you?" she asked.

"I mean, there was a statue, but—"

"Under the green lights, right? The tall shadow. The statue inside it."

"I had to open my eyes to see it."

"You opened your eyes? In that place?"

“Yeah.”

“I was afraid I’d be like trapped in concrete.”

A pause. “So the statue moved?”

“Not until I touched it. Through the fog. It looked at me.”

“With no eyes?”

“It turned its head.”

“...”

“I’ve literally never run faster. I was looking backwards the whole time, never opening my eyes.”

“It chased you.”

“I couldn’t outrun it. Its joints were cracking and leaving bits all over the place but it moved like a human. Superhuman. When it stabbed me it was like an explosion in my back. Like it was trying to give me something. Weigh me down so it could keep me there.”

“You’re intact though. Mostly.”

“It wasn’t trying to kill me. Just, every few steps—wham! Another spike.” Her spine waved lazily. “And every time it happened, I would suddenly know something. My dog’s favorite color. How many people would be on the bus tomorrow. That my grandparents never loved each other.”

“It wasn’t a trick?”

“No. I’ve seen my dog pick his crushes. And my grandparents were weird when I was a kid. It wasn’t like knowledge, I guess. Certainty? Clarity, maybe. Part of me being subtracted away so I could see the rest clearly. Like a glass with all the color drained out.”

“...”

"And I wanted to stay."

"Down there. In that place."

"Yeah."

"You never opened your real eyes?"

"I didn't need them."

"..."

"After being stabbed a few times, I barely needed my second ones either. I just had a sense. I know what's down there. Everyone's abandoned parts. The dragon on the steps. I knew I shouldn't stay. But I wanted to."

"To have self-knowledge." He blinked away a mote of dust from the palm of his hand.

"Self-acceptance."

"Remembering?"

"Forgetting."

"And yet you never took the spikes out."

"I've tried, but look." She unsheathed one from the hollow of her neck. The wound gaped open. It was dark like a mouth full of ink, with no trace of healing on its lipless fringe nor even a faint reflection of the sunlight which streamed low into the room. She plunged her hand in and through the other side. Black fluid trickled between her fingers.

He had taken a step forward, intrigued.

"If I take out too many, I'll fall apart," she said. "I know I will. I'll disappear."

He closed the eye in his palm and laid his hand on hers.

"There's nothing left of me inside."

She guided him through her back and out between her col-

larbones where she saw those ink-drenched eyes emerge, all down his slender arm, opening in a timid wave and blinking away the liquid which wove itself in the valleys between. She caught their gaze and traced it, down his wrist and fingers, unfurling toward the window where a black moon hung in the afternoon sky. Everything stopped except for their breathing. There were footsteps behind them. In the reflection they saw Roland from accounting who had turned to see their original bodies, standing with their eyes closed, while he patted at his comb-over, raised a hand as if to speak, took a few steps backwards, and hurried away. Easy laughter took them.

“His face.”

“His face!” she replied.

“He was just like, I don’t know what this is, but I’m not fucking with it.”

“We look insane.”

“Comatose.”

“Deranged.”

“Psychopathic.”

“He’s gonna call HR.”

“For what, closing our eyes?”

“Unlicensed mindfulness in fourth floor break room.”

“Tripping balls on instant coffee.”

“It’s not a heart attack, it’s a body high.”

“Failure to cultivate an eye-inclusive workplace.”

“I don’t know, you did a pretty good job cultivating.” She looked down again at his blinking arm.

“I thought you didn’t like the eyes.”



“They are, admittedly, nice and big and pretty.”

“Thank you.”

“Actually, while you’re in there,” she said as he began to withdraw his arm, “can you, like, take a look inside?”

“Uh, sure.”

His forearm was inside the black wound now, and he opened an eye and felt the shadow flow into and behind it, pluck it from its socket, provoking a dull resonance and no pain, seeping in through the nerve and filling it with some frail otherworldly sight that penetrated even this darkness which was absolute. Below, spikes threaded between holes and punctures and cascaded like a helix down her ruined spine. It seemed to stretch for miles. The bones in the distance quivered like wind chimes, and the whole chain swayed in its far tail as if suspended over some cold, lonely current.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“How many times were you stabbed?”

“A couple times per flight, at most? Something like twenty flights total? Forty max.”

“I see easily over a hundred. There’s no end to it.”

“...”

“It’s moving at the bottom, the further down you go. Like it’s connected to something.”

“...”

“Do you want me to—”

“It was wrong about the number of people on the bus.”

“...”

“I went to work the next day,” she continued. “Didn’t take

time off. Took the bus, same time as always, same driver. I said hi to her, she told me to scan. Same as usual. I knew with absolute certainty that there'd be five passengers on that bus, including me."

"Were there?" He tried to call his eye back, but he couldn't.

"There were six. I counted and recounted. Me. A guy with music on his phone. A couple sleepy-eyed kids. A guy in scrubs. A lady holding a suitcase. Six."

"So it was wrong?"

"It had to be right. I was as sure as the sun comes up. So I turned around with my back eyes open."

"..."

"The guy in scrubs wasn't there."

"..." His eye seemed to have fallen very far down.

"His seat was empty. Everyone else was exactly the same. The phone's music was still playing. The bus driver stopped to let some more people on. He just wasn't there."

"..."

"I tried not to react. I turned back around and opened my real eyes, and the guy was there again, but ..."

"..."

"He was hanging from the roof of the bus. You know those overhead handles?"

"Yeah." His eye felt completely numb now.

"He had his neck through one of those, and every time the bus turned a corner, his body would swing and smack against the window. Nobody looked or said anything. And the edges of his scrubs were bleeding purple, and ..."

“Was he real?”

“I blinked and he was gone. But a few days later, I saw an article about a memorial for a local nurse. They had a picture on the site. I think it was a graduation picture. It was the same guy.”

“...” He could barely see the spikes as they rushed past.

“But it doesn’t mean the prediction wasn’t wrong. He was there when I got on the bus. I saw him.”

“...”

“The thing is, it’s happened a few more times since then. A park bench that shouldn’t be empty, and then it isn’t. A piece of graffiti that says something else at first.”

“...” Somehow he knew, from the swaying and the dimness, that his eye was nearing the end of whatever was down there.

“And the worst part is, I know, right now, with the same unwavering certainty, the same deep-in-my-bones pit-in-my-stomach feeling, that I’m already dead.”

For a moment, his eye was parallel to a shadow which tumbled from the last piece of bone, shredded by the wind that whipped at the black mist which clothed and hid everything except for its head, turning, fixing him with its missing gaze, with an ancient urgency, pinning through the pupil of his wayward eye all the versions of himself scattered through time, far away from that unknown place. Then it passed and there was nothing more to see. And that little vessel made of veins and glass could never more be called an eye as the endless darkness swallowed it whole.

\* \* \*

It had snowed heavily a few times before John messaged him again. He was to drive an hour out west to some warehouse address in exchange for, in John's words, gratitude, his name etched in art history, and a very nice espresso machine which the building's previous owners had abandoned and which John had refurbished despite never drinking coffee.

"You fixed up the machine as a bribe, then."

"Not at all. It was good practice."

"Practice for what? We all get burned out sometimes. You don't have to change careers and—"

"Come and you'll see."

So night found him slushing his way up the long ramp toward the building and its floodlights, where a garage door opened to meet him. Exchanging his coat for a latte, he was led onto an open floor crowded with things hanging from the ceiling—gemstones, strange shapes, common trash—and machinery everywhere. Container cranes towered over pulleys and lifts and great carousel wheels whose purpose was opaque to him. John had disappeared behind some faraway panel. The lights went off. A spotlight pointed at a wide, empty slab of marble in the center of the space.

"Will the test subject please ascend the platform."

Some of the hanging trinkets seemed to vibrate as John's megaphone voice passed through them. He took a few steps before being corrected.

"The real test subject."

So he shed his body too. As the spotlight hit his face, his

many eyes were tricked by all the baubles and metal into seeing waves shimmering through the darkened air, driven on by the inexplicable rotation of their dangling substrate. He paced the platform, crossed and uncrossed his arms, spinning his blinking body one way and another.

“It looks pretty cool, I guess, but—”

“Have you found the red circle?”

“...”

There were, maybe, a few specks of red in a corner of the room. He saw them out of his shoulder but now turned to face them head-on. New objects revealed themselves as he moved ever so slightly, a smattering of blue crystals far away, a crumpled green sheet poking out from behind a rusted box, a couple more streaks of red now visible on the wall, and finally he saw it. As clear as a sun hanging low in the sky. Beneath the spotlight and to its left, both near and far away, the nonexistent red disk coalesced into view.

“Excellent.” The density of the hanging objects seemed to absorb all the echoes of his friend’s voice. “Find the other circles.”

Keeping his head fixed in place, he moved his arms around, shifted his stance, probing the air for pockets of color which he saw all down his body and in the palms of his hands. A green disk made of pressed leaves and counterfeit bills. A blue disk with an aquarium inscribed inside. After some experimentation, every joint of his body was pinned in place by a web of optical coincidences designed for him alone.

“Don’t move.”

Suddenly the room was so bright that he almost squinted. It was no longer just his joints. Every one of his dozens of eyes was faced with a different picture, a different illusion, each seeming to show a bright figure standing in a dark space. He shifted his legs and refocused his eyes. It was the same figure in all of the images, though the features were sometimes made of bottle caps and other times of painted wire, all seen from different angles which made him nauseous as his mind tried to combine everything into a single scene. He unfocused and let the figure align itself between all his eyes. It snapped. Now it was the figure that felt real, three-dimensional, while his eyes were scattered all around it, spectators embedded in a fictitious dome which enclosed the nonexistent object.

“Do you see the sculpture?”

“You are insane.” He raised his voice to reach whatever elevated lift his friend was standing on.

“I choose beautiful subjects too.”

He scrutinized the outline of the figure with its slender limbs contorted as if its joints were fixed in place. One arm reaching up with its palm open, the other bent with the elbow thrust out. He realized that it matched his own body.

Somewhere deep inside the warehouse, a lever was thrown and rust shook itself from moving machinery.

The figure’s arm disintegrated into its constituent trash. The perspective was lost. He waved his own arm around, palm still open, chasing whatever lines of sight had been altered by the new development. He found it. Elbow stretched behind his head, he saw the figure’s arm reappear in that same pose.

The figure was moving too, with its arms and its legs, dancing in slow motion to the noises which rumbled underneath the marble that he stood on. He followed the movements of his own body, seen through dislocated eyes. A step forward. An imperceptible tilt of the neck. Hands splayed in midair. The dance paused for a moment as some mechanism stopped and sputtered back to life.

John was shouting something that he couldn't hear.

The dance got faster and he gasped for breath. It took him from one side of the platform to the other, spinning, twisting, leaping. The space seemed to dim a little as the figure landed, composed itself, breathed in, and spread its wings. So did he. Despite his proprioception insisting to him through waves of nausea that he *had no wings*, the eyes on his back said otherwise, as the mechanism forced him to flex his shoulders in sync with the feathered movements, lest he lose the perspective. For a quiet moment, he floated like a seraph.

He understood why the platform was made of marble.

John threw another switch. The lights flickered.

Then he was a bull with bulging muscles, and the empty socket in his forearm was a numbness in the point of his shoulder. Then he was a hairy spider, and his missing eye was a twitch in the tibia of his left front leg. The lights flickered again and metal banged against metal. He embraced the changes wrought upon him by his friend's extraordinary vision as he writhed at the center of that zoetrope stage, with all his pupils cloudy and unfocused, seeing as if asleep so as to not disturb the illusion, seeing into a chamber which did

not exist. And his skin was the chamber's darkened walls, rippling with eyes of its own like apples in the sea, and it was the chimera within. And he was the chimera, performing the very motions that would reveal his next shape.

The lights flickered again and went out. All but the spotlight. He heard John swearing. Another lever was pulled and everything was still and silent.

"John?" He closed his eyes and froze, afraid that the illusion would leave him.

"Sorry," came the reply from somewhere high up. "The load is fucked. I can fix it, let me just—" A mechanical lift whirled.

"John." He was closing all of his eyes except for the one he couldn't. The empty socket ached.

"What? Hang on."

"John, I think I can still see."

Somehow he felt inside his missing blind eye the outline of every object hanging in that space. The distance, the tilt, the spin, all known with the certainty one finds at the bottom of a deep pool. No colors were visible to him, only the silenced rays themselves, blooming from suspended prisms dark and pristine and antvisual. Like the blindsight with which a spider knows its web. He traced the artist's spatial puns and renewed their focus inside his own closed eyes.

The machinery began to whirl in the dark.

He danced again, now as something grotesque. The strings inside his limbs carried him with no consciousness of the illusions they were meant to convey. His shoulders pulsed



backwards. A rotor shifted in the room's far corner. He turned. Hopped on one foot. Beat his chest with both his hands. Fell down and sat up. His friend was spellbound but he was not enjoying himself anymore. He was doing it to prove that he could.

John was shouting. "That's right! Yes ... yes! The spin—wings up, wings down—carousel lift comes in—"

The ugly churn of metal caught and breaking. "—was supposed to—"

He matched the machine's jerks and shudders. Traced its broken lines of sight.

"Keep going!"

The room was lit in horrible shadow by a flash of blue and then the smell of smoke.

His body felt broken too, half-numb, half-swinging.

"Fuck it. Don't worry!"

Fire crept from one hanging strand to another, setting loose their weights which shattered on the floor.

He was crying and didn't know why.

John had arrived with an axe and a fire extinguisher.

He kept his eyes closed and, in warming darkness, savored every unmeant convergence in his friend's destroyed work. Every warping line and bending ray. He twirled and flew on the tips of his toes as part of his body acted out something that was once a phoenix and the rest of him was a snake. A goldfish climbing a mountain. A tree with a family inside. He was every living creature at once. The strings in the eyes in the palms of his hands tugged and raised them high, high above his head

and drew them together in a lazy arc, as if tied and hanging, the flames flickering down his wrists and arms and narrow waist, the shimmer of the crackling air sending the light, the strands, and his own body into the same fragile quiver while John, laughing like a lunatic, sprayed the extinguisher up and all around them.

\* \* \*

It took him a few days to figure out the espresso machine, and weeks later he was still apologizing for wrecking his friend's masterpiece. John, for his part, insisted that he had kept his promises because his art was, in fact, history. And there would soon be an even greater project, something for the two-eyed masses, which would be the expression of his gratitude. The days were short now, and the sun rose late.

He woke up to a text from John: "WHAT DID YOU DO TO THE SKY"

Rubbing his eyes, he went to the window and stared at the early morning grey. His phone buzzed again.

"THE OTHER SKY, IDIOT"

He checked the sidewalk to see if John was spying on him, but there was only snow and salt and the lingering realization that his friend had no faith in him, and rightly so. Stepping out of his body, he saw in his other eyes the sky turned black. Its stars and moon shone down on a terrain that appeared just as in daytime, the cars with their headlights off, the street-lamps quiet, the cardinals of winter glowing in midair like bulbs in a darkroom. Testing his other eyes again, seeing

the normal sky and the rest of the world unchanged, he concluded that it was a malfunction not of light but of time in the parallel world.

He replied: "Don't worry I'll fix it"

Out the door and down familiar streets, he ran until he reached that first alley. The woman he had met at work was there, as he knew she would be, and turning the corner he shouted, "WHAT DID YOU DO TO THE SKY?"

"Why are you blaming *me*?" she replied.

"Who else would I blame?"

"Maybe you did it."

"I didn't."

"Maybe you did it in your sleep."

"Well, I never was a morning person."

The door in the wall was black under the morning sun and pristine white under the moonglow. If they opened their eyes in both worlds, it was difficult to snap the two doors into one image, unless they focused on the texture of the wood, the brass handle, and the unframed outline which it cut into the surrounding brick. He held it open. She entered and tripped over the first step, catching herself on stairs that went up instead of down.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but ... come look."

The stairs traversed the sloping face of a massive black pyramid with its apex out of view. The first flight had at least a few hundred steps, after which it turned left. There was no room in the city for a structure like this. They climbed for many

wordless minutes and saw unfamiliar buildings around them and below, while the old world's sun seemed to shine motionless from directly overhead. They cast no shadows. The wind grew still. Deprived of visual cues, they perceived time as something inside their own bodies—their aching limbs, the soaking of their clothes—and somewhere far above an unrecognizable forest they sat for a while and rested.

“Want some trail mix?” she asked.

“You knew this was gonna be a hike?”

“Nope.”

“So, wait. You just always have trail mix on you. I don’t judge. This is good trail mix.”

“Only if I’m going somewhere scary.” She poured some for herself too.

“Edible security blanket.”

“Something like that. My grandpa started it, and I kept doing it after I grew up.”

“Was he outdoorsy?”

“You wouldn’t believe it. We’d go on hikes, just the two of us—this was before my sister was born—and I’d always get hungry in the middle and start rambling about cake and ice cream. I think he started putting the chocolate pieces in there just to shut me up.”

“They’re the best part. Dark chocolate, too.”

“He’d let me run wild. This one time, I was climbing a tree and he was shouting, ‘Be gentle! Let the lichens live!’ like he always did and I wasn’t listening, just scrambling from branch to branch, higher and higher, and I think he got worried

because I saw him standing right under me.”

“I’m surprised he let you climb at all.”

“Oh he was super rough and tumble. He always said kids needed to play and get hurt, and he and my grandma would argue about it.”

“Any pain is worth this trail mix.”

“The last branch from the top, I reached and I barely had it in my hands. I let myself dangle from it. I would always try to curl up and hook a leg around, hanging like a sloth, but that time my grip wasn’t good enough.”

“No—”

“Yeah. I fell. I got cut up by all the little branches on the way down, nothing major, and luckily he caught me and we both fell down.”

“You were both all right?”

“Yeah, thankfully. I was bawling my eyes out, though, and he was trying to clean up my scratches. I kept pointing at the tree because this bracelet a friend gave me had gotten caught up there.”

“Don’t tell me you climbed back up to get it.”

“I didn’t. I literally couldn’t. It was right where I fell through, away from all the thicker branches.”

“Hanging in midair.”

“I was crying and whining, and he was looking up at the bracelet, squinting a little because it was glittery in the sun, and all of a sudden he gets this look in his eyes that instantly makes me quiet down.”

“You were afraid?”

“It wasn’t fear, more like ... respect? Like how as a kid you just know when adults are talking about adult stuff and you should be quiet. The kind of silence that just hangs over you, almost like you did something wrong.”

“... ”

“He starts making this ugly croaking noise, like raspy and deep. Over and over again. Melancholic.”

“... ”

“And these two ravens flutter into the tree and they’re eyeing him, tilting their heads back and forth to look at him. He goes quiet. He grabs a handful of trail mix and raises it up, in both his hands, not even toward the birds, just upward, and he makes that croaking sound one more time and it’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“... ”

“One of the ravens swoops down, snatches a peanut, and flies away. But the other one—I guess the sun caught the glitter just right—it picks up the bracelet in its beak and just lands in front of us, strutting around, kind of keeping its distance. My grandpa kneels down and spreads the trail mix on the dirt, just kneeling there with his palms face down on the ground, and the bird comes.”

“... ”

“It drops the bracelet, nibbles at the peanuts a bit, picks up a sunflower seed, and walks towards me.”

“It wasn’t scared of you?”

“It was, I think. I was scared of it too. It looked at me for a second, then it flew away. It didn’t even keep the seed.”

“Your grandfather is a crow whisperer.”

“Raven. Crows have different tails. But yeah, he is an everything whisperer.”

“That’s the best justification for trail mix ever.”

“Oh no that’s not why. We went home, and I’m all bandaged up, right? My grandma freaks out, yells at him for almost letting me die, and my parents never let him take me hiking again. Not until I was an adult, at least. But every time I’d go on a school trip, or a friend’s parents would take me somewhere, he’d send me off with a little bag of trail mix for good luck.”

They climbed on, under the perpetual midnight and noon, the flights of stairs shortening with each turn, until finally they stood, above the world, above the clouds, on a platform with an altar in the center. She went up the last few steps and turned to look at him. The spikes down her back were fish bones, batting at the windless air in waves and twists, floating as if waiting for something.

Her eyes were closed. “It wants you to pull them out.”

“But won’t you—”

“It’s okay.”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I do.”

“You’ve already been sacrificed once. It can’t possibly ask you to—”

“It’s tired. And I feel alive. For once I feel alive.”

He started with the spike at the base of her skull. Quietly he pulled it out and paused, hoping she might change her

mind. The ink inside poured and evaporated and hung like smoke in the air between them. There was the grinding of stone on stone. The platform of the pyramid sank straight down, with dust stirring all around them, and it came to rest one floor down. He laid the spike at the base of the altar, its porcelain slick with blackness. The sun and the moon were setting as one.

Then he pulled the next spike, one vertebra down, and the pyramid again became shorter, and the platform wider. Her eyes were open and fixed on the horizon. Spike after spike, he pulled out the supports that were holding her together, holding the platform up, and they fell slowly, surrounded by fog and chalk, and at one point she closed her eyes and spoke.

“One time, my sister and I were at a carnival with our grandparents, and we each had this giant cloud of cotton candy that my grandma went nuts about because it had too many calories.”

He kept working. The moon was bright and the sun was very, very dim.

“We decided that whoever finished our cotton candy the fastest would go first on the Ferris wheel. The gondolas were small, only two-seaters, and we knew we wouldn’t be allowed to go together without an adult.”

The pyramid was low to the ground now, almost a plateau, and there were perhaps only a hundred spikes left.

“I scarfed mine down so fast that I started coughing a bit, and my grandma noticed and started slapping my back and she took the cotton candy away from me. I cried for it back



but by the time she relented it was already too late. My sister had won.”

The moon had almost reached the crown of her head, the moon and the sun. He closed and opened his eyes a couple times, testing their perfect correspondence. The spikes which he laid on the ground between them now mostly had the feel of nail and bone, not porcelain.

“So we waited in the line for the Ferris wheel, and she went ahead with my grandma who made them stop the wheel completely for them to get on. My grandpa and I were one car behind them.”

It was getting hard to see through the haze of the evaporating fluid.

“They took us around the wheel a few times, but all of a sudden the clear blue sky grew dark and there was this bizarre downpour of rain, just pounding down in the middle of a cool day in summer. They said over a megaphone that they were gonna start evacuating the ride.”

The platform was almost level with the ground. The holes in her spine gaped open and flexed away from their initial circularity. He kept working.

“They turned the music off and started spinning the wheel slowly, I think because of the rain, and people were getting off at the bottom. But we—me and my sister—were still on our way up.”

There were perhaps only twenty spikes left. He savored these last few, keeping them perfectly level as he eased them out, one by one, careful not to spill the black marrow inside.

“And the sky was completely black from that thundercloud that just came out of nowhere. Her car was just rounding the top, and I could see her from mine, looking wildly around from window to window, swatting away my grandma’s hands as she weighed the possibility of climbing out and down herself. I saw her hair start to float.”

The familiar buildings of their city rose up around them. The moon and sun were unnaturally large.

“Lightning struck her, right at the top of the wheel. It went through the gondola’s hanging arm, into the roof of the cabin, into her hair, her skull—I see it every time I sleep—the way her eyes looked, just—just two caves of fire with her eyelids closed, like a bomb going off—”

He wrapped his hands around the last spike.

“And when she fell back, I could see—see her skin under the pouring rain, with that red tree snaking all down her neck and shoulders—growing, blooming—and she was gone.”

They looked at the sun and moon together and could not tell between the two.

“They never let me see her again, not even at the funeral. I just know—”

The platform was level with the ground. The last spike was out. He hugged her and began to turn her around.

“I just know that it should’ve been me, up there—”

The disk framed her head in its center as it hung, dark against the daytime sky.

“Her name was Grace, and I think—”

The sockets of her eyes were empty.

“I think mine was Maria.”

The platform sank deep into the earth and the walls folded in and sealed over them. He coughed away the dust. There was a wisp of shadow nearby which hung vertical and swaying. Scattered below the broken altar was a torn plastic bag, some pieces of chocolate, a few sunflower seeds. He opened the rest of his eyes and flooded the chamber in soft green light. His shadow lengthened as he shifted his gaze onto his own body, seen by him as some small chimeric thing, half-broken at the bottom of a pit whose descending stairs were studded with all his blinking eyes, downward-facing and viewing together. The tips of his talons scraped along the ground as he moved to plant a seed beside the swaying shadow. The smell of that place, with all its bone and rotten blood, was not any harder to bear than the remembrance of even a single name that had been forgotten inside. He gathered up some loosened faces, climbed the steps, opened the door, and began his work.