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Shibboleth

By

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A mirror of steel is oddly silent.

There's a depth to your reflection missing in polished metal...the impossibility of an echo. You can speak your thoughts in silvered glass and know that you're heard.

The last dressing room I shared with Justine had steel mirrors, made of bulkheads from a dead country's navy. It was part of the glut of such steel that flooded markets while warships loaded with corpses were scuttled as tomb-reefs that pressed pearls of eyes, coral of bones. Steel desks, benches and chairs crowded out wood furnishings...the grain of which was scarred by winters made harsh by ash-clouds of the dead and by the rings of trees that marked not just years, but tons of human soot held in the sky. Justine and I had sat beside each other, applying our make-up in the steel's gaze, dumb as we harlequinned ourselves with the simple lines we'd devised for our *Cymbeline*. We were startled by our not speaking to each other's reflection as we usually did, when streaming chatter replaced the dream cycles lost over days of rough travel. Our gazes twined in the

mirror, and as one, laughing, we touched the unwhispering steel as if to shake it from its deafness.

Alone, farther from Justine than I've ever been and standing more than a year from when our gazes could next touch, I now looked at myself in a steel mirror and heard its silence in a new way. The flooring hummed against my naked feet as I shifted and bobbed, trying without knowing why to mime the tilt and roll that the train I rode would have if it moved on metal rails set on solid ground. If I pushed the mirror from its silence, I'd feel the roar of the train's engine, conducted by porcelain walls at a frequency that, if I could hear it in the anemic air, might sicken me with vertigo. The steel was treated to not fog, and the steam I breathed in that coffin-space that doubled as basin and shower held an emptiness compounded by the steam's inability to clear the allergy-like congestion behind my eyes, or ease the swelling in my face that made me look like a mountaineer healing after a brutal climb. The steam looked like what folktales say a sleeping dragon's breath is like in a vale, hanging as threads far thicker than it could at sea-level, in droplets too large for the pull of an earthly ground to allow.

Steam can be silent, just as it can speak. In a free zone of Palestine, my oldest friend Jim and I had breathed the steam of a bathhouse that had been in operation eight hundred years. The bathhouse stood, and might stand eight centuries more, near a graveyard of the land that had drunk nations of blood since Caleb had first stepped there. The proprietor had let his hens peck among the sun-cracked stones, so that even the boiled eggs he offered as a parting courtesy were flecked with death. The herb-scented steam of that place, which once held the breath of Crusaders, had felt heavy and *present* in our lungs. Ripe with the taste of the past... in a way that the quarantine baths that Jim and I had

shared during the Dying couldn't have been. Those baths burned with tinctures that left us unable to stand the touch of the softest towels and with fumes that scalded our lungs. Jim lived the past, breathed the past. And now, as he chipped the bones of giants from the Gobi and tasted the dust of dead strata, he was less remote from home than I was...because he was camped near trade routes and would be able to post letters. When I return home, I'll taste the same dust, drifting from creases in the letters he'll have sent while I was gone.

Breathing out steam born of water so young it had been drunk or passed by none of God's creatures but Man, I stood before my mute double and worked foam from fine glycerin soap that had been liquefied and re-poured around a magnetized disc in case the train's turbines stopped spinning and made the soap drift as lazily as the bubbles it made. I lathered my swollen face, and knew the steam I breathed wasn't silent because it misted from distilled water. Such steam could yield hymns from all it touched—as the perfume my mother pressed from sheets in the violet of winter afternoons, and as the mist that combed a fresh-turned-soil scent from the dust of centuries-old dressing rooms...a scent joined in my mind with the flurry of costumes being pressed, the flinging open of make-up kits and the whir of hand-held sewing machines. The steam I now breathed smelled only of the tungsten coils that heated it and the plastic pipes that carried it. My lungs full of the steam's absence, I placed the soap unmoving on the steel mirror, raised the glass shard I'd brought from my compartment and ran it up against my throat.

"Is this a weapon?" the Customs Official had asked when he'd lifted the shard from my effects. Though I said it wasn't, the shard *was* a weapon...the same way soldiers' camouflage is. On the day I'd first pushed a shard like this along my throat and jawline,

while I traveled another outland for Justine's sake closer to our home but much crueler, I'd faced soldiers in brown and green camouflage milling in snow, ready to kill me. Theirs, though deadly, was a *theater* of authority; it was made a performance by their being distracted by religious theater they listened to on the phones they pressed under their helmets, that they commented about to each other through tactical headsets, even though they stood close enough to speak normally. They had poor costumes for their play. They lacked the winter fatigues that would have bent light around them as they hid on the embankments of the highway choked with stripped and derelict cars that Allen and I walked to get home. Such gear would short the electronics that let the soldiers be audiences of the drama that so enthralled them, that made their daywatch a mummery that would have killed Allen and me in front of an unseen audience with one lone member... a being I'd later learn was himself fleshless, and less visible than these soldiers would be if outfitted in stealth gear.

The few soldiers who didn't have phones pressed to their ears smoked contraband—slouching, undisciplined as the deserters I'd seen as a boy looting warehouses and hospitals. They milled at the roadblock with the foot-to-foot hopping that told me they'd sooner shoot Allen and me and pack our stripped bodies with thermite than scrawl form entries accounting for our deaths. No more would be left of us than fragments like the furnace-cracked teeth I picked from the tread of my boot after walking access roads near factories. Not even a smear of ink on government foolscap would be our epitaph. No Boston Police were at the roadblock. No Stateies, private military or CDC personnel... a cold, sea-water dread pissed into my guts as I wished to God for the presence of those

from whom I'd hidden as a boy, who'd often deserted to form kidnap gangs that preyed on families desperate to reclaim their few scattered members.

The soldiers seemed to be waiting the half hour until dark before taking to the embankments—when those not enthralled by serial dramas would use nightscopes to shoot travelers with Godlike impunity, mimicking their own cruel, arbitrary God...whom they resented for not lifting them in the promised Rapture, leaving them in an emptied world with no warrior Christ under Whose flag they could butcher. My life and Allen's had been spared for the moment by the oversight of a quartermaster too busy commandeering quicklime to properly camouflage these irregulars pulled from the staffs of rust-sealed prisons and the sheriff's departments of counties that now only existed on roach-spotted maps. To this day, I can't stand the grind of sled runners on pavement—the memory of that sound while waiting to feel bullets shatter my ribs is too strong, as is my memory of the fear that I'd not be dead when hooks would bite around my collar bones and drag me to a pit greased with the jellied gasoline that had once been a weapon of war, but that was now a tool of "civic hygiene."

I skimmed the shard from jaw to cheek, over the swelling in my face where blood and lymph pooled that would have, at home, settled near my ankles. My face had been wolf-gaunt when I'd had to first learn its contours under the kiss of glass on my skin, in a room thick with toxic smoke, with food long rotted to clay and the smells of wine, beer and liquor that had evaporated in their glasses, leaving concentric rings of mold.

The steam of *that* moment—maybe an hour before I'd faced the soldiers—had reeked with the newly woken musk of decay and mildew...even though the plastic-tinged water that had made the steam then had been pure enough to drink. I myself had reeked like a

thing dead on a summer road, from a week of back-crooking labor in a hinterland that consumed itself. Knowing I'd face men eager to kill me, I'd pressed broken glass to my face in a room so cold, the mist beading on the windows froze into stars like those etched in Polish crystal. My hands shook from hunger as the glass skated where blood pulses closest to the skin. Allen, casting aside the urgency of just a heartbeat before—an urgency that felt as if it stood breathing by our shoulders as a third person next to us—grinned after my first stroke didn't add the steam of my split jugular to that which froze on the windows. I grinned back, drunk with a euphoria I never want to know again.

"Did you know that we're cool?" he asked, making a gallows joke of a phrase we'd used to make light of toil and filth. With that joke, he rewrote the moment when he'd first asked the question into a halcyon time of a few days before, when we'd had the luxuries of a fireplace and a roof over our heads, and had felt able to handle any danger with two guns and three rounds between us.

When he'd first asked *"Did you know that we're cool?"* it was with staccato anger accenting each syllable. It was the same anger that had scarred his voice when we were ten, and he'd asked an older boy who'd invaded the isolation ward we shared with Justine and Jim why he'd punched him...as if the boy had hit someone else that Allen wanted to defend.

"What do you mean, 'cool'?" I'd asked, turning in my sleeping bag that smelled achingly of Justine's hair and feeling the wadded bills in my pocket we'd banished ourselves from the city to earn.

Allen lifted the book he'd been reading by the light of the portable lamp fueled by what we stole off the nearby traffic grid and by the firelight fueled by woodscraps and

books we'd found in the house we squatted. Hunger punched our insides as we lingered in the ugly twilight between having too much empty pain in our guts to sleep and the moment we'd be too spent not to sleep. At dawn we might buy food from half-empty farm trucks heading to the freight wagons that were light enough to be pulled over the ice by horse teams. Or we could earn mouthfuls in lieu of pay by unloading the trucks. If we didn't eat tomorrow, we'd become too hungry to feel hungry, and then we'd be too weak to work. Our boots dried on the hearth, sweating the manger-stink of the greasy, near-useless waterproofing we'd slathered on them. Our wool socks hissed on the grate, wafting the sourness of lanolin and the compost-musk of our feet.

By the amber light of the fire and the lamp, I saw that the book cover depicted young people—boy-men such as we, standing in god-like defiance atop a mound of rubble and curled metal in the square of a ruined city. The mound was both like and unlike the mound near the Center where Justine and I had met Allen when, before he lived there with us, he'd thieved into our ward for the fun of it—*like* and *unlike*...the way a storybook castle is like and unlike a real castle. The boy-men on the cover gripped ornately useless firearms and had musical instruments strapped to their backs like broadswords...lords of a fanciful desolation. Looking at them, I tasted the same contempt I do when I face the soft-bellied smugness of a man who lives off of women.

"People wanted this," he said, deadening the anger in his voice with that profoundly adult authority he could conjure, and of which I'd always been jealous. Allen was himself like a boy whisked from a storybook: bright and wise enough to not talk like a boy. He spoke as if he'd already been a parent--as if telling young people how things were had been something he'd done since he first learned to speak. Despite the acting and the

elocution I'd studied, I couldn't project the sureness he could...even when I played a young, wise boy such as Allen was, who told a sad tale of sprites and goblins to enthrall his mother, too terrible even for the crickets to hear. Around Allen, I had the same uncertainty I did when I forgot lines in rehearsal. I never felt alone with him, never felt without at least another pair of eyes on us. With a finger the nail of which was flecked with plum-colored blisters, Allen pointed to the pile of rubble on the cover, the thing of a bygone era's playground-dreams that we'd known as a place to avoid the bite of sick rats.

I groped in my kit, felt for the stick of licorice root wrapped in plastic that smelled like the dried spit that clings to the toys of small children. I thought a moment before using the splintered licorice root to dig the day's rot from my teeth. My mouth was slick and foul, but the resin of the licorice would make my guts bend even more for real food. Out of boredom, not hygiene, I chewed the end of the root I'd frayed with my teeth to pick away the smears of the ptomaine-foul meal of canned pork and crackers we'd choked down eight hours before, having passed on a flank too grey and stinking to have not come from a sick mule. I wondered how badly my gums would bleed should they again feel the bristles of a toothbrush.

"Who wanted what?" I asked, with a small fear that I wouldn't fully grasp what he'd say with his grave boy-from-a-storybook authority.

"People who lived in this house," he said. "People from Before. They *wanted* what we deal with. I think they thought it'd be fun. Like school letting out for the whole world."

I considered what he said, digging plaque from the back of my mouth and fearing that the soreness behind my molars heralded wisdom teeth I couldn't afford to have cut from my jaw, and that I might instead have to hire a blacksmith or iceman to pull my back

teeth to prevent infection. I realized I envied another skill of Allen's—the ability to think of Before as a time like any other, and not an ideal that we only knew through dim childhood memory and the burning of its remnants to keep warm.

"Let me see it," I said. He tossed me the book. The pages smelled of the naked pine shelving that had kept it from turning to mulch...the shelving that we saved for the hearth should the boxes of old files, bank statements, letters and utility bills run out.

The book cover was in the garish melding of the photographic and the painted favored by publishers when my father had been young. I knew the style from the crates of books from his boyhood we'd packed for library donation before we made our exodus from the dying fringes to the center of town. The youths on the cover had the vapid idealized beauty from a time when surgery and hospital space could be spendthrift'ed on the sculpting of faces and the reshaping of flesh. (True, those who lived on the outlying estates made quilts of their flesh, yet for this they used private surgeons, whom they treated a bit better than cooks and stable boys: court jesters with scalpels and needles full of lotus to soothe their masters' anguish of being cosseted.) The beauty of the youths was the inverse of the beauty of the faces on old coins and medallions. The youths were posed in a stance of triumph that echoed the propaganda of dead tyrannies; the only triumph I'd known amid such rubble had been when all of us from the wards had marched with borrowed shovels to stove the rats that fled the piles we'd drenched with fuel and set alight.

"I'd like to give it to them. Right in their faces," Allen said, as if he held his staccato anger in check for the sake of one of those teacup-fragile kids born after the Dying.

"What?"

"The shit we eat that they thought'd be so cool."

Looking back, I know why Allen and Jim never got along; Allen punched through the past that Jim so treasured.

I wish I'd torn off and saved the book cover and shown it to others from the neighborhood and the ward, even though it affected me in a way that made me feel as if I'd already shared it with one or two others. Instead, I threw the book on the fire, along with scores of books like it that had belonged to the last owners of this house now deeded to the squirrels that scurried in the upper floors. If we were better trappers, at least one squirrel would now be turning on a makeshift spit, dripping fat. We didn't dare talk about this; if we did, our hunger would make us stupid enough to try to flush and catch a squirrel in the dark, rotting upper storeys. Instead, Allen and I read aloud a few pages from each of the books before conscripting them to the drying of our socks; in draping whimsy over the days Allen and I endured, all the books voiced an ulcerating need to forsake, in the name of edgy "authenticity," comforts for which Allen and I would have given much...had we anything to give. I put away the blood-spotted licorice root, and was about to say something—probably about girls we knew—when Allen's stomach growled, loud as the grunt of a small dog, through his wool sweaters and the thickness of his duct-tape-patched sleeping bag.

"I guess this means we're cool," he said. And in our giddy hunger, the crack seemed worthy of the laughter we gave it.

Our breakfast was coffee stirred from crystals and melted snow in our electric pot. Rust from the pot made my tongue rough and dry for hours. We trudged along the highway that took us away from Boston, the choking city where there was no work, and

few goods anyone could afford in the markets. No checks had come from my father, nor had any mail from past the Rockies reached anyone I knew for a month, fuelling rumors of closed airports and cut lines of communication, though wire reports still came from past Denver. Even if checks from my father had gotten through, it was doubtful that banks would convert them to cash we could use. Friends who'd returned from trading had told us that Manhattan was worse off, and Providence had closed all points of entry. Boston starved—as it had previous winters, yet those lean and brutal times had ended after a few weeks...broken by the coming of vegetables and citrus from ports as far away as South Africa, and by the sing-songs of butchers walking the streets with their obsidian knives, offering to slaughter and dress backyard livestock in exchange for a few dollars or a shank. Fresh pork, stringy old geese, oranges, rosen kale, and greens tough as parchment even after being boiled in vinegar had ended those famines before winter stores became too meager and bodies became too ruined to fight infection. This year Boston had felt dangerous as a mastiff gone feral. Each piss-reeking corner was heavy with violence—the maybe-innocent shuffle of footsteps behind you became threatening as the sound of a mercyheart drawn from its sheath. Hunger, and the rat-gnawing worry that the rough times might not end, made walking from one house to another feel the same as did drifting into a provincial bar and knowing that you are the only unarmed man there.

Before I'd taken to the road with Allen—with our sled weighted with the gear we'd need to husk work outside the city, helping farmers and scavengers clear what had been suburban lawns for spring plowing—Justine's Aunt Louise (whom I've called *my* aunt, but only, it seemed, as a gift granted by Justine) had taken my face in her cool, dry hands.

"Child" was the one word she said, as if to acknowledge I was a child no longer.

"Child"...a *word*? Or a *name* she gave me, to carry as a shield, or an inner-lamp to fill the dark places I'd travel? In Florence, I met a man who'd been named "Fool" by his grandmother, so that he, the youngest of his family, would find fortune when at fourteen he'd struck out on his own. Is "Child" a name, a title, I still bear in the folds of all that I am?

Justine had leaned on the railing of our porch as Allen, pulling the sled a half-block down the street, offered us the gift of a good-bye alone. We stood among blood-rubies flecked on snow—with the disappearance of scraps and cat food, Crispin had foraged for mice and had scattered the innards he couldn't eat in front of the window we left cracked open for him. With so little fuel that winter, no soot dusted the snow. Tiny red spleens gleamed against untainted whiteness. "Come back to me," she whispered, close to the nape of my neck, as she had the times before when I'd left to search for food and money during times less dire.

"I promise."

"Don't promise, *do it*." She gripped my coat by the lapels, and, unmoving, we stepped into one of the timeless moments we shared, when the span of a heartbeat seemed the whole of an evening. The feel, not the sound, of aged seams tearing brought us out of that moment, as her grasp inflicted the first of what would be many small rips in the coat we'd pulled from the charity bin two winters before.

"I'll come back to you," I vowed to her and to the God who in His mercy had brought us together. I held her and breathed the new scents her skin bloomed now that she was becoming a woman, scents I could only taste for what they were now that I was

becoming a man. I lifted her palm and kissed it. We looked at our hands as lovers would at a rose the perfume of which they've just shared. My hands were corpse-white, flecked with dried skin, cracked from the winds that had scoured them as I did what work I could find that winter. Justine's hands weren't as dry as mine...she hoarded near-empty bottles of lotions she scavenged for the small vanity she had for her skin. Our hands seemed two types of earth intertwined, like those near riverbeds when rich silt is left behind by spring floods. Her sister Janice's tread on the snowy porch behind us didn't pull us from the moment. Janice forsook her good-bye to me so Justine and I could whisper our farewell. Janice's silence was a presence—it touched her sister as only a bond of blood can allow. Through Justine, it touched me as well...the way that beauty can touch the face of a blind man.

I'll always ache that I didn't say a true good-bye to Janice as I felt her watching us, the same way you can feel when someone you love watches you sleep. The neglect I showed her when she'd given Justine and me a quiet time of farewell is one of the small crimes that doesn't mark my soul, but stains its core. Sins of inaction leave the deepest scars, because the keen of *nothingness* never dulls. With the warmth of Justine's cheek on my neck, I was aware of my memory cupping the tableau in which we stood, aware of those whom we loved looking away. And I was aware of the unseeing gaze of her father's telescope above us, a dented thing pulled from a university dump, in the far window to my right. On our narrow street, the telescope had only a sliver of sky to search. Knowing now that its gaze has since been further clouded by the sky-borne ash of the daughter of the man who owned it is a thorn in my heart. Not saying good-bye to Janice that day—as opposed to the day that I last saw her, when the smoke of her rushed cremation and of all

the others who died that day painted the dusk with the colors we would wear to mourn her—is a very small sin. Yet it is a sin that has been rewritten within me, the way a simple cell can be rewritten as cancer. That moment of good-bye with Justine was the last moment that I had, without reservation, liked myself. To have shared that moment with Janice as well would maybe atone for what I'd become before I returned, when I'd begin a walk toward a loss that through frostbite might leave my body as lame as my soul.

I began the trek away from what and who I'd been at that moment of good-bye—marking distance in spirit, not miles—when Allen and I left the house in which we'd read the books that had painted our lives and times with the paschal-egg colors of Romantic fantasy.

We waylaid farmers and bargemen uninterested in selling us goods for which they'd get much better prices in the city, and who had no work for two boys sallow with malnutrition. It was past noon before we earned salted fish that we hoped came from waters not too near treatment plants, and winter apples soft and almost brown that had the mustiness of a root cellar clinging to them. Late afternoon, we earned a single potato. By night, we squatted another house marked with door scratchings that told us there was a working fireplace within. A cache of old phone books, the only paper left in the house, and the pine shelving from the last house we'd squatted (which we'd chopped and stacked on our sled) fueled our fire that night. We wrapped the potato in already twice-used foil and placed it in the fire. When we'd eaten it, we used the ugly paste boiled out of marshmallow root to pack our guts with the illusion of a full meal. I fell away from my own unfed sides, a hollow man, of whom famine was making a wilderness in which I'd wander and die.

Allen pulled stalks of willow wand from his pack; boiled into tea, they'd stave off fever. "Should we?" he asked. And if I weren't so cold and tired, I would have found small joy that the boy who seemed ever-wise was now asking me what was wise.

"Shouldn't risk it," I said, thinking of the rot willow wand had caused within kids who'd drunk it while malnourished...we'd filled our bellies with a lying food that, even as it bloated us, would let us starve if we ate it too long.

"We're still going to risk fever."

"Maybe we need to risk fever," I said. In my mind, I tasted the death-stink of a girl named Susan in our ward whose liver had dissolved because of willow wand she drank during the mild famine of three winters before. Her body pooled ammonia. She convulsed so violently, the nurses restrained her with belts and strapped a helmet to her. I saw the fountain-marks on the walls by her bed, like those on stable walls when a steer's throat has been slit, after she'd gouted blood from her nose and mouth during the fit that had killed her. Jeremy, her friend, had no Dusk Colors with which to mourn her the day she was buried. As if lifting the sins of his fathers, he took up the Before mourning color of black, which made him look paler than he truly was. In my memory, the kicked-dog hurt in his eyes will always be joined with the poisoned breath that infused the ward long after Susan had been lifted away and her mattress burned.

I know Allen and I spoke of other things after he put away the willow wand. What they were is muffled by the hunger I knew as I was transfixed by my hands. I'd last truly seen them while saying goodbye to Justine. They were forms unknown to me, grafted to my arms. The veins at the backs of my hands stood out as they never had before. I'd once read in a rotting book with no cover that it's when these veins stand out that you've truly become a man. Yet did they stand out because I was no longer a boy, or because famine had burned away tissue that had been between the veins and skin? What man would I be?

Could I be a strong, decent man if my adulthood was midwived by starvation? How would the man I'd be unfold himself, should I meet him on the road?

I hope the young man whom we did meet the next day still lives... that in this world made so brutally small, I can find him and make amends... both with him, and the self I lost in meeting him. I hope my hunger during our meeting was an alien thing, a possessing spirit, like those I've seen blamed for the fits of epileptics in the outlands near Chicago. Allen had his own specter to carry, woven into his flesh. By shirking that burden, he too changed. I choose not to endure the thought that maybe he changed because his burden had shirked him.

When we met the young man, our feet were lead-heavy and numb, our hands throbbed in our wool gloves. The rot of our skin slicked oily on our clothes. It had been afternoon before we found work, heaving salvaged pipe and wire onto the cart of a scrap dealer who paid us in bills so old and greasy they smelled of the horses that pulled his cart and looked as if they'd melt if we balled them in our naked hands... a thing we'd not do, for our palms were crisscrossed from handling the copper razor-strands of cable that had once streamed data to houses now infested with creatures that dulled their teeth on wire insulation. Our work gloves, good for pulling bramble, were too thin to turn frayed metal threads. We thought to buy a pot recast from melted cables from the merchant but didn't, knowing that the desire to own the pot was born of our hunger to imagine food in it.

The later opening of our jackets was motivated by the same stupid and hunger-driven desire. In twilight the color of boiling sap, Allen and I, our hands too raw and swollen for us to work the next day, fumbled with hook-eyes and let the sick breeze out of the west make wings of our coats, and so made the wind our accomplice. We had to give our hands a day to scab. This was our unspoken motive for what we committed. The young man pulled a child's wagon, the carboy of telltale orange in the wagon visible from tens of yards away. In light narrow as an old woman's breath, the silver wedding ring he wore,

unscuffed and still bright, sponged up the yellow dusk. That he was desperate enough to take to the road alone, was stupid enough to travel with such a precious thing on his finger, and didn't put a tarp over the carboy told Allen and me more about him than we should have known. I often think of his wedding ring, and the young woman who wore...or still wears...the ring's mate. I've prayed that he—just a few summers older than I—returned to her a victim of no greater crime than what Allen and I inflicted on him. I've prayed that the wedding ring didn't find its way, black with grease, tossed among the buckets of wedding rings saved so that their inscriptions could identify the cremated dead who'd owned them. I have prayed he went home after meeting us, and that brigands didn't cut his ring from the cooling body that would feed the whelps of foxes in their winter lairs.

We stopped him, letting him see our guns, letting him see that we could take what we wanted, even though he had the hands of a farrier and was broad-shouldered as a miner. The fear on him was like a thing seen in deep winter morning—a rock or tree that is as much shadow as substance. We "bought" the carboy of treated nitric acid from him for far less than it was worth, as the one thing on his wagon full of cheaply made tools that could find him any work. Whether Allen and I would have taken the carboy if he had not "sold" it to us is a thing I'll never consider. Had we not been starved and filthy, had we not been cold and afraid of being unfit to work because of our savaged hands, had we been the decent boys we'd been before that moment...we would have shared our heavy-duty wood bore in exchange for use of the acid and sought work *with* him, this fool who had no bore, only a chrome-forged pick that would bend against frozen soil.

I've stood on the porches of houses in fields when summer storms have arced like waves over the horizon. I've felt the air drawn out of those houses as thunder crashed nearby; it has touched my shoulders like a cloak before moving past me and away. Something that had been part of me flowed over my shoulders and away from me in the same way...my decency? Or my perception of a decency I never truly had? The shame, I

knew, came from within and without, as if draped on me by one who was saddened by my apostasy, but who didn't understand it well enough to judge.

In another house, heated by the fire of newspapers bundled for recycling the year I was born, Allen and I peeled off the linings of our soft woolen gloves, gaping apart cuts that had scabbed to the fabric. Our lacerated canvas work gloves stood blood-hardened near the fire...like mandrake roots made into Hands of Glory in the witches' shops that linger in the rotted neighborhoods of university towns. Allen's whimper as skin came off with his glove lining was like the cry I've heard a mute girl make while she dreamed.

"Guess this was a cool thing we did, huh?" I said. Together, we let out sounds at once like grunts and laughs, as we waited for the sweet cicely root and aspen bark we'd use as poultices to boil in our rusty electric pot. In silence, we avoided adding to our guilt by making excuses for our crime.

Shame of what we'd done roared like the noise of water in my thoughts the next day, as we came upon one long-term squatter after another clearing what had been suburban yards for planting. The long-termers were easy to mark along the roadway, given away by the unseasoned cordwood of newly felled trees piled so the long-termers could cart it away to sell. Two clever boys we seemed, to be able to drill deep into new stumps that would take horses and tractors hours to clear, and to pour nitric acid infused with accelerants into the borings, so the partly dissolved wood itself became the explosive that would blast the stumps out of the ground. We'd detonate the stumps with wires strung to an old tractor battery, or we'd make a punk out of rags sopped with clay dug from under bramble that had been hedges. What punishment we saved our hands fell on our backs, as splinters hit us like small hatchets; our coats were no protection, for we had to take them off to run from the stumps while the punks burned more quickly than we'd have liked.

We worked, it seemed, as quickly as the punks burned, lest the blasts lure other traveling workers, who'd try to rob us of the carboy that we had ourselves robbed.

We stayed that night in a house the yard of which we'd cleared. By the warmth of the electric heater we ran off the grid, we salvaged our hands with cheap amber disinfectant we'd gotten from a long-termer and dared count our bills for the first time. Some bills were near worthless as bavin-coins, and would have to be exchanged at the bank or through black marketeers for fresh currency. Others were printed in the blue ink that marked them as worth exactly their dollar amount in gold on any given day in any district on the continent. Yet others were so mulchy and porous, they sponged the orange tinctures from our fingertips. We'd each earned enough to pay rent on a large house for three months. We divided the bills, and, knowing what anguish cheap gun oil full of impurities would leak into our hands, we cleaned our weapons anyway, to make sure our three rounds would truly matter, should they need to.

The next day, we found a truck on the road, the rusted contents of which, had we found them in the ground, would have prompted us to dig deeper for the bones of dragons. No scrap hunters had gutted the swords, fit to kill ogres in fables, and the suits of mail, fit for exiled princes, that rotted in the truck. Maybe scavengers--finding a cache like those mentioned by the old professors and teachers who wandered to people's homes in these parts and told a night's worth of stories in exchange for a meal and a bath--felt they shouldn't loot a tomb that might have a curse protecting it.

The swords were of good steel, not like the lightweight swords I'd helped propmasters make. The chainmail, grimed with blood-smelling corrosion, was as heavy as five of the coats of costume mail I'd worn that were made of thick yarn hardened with grey paint. Lances and what had been saddles of fine leather were now mold-eaten as the boots we still found on unburied corpses.

"It's for a play," Allen said. And as I *felt* more than knew that he was wrong, I was sickened by something. In my hollow guts, the sickness had a weight. The time I knew as "Before" had a Before. I could see that while a wise boy like Allen couldn't. I remembered when I was small, banners advertising fairs that recreated the past without

the unpleasantnesses of war, famine, plague...the hardships that made the art of the past passionate and enduring. Though it seemed that plague had risen up to brigand this fair, so that the owners of this truck would abandon it and hide until a burnthrough could occur. That they never reclaimed the truck told me the past had claimed its due from them.

I lifted a sword the way Arthur would lift it from the Stone and Before burned my palm, as the damp leather braided at the pommel seeped rot into my wounded hand. I—newly born a thief whom those of Before might see as a highwayman of the romantic past, and who walked the tomorrow they thought would be a holiday—couldn't stand holding the weapon they'd have me bear. I dropped the sword. "No. It's just another thing that was supposed to be cool," I said, pleased to say something dramatic and final, to eclipse the wise boy Allen could be while he faced the past. Allen was quiet. I felt as if what I'd said had been heard by someone who wished to speak, but couldn't. We left the past's dream of the further past to corrode in the snow.

That night, in the final house we'd squat, I saw my face for the first time in days. There was no connection to the grid to link our heater. We didn't light a fire, so the smoke wouldn't attract the desperate fools who took to the road to find work and food only now, weeks into the famine. We'd be prime victims to rob and kill, with the small fortune we carried. Our foot-and-sled tracks in the snow leading to the front door were betrayal enough, without smoke to promise our killers a warm night's sleep by our looted bodies. I shuffled to the first floor bathroom of the house, to piss in the sink rather than face the cold outside. The bathroom had the unique stink of raccoon shit, but no shaggy forms ducked from the beam of my flashlight. Even in a room rank with the dung of scavengers, the stink of my own crotch was offensive to me...as was the spoiled beef smell of my steaming piss, rich with the proteins my body had taken from itself and now sluiced as waste. With my flashlight set in a mounted toothbrush holder, I saw myself lit from below in what my old acting mentor Frank had called "Shylock

lighting" . . . transformed into a caricature of the Dirty Jew. I looked like a villain in the illustrations of the misspelled tracts that hayseeds leave stacked in train stations to extend their ministries while they traveled.

My eyes in the mirror were unliving as a doll's and underneath had the blotches that, as make-up, I'd applied to play characters who were aged, dying or dead. My beard, such as a boy could raise, looked like mange on cheeks so hollow they made my jaw seem long as a wolf's. My hair hung lank as the bloody locks I wore while playing Banquo's ghost in the days when a foodstuff like corn syrup could be wasted as stage blood. I raised disinfectant-stained fingers to my face, touched whiskers that had the same frayed tips that a sickly girl's hair takes when it grows too long. I twisted a few. They snapped like the strands of spun sugar that clung to Aunt Louise's wooden spoon when she made sea foam candy.

I looked at the monster I was. Then lifted the flashlight and lit myself from above and the side, changing my image to one like the portrait of a sixteenth-century saint, giving humanity to myself through the airy nothing that made me seem a lunatic, a lover and poet as I moved the light like a will-o'-wisp around my face. I left the dung-thick room and soaked rags with bleach I found in the kitchen, then stepped on the rags, cleaning my boots of any trace of the pathogen in raccoon shit that rots the brain of a healthy man to dementia in a matter of days.

I wished to go home, but I knew I never could again. Not truly. Not as the thief I'd become. *Home* would never accept me, because I, re-born a thug, could never again fully accept it. Yet Justine needed me to return, whatever was left of me that was worth her love. The bills I carried were her sliver of hope, and I'd never cheat her of hope, or make her hope in vain.

"We need to go back," I told Allen as we "ate" cold, snot-like marshmallow root we'd boiled that afternoon.

In a dream-state of hunger that I could feel in the stoop of his shoulders, Allen lurched around the living room where we camped, scraping his spoon against the tin plate as he paced, as if trying to summon true and plentiful food through the sound of it being casually eaten. He stopped in the lantern light dim enough not to be noticeable from the road, looking at once-white carpets, at the tracks left by the distinct bootprints of the containment suits that CFDC teams used to wear as Before fevered into the Dying. The leaking bodies dragged out by those crews had left smears on the carpets like the brush strokes of an abstract artist.

"We need to go back," I said again.

"We strong enough?"

"There's going to be even less food on the road. The farmers'll hoard what they got. More people are looking for work. I think we're too weak to do more work. What we got left, we need to get back."

"See how we feel in the morning."

"Could you work a whole fucking day tomorrow?"

"We got to eat before we go back."

"Nothing's out here."

"We might be too weak to make it home."

I was stiff with the poisons leaked by my body's feeding on itself; when I blinked, it felt like my eyelids scraped sand. Tomorrow, we'd have the final burst of energy that famine brings, or we'd begin the half-senile walk toward organ failure. Either way, I didn't have the strength to talk further with Allen. I fell asleep to the scrape of his spoon across an empty plate, the noise of a conjurer without even a lump of lead to transform.

I dreamt of the smoke that bore my mother to the sky, of the colors I saw paint the sunset of the day she bride-stepped to the clouds. So near to death, I dreamt that my mind rose as did smoke, straining the silver thread that joins it to my body. In the dream, I heard my father's tread behind me, and waited for him to say, as he had said in fact, how

the colors of that twilight suited my mother. His silence startled me. I turned and saw my mother, wearing the colors of her own mourning, gold and vermilion, looking at the sunset that would be her only grave.

I began to hate Allen then, as he woke me before my mother could speak, sitting up and gasping...the way I'd once woken gasping when Crispin had pressed against my nose and mouth for the warmth of my breath. A third being stood in the room with us, a person-shaped collage of shadow and dust that unwound as does a small whirlwind in a crosscurrent. Afraid that I was so unafraid, I looked to Allen, who, still sitting up, breathed as does a mouse dying in a trap. The cataract of moonlight that dropped from the windows painted his breath, which misted in an almost still cloud near his lips, as if his newly lost soul lingered on the step of what had been its home.

"We've got to go back," he said in sudden dawnlight. How dawn came in a turn of heartbeats, I can't know. Logic would say that I fell back asleep, and Allen woke me. Yet there can be no logic when your mind is gutted by hunger, and I have known logic to sow ugly lies. Dawn came, and she came boldly, from behind the tattered curtains. My senses burned in her lavender-grey fire.

As we dragged our sled over the carpet smeared by lymph that seeped from the family that had laid the carpet down, I felt the echoed ghost of the third person who'd stood over our sleeping bags, the dust-angel who'd watched over our sleep as neither sentry nor foe. I looked over my shoulder at where the ghost had stood, and the ghost refracted into greater solidity over the span of the deep breath I took--gaining shape as does an audience the instant house lights come up--only to fall back into greater nothingness as my eyes widened to see it. The *feel* of the ghost stepped into me, as if filling the void left by the person I'd been before taking to the road. Had I been stronger, such a violation would have felt unreal. In my unreal hunger, I felt the ghost with the same patient dread one feels standing under a dead oak on a winter's night. That dread seemed to leave the house with us, following as would a guilty thought...walking,

perhaps, as it had since I'd left Justine in the hallowed space that Janice had touched while her sister and I said goodbye. What followed us was *hurt*, and feral. It lurked on the periphery of our senses in a way that made me think of the street kids who used to stand at the gates of our wards and cut themselves down to the muscle with smashed bottles, so they'd be let in as emergency cases and so gain a meal and a night of peace in a true bed.

Miles down the road...how many I can't say, but we'd made good distance, because we were close to the old toll stations on the border of town...we smelled smoke rich with the scent of roasting meat. We coursed the scent as would hounds, hoping to trade or buy food, knowing that no one who didn't have food to share would light a fire so near the road, *telling* ourselves this was the case, not wanting to admit we were being stupid—maddened by the promise of meat—approaching somebody with food and fuel that he may not want to share or trade, and who might be too eager to defend what he had. The carboy held enough dregs to trade for a meal, giving a patina of sense to our dash to the smell of cooking flesh.

By dying embers in a yard, we found rabbit pelts curing above the reach of wild dogs atop what had been a children's swing set. Within the embers, we found rabbit bones we snatched up and sucked the marrow out of. On the rim of the fire were orange peels we devoured; the smears of rabbit grease on the peels left by the man who'd eaten the orange were savory as a banquet on our brittle, coated tongues. On a peel was an import sticker bearing the name of a grove near Cape Town. Allen and I looked at the pelts, to see if any meat or fat could be gnawed from the skins. Our host made himself known then, with the slow, deliberate cocking of his rifle from the window behind us. We walked away slowly, following our own sled tracks.

The earth-heavy *dread* of a bullet is a mark on your back, on the coin-sized spot that waits for the impact of what you'll only feel as a tackle. The mark presses into you as you hold your shoulders low, not daring to show your worry, lest it encourage the one in whose sights you walk to squeeze the trigger and punch apart your spine and lungs. The

dread forced breath out of us even as we reached the road again, out of range of even the most high-powered rifle.

Adrenaline and food scraps are a cruel mix while you starve. There is a sadism to being partly fed, regaining only enough strength to fully feel how hungry you are, losing the numbness that is the one meager gift of malnutrition. We could feel, with the new volume of our famine-thinned blood, with the rush of receding adrenaline, the rotten wood in the joints of our feet, the cramping poisons in our calves that meant the scarring of muscle. We could feel—with the new flow of nourishment to our brains—how invasive and sick was the way that "we" were feeling. Old grandmothers preach that familiarity breeds contempt. What *I* felt was past all contempt for the "we" that Allen and I were...who felt together, who saw together, who spoke together, who shared the convulsions of our folding bellies. It was hunger, not fellowship, that made Allen and I the "we" that we'd become. Famine had scoured away the walls of "self" that had separated us. Allen and I had been sharing our thoughts, our discomforts and our desires because *we* were too physically weak not to. It's a sharing without language, without the mortar of syntax and words: a pre-literate, pre-verbal bleeding of what's within, like the sadness you feel as your own when you see it in the eyes of a dog trained to guide the blind.

And I realized that the "we" that Allen and I were was a "we" of more than two persons. "We" were also the ghost that followed us...that *had been* following us...the living, guilty thought whose tread was distinct, even as it filled our footprints behind us the way the absence of the newly dead fills a sickroom.

Allen felt my realization...and in my awareness of his feeling what I'd realized, we reaffirmed the "we" that we had been. *He'd known* of our follower with a surety I didn't have until now. It dawned on me that since leaving home, I'd been dimly aware of our follower the same way a child who has only seen pictures in fairy books would know a sylph were he to see it, a thing the unreality of which had yet to be tested...like the

unreality of a fox the child has only seen painted in rich watercolor reds and browns staring up at a crow it will outwit.

Our follower wasn't welcome, not by me, who found him lurking in my thoughts as I would a bilge-damp stowaway. He followed out of hunger, a scavenger tracking sick animals, even though he had no flesh to nourish.

Allen's shoulders rose as he pulled the sled. I waited until we'd walked another mile, and his shoulders had dropped, to ask what he knew about our follower, even though I knew he'd lie...

...when again the smell of smoke stained with meat wafted on the road, pressing our skulls, bringing gorge to our throats and the danger we'd vomit the precious scraps we'd wolfed. The smell was a flood-crash of memory that struck us with the feeling we all know when we talk to old friends in dreams, and only remember as they walk away that they're dead. Had the wind blown another way, Allen and I would now only walk the dreams of friends who'd known us while we lived. We fled the road and the memory the scent brought the same way we had, as small boys, run from what such poisoned air had carried as *sound*: the music of people driven mad by panic and grief, made with the clatter of scrap metal and the blowing of horns made of bones pulled from slaughterhouses and the heaps behind triage centers. The memory of lunatic marches followed us, the way those processions had years ago coursed people and animals that they tore and held aloft as standards, still bleeding and thrashing on pikes, under banks of crematoria smoke.

Allen and I hid the sled behind a rusted van, too panicked to care that our tracks made hiding it futile. We climbed an embankment, our minds packed with ghosts of spinning deathdancers. Our footing on snow and mud, we clung to the barrier rail of what had been a playschool, almost level with snow-buried yard-toys humped like fresh graves, cursing the tracks we left, yet knowing we had to take high ground. We reached a tree that jutted out of the embankment, gaining footing on the barrier rail to climb it in our snow-slick

boots. We reached a stout branch, gripping another branch above us for balance with our scabbed hands. We saw along the road for miles...and so saw our city dying. Greasy smoke rose like funneling leaf-swarms from what had been factories: the fruits of hunger and weakened immune systems. Perhaps a death-gift from ships that had brought plague along with crops from the southern hemisphere. We clung to the tree, watching as if from a masthead scores of people drowning on land. *Burnthrough*...when sickness devours the flesh that fuels it, until no more kindling that has loved and mourned and suffered and walked in God's image remains for it to burn, and the husks of those who have been scalded by fever and suffocated by the water of their own lungs must themselves be made ash in furnaces.

The smoke was beautiful the way that only things that herald death can be, haloed by swirls of crows we were thankful we couldn't hear. The smoke lured us to sleep, even as it caked our throats with tomb soot. In sleep, there'd be no hunger. No cold. The smoke of our sleep would paint the sunsets of latitudes to which we couldn't fly over the span of a single day. We couldn't know whose bodies danced as ash within that smoke, who among those we loved now found homelands in the sky.

In sleep, we could join them. In sleep we'd be warmed by the hearth of dusk....

A sound like a child in pain pulled me from the trance to which the smoke had lulled me. Had I been stronger, alert, I could have better caught Allen as he tried to catch the bird's nest we'd dislodged. He gripped the higher branch with one hand as I gripped his collar to steady him. I read in his face, as a feeling through my skin, his need to have saved something fragile. We looked at the smashed nest below, and tasted the fragility of our own lives.

Quarantine would be enforced by those with the authority to do so and by panicked homeowners with rifles. After sunset, the city would be shut down. Guns on the roofs and streets. Anyone found on the roads without permits or proof of residency in the hinterlands would be herded, thrown into holding pens to control the spread of sickness,

where we'd be certain to contract sickness in our weakened states. We didn't dare sleep without a fire tonight, yet any squat with a working chimney would be raided or burned or held by squatters better armed and stronger than we; any fire lit outdoors would be shot at from a safe distance. There might be aerial monitoring. And it was too cold to find adequate shelter in one of the rotting houses, little more than lean-tos, far from the roads that were still traveled. Martial law, and vigilante law, could already be enforced in the city to which we had to return tonight, before weakness, starvation and cold killed us while we waited for quarantine to end. I'd read stories about long-ago travelers on roads stalked by the blood-drinking dead, and the dread those travelers felt as they saw the day end. I knew such dread, looking at the long shadows before us as the sun stepped west, and knowing this was likely the last day I'd see.

But I'd not give Justine false reason to hope. Even as a footpad with a shit-smearred soul, having exiled myself from my better self, I'd never betray her. I had no right to the luxury of dying out here, with the money that'd be the salvation of Justine and the others I loved. I hadn't earned the privilege of sleep, even in death.

There's a fire that's snuffed in the plumage of a game bird that's been shot; it dies before the bird itself does, even while the blood around the quarrel in the bird's chest is still warm enough to nurture hatchlings. I saw an ember of such a light return to Allen's eyes, and felt a flush return behind my own eyes. It was like the feeling that pushes into a limb when a tourniquet is cut. All wish to live. Yet to wish is not to *will*. A wish is not a choice that pulls your sinews tight, that wakes the blood in your marrow.

"The Club," I said softly, as if I spoke with a candle flame before my lips I didn't want to make flutter, as if I honored in near-silent *kaddish* the thing I'd just killed. Because the decision to live is a kind of death; it's the stone-knife sacrifice of the part of you that'd be happy to die. To rest. I gave that part of me what it longed for. It was the Isaac within me to whom I showed no mercy, though since that moment, I've felt a trace of Isaac's brother in my heart: the wanderer, the ever-homeless exile.

"The Club," I said again, for Allen's sake and my own. No prayer of mourning can be uttered just once, nor can any cantrap for strength. In a way that could happen at no other time and in no other place, Allen understood what I meant. I saw in his rekindled eyes the mirrored understanding that we should make pilgrimage to a site of atrocity while we dreaded snipers' bullets, to a place that was a witch's lair of candybread stabbed into reality...so that once there, we could make changelings of ourselves.

To walk to The Club was to live a life sustained not by breath and heartbeats but by ruin such as I'd tasted once before, when, with numb hands, I'd clung to the vents of an ice-caked subway car, balancing on the rear coupling as tunnel walls screamed past, proving my manhood to boys who were not my friends...and whom I despised in the way we all hate those to whom we feel the need to prove ourselves. Gripping that train, my knuckles about to shatter, the rumble of wheels punching through my boots into my knees and hips, I was then further from death than I was walking through the fallows of ruined houses and looted businesses toward the The Club--the hulk that had been the tinderbox of an isolated, virulent burnthrough that littered the surrounding parking ground with victims killed by wind-like fever and the bullets of panicked sheriffs. I was nearer, because I now waded into the dreamworld that borders death as if into a riptide.

The concrete plain around The Club for the stowage of vehicles was cracked as the mosaic of a child's puzzle. It was visible under the waist-high, sword-sharp canopy of lethal plants above the lot that kept snow off the fractures. The blood of a man walking through and cut by that canopy of leaves would fall to the mosaic in snowy wet clumps with his strides. Jumbled bones lay framed by broken windshields...blackened by the fumes of rotting upholstery like scraps in a roasting pan. Other cars, their roofs made smooth-edged by snow, were nests to feral things that had found the marrow of human femurs sweet, and still other vehicles bore the neat bullet holes that kept their would-be drivers forever behind steering wheels. I don't know if this harrowed place had called to the razor-leafed bramble that grew out of the pavement. I can't know, anymore than I can

palm the smoke of my thoughts, if the bramble knew the dreams of those who still lived nearby, and so answered the enticement to root among the vehicles as it would around a spell-trapped castle. Maybe the bramble—which I've seen grow wild around rust-vacant military bases where it had been planted in lieu of barbed wire—had been seeded like hydra's teeth around the club as a forbidding. What might have been the last minutes we'd know still warm in our bodies were lost hacking bramble to the club door through which we'd have to pass, and there take the elf-glamour that might let us live past moonrise.

A shoe...

The first solid thing I saw in the unbreathing dusk of that crypt. The shoe was alien--finery from Before made with tight factory seams, not stitched by a cobbler. It was of a kind worn in the stead of foot-binding, that women stilted on while dancing, while trudging stairs, while walking the smooth sidewalks without *pavés* that had been the skin of the city before the concrete flagging had been wrenched up for foundations and breakwaters. The angle of the shoe in the dust evoked the snapping of an ankle. My eyes trespassed on the burial mound of a dead kingdom, a sin that in other eras would have them bewitched to wooden orbs by barrow wraiths. Allen and I stepped into folklore, walking past the shoe that lent a seed of truth to the stories we'd heard about what kinds of detritus of Before had been left here when the place was shut down. We entered a legend, to find treasures in the ruin that might save us.

Panic leaves strokes distinct as smears of bloody lymph on carpet. Meals, left when I'd been a child and had seen grainy footage of this place besieged by gunfire, lay finished at the bar by rats and fungi, reduced to dust-furred shapes beside cutlery rusted to abstractions. Coats were draped over chairs, some made of quilted down like the sleeping bags Allen and I carried. They were chewed, most of the feathers inside taken away to make nests for the animals that thumped near the ceiling at our coming. There was no smell of death here, because not even death walks a place so forsaken, and the

smell of death is still a smell of nature. This place stank of an emptiness that didn't oppress our breath, but pulled it out of us.

A woodsman without his tools can't know who he is. I've seen them wander into town...their hands dead at their sides for want of an axe or saw. Allen and I, in this death-forsaken place, didn't know who we were without the sled of tools we'd left outside the sword-bramble, didn't know who we were without the gear that defined the world we knew. Even our thresher's knives had become dream-things, dulled by our hacking the bramble and dripping a thick sap like the blood of a thing killed by a warrior saint. Not knowing ourselves, intruded upon by each other, poisoned by crematoria fumes the Furies would savor as wine, followed by an un-bodied thing in a place that worried our hearts the way incubi and infant-handed *maras* worry the backs of sleepers, we were in a Hell like that of the peoples who'd been old before the Greeks had been young.

We risked a fire in the great steel sink of the kitchen, risked the poison smoke of varnished wood cracked from gnawed chairs that rose to the high ceiling as if in a curing house. We made a cauldron of a soup pot, pouring spring water from age-brittle plastic bottles to cast a transformative spell on ourselves. The dishtowels we soaked with liquor turned grey-black and reeking from the filth we scraped off our goosefleshed skin. I sweated in the cold as I saw steam cake the windows, and in my malnourished state, the sweat that ran to my mouth was salt-less as rain. The beer and gum-thick dishsoap we worked into our hair foamed slick as grease pools near rendering plants. Our newly scrubbed skin had the look and scent of the laudanum addicts who sprawl in the shallow hallway graves where they let go the fruit-sweet musk of their last breaths.

Colognes and hand soap from the washroom nearly completed the guise we needed to take: that of wealthy boys indulging in the sin of the rich who make a game of poverty. The sin that lets debutantes play at being whores, knowing they can cast off that life while the disowned girls of port cities can't. That lets students make a hobby of addiction and the Japanese tea-ceremony of melting smack and shooting up, knowing they can take

cures in Lucerne clinics, their track marks closing near the platinum bands of watches custom-made in Geneva. The sin that lets boys whose nascent beards are shaved in bed by servants frolic in the shitholes in which boys like Allen and me toiled, that makes a sport of what we do to survive...that lets these lads boast while being seen by the right people lunching with the right heiresses in the right clubs.

To perform such a masque—that of boys who masqued themselves as what Allen and I really were—we'd have to scrape off the mange-whiskers we'd grown, the beards frayed by starvation and worry, that marked us as two who could be easily killed and forgotten. We'd packed no razors, why should we? Cooking oil and dishsoap made our lather...warm water from the pot took a rust tinge from our flayed palms as we wet our faces. As I'd seen done by vagabonds who rode freight rails from city to city, I smashed a bottle that had held a sugar drink and tested the keen of the longest, sturdiest shard. With hands that felt gloved within their new scars, I raised the shard to my throat. When the ugly scrape of the first stroke fell quiet and even the crack of the fire was mute, Allen grinned and asked me, the universe, and maybe even God, should He have bothered to look down, "Did you know that we're cool?"

A prop dagger, sharpened, can stab a man through the heart, then be put in its scrap-leather sheath and be a prop again. Allen and I were costumed, wearing what had been sweaters of spun glass that hadn't rotted over the years they'd been left draped over chairs. We packed wet cooking salt on our boots, so they'd be stained as if by road salt, making us look like we'd walked streets populated enough to have been plowed and salted, and not the roads of the decaying outlands. Our "make up" of freshly shaved skin howled in the brittle air as we walked the path we'd cut through the bramble that smelled of citric extract and the tannic vinegar used to clean head wounds. We were keened props, things of reality pretending to be false. We felt sheltered by our deception, as if we held a lock of the Elf-Queen's hair that would turn a sniper's bullets to frost. Like Orfeo or Lot, we knew not to glance back at the place we'd quit.

The *we* that Allen and I had become let our thoughts be non-verbal, let us speak in near-grunts as we hiked to the checkpoint that would grant us passage into the city. Our approach was a dumbshow, done for groundlings whose displeasure would leave exit wounds. As we reached the wall of ill-shod soldiers milling in front of what had been a tollbooth, Allen muttered to himself, and the mutterings we'd shared and understood became gibberish to me. I was suddenly afraid to be so alone in my own mind, unable to be aware of the third being I'd felt trail us. I realized that I'd welcome awareness of that specter...who else but the dead could bear witness to my death?

Some of the soldiers, as they weighed life and death under a forest of smoke columns swaying in the east, couldn't be bothered to close their phones while they listened to the Evangelical plays broadcast at that hour. Allen, I realized, wasn't muttering, but *praying*. He, a Catholic, walked beside a Jew along a corridor of wrecks towards death as if in some Romantic Era parable, whisper-praying as did the Hasidim who'd taken me in after the first Center to which I'd been sent was burned down. I wished to pray, but couldn't while walking that frozen path, while the river that had been the lifeblood of my home became that of Babylon. I felt overwhelmed by Allen's faith, a *converso* for the span of those heartbeats as the storm of my soul was billowed under by the storm of his soul...

...and which I knew was too strong to be his alone.

Amid the noise in my mind, like the memory of the plague-mad revelers' music, I felt a wish to kill the soldier who walked up to question us in the filthy air. Behind him, commandeered backhoes widened the pit in which he'd gladly burn us. I hoped the wish was a goblin-thought. Something nurtured by the memories of the music made by rioters maddened as if by Hearn's horn. Maybe it was Allen's blasphemy that put me in such a Godless mindset, because as we'd entered the checkpoint I'd heard Allen tell the God to whom he muttered to *hush*, as if he spoke to a noisy pup he trained.

There was a rawness in the soldier's voice. It filled me with a dread like that of falling in a dream. Because although he wielded deadly force, he himself was not deadly—he

was far worse. I've known deadly men. They've never frightened me the way this man did. True deadliness is patient, like a predator waiting in reeds by a stream. It's a decision to be lethal that's never impulsive and that can be countered like a chess move, by the recognition of that willingness to kill. Men who aren't deadly are wielded *by* the power they think they wield. And they're jealous of that power...knowing it can abandon them like the wives they beat into fidelity. Anger shakes in the eyes of a man who's not deadly while he holds a gun, palpable as the misogyny in the eyes of those who first "become men" as clients of whores.

I've since learned that to look at an enemy is to look at yourself. But then, as a boy, I didn't know why I looked to see if the soldier had the scars that would tell me if he'd had the kitchen table surgery that would have torn the corners of his mouth while a butcher-priest cut the wisdom teeth out of his jaw amid prayers shouted in ecstatic tongues. I wondered, as he looked at Allen and me, if he'd had the other surgeries that would have removed his appendix, tailbone, and one rib to rewrite his body in accordance with Scripture, erasing the lies that Satan had written into his flesh the same way the Deceiver had hidden fossils under the skin of the Earth.

I know *now* that I looked at him so because I was aware in a deep, wordless way that if he knew I was a Jew, he'd search my brow for traces of horns.

The man's hand shook as he questioned us in his lazy-tongued dialect, under a bank of meat hooks hung on the chain link fence like wash drying, by rusted barrels of thickened fuel that with their patches of red, waxy polymer looked like an art installation made of junkyard salvage. The Church Militia patch on his shoulder, stitched over the flag there as if to cover something shameful, told me he was used to the spirit of God working and flowing through him the same way as did lethal power, moving him to do things for which he'd have to take no personal responsibility—from dervish-running in circles at revivals to proselytizing strangers to shooting a man. I didn't shake. Because

that would loosen the mask I wore of the specter he'd been raised to fear: that of the shape-shifting Jew who passed for "normal."

I stood before him, to his eye with the complexion of a saint and the condition of a devil. I was the fiend that boys such as he had been told would carry him off in a sack if they were bad. I addressed him as if he were a recalcitrant Gabbo, acting impatient and weary and invigorated beside my friend as if we were on our way home from a day of shovelboard and bear baiting, speaking to him as if he didn't grip a weapon, but loitered expecting an undeserved tip. We were each other's monster. To me, he was the villain, descendant of the shiftless *vilain* of old dramas. I feared him because what I'd seen of his kind stranded at docks and rail yards, who cursed the Sodom in which they were marooned and that I called "home"...when the Sodom they endured was what they brought in their hearts along with their scar-widened grins, as they awaited passage to the countries that let them pursue the Hammite slave trade they claimed as their lost heritage. I know now that by looking for traces of crude stitch-work at the corners of his mouth, I wished to put a mask on him out of anger for the mask I'd been coerced to put on...that made me the embodiment of the mask-wearing fiend he dreaded.

The living mind can stand only so close to death and remember its face. Death is eternal, an infinity of mirrors with no object of focus. It's indifferent to time, and while we breathe, we can't grasp an unchanging end. That's why drowning men spin into a pit of memory as they die, awaiting the heaviness of the sea in their lungs. That's why sailors, knowing such a crush of memory might await them, always carry the horizon's span in their eyes, even when inland. Death smothered my memory of passing that checkpoint. Yet in that darkness, I know I felt the being to whom Allen had prayed and knew him not to be God, even though he touched me as would God, granting me some small peace in my terror. It was a peace I felt he granted Allen out of a kind of love I'll never know.

I slumped like an old man as we walked away from the barbed wire gate bordering the converted tollbooth, our masque (our farce?) ending as we crossed into the Commonwealth of Boston, out of the jurisdiction of the soldiers. Allen looked about to fall in the snow like a drunk whom the cold would either sober up, or numb to sleep and let him freeze to death. We became the starved and desperate boys we were, home in our dying city as smoke stained skies the color of bile, too tired to flinch as shots rang out from the checkpoint; the people behind us on the road must have been worse actors than we. They'd burn in the failure of their performances, executed by men enraptured by phone plays about their promised Rapture while they sent strangers to the Heaven they'd have to earn, and not be lifted to.

As we parted, Allen had the expression of a diver looking at water from a height he'd never attempted before. The "we" that we'd been was dying. Through that death, I knew whatever pained and frightened him waited for him at home. Years later, with my lover Cynthia in her studio redolent with paints, clays and exotic yarns, I felt pain behind my eyes and heart the moment she set down her brushes after doing my portrait, when she severed the connection we'd shared while I sat in active stillness and as she pressed her will onto a blank canvas. Looking away from her was like tearing stitches in my mind. That pain echoed the pain of leaving Allen, as our famine-sharing of our selves rended. Torn from him, I could see, but not understand, the grief that waited for him, the grief that made me hate myself for hating this boy who in his desperation had clung to my mind the way a drowning man would cling to driftwood.

There was another sadness standing at that corner with us, besides that which nearly bent Allen double. The being that had walked with us faded from our senses as its sadness grew. It billowed to nothing the same way our breaths did, lifted by the cold air. And for the first time in my life I knew that I'd stood beside a ghost of someone newly dead, who'd just recently let go his last breath and his soul with it. Allen looked to the

plumed sky, and I knew the colors of that twilight would be the colors he'd wear in mourning.

I didn't see that sunset.

Pulling the sled, I came to Aunt Louise's home. Crispin was the only one to greet me, leaving the blood-jeweled snow on the porch where he crunched mouse bones to wrap himself around my legs. A note from Justine and Janice, written in the shorthand of the wards, told me that everyone in our household had gone to gather fuel from the abandoned lawns near the fallen overpasses, where no snipers or home-defenders would be. I fell into my bed still in my coat, and knew from the stray hairs on and the scent embedded in the pillow that Justine had slept there while I was gone.

I woke to the smell of smoke, *pure* smoke from a woodfire, not poisoned by fumes of human blood, hair and fat. The bills that had been in my pocket were gone, and I felt panic at what I might have done while Justine or Janice pulled the money from my coat as I slept gripping my gun beneath my pillow.

A plate on my nightstand dusted with soda cracker crumbs told me I'd woken and eaten. I had no memory of it. I touched a dim awareness I'd had...of being comforted by the sounds of sniper fire, that in my half-dreaming mind sounded like the fall of smiths' hammers in a stable.

The silence told me I was alone (without even Crispin for company, since he'd have cried from the hallway at my stirring). I stripped and walked to where the fire I smelled burned in the yard. The insulated gloves and tongs I used to lift flagstones from the coals and drop them hissing into our cedar tub were stained from the times we'd used them for cooking shanks in the pits we'd dug in the summer. While the stones warmed the water, I scrubbed with snow, burnishing myself with the flush of a healthy man; the snow was clean...too close to the factories that were now crematoria to be stained by human soot, the way a man standing right under a fountain might not be hit by the spray. I washed in heat and cold until I felt faint, dried myself with a towel warmed by the fire.

Duck eggs, bought from a vendor or stolen from the nest, waited for me in the kitchen...along with a loaf of Justine's bread, oven-warm in the center, and mare's milk poured through pine branches and left by the stove to set. I'd slept long enough for the food to be bought on the black market the morning after my return, long enough for someone in this house to brave snipers near the center of town and return with food and fuel for the tub and stove, long enough for Justine's bread to rise and be baked and for the milk to turn to a rich qvark.

No longer feral for being washed and fed, I wondered if Justine could still love me even as I heard her tread behind me, and felt the placing of her cool hand on the still bath-warm skin at the base of my neck. She took me in her arms as I rose, and as I crossed the threshold of her gaze into the one home I've ever known, I knew that she knew that I'd wounded my soul. And that she forgave me for marring something she loved.

I didn't cry with her as we lay in bed. Crying is a flowing outward. I folded inward. Justine let me fall...and so pulled me from my hurt. Scarred, but healed. I knew I could come home, because the best part of me had never left. Justine and I rebuilt the quiet inner spaces that Allen and I had razed while we starved.

When next I shaved, I used the shard I kept wrapped in my pocket as a talisman, so I'd never forget what I'd survived. I barely nicked myself; more blood flowed from me because of the new toothbrush I found in the bathroom, which scrubbed red yolk from my gums in a way that made me look like a dying man spitting the milk of his ulcer. No razor has touched my face since.

My face smooth and resting on Justine's breast, I asked her what had been the colors of the sunset the night I'd returned. She stroked my hair in rhythm with her speech.

"Burgundy...and a kind of ivory. There was green, too. The kind you see in marble, sometimes."

I love her deeply for never asking me why I needed to know.

A mirror of steel is oddly silent....

Yet what of a mirror that's fallen mute? What's the nature of that quiet, that shocks you to deafness? Is it the void of a retreating echo? The quiet after a gunshot? Is the silence odd because it's really your twin who's now dumb, the self that you can't hear, yet with whom you speak in the language that's too fragile to bear the weight of uttered words?

I never spoke to Allen again. After what we'd shared, I couldn't, any more than nerves can speak to a severed limb. I waited to know what happened to Allen, and to me, while we roamed in exile. Spring came, as did barges heavy with crops from upriver and seafaring ships that didn't bring new plague strains along with cargoes of fruit and grain. The Charles spoke as its frozen sheets cracked and icebreakers made paths for flatboats that brought livestock to the Magazine Beach slaughterhouses. Among the stalls of the open-air Cambridgeport bookmarket, I saw a boy whom I knew to be Allen's cousin, who wore colors of mourning that were burgundy and ivory...and the kind of green that hides in marble, sometimes. I led him away from the beehive hum of writers and poets reciting their works to potential readers to a spot by the shore, where the most distracting sound was the blows of rivermen cutting blocks of the Charles to cart to icehouses in midtown and to fish markets by the harbor. Under the buds of a willow tree, he told me that I'd had by proxy a brother whom I'd never meet, even though I knew his face, and his spirit, with an intimacy I'd shared with very few.

I've played in comedies about twins as separated as two drops in the ocean who seek each other, and who are reunited. I've made burlesque of mistaken identity and farce of confusion. I know now that it's a great loss that there are no tragedies or mourning plays about twins. No farce can speak of the language that is rejoined when two who've shared a womb meet again. The language of twins is urgent as the language of your heartbeat. Words are the lies we place between a thing and what it is, like when we say that *lightning is flashing*, even though we know lightning can't exist without a flash...any

more than you can exist without that which is reflected in burnished metal. Maybe this realization, not a sword, killed the Gorgon.

Allen had been cut from himself, as cruelly as language cuts lightning from its flash. I was scarred the moment that he was cut, burdened with a *wyrd* that was as inescapable as the birthmark of a seer. Allen's twin brother had been born simple, choked into that state by the birthcord of his brother. He could speak with Allen as he could with no one else, his speech as limited as that of the street kids who lurked on the peripheries of the wards who'd cut themselves to be let in and treated, the kids who were raised feral, who didn't fall to that state, but were stunted to it, cut off from human voices and human touch...so much so, it was rumored that some had been raised by dogs.

Allen and his brother shared language the same way they'd shared womb's blood, and so had bled into each other. I, sharing a crucible far crueler, had bled into Allen. His brother...frightened...dying of fever, and maybe not knowing what dying truly was, reached out to Allen, through whom I'd felt Death as it took Allen's brother, my twin, whose name I'll never speak, because I'd "heard" his name through the language that is felt, not spoken. Through the silent language of steel mirrors. By touching that dying boy I'd felt the soul of one who was becoming a ghost, the presence of a shade-not-yet-dead who'd followed Allen and me into the dead lands we walked so the ones we loved could live. The boy had died in delirium, between two worlds, between dreams and waking. From there, he'd called to his brother and summoned me into a dusk the mere sight of which changed my sight, the way that vision of our world as seen through a birth caul changes the sight of a child born with one draped on his face.

A mirror of steel is silent, as are the ghosts I still feel each day as I walk streets that plague has emptied. Ghosts, like reflections in steel, have only the voices we give them, even though what they speak is theirs alone.

I look at myself in a mirror of steel, newly shorn by a glass blade, unable to bear the vertigo inspired by the too-slow, counter-clock swirl of stubble and glycerin foam down

the drain that will remake stubble, dead skin and foam into food that I will not eat. I pushed the basin flush with the wall, then activated the spray of water that streamed too thinly and slowly to truly be called a shower.

The droplets fell so that I saw through them as if through tears wrung by gusts of bitter cold. The ceramic walls of the train could never know the voices of ghosts such as I'd been taught to hear by Allen's brother. No ghost's voice could be heard over the train's engines and the spin of its turbines that kept my feet too lightly pressed to the floor. No ghost could ever walk from such dim shadows as those cast by artificial light, amid hallways and corners that, even while they were constructed, had never been touched by sunlight.

Washed for the first time after half a year of sleep, I walked back to my compartment and spoke a *kaddish* into those voiceless spaces for the brother I'd lost and whom I'd never know, and through whom I'd tasted the bread and the prayer of his deathbed Communion.

In these voiceless spaces, what voice have you, that we may speak in this way? What prayers in what language shall we offer as mirrors silent to each other?

End