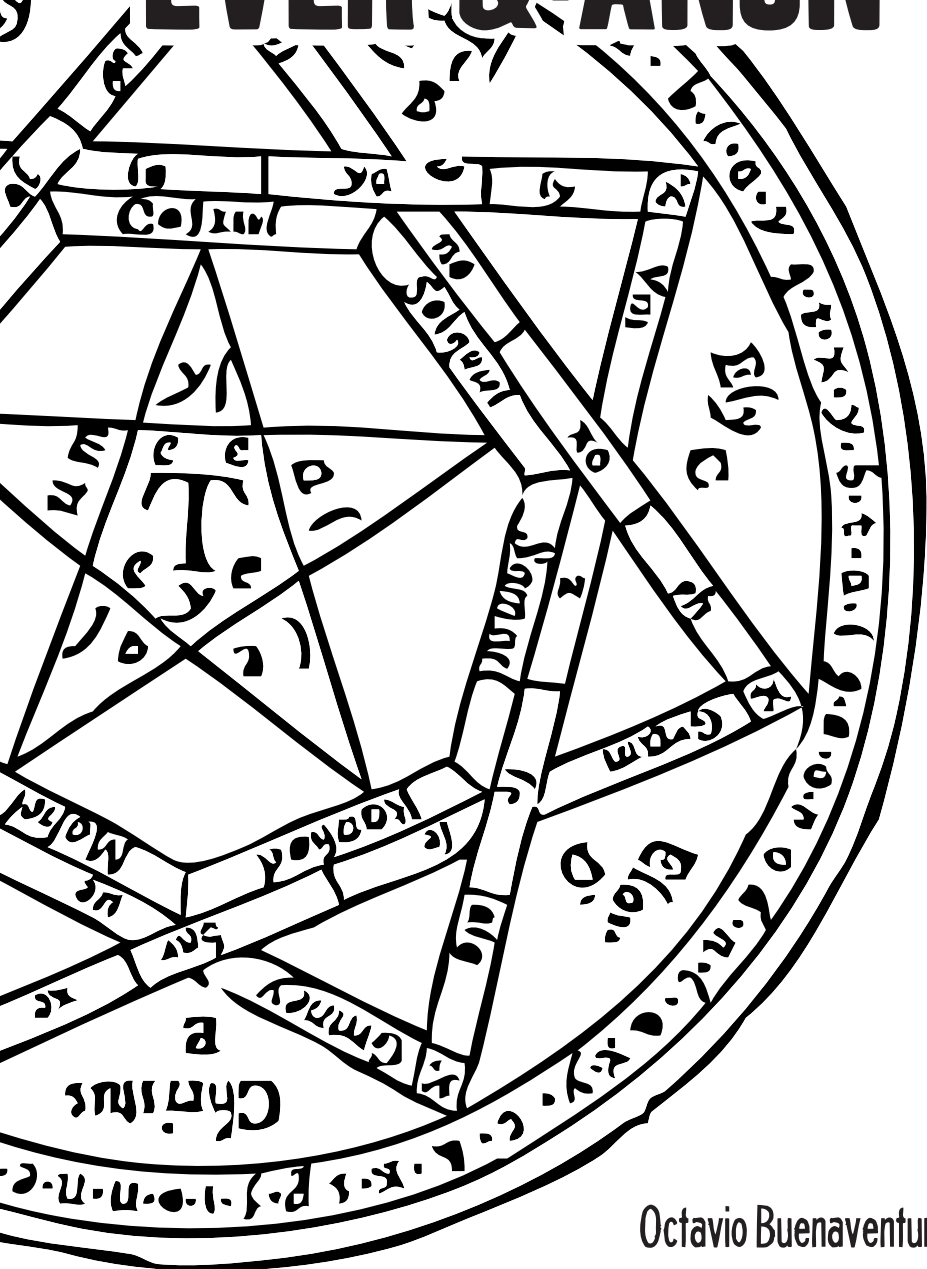


EVER & ANON



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We at Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness are pleased to present you with *Ever & Anon*, a post-revolutionary story of misfit artists and dead gods. *Ever & Anon* was originally published in 2007 by The International Anarchist Conspiracy, and is reprinted herein by permission of the author.

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And now the real drama of human life
can unfold, in all its beauty, harmony,
creativity and joy.

-Murray Bookchin

We weren't ready for anarchy... but it
walked into us like morning.

-Amiri Baraka

For W—

ALL AND DARK, THE TREE HUNG OVER THE PATH THAT LED INTO THE GROVE. FOR THREE hundred yards there was nothing but tan, overgrown grass, dry under the sun which had been exceptionally hot that year. The only thing that broke the uniformity of the grass was the tree; an oak, over a hundred years old, its branches imitating, to an astonishing degree, the dendrites of the human brain.

At least that is what Rosemary always thought. She was indeed thinking this same thing as she walked along the path. As she drew closer to its large trunk, she noticed someone sitting with his back leaning against it. Soon, it became clear the person was a man, eyes closed, cigarette between his lips.

She stopped walking, bare feet motionless on the hardened dirt path. A warm wind blew through the grass, tracing insane patterns that only the birds could fully appreciate. Just as she was hoping the same wind would not rouse the man, he opened his eyes and took the cigarette from his lips. Without looking at her, he put the half finished cylinder out on one of the tree's protruding roots, brushed off the burn mark and put the cigarette in his pocket. A few leaves fell from the tree.

"What are you doing here?"

It happened too quickly for her to process. She could not understand how he had seen her, let alone how she had heard him so clearly. For his words entered her ears as if he was right in front of her when in fact he was over fifty feet away. While her mind struggled through this, Rosemary fell victim to what is commonly referred to as teleportation. She found herself standing directly in front of him before she could finish her last breath.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked again.

His face was a composite of red ants and bay leaves, all seeming to be frantically moving while remaining motionless. Despite this, all Rosemary saw was the face of a man she had once known.

"Who are you? I...where do I..."

"Know me from?" he said. "That is for you to discover."

"Well..."

She was surprisingly calm, being that she had just been teleported, even if it was only a short distance. If she could have seen the true nature of the man's face, perhaps she would have been more alarmed but due to this man's as of yet un-catalogued powers, she could not. His hair was black and flowing down to the bottom of his back. His eyes were green. And he talked without opening his mouth.

"What I need you to do," he said, "is to return to your home."

An image of burning furniture filled her mind.

"Why?"

"You live there, do you not?"

"Of course I do, it's my home..."

"Once you have returned..."

She waited.

And waited.

But nothing followed from his frozen lips.

"And once I have returned," she said, "what should I do?"

"Wake up."

Her sheets were soaked with sweat. Immediately she turned to her left but found that Jones was gone, a nearly healed pillow holding only the shadow of his skull's imprint.

"Jones?" she yelled.

"Yeah."

His voice came from downstairs.

"You okay?" she asked without knowing why.

"Yeah." There was a pause. "You finally up?"

"Obviously. What are you doing?"

"Reading. You hungry?"

"No." She threw the covers off her body and sat up, placing her feet on the cold, wooden floorboards. "I feel..."

But she was speaking in a whisper now, and Jones could not hear what followed.

THE TEA KETTLE was removed from the stove just before the steam spewing out of it became too thick. Rosemary did not share Jones' passion for scalding tea. He liked to hold it and let it warm his fingers. She did not. His hands were far rougher than hers.

After dropping the tea bag into the cup, she joined Jones at the table. He had just finished chop-

ping some wood outside. A few, small islands of snow lay near the front door. Two pieces of the newly fractioned wood were burning in the stove.

"You were talking in your sleep," he said, closing his book.

"What was I saying?"

"Something about a skeleton."

"That's weird. I wasn't dreaming about a skeleton."

"You know, they say that the sight of a rock in a dream can give you an orgasm. Our minds can be in two places at once and can confuse objects."

"Maybe it's not confusion. Maybe it just shows us that a man or a woman could easily be a rock, as far as something that can give us an orgasm. Or ourselves."

"Doesn't say much about our sexuality, though."

Rosemary shrugged.

"So I was talking about skeletons?" she asked.

"I wouldn't say talking. But the word came up twice, by itself."

"So I just said skeleton twice?"

"Yep."

"And nothing else?"

"No. Not as far as I know. Did you have an orgasm?"

"What? In my sleep?"

"Yeah."

Rosemary brought the cup to her lips and blew on it.

A wisp of steam flew towards Jones.

AT THE TIME, Rosemary was painting on an eight by eleven foot sheet of un-mounted canvas. After having a quiet breakfast with Jones, she threw a few more logs into the stove and walked up the ladder to the loft that hung above it.

Their house was built in a time that neither of them fully understood. Some said it was fifty years in the past, some said one hundred. In either case, whatever was happening in that past necessitated a large amount of space. Upon entering Rosemary and Jones' house, one saw an all wooden kitchen with a ceramic sink and a large cutting block. To the immediate right was a coat rack and below that the couple's shoes, usually sitting in neat rows. To the left stretched the living room, holding two leather couches and one large, oak desk. It was at this desk that Jones worked on his poems. At the edge of the living room, tucked in the corner, was the stove. As was previously mentioned, a loft hung above this stove. From the living room floor to the ceiling was a space of forty feet. The loft was situated fifteen feet above the floor. Across from the loft was a staircase that disappeared from view as it ascended towards the two bedrooms and the lone bathroom.

Rosemary finished climbing the ladder, put her hands on her waist and slowly approached her painting, spread out on the loft floor. Radiant nakedness ridden with disease but if one looked closer into these carefully crafted cancers, small pinpricks of light could be seen, all arranged with the most random species of precision. Blue rattlesnakes metamorphosed into devilish limes which in turn exploded into the same disease which seemed to be infecting the entire panting.

Rosemary sat down cross-legged in front of her creation. She had been working on it for three months at this point. It was not discontent she now felt, for she had felt that before and knew it well; simple distaste for what slowly dried when she walked away from it. What now possessed her was unease. Something about this painting disturbed her in a way that escaped the clutches of reason, conscious thought or even intuition. It was as if the painting, upon reaching a certain state of composure, implanted a blood clot into her veins and, just as dying of a blood clot carried nothing more than its sheer, objective consequences, so this imaginary clotting gave her nothing more than its own objective consequences: unease.

That was the only way she had been able to describe it to Jones.

"It's got to be...emotions aren't that simple, you know?" he said.

"This one is."

"But...I mean, it's not the most uplifting painting. Maybe it...:

"I've created more disturbing images than that."

Jones only nodded to this, it being perfectly true.

It lay below her as she sat there, legs still crossed, her back arched forward. In a few minutes she would begin working while down below Jones finished washing his ceramic mug. He placed it in the wooden drying rack and walked over to his desk which was directly below where his wife was sitting. Before sitting down himself, he checked the stove. Seeing that she had put more logs inside,

he returned to his desk, pulled out his chair, sat down with a sigh and grabbed his pen. He was in the midst of uncapping the ink when he stopped moving and listened. Rosemary's brushstrokes were not as audible as they usually were. For the next minute, the two of them waited for something neither of them could explain.

"ROSE?"

A sigh preceded her response.

"Yeah?" she said, voice low and with a pronounced sense of frustration.

"Sorry. Did I..."

"No, no. I'm done."

"I thought so. Didn't hear the strokes anymore."

"What is it?"

"Come down here a second."

"One second."

She looked over the new additions to her painting. A new red she had mixed the other day, congealed into shimmering spheres on the canvas, appearing as an antidote to the cancers, both coming from her. This new appearance fascinated her but when the last of the spheres was put down, all of her energy vanished. With a light sigh, she stood up, dropped her brush into a glass of brown water and climbed down the ladder.

The fire was weaker than it should have been and so she put three small logs on, left the metal door open an inch and waited until the flame's longing for oxygen ignited the dry wood. She closed the door and walked over to Jones, still at his desk.

"How you doing?" she said, running her finger through his hair.

"Look."

She stepped to the side of him, looked at his eyes and followed his gaze to the wall. To the left of his notebook, nestled below the corner of the window, were five small, red marbles, buried halfway into the wood. It was immediately apparent to her that they were arranged in the pattern of a traditional pentagram. But what was more surprising to Rosemary than the configuration of the marbles was their color, the same color she had just recently made and used upstairs.

"What do..."

"How did you see?" she asked, interrupting him.

"See? See what?"

"My painting. You saw what I just painted."

"N...no. Wait. I didn't do this. I thought you did."

"No."

It was at this point that it began to snow outside, flakes thick and silent.

WHILE OBVIOUSLY SHE could not do the measurements herself, Rosemary was certain that if the proper equipment were obtained they would find that the marbles were embedded in the wall at their exact equator. The same thing went for their alignment. She could tell they were perfectly symmetrical. As for their color, the likeness to the red she just created was beyond similar; it was identical. A red that appears for a fraction of a second in a sunset, a red that unifies all the others while rarely being seen. It was the last guardian of the sun, the lone sentry that made sure all of what the light-giver ejaculated was kept in order, the secret of its existence remaining a secret.

"See how there's..." Jones gently moved his index finger around the circumference of the topmost marble. "There's absolutely no crack in the wall. It's like they just appeared. One minute...I mean, I just looked and there they were. I figured you just forgot to tell me you put them there."

"You promise you didn't do this?"

"Yeah. You would've heard me."

"I know." She rubbed his shoulder. "But this...it's a little weird. If you want to know...go upstairs and look at my painting."

"That's right. You thought..."

"Go look at it. You'll feel stranger."

Jones stood up, walked over the ladder and ascended. Rosemary sat down at his desk, leaned forward on her elbows, and gazed at shape. The lone point facing upwards. The perfect harmony of the extremities. As she looked in the center of the pentagram a pleasurable sensation, akin to being in the middle of a meal after one has been starving, filled her stomach.

"Fuck me," she heard him say above.

THE SNOW CONTINUED to fall as she closed the front door and popped her thick collar up. Black boots covered her feet and a black, puffy jacket covered everything else. As she moved down the path, in between the tall walls of snow, a crow flew over her head. She watched until it was out of sight and by that time she had reached Evelyn's house.

It was as tall and spacious as theirs but housed only her. The three of them had come to the conclusion that the same architect had designed their houses but, after completing Rosemary and Jones', the architect had decided to include all of the bedrooms above the living room. So, where Rosemary had just a lone loft above the stove with the bedrooms in another part of the house, Evelyn had four connected rooms lining the cavernous walls, all with windows opening down onto the living room.

Rosemary removed what snow she could off her boots and knocked on the thick door in front of her. Without the sound of footsteps preceding it, the door opened, revealing Evelyn's dark face. Her brown hair was spread into two tails. Two jade bracelets lined her wrists. She was wearing black jeans and a black t-shirt. A cigarette burned between her tattooed fingers. Her smile was effortless and wide, revealing slightly stained, slightly crooked teeth.

"Hey, baby," she said, stepping aside. "Come in."

"Thanks, Evie." Rosemary walked inside, the door closing behind her. "How're you doing?"

"Good. Good. How's the painting?"

"Fine." Rosemary stepped out of her boots and hung up her coat. "Listen..."

"You want some tea?"

"Sure." Evelyn walked over to the kitchen and grabbed a mug. "So...there's some weird...weird shit going on at my house."

"Is Jones alright?"

"Yeah, yeah. He's good."

Evelyn put out her cigarette, finished loading the metal tea-ball, dropped it into the mug and walked it towards the stove. Rosemary followed her, noticing a hint of distraction in her friend's movements.

"What's weird then?" Evelyn said, lifting the kettle off the stove and pouring the water into the mug. She put the put kettle back and handed Rosemary the tea. "There you go."

"Thanks. Alright..." She blew onto the steaming liquid. "At some point in the last two hours, five marbles appeared in the wall next to Jones' desk. We've looked at them and they...we didn't put them there. As if that's not...oh yeah, the marbles form a perfect pentagram. If that's not weird enough, the marbles are the same color...you know, that red I just made?"

"Like...the same or..."

"Identical, Evie. I...what...do you know anything about pentagrams?"

"Pentagrams. Sure"

"Like what? I figured you'd know."

The two women sat down on the twin chairs facing the stove.

"Well...let's see. I...some people link the five points of it with our five senses. The Babylonians thought the five corners represented Jupiter, Mercury, Mars and Saturn with Venus resting at the top. You know their god Ishtar?"

"Yeah"

"Venus was Ishtar. The body in the sky, I mean."

"Actually I don't know anything about Ishtar," Rosemary said, taking a sip of tea.

Evelyn smiled and shook her head.

"Ishtar was the Babylonian mother goddess. Goddess of the spring, fertility, love. There's this story about her where she grew dissatisfied with ruling over the earthly world and wanted to rule the underworld as well. Have you heard this story?"

"No."

"So Ishtar went down to the underworld. Her sister was the goddess of the underworld, by the way. At the entrance, the gatekeeper wanted to know why she wanted to go down there. She told him the truth about being fed up with life above and he told her sister. When she heard, the sister got a little annoyed but agreed to let her come, provided that she obey all the underworld laws. One of the major laws was that all dead souls had to shed a piece of their clothing at each of the underworld's seven gates. As Ishtar descended, her clothing came off, one piece at a time until finally her dress came off and she stood naked in front of her sister who was sitting on her throne."

"What did the sister do?"

"Ishtar began whining about being naked and her sister reminded her about what she agreed to upon descending. Out of anger, I guess, Ishtar threw her sister off the throne and took her place. But the demons of the underworld sentenced her to death and turned her into a piece of rotting meat."

"A piece of rotting meat?"

"Uh-huh. And then the sister hung her up in her coat rack. Fortunately for old Ishtar, her uncle convinced her sister to let her return to the earthly world, the only catch being she had to send a substitute down to take her place. When she came back up, she was going to send down some petty little deity, but when she came home she saw all the little gods were distraught at her absence. So she didn't feel right sending any of them because they truly loved and had missed her. When she got back to her palace, though, her lover was sitting in her place at the throne. Ishtar really was feisty because she sent him straight down into the underworld."

"Good"

"Of course she missed him after a while."

"Nice. What did she do then?"

"She sent her lover's half sister down for sixth months at a time."

"So this girl and her half brother took turns in the underworld?"

"That's right."

"Ishtar's a brat."

"Well, she was a queen. They always seem to want more than they need."

"Anyway..." Rosemary took a sip of her tea, found it cold and put it down on the armrest of her chair. "This is all really weird, this pentagram. I mean..."

Evelyn looked at her, waiting for a response. At first, Rosemary took this as a clear indication that, in some way, Evelyn was responsible for the anomaly. It was only when a look of worry came over her friend's face that Rosemary dispelled this notion, labeling it as paranoia and quickly forgetting it.

"What?" Evelyn asked.

"Nothing. It's weird, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It is."

JONES WAS STARING at the pentagram when she returned to the house, his right hand in a fist, resting under his chin. Through the window, she watched his expression remain constant, vacant and overwhelmed. She kept her eyes on him as she stomped her boots. His eyes rose up towards hers as she opened the door. The heat from inside jumped up to meet her, making her muscles melt. The cold from outside provided him some relief from the entropic malaise pulsing out of the stove.

"You figure anything out?" she asked him.

"No." He slowly lowered his hand from his chin and sighed. "I don't have a good feeling about this."

"You..." She stepped out of her boots and closed the door. "Why?"

"Shit like this doesn't happen all the time, right?"

"Yeah, right."

"But it isn't doing anything to me."

"You just said that you don't have a good feeling about it."

"It's not..."

He opened his mouth, took a deep breath in and then quickly closed it once again. With a sense of unreasonable, illogical defeat, Jones shook his head and shrugged his broad shoulders. In the pause, Rosemary took off her thick black jacket and hung it up over her boots. When she turned back around, Jones was on the other side of the room. She had not heard him move.

"I think what I was trying to say," he continued, "was that something like this should make me really frightened, bewildered, whatever. But it isn't."

"Do you want to be frightened?" she asked, squinting her eyes, still confused as to how he moved away from her so silently. "I mean, it's a good thing that the two of us aren't foaming at the mouth and having heart attacks."

"You're right. That's what I've been thinking. Still, though..."

"I know what you're saying."

Rosemary walked over to him, grabbed his waist, kissed him on the lips, felt dozens of his mustache hairs penetrate into her nostrils and laid her cheek on his shoulder. For a few seconds her eyes were closed. When she opened them, the pentagram lay directly in front of her. Not wanting to think about it, she let her eyes wander. The first object they landed on was Jones' poem.

"What did you write today?" she asked, stepping back. "You done with it?"

"Take a look. Tell me what you think."

She walked over to the desk, keeping her eyes off the five, red marbles. The poem was lying on the desk. His inkwell was still uncapped. Throughout their time together, Rosemary learned to treat this sight as an indication that he was uncertain as to whether or not what he had written was adequate.

She leaned forward over the poem and read the two new stanzas on the page.

*Bursting out crumpled into the light
Saturated grapes fighting for dominance
In a field, burning*

*Leaves snap themselves in half as the
Bull returns to the castle, covered
In his mother's blood drenched jewels*

In between the first reading of the first and second stanza, Rosemary sat down. She read each one three times. When the same images returned amplified each time, she looked up at him and nodded.

"That's good, Jones."

He remained where he was; staring out the window, hand back at his bearded chin. The snow continued to amass upon itself. In the distance, Evelyn's chimney expelled its smoke. A murder of crows took off from a distant tree.

"What if you did create it? The pentagram, I mean," he said, turning to her.

After a few minutes of silence, Rosemary shook her head.

"Then I still wouldn't know what it means."

WHAT IF YOU did create it?

She could not count how many times this sentence had circled through her mind as she lay there, in bed with Jones. The stars were out that night, the absence of wind allowing the trees to remain motionless. Their bedroom fireplace held a large mound of coals in its iron mouth. Each crackle snapped Rosemary out of her seemingly endless attempt to better answer this question, not to Jones, but to herself.

She was not sure as to how much time she spent in this state when she finally got out of her bed, slipped into her sandals and walked downstairs. The living room was considerably colder, most of the stoves heat having dissipated. Assuming her insomnia would not subside, she grabbed a handful of kindling, threw it over the coals, stoked it until it caught and positioned two aromatic logs atop of it. Once it was going, she walked over to Jones' desk and lit his lamp.

The five marbles caught the light and threw it back at her, more radiant and ghostly than they appeared during the day. These marbles owed most of their power to the fact that they were perfect. Rosemary, during her tutelage, always had a profound respect for those ancient artists who placed heavy constraints upon what they could create in order to fashion something that was all but perfect: with only a handful of conditions to meet, they could sharpen their abilities until they approached a level of precision that, at the time, was thought only to be within the grasp of a deity. While her own art was far removed from the ancient's, the reverence it engendered in her never departed. As she looked at the red marbles, she felt the something similar. But it was not reverence. She did not know how to revere something that was not human. For what rested in front of her eyes was true perfection. It was what the ancients always dreamed of: the ideal of the sphere. Human hands did not fashion these marbles, thus dispelling any notion that those same hands had created an imperfection on the surface. To behold something perfect was not at all pleasant to her. It was terrifying.

And it was this terror that drove her up the ladder to her loft, that made her grab a piece of white pastel, and made her return to the desk and begin to draw lines between the marbles. It took her a little over a minute to finish. When she had, the lines before her were irregular, deviating in barely perceptible curves from their ideal course. The fear was gone, however. By giving form to the points in space she had received heavy eyelids and the promise of sleep. The fire continued to consume the wood in its eternal quest for oxygen. Infused with the star's blue light, the snow continued to fall. The white pentagram sat silently on the wall.

"ROSE?" JONES ASKED from his desk.

Rosemary was up in her loft, in front of her painting, still waiting for her next direction.

"Yeah"

"You...you did this right?"

"Filling in the shape?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, it was me."

"Good. I was about to say you didn't pull the second act off as well as the first."

"You think I did it?" she asked, sincere surprise propelling the words.

"Not anymore. I never did until now, but you just, you know, dispelled that notion. Whatever did this can draw a line better than you can. A crow could draw a better line than this."

"Go fuck yourself, Jones."

A CROW SAT by itself in front of Evelyn's door as Rosemary approached, its black talons resting on the snow covered steps. Each step she took towards it increased the expectation that it would take off and every time that it did not do this, that expectation exploded into bewilderment. It was not until she was five feet from it that it hopped away, its wings opening half way with each bound. She gazed at it before knocking on the door. For a bird, especially one as cautious and expectant as a crow, this one was surprisingly still. Its head did not move and its left eye remained steady, fixed on her uncertain form.

Rosemary furled her brow and assumed that this crow had hit its head on one of Evelyn's windows. She knocked on the door and waited. Unable to help it, she looked back at the crow.

It was gone.

EVELYN HAD MOVED up from town a week after the two houses were discovered, just as Rosemary and Jones had. There were only six others who took part in the lottery. Once the winners were announced, the three of them knew they would only be able to live there for a year and half before the others were to be rotated in. However, after five months, on one of his bi-monthly trips to town, Jones learned that the others had taken houses in other parts of the region and the two houses were now theirs. Three years had elapsed since then.

Evelyn had red, vine-like tattoos covering each of her fingers. An old lover had given them to her. The jade bracelets she wore on her wrists were a gift from an old woman she met when the fighting was still going on. The woman had approached her on a country road where the revolutionaries were heading one way, the displaced heading the other, their town burning behind them. Evelyn did not notice her approaching until the bracelets were practically in her hands.

"Wha.."

"You have no need to thank *me*," the old woman said.

That was the extent of the exchange. Evelyn never saw her again. She had not taken the bracelets off since that day. A scar ran up her left leg from her knee to her hip. She smoked cigarettes rolled from the tins of tobacco Jones procured for her during his trips. In the mornings she read and went on walks and sometimes slept with Jones, sometimes with Rosemary. In the evenings she wrote. For the nearly four years Rosemary had known her, she had been working on the same novel. Not once during that time had Evelyn ever discussed what it was about. Nor had Rosemary ever asked.

"I JUST FELT like doing it," Rosemary said. "To make it human."

"But you were just saying it isn't human."

"I know, I know." She stepped away from the stove and walked back over to the couch where Evelyn was sitting. "I couldn't stand looking at it, thinking about it, sitting there with nothing earthly about it. Imagine if a...I don't know. I can't think of anything else to compare this to."

Evelyn smiled meekly and sank into the cushions behind her. She crossed her legs and scratched at the skin under her left bracelet. Rosemary, standing this whole time, finally sat down beside her. Soon enough, the two women were in the same position, slumped backwards, staring at the erratic flames consuming the wood.

"You know," Evelyn said after a few minutes of silence, "there are a lot of interesting things about the pentagram."

"Like what?"

"Well..." Evelyn stood up with a groan, walked over to the kitchen and rolled a cigarette. Rosemary heard the strike of the match, the hiss of the flame and the crackling of the tobacco. "Have you heard about the golden ratio?"

"It rings a bell. But no."

Evelyn came back to the couch with a piece of paper and a pencil.

"Look at this."

With the paper pressed against her upper knee, she drew a pentagram.

"Okay" She pointed with her cigarette at the horizontal line directly below the uppermost point of the shape. "Take this line here."

"Alright."

"Now look at this line." She tapped on the crosswise line that descended down to the middle of the shape. "Take the two of them together. The length of both of them joined is to the longer line just as the longer line to the shorter line."

"I have no idea what you just said."

"Listen." She took a drag of her cigarette and exhaled the smoke violently. "The longer line and the crosswise line share a mathematical relation. They used the Greek phi to represent that relation. Phi is the golden ratio. It equals one point six one eight and on and on. So...the golden ratio is this."

Above the pentagram Evelyn wrote the following equation:

$$\frac{a+b}{a} = \frac{a}{b} = \phi$$

"How did you learn all this stuff?" Rosemary asked.

"Reading. You saw all the books I left for the library in town. I'm surprised you don't know about this."

"Why would I know anything about math?"

Evelyn tightened her eyes and took another drag.

"You're such a bitch," she said, grinning, smoke rising above her.

"Well, I fucking hate math."

"Here, keep this."

She handed Rosemary the paper and leaned back.

"Thanks" Rosemary said, dryly.

"Your man Dali built the canvas of his *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* based on the golden ratio. The canvas is what you'd call a golden rectangle. You know the painting I'm talking about?"

"Yeah, yeah. I've seen the prints."

"You know that thing above Jesus' head?"

"Is that the golden ratio?"

"It's based on it." Evelyn took a short, quick drag. "Artists have used it forever."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Pythagoras is said to have discovered it. You heard about him?"

"Something. Not much."

"Him or one of his followers. The pentagram was their symbol because it contained it."

"Wait. So...did the Babylonians get it from the Greeks?"

"No, no, no. The symbol itself has been around forever. The ratio was discovered within it. You see what I'm saying?"

"Now I do. What do you mean the shape's been around forever?"

"You remember yesterday?"

"Yeah," Rosemary said, suddenly sitting up. "Why?"

Evelyn took a final drag, stood up and walked over to the stove. With the smoke of her last inhalation flowing out of her small nostrils she opened the door and tossed her spent cigarette into the fire. She closed the door before seeing it quickly reduce itself into smoke and ash.

"What you saw on your wall yesterday wasn't a pentagram," she said, turning to Rosemary.

"Yeah, it was"

"No. What you saw was a pentagon. Your mind connected those five points in that specific way. It was you who turned it into a pentagram, at first mentally and then, last night, physically. It was inside you, baby. You know what I mean?"

EVELYN'S NOSE WAS one, harmonious curve from its tip to in between her green eyes. Her forehead stood out slightly, a detail of her facial structure she had once hidden with bangs. Now, however, and for a long time, she had left such vanity behind. When she first made the decision and finally cut off those awkward outpourings of hair, her first thought, which she spoke mildly to herself, was:

"What the fuck was my problem?"

For indeed, the shape of her forehead did nothing but accentuate the natural beauty of her nose which was itself flanked by two, prominent cheek bones. It was these cheekbones that attracted Jones' fingers the first time the two of them slept together. Those rough fingers lightly poked them while she slept. Jones was fascinated at the moment by how, from a distance, her cheeks gave the impression they would feel inordinately soft when in fact they were no softer than his. She awoke to this happening just as he made this discovery.

"What's up?" she asked, yawning.

"I was just feeling your cheeks."

Just? Just feeling my cheeks. That's a relief. I thought you were poking me."

Jones tightened his eyes and thrust his finger into her navel. It happened too quickly for her to immediately react, but react she did. Laughing hysterically, she spent three minutes batting his fingers away. After the ordeal was over and Jones had given up, something occurred to her.

"How...did I ever tell you I hated that?" she asked.

"What? Being poked?"

"Poked in the belly button."

"No. I don't think so. I don't like it so I figured you might not like it."

"I've never liked it. I hate that feeling."

"I know. It doesn't feel right. Even if you do it yourself. Like it shouldn't be there. I mean absolutely should not be there. It's not like pain warning you to not touch a wound again. More of a low, bassy voice giving you orders"

"That's one way to put it."

This all occurred on Evelyn's bed. Earlier that morning she had gone over to his house and had breakfast with him and Rosemary. After they had finished, Rosemary and Evelyn drank coffee while Jones stared at one of his poems. A lull in the women's conversation turned into a lengthy silence. In the midst of it, Evelyn suddenly posed the question.

"You want to sleep with me, Jones?"

He looked up from his poem, slowly turned around and nodded.

"Alright"

It was four months after the three of them had moved into their houses that Evelyn first slept with Rosemary. Eight months after that was the first time she slept with Jones. Rosemary and Evelyn once fucked on one of her old paintings. For two weeks Rosemary had been staring at another seemingly directionless, pointless, paint infested canvas. She knew she had been complaining too much to Evelyn and knew just as equally how grating it must be to her. Without any forewarning, in order to make her friend stop talking, Evelyn pushed Rosemary backwards onto the un-mounted canvas. Their movements caused the fresh paint to smudge and streak in irregular patterns. By the time they were done and their clothing and skin was covered in a wide variety of colors, the painting had taken on an appearance of spontaneity and life which it had hitherto possessed.

"CAN YOU LOOK at this?" Rosemary asked, standing up and pulling down her pants. "I can't tell what this is. It's just a zit, right?"

The top of her old jeans curved down her ass in front of Evelyn. She leaned forward and inspected the small, prominent red dot residing on Rosemary's right cheek. A small head of pus sat atop it, staring at her.

"Yeah, it's a zit," Evelyn said. "You want me to get it?"

"Hold on. Poke it first."

Evelyn quickly extended her finger and the second it connected with the zit Rosemary stepped forward, away from her.

"Ow. Careful," she moaned.

"It hurts that bad?"

"Just..." She slowly moved backwards, hands holding her pants up. "Be careful, alright."

"Then you can't be such a baby."

"Whatever."

Once again, Evelyn's fingers approached the zit. Taking her time so as to not upset her, she positioned the thumb and index finger of her right hand around it and began to gently squeeze. The tips of her fingers soon ran into resistance, the head of the zit rising upwards. Evelyn kept her eye on the pus, waiting, while Rosemary closed her eyes and bit her lower lip. Sensing the imminent explosion, Evelyn pulled back. The pus shot outwards, landing on her black shirt. By the time Rosemary had pulled her pants back up and turned around, Evelyn had wiped it off.

JONES WAS EATING a piece of bread when she returned. A book was open to his right. Rosemary stepped out of her boots and joined him at the table.

"What's Evelyn up to?" he asked.

"Nothing. Being insane."

"She tell you anything else about the..." he said, nodding at the pentagram.

"Some stuff. Something about the golden ratio."

"What's that?"

"Don't ask. Some old Greek number. Apparently the pentagram was the symbol of the old Pythagorean cult."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I didn't know that. None of it really helps me, though."

"What..." Jones dropped the hunk of bread on the table. "What would help you? Are you talking about the pentagram, helping you with the pentagram?"

"I don't know. It's all great, all this random stuff about Ishtar and Pythagoras. But I want to fucking know how this fucking thing got here, what it's supposed to be doing, and why...you know, just why."

"You seemed to be handling it yesterday."

"I couldn't process it yesterday. Then last night it was driving me crazy."

Jones nodded and picked the bread back up. He took his eyes from hers and scanned the house as if her were looking for something. Rosemary did not notice this but if she had, she might have asked what he was looking for. Instead she locked into her own thoughts, seeing colors. The cancers had come face to face with their antidote: the red spheres. But now something must show this epic battle in a certain context. There must be a frame of some kind, an illusion of perspective. Gold, attempting to trivialize the battle, its false splendor vying with the luminosity of the red spheres. Gold.

"I'm going to go paint," she said, getting up and heading to her loft.

"IT'S DONE," SHE yelled downstairs.

There was a pause and in the midst of it she could hear Jones' pen strokes. When they stopped there was the sound of his stretching his arm and yawning.

"Yeah? Can I have a look?"

"Come on up."

He climbed the ladder, stood beside her and folded his arms. Stretched below him was the finished painting. In the last four hours she placed dozens of writhing, golden tendrils on the canvas, jumping inwards from beyond the boundary of the painting.

"What were you trying to do with the gold?" he asked.

"What do you think I was trying to do?"

He lifted his arms and placed his hands behind his head. His body odor made its way to her nostrils. For a few minutes he silently contemplated her creation, eyes calmly scanned back and forth.

"It's...the red balls, they're brighter than the gold," he said.

"Yeah?"

"The gold looks kind of pathetic next to them. But the gold is trying to force its predominance over them. It isn't working, though."

"The red wins out?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good."

THE BEDROOM FIREPLACE was crackling, the power of its flames overshadowed by the oil lamps burning at the bedside tables. Jones and Rosemary were lying down naked above the covers. He was reading. She was picking off her fingernails.

"So you'll take it to town next time?" she asked, flicking a thumb nail away.

"You want me to build the frame or..."

"Let someone else do it if you want to."

"Okay. You trust them?"

"I just..." She began to rip a middle finger nail. "Maybe they fuck it up a little, who cares? I got it out. The people who want my stuff will get the effect even if it's a little lopsided. I don't really...hold on." She flicked the newly ripped nails away and turned around. "Has this thing gone down?"

"What thing?"

She bent over, sticking her ass up in the air.

"This zit. See it?"

The mattress shifted as he moved closer to take a look. His breath got closer and closer. His beard hairs touched the soft, dimpled skin curves. The expectation of what he was about to do was equal in excitement to his tongue actually touching the bottom of her vagina. Her eyes closed. The oil and the wood burned at different speeds and cast unique shadows on each wall of the room.

UNLIKE MANY OTHER women, orgasms always knocked Rosemary into unconsciousness and carried her into deep sleep. Tonight, her orgasm only carried her an hour into the future before depositing her into the same mental state she was in the previous night. Once it had, the image of the pentagram

dominated her thoughts once again, only now it was altered by the crude lines she had added to it.

She sat up in bed, folded her arms over her breasts and stared at the fire. The white lines connecting the red marbles were so paltry, so pathetic compared to the aesthetic grandeur of the marbles. The least she could do was attempt to approximate that same grandeur. Even though she would never duplicate it, she could make a better effort than the one made last night.

Jones rolled from his back onto his stomach as she got off the mattress. He woke up, briefly, but Rosemary did not notice. In that short moment of consciousness, he felt something odd transpiring. He did not have time to articulate this intuition rationally and fell back into sleep knowing with complete certainty that whatever Rosemary was doing, whatever the temperature of the room was, whatever the crows were thinking outside, was not normal.

Just as he left this fragmented thought process behind, Rosemary was putting more wood into the living room stove. After closing the stove door, she walked over to the desk, lit the lamp and gazed at the shape. All of the supplies she had up in the loft would have to come down here.

JONES NEVER TOLD either Rosemary or Evelyn about an encounter he had on the way back from town a year earlier. As he walked through the snow covered path to their houses, he came upon the figure of a man sitting against a tree. Upon reaching him, the man looked up with a confused expression on his face, his eyebrows fallen, eyes squinted, lips pressed tightly together.

"You alright?" Jones asked.

"We never expected this, did we?"

Jones dropped the bag of supplies he had gotten from town on the ground.

"What? Snow this early?"

"No. You know what I mean."

In all actuality, Jones did not know what this man meant but felt as if he did. A crow was staring at them as Jones sat down beside the man. He sighed and looked out at the small ravine descending in front of them.

"Yeah," he responded. "I don't know. It's strange."

"We never had to go to these places. I mean we did, of course, but it was more of an accident when it happened. Not always a happy accident either. If we choose to go this way, we better prepare ourselves for what it is."

"Well, nobody's perfect, right?" Jones said, standing back up and retrieving his bag from the snow. "Which way you going?"

"I don't know. I'll be alright, though."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

Jones never saw the man again. The next time he went to town with Rosemary's latest painting and a few of his poems he enquired about the man. He described him to the best of his memories ability but no one he questioned ever recalled seeing such a man. And so, after dropping off the painting and the poems and gathering the oil, tea, coffee, tobacco and other such things, Jones returned home without the slightest trace of unease.

He and Evelyn shared what Rosemary called "that old aloofness" in regards to the oftentimes inexplicable events life threw in front of them. Rosemary, knowing that he and Evelyn both were involved in the uglier events of the past, never gave them a hard time about this.

Jones had a dark brown beard slowly becoming ridden with gray. The hair atop his head was black and cut short. His eyes were wide and an extremely light shade of blue, so blue that the contrast between them and his dark hair often caused Rosemary, someone who had known him for years, to take a deep breath.

HE WOKE UP before the sun had risen. Usually the crows were the ones who roused him. They had a liking to the overhang of their bedroom window. Jones had never been able to find a pattern in their movements. Sometimes they would be on the overhang for three mornings in a row and then be absent for six. The overhang could only hold five of them comfortably. Those who had secured a spot on it would call to their friends suspended on the branches of the nearby trees and it was this exchange that called Jones to breakfast. This morning they did not wake him, though. It was the sound of something heavy being moved downstairs.

A few seconds were dedicated to him deducing what was taking place down there before he gave up and got dressed. He descended the steps into the living room and saw Rosemary pushing his recently cleared desk away from the pentagram. All of his writing materials were neatly arranged on the kitchen table. This sight immediately abated the feeling of anger that started to grow upon seeing her

messing up his work space.

“What are you doing, Rose?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

She turned around calmly, having heard him come down.

“I’ve been painting the wall. I need more space.”

As she finished moving the desk away, Jones walked over the pentagram and saw that while he had slept, Rosemary had painted over the white lines with black paint. Over the black paint she had placed multicolored waves pulsing out of each red marble. Through some optical effect he did not understand visually, she had traced faint lines between the marbles, straighter than the previous ones, their ghostliness adding to the general mystery of the spherical objects that had born them.

“I didn’t want to get paint on your desk. Do you mind?” she asked.

“No, no. What...you gonna paint the whole wall?”

“Yeah.”

Jones nodded and looked down at his feet. Surrounding them was almost all of her paint, brushes and assorted instruments, arranged in no discernible order. He knew, from everything he had seen since waking, that this was the next project.

“What are you going to do when it’s done?” he asked.

She took a deep breath in and quickly turned to him. Her hand landed on his left shoulder and she looked him straight in the eyes.

“Have you ever asked me that about my other paintings?” she asked.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Can you do me a favor?”

“Yeah,” he said, already knowing what she was talking about.

“Don’t ask me that question now.”

“Okay.”

ROSEMARY CONTINUED PAINTING the wall on into the afternoon. By noon, the pulsations from the marbles had transformed, smoothly, seamlessly, into what could only be described as serpents. Jones had watched the first limbless reptile take on more and more detail until it was completed. Once she had finished and started on the second one, he had gotten to work on his poem.

The new location of his desk bothered him at first. While the importance of the pentagram was clear to him and his desire for Rosemary to understand it was strong, it still bothered him. His desk was closer to the stove now, but it sat below another window. The old position had him looking out towards the path that led to the front door. Beyond stood a grouping of eight trees, all over one hundred feet tall. To the right of the trees were three massive boulders. In the center of the boulders was a fire pit, buried in snow. These sights had become entwined with the concept of writing to Jones and now that he had to look at a different landscape, he found it difficult to get started.

Two tree trunks stood in front of the window to the right of the stove. Between them he could see the small hill that rose behind the house. He could not say why these things bothered him, but they did nevertheless. Suddenly, everything began to distract him: Rosemary’s coughing, her brushstrokes, her pacing back and forth, the sound of crows, the falling of snow from the roof, caused by the wind.

Fifteen minutes passed in this manner, Jones doing nothing but holding his pen in one hand, his head in the other, the poem resting below him. And then, just as inexplicably as these annoyances had arisen and become unbearable, something arose inside him that pushed all the distractions into irrelevancy and, before he was aware of it, made him begin to write.

“Will you take a look at this?” he asked, turning around.

Rosemary kept her eyes on the wall, nodded and stood up. She dropped her brush on the floor and walked over to his desk.

“Yeah. What you got?” she said.

“Here.”

He got out of his chair and exchanged places with her, moving over to the painted wall. She had completed three serpents and, from what it looked like, saw that there would be no more of them. The serpents rose out of the sphere surrounding the pentagram and then turned to the left at irregular, ninety degree angles. They were chasing each others tails.

At the desk, Rosemary read the following stanzas:

*Bursting out crumpled into the light
Saturated grapes fighting for dominance
In a field, burning*

*Leaves snap themselves in half as the
Bull returns to the castle, covered
In his mother's blood drenched jewels*

*Rejoice in the night, dull and tired
Finding worms broken and swollen
Ripped from the shelves of kings*

*Gears in the fog turning
Violet ribbons strung on dead limbs
The ghost of the sun in the puddle*

*And gratitude for the stones
Fallen or stolen, uncertain
The snow will tell us lies*

Rosemary looked up from the poem and out the window. The two tree trunks seemed to be bulging in and out, as if they possessed lungs and were taking slow, year long breaths.

"That's good, Jonesy."

"I'm not to sure about the last stanza," he said, returning to the desk. "It's the 'and gratitude' I don't know about. Something doesn't sound right."

"I think it's fine."

"Yeah, but nothing..." He got on his knees and looked at the poem with her. "Nothing else, no other stanza starts with something weak like that."

"Is it important, the word gratitude?" she asked.

"I think so. It came out and felt right. I don't know how else to express it."

"But the and...it's as if it's the conclusion of something that had been expressed in the rest of the poem but never articulated, something unspoken, that was meant to be unspoken but that suddenly broke through the surface. Is that..."

"Something like that. I'll keep it unless I think of something better."

Rosemary leaned forward, kissed his sweaty forehead and stood up. She went back to the wall and began to clean off her brushes.

"You done for today?" Jones asked.

"Yeah. I don't..." She shook her head. "I have no fucking idea what to do?"

"What do you mean? Next?"

"Yeah. I...whatever. It all feels fake next to those marbles."

"It's better than your first drawing."

"It is, it is. But still..."

"Yeah. Are you...never mind."

Rosemary knew what he was going to ask her.

She was glad that he did not do it.

EVERYLYN HAD JUST finished making some soup when Rosemary came over. It was made with her own vegetable stock and filled with potatoes, carrots, celery and assorted spices, predominantly curry powder. Evelyn could never make enough for just herself and always had more than she could eat. Luckily, Rosemary was hungry and the two women sat down in front of the stove and waited for their bowls to cool.

"I'm gonna come over tonight," Evelyn said, stirring the broth with her metal spoon. "I had some weird dream about Jones last night."

"What happened in it?"

"I can't really remember all of it. Something...he was under a tree and...it made me really horny, though, that's all I know."

"I don't know if I can tonight. That fucking thing...you think we should tell anyone in town about it?"

"They'd think we were crazy," Evelyn said, raising a spoonful of soup to her lips.

"They already do."

"But they love us."

"I know. I wish...there was something we could say about it."

"What do you mean?"

"I get this feeling like I can...the pentagram is so simple, so boring, that despite its just appearing on my wall, there isn't anything else to say besides the obvious facts of its existence."

"I've told you a lot about it, though."

"I know, but it doesn't change the fact that it's simply there. You can tell me all you want about what it's meant in the past, but when it gets down to it, I'm still staring at five red marbles stuck in my wall."

Rosemary chuckled to herself, shook her head and looked down into her soup. If she had continued looking at Evelyn, she would have seen an expression that revealed not only sympathy and mutual confusion, but knowledge and secrecy.

JONES AND EVELYN were upstairs. The noise had ceased to float down the stairs into Rosemary's ears and she gathered that they were done. It was past midnight and she was nowhere close to feeling tired. Around ten she had stopped reading, feeling what she thought was an intuition as to what could surround the serpents on the wall. At ten thirty three Evelyn came over, finding her friend staring blankly at the pentagram, a clean brush in her hand. At eleven, while Evelyn was vigorously rubbing her vagina over Jones' face, Rosemary was making a cup of peppermint tea, truly believing that, upon drinking it, she would be able to paint. This did not happen, and neither the tea nor her most earnest attempts at relaxing had caused anything new to appear on the wall.

Evelyn and Jones fell asleep when Rosemary suddenly exclaimed:

"Fuck this!"

She did not yell this loud enough to wake them, though. With angry, heavy steps, she walked to the kitchen, put the cup on the counter and stared out the window that hung above it. Outside, the wind was making the branches of the trees slowly move back and forth. All of the snow clinging to them had long since been knocked off and as long as the languid movements continued, the branches would remain relatively free of snow. Something about this sight made Rosemary turn around and lock her eyes, once again, on the five red marbles. But rather than being a vain, logical attempt to interpret them, this gaze underscored an irrational longing to experiment, to do something which in the end may be pointless and absurd but, as long as it was not attempted, carried with it a joyous feeling of mystery.

This feeling carried Rosemary over to the marbles. This feeling made her crouch down and lean forward. This feeling made her place her eyes a few inches from the unearthly, geometric configuration. And it was this feeling which made her lift her left hand, extend her index finger and press the top right marble. Just before it happened she realized that, since its appearance, she had not touched the marbles or even thought about doing so. Before this realization and its implications had time to unfold, the marble retreated into the wall. Startled, she pulled her finger back just as the hole where it had been sealed itself up and every color capable of being seen by the human eye flashed before her.

"YOU AWAKE?"

"Yeah," she moaned, pulling her pillow over her head.

The sky was still dark. It was this darkness, the lingering of night, that angered her most about having to wake up for school. She never felt that the night left her mind during the hours dedicated to what her parents swore was her betterment.

"Then get up. Do we have to do this every morning?"

"Yes," she moaned, shooting upwards and wrapping her arms around her knees. "I hate school more than anything."

"Look...it's me who has to wake you up each morning..."

"Then don't wake me up, mom."

"Stop it. Get dressed."

"Fine."

THERE WERE NINE of them.

Although his original intention was to get over the mound as quickly as possible so as not to attract any unwanted bullets, the nine bodies froze him at the top, in plane view of thousands of hypothetical demons. He stared absently at the dead men and women. Their guns were either at their sides or somewhere near them. One of the men was on his back, a smile on his face, a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead. A feeling of peace was transmuted from the dead man to the living man, and he could not move, feeling, in some strange manner, something similar to rest.

"What the f..."

And then the bullets came. He remembered his original motivations and dove forward into the bodies. The bullets continued to sail above him, keeping his comrades trapped where he had just been, on the other side of the mound. Instinctively looking for the nearest cover, his hands located the peaceful corpse and dragged it closer. In doing so, he destroyed the precise bodily configuration that had allowed the corpse to give a taste of the unspeakable bliss it was now awash in.

But he was too scared to notice this.

THE TOPS OF the bottles clattered together in the box as the car drove along. She was in the back seat with her friend. A stranger, someone they had just been introduced to, was behind the wheel.

"I don't know what they're going to do," she said.

"They didn't say anything?"

"I don't think they knew."

"But we're sure that they're out right now?"

"They fucking better be, that's all I know," the driver suddenly said.

"Wait...you don't know anything either?"

"How the fuck would I know anything," he said. "Whatever. Get ready."

She nodded and her friend handed her one of the bottles and a metal cigarette lighter. A quarter of a gasoline soaked rag was tied to the bottle's neck, the rest of it dangling along the side. The bottle was filled with two parts gasoline, one part motor oil. The driver began to slow down. She unrolled the back window and sat on it so that her torso was out of the car, the bottle in her hands, waiting.

Finally, the car came to a halt in front of the police station. She lit the rag and threw the bottle at one of the waiting police cars. Before it had cracked and spewed its flame over the vehicle, she was already lighting the second one. The police station had only one door, it being a small, neighborhood outpost. In less than two minutes, the police cars were heavily ablaze and the entrance to the station engulfed in flames. The car took off once all the bottles were spent. The three of them never knew that the police had long since abandoned the station.

"GO FUCK YOURSELF. You and your fucked up, wimpy ideas."

"Wimpy? Who the hell do you think you are? Wimpy? At least I'm not a fucking coward and can... even attempt to say what I'm thinking."

"Whatever. What you're thinking is shit."

"Where do you get the arrogance to judge so many things so..."

"From nowhere, you bitch. From nowhere. It doesn't come from some fucking god...see, that's your problem, motherfucker. You deny and deny and deny, but you still believe all that old, restrictive crap."

"Look! I've never...you hear me? Never! Never denied believing in something. Only simple, reactionary cunts like you always associate it with the old systems. You ever had a question you couldn't answer? Maybe if you stopped being so fucking arrogant you'd realize you can't answer everything."

"So everyone question...you know, fuck you! I don't care! I'm out of here."

"Leave then. I'm done."

The door opened quickly.

But not as quickly as it slammed shut.

SHE HAD CONSUMED too much sugar and could not sleep. Her mind attached and detached itself from dozens of different, pleasant fantasies, giving her so much excitement that sleep seemed like a nuisance. Suddenly, a swift, unpleasant object began moving down her left cheek. She shrieked out loud, swatted her face, jumped out of bed and switched on her bedside lamp.

A spider, having gotten its bearings after falling to the floor, began to scurry away, heading towards the bedroom door. Before she knew what she was doing, her barefoot was falling towards the ground. It pulverized the spider. She wiped her foot off on the carpet frantically. Pieces of the spider gradually detached themselves from the callused bumps of her feet. She did not want to look at them. They disgusted her.

THE DOG HAD been whimpering all morning. A newcomer would have seen the dog and immediately noticed that it was starving. But he and the others had grown so used to its appearance that they had no pity or sympathy for its incessant, ease-shattering moans. And so, having had enough of it, he stood up, walked over to the dog and kicked it solidly in the stomach, causing the whimpering to momentarily increase in volume and then stop altogether. The others in the alley clapped their hands. Only one of the women was angered but she made no attempt to show it. The dog cowered away, took

a last look at the group of humans and wandered away, never to see them again.

“SO WHAT’D YOU DO?”

“What the fuck could I do?” he took down his shot of whisky in one quick gulp. “I wanted nothing more, man, nothing more than for us both to be able to walk away. I tried reasoning with him, but something, you know, something would not let him back down. So there I was, no bullets, knife out, staring at him. His knife was a lot bigger than mine, a lot sharper too.”

“You remember?”

“Fuck yeah. My heart was beating so fast, my adrenalin going, it felt like a dream but...the dream, the kind of dream where you remember everything. The way the rocks were scattered, the trees, the birds, the way the snow was falling, the way the wind was blowing. And I remember the knife too, so bright, so new. It looked new. This guy, I bet it was what he lost himself in, you know. What allowed him to forget?”

He pushed the empty shot glass away and pulled a full one closer.

The man listening to him waited for him to drink and continue.

He did neither.

“Keep going, though.”

“Yeah,” he said and downed the next shot. “Ahhh. Yeah. So there we were, and I was wondering out loud, asking him what it was that kept him fighting. I was willing to give it up, to let him live. Because that’s what we were fighting for. And then suddenly he wasn’t there. I mean he was, right, but I saw it, the thing I was asking about. What kept this poor motherfucker fighting. And I hated it. Something so vague, so foggy, like a damn leaf falling from a tree. And he was about to kill me for it.”

“But obviously you killed him.”

“Yeah,” he said, slowly. “Obviously. Least you got enough decency not to make me relive the bad part for you.”

“No. No. I’ve seen enough myself. I’m grateful every day since its been over.”

“Want to know something?”

“What?”

“We killed people. A lot of us did. Did it for a reason. It might’ve been a better...better reason. But what the fuck’s a better reason? You see what I mean. I didn’t want to kill that guy at that moment when he wanted to kill me. But I killed people before without thinking. I had that same thing in me. And what’s bothering me and has bothered me since it ended is this...I don’t think it’s gone. I don’t think it *can* go. Just because we aren’t killing each other doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

THE TWO TREE trunks sat in front of her, still taking their year long breaths. Flames rose and fell from atop the logs burning in the stove. Rosemary took a deep breath. The snow had stopped falling at some point and now the fraction of the landscape she could see through the window was perfectly still. No snow fell from the branches. No animals sped through the darkness.

She could not remember what she had seen but she knew she had been somewhere. The experience was similar to falling asleep in one location, having someone carry her to another location and then suddenly waking up there. Upon waking, there is an immediate recognition of having traveled but the events surrounding the travel remain hidden firmly in the shadows.

Rosemary leaned forward and rubbed her forehead. She remembered pushing the top right marble into the wall and then suddenly seeing colors. That was all. There was no timekeeper in the room. She did not know how long she was gone. But it was still night.

She removed her hand from her head and looked down at the desk. Sitting atop it was the poem she had just recently read. There was a new addition to it, however: the Roman numeral I, sitting atop the first stanza. On an entirely new sheet of paper sitting beside it, underneath the numeral II, were the following lines:

*Oil in the iris
Ground down into sand
A dog’s whimper of water*

*Web longing for geometric legs
The scream violated the tree
Finding spiders of nightmare*

*Flame dwells in the bottle
As the planets turn in the pulp
The five sides of longing*

*Faceless rinds fuming at
The queens of eucalyptus
Red ants build tombs*

*The gods spit pus at me
Of these shades
I am*

Rosemary flipped over the sheet of paper, expecting to find something. After discovering it to be blank, she continued to gaze at it until her vision went blurry. Sleep was calling for her desperately. Reluctantly, she dropped the paper, threw four logs in the stove, waited for them to catch and then walked to one of the couches. She pulled a blanket off it, spread it out, covered herself and fell asleep. Just as the sun rose in the morning, the oil lamps she had forgotten to extinguish burnt up the last of their fuel.

EVERLYN RUBBED JONES' shoulder, said goodbye and walked to the door. She slipped into her boots, opened the door and, with a mischievous smile, slammed it shut. Jones turned around just in time to see Rosemary stir on the couch and open her eyes. She saw him sitting there, at his desk, where she had been sitting last night. He was looking at her lovingly, eyes wide and patient and receptive, basking in the sight of her mind recognizing where her body was. After a long yawn she sat up and smiled at him.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Almost noon."

"You serious?" She looked out the window. "Man."

Outside, the clouds were completely blotting out the sky.

A slight wind was sporadically moving the branches.

"How late were you up last night?"

"Jones?"

His good humor was disrupted by the sight of her eyes. Something was bothering her, something she could not figure out on her own as she usually did. And now she was staring at him, one step away from total confusion, barely hanging onto to a reality which had swiftly inverted itself.

"Yeah."

"I want you to listen to me, okay. Can you do that?"

"I'm listening now, Rose," he said, smiling. "What is it?"

"Last night...I don't know how late I was up. Just staring at that fucking thing. All of a sudden I got this idea to push one of the marbles into the wall. I pushed it. It was like I went somewhere but I don't have any logical reason to think so. Next thing I knew, I was sitting at your desk."

"Where were you before?"

"Right there." She turned around and pointed at the wall. "Right in front of it."

"So you teleported over here?"

"That's right. I don't know how, I don't why, but it happened. Maybe I was just tired. Maybe I'm losing my mind. I don't know. But I wanted to tell you so you know, so I know you that you know that..."

"Okay. Okay. Come on."

Jones stood up and began to walk towards her. The second he started to do so, Rosemary jumped up from the couch, grabbed his arm and held him back.

"What?" he asked.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

"I'm scared. What if..."

"Rose. Come on."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her over to the wall. She wanted to resist, to put up a fight, to keep him away from the enigma. But at the same time there was a subtle urge to be passive, the share the treasure. It was then, thinking of it as a treasure, that she realized she felt some sort of ownership towards not only her additions to the marbles but towards the marbles themselves.

They stopped in front of the pentagram. It sat before them, Rosemary's painting bleeding its life into the red half-spheres, the three serpents crying out in agony, enslaved by a perfection they could never match.

"I'm going to..." Jones started to say.

"No. I'll do it."

"Let me do it. That way I'll truly know it's true."

"So you don't think I'm telling the truth?"

"You know what I mean, Rose. I just want to see."

"Fine," she said, offended. "Do it."

Not wanting to get into a fight, Jones meekly smiled and got down on his knees. He extended his index finger and moved it over to the center of the pentagram. There it hovered for a moment.

"Which one did you press?" he asked.

"The top right one."

Without another word, his finger landed on the pole of the marble. But it did not retreat into the wall as it had the previous night. Jones tried the same marble three times and then pressed the one to the left of it. Again, nothing happened.

"Rose..."

"I swear to you..."

"I believe you, Rose, I believe you."

"No you don't."

"I do. Come on, seriously. Five marbles magically embedded themselves in our wall. I'm willing to believe quite a lot. You want to know what I think?"

She sighed, crossed her arms and sat down on the back of the couch.

"What?" she said.

"That this thing is tied to you in some way."

"Tied to me? How, exactly?" Before he could answer the question, she suddenly remembered something, a sliver of a memory. "By the way, what was that second part of your poem about?"

"My...my poem? What does that have to do with anything?"

"I don't know, Jones. What was it about?"

"Why are you so angry with me?"

"I thought it was pretty clear. You don't believe me."

"You didn't let me..."

"What was the fucking poem about?"

Jones rubbed his temples with thumb and index finger.

"About? Uh...I don't know, Rosemary. Do I ever know?"

"I thought maybe...it had something to do with this?"

The two of them looked at each other. Understanding broke through the anger that had built up on both sides. Neither of them knew what they understood, but what they did know was that it was pointless to be mad.

"Really?" he asked. "How come?"

"I don't know. It just occurred to me."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you."

"What did you mean you thought it was connected to me?"

"The color you made for your painting. It matched the marbles."

"Wow."

"What?"

"Nothing." She widened her eyes and bit her lip. "I almost forgot."

"That's not just a coincidence. I don't know *what* it is, though."

"Good." She got up off the back of the couch, walked over and gave him a long, wet kiss on the lips. "Neither do I."

EVELYN PULLED A detached eyelash off her wrist, looked at it for a few moments and then blew it away. She was trying to answer Rosemary's question but had gotten lost in her own thoughts.

"Hello?"

"Sorry," Evelyn said. "What was the question again?"

"What's up with you?"

"I didn't sleep too well last night."

Rosemary's eyes opened widely and she leaned forward on the couch.

"Why?" she asked.

"I was having weird dreams." Evelyn took a sip of tea. "Really weird."

"What were they?"

"What? My dreams?"

"Yes. Are you trying to drive me crazy?"

"No."

Evelyn smirked and put her mug down on the ground.

"Please, Evelyn."

"I was having these dreams...like they weren't me or my memories, but they were. Isolated little fragments of some story that didn't need any context. You know how dreams are. What is left unspoken is left so because everything is explained by silence. When I woke up this morning, it was as if my mind had been slapped around."

The look on Evelyn's face only added to Rosemary's quickly blooming suspicions. What Evelyn had dreamed was what she herself had seen and forgotten the previous night. How this was possible, Rosemary did not know. But just as in a dream, logic was a long forgotten law.

"What happened to me last night?" Rosemary snapped. "Why won't you tell me?"

"I don't know what to tell you, Rose. But...don't flip out. I have...an idea."

"What?"

Evelyn grabbed her mug and stood up. She began to pace back and forth in front of the fire. Each slow, seemingly endless step caused Rosemary to grow more and more frantic and upset.

"There is something in the pentagram."

"No shit," Rosemary said.

"But I can't give you any answers. I know what you're going..."

"How do you know what I'm going through? Is there a pentagram here somewhere that you've been keeping a secret?"

All of a sudden, Evelyn walked straight towards her, knelt down, put her mug on the floor and firmly grasped her friend by the shoulders.

"Do you trust me, Rose?"

"I...yeah."

"Then listen to me very carefully. I can't tell you anything. No one can."

"Why?"

"Will you please trust me? What is happening to you had happened to me. But there is nothing I can do for you that you can not do for yourself, only infinitely better. Any answer I give you will be false, so don't ask me any more questions about it."

The logs hissed and cracked behind the stove door.

Rosemary nodded and let her eyes float down to her friends jade bracelets.

They were glowing.

THE CLOUDS WERE moving swiftly over the area, occasionally breaking apart and letting in the light. Blue sky would appear, bordered by flimsy tendrils of vapor. But these cracks in the clouds never allowed the sun to be directly seen. As Rosemary walked back to her house, confused, lost and angry, the sun remained elsewhere, its pure light given only to the evaporating water dancing above.

Halfway to her house, Rosemary saw something move to her right. She stopped where she was on the path, in between the tall mounds of snow. Her eyes remained locked on where she had noticed the disturbance. With as much patience as she could muster, she waited there for three minutes. And then it moved.

A fox. A blood red fox. It quickly ran out from behind a tree trunk, looked directly at her and then bolted off, heading for the boulders that contained the fire pit. Rosemary climbed out of the path, filling her gloves and jacket sleeves with snow in the process, and then ran after it.

All of a sudden, the mysterious language which the world had been speaking to her in became her native tongue. From the ground and sky came the translation, delivered directly to her mind.

"Mom?" she yelled, running faster.

The opening in the sky directly above her sealed itself off.

"Mom!"

All became gray.

"Mom!"

The fox had disappeared.

"HERE YOU GO," Jones said, handing her a mug full of tea.

"Thanks, Jonesy."

He sat down beside her on the couch and rubbed her warm scalp.

"You alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I'm just overwhelmed."

"You went from one big project to another one. I think I understand."

"I'm glad," she said, knowing he did not. "I need some rest."

"Don't go near that thing tonight. Okay."

"I won't." She took a small sip of the scalding tea. "I won't."

A kind, reluctant grin came to Jones' face.

"Before you and I met," he said, "I was working on this one poem. Back then I was obsessed with the epic. Since it was dead, I wanted to resurrect it. But I couldn't and still can't understand how an epic poem can maintain its consistency and quality for such a long time. It would take a lifetime and I didn't want to dedicate my life to one poem. Despite all that, I started one. And it consumed me in the way this is consuming you now, sort of. I wrote about two hundred pages of it and by the time I finally gave up I had become so terrified of the world and its symbols that I couldn't even go outside for a walk. You know what I learned, though?"

"What?"

"I'm still writing it."

"Thanks, Jones," she said, dryly.

Rosemary did not notice the pain that fell into Jones' eyes.

He looked down at the floor and sighed.

ROSEMARY WAS TALL and slender, her eyes narrow and dark. Once, when she was a child, she believed her skin to be that of a dragon. This fantasy, never voiced to either her friends or family, was a concrete reality for over a year. When she was twelve she looked at her forearm one day and saw three moles arranged in a triangle. By the time she was sixteen those moles had either moved or vanished. She did not know which.

For years she had worn her hair back in a single tail. She found this arrangement to be simple and boring. While it caused no laughter, she found the plainness of it amusing and liked to think it said something about her nature. Neither Jones nor Evelyn knew the reason behind her hair style and had never given it much thought. The one time it came up in conversation was when Jones saw her undo the band and shake her hair out in the middle of the living room. He had seen her do this many times before in the bathtub, but here it struck him as being out of place.

"Hold on," he said.

"Wh..." She turned to him, letting go of her hair. "What?"

"I never see you like this."

"Like what?"

"With your hair down."

Rosemary waited, smiling at her husband. For less than a minute, the situation enthralled them both and they stared intently at one another. She was the first one to tire of it, quickly putting her hair back in its normal place. She had only taken it down in the first place because her scalp was itching and she wished to scratch it.

EVELYN LOOKED UP from her book as the door opened. Seeing that it was Jones, she put her book mark down, closed the pages over it and stood up.

"Hey, buddy. What's cooking?"

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head. He took off his jacket, put it on the rack and sat down across from Evelyn at her table. "Rose is being...she really hurt me just a second ago."

"How?"

"I was trying to tell her something, something I've never told her before. I guess I'd discouraged her because..."

"What did you tell her?"

"About this book-length poem I was writing before I met her."

"What bothered her about that?" she asked, nervously spinning her book.

"She didn't say, but it seemed like she was waiting for me to say something about how it will all make sense. Of course, you know, I didn't finish that poem and kind of went a little crazy, so it made her even more frustrated hearing that. But I told her, you know, I told her that I learned that you never finish anything you start."

"Jones..." Evelyn slowly rose, walked over to him and sat down on his leg, wrapping her arm around his neck. "It's not your fault if she can't understand. Don't let it hurt you too much, alright?"

“Yeah.” He looked away from her and nodded. “Okay.”
 “But don’t let her get away with anything she wants.”
 Their eyes jumped towards each other.
 Jones rubbed her back.

HE WAS STILL over at her house by the time ten o’clock rolled around but Rosemary did not notice. If she had, it is doubtful that she would have cared. Once again, she had been pulled towards the wall with her brushes and oils and paints. She was lost in the process, fingers firmly holding the brush, wrist languidly rotating to the promptings of her imagination.

One serpent held a mountain of fire on its back, extending up to the bottom of the window. The mountain’s surface was ridden with charred trees. A few dark gray clouds wrapped around its tip. Another serpent held an ocean, seen from above, the surf breaking on its curved, prostrated back. The sand bordering its scales was untouched and virgin, existing only for the salty, viridian water. The body of water extended down to the floor. Where it had no natural border, it vanished in a controlled disintegration. Over the third serpent were dozens of trees. Manipulating the pained expression she had given to it earlier, the roots of the trees seemed to be causing the limbless reptile unimaginable agony. Meanwhile, the trees were thriving off the cold-blooded sustenance, either unaware or uncaring or grateful towards their benefactor. Rosemary did not want to give the trees any definite expression. The trees likewise extended down to the floor but did not disappear as the water did. Instead, Rosemary had left the wood bare above the tips of her trees.

After finishing the last tree, Rosemary abruptly stopped. She dropped the brush in her hand and shook out her cramp. She wanted to put clouds and birds in the air above the forest and then have the airy setting morph into another layer of the work but felt too intimidated by the commitment it would entail.

“Okay. I’m done,” she whispered.

Normally, she would have begun re-organizing the supplies she had strewn all over the room during her painting. But she remained where she was, eyes drawn back to the marbles. The day before, she had pressed the marble at the top right of the pentagram. If she had to press another one it would be the one on the bottom right.

Without another thought, she pressed it.

“WHAT ARE YOU doing?”

“What?” Her mother held up the box. “This?”

“Yeah. What is it?”

“It’s baking powder.”

“What’s it do?”

“It helps the cake rise. You need it, otherwise it’ll be dumpy.”

“Oh.”

She shifted her position on the chair and continued to watch her mother mix the ingredients for the cake. There was no special reason for the cake. She had merely mentioned she liked cake.

“Cake’s tasty.”

“It is, isn’t it?” her mother said. “Let’s make one.”

“A cake?”

“Yeah. Why not? You want to?”

“Yeah!”

And that was that. At first, the process of making the cake; the getting out of bowls and measuring spoons, the removing of items from the cupboards and the heating up of the oven seemed dull, but once the first egg was cracked, she quickly became enamored with the slow forming of the batter and the magical nature of her mother’s worn and beaten hands. When the vanilla bottle was uncapped, the smell dove into her young nose and invited her to drink of its dark contents. Unbeknownst to her mother, she grabbed the bottle and took what she thought would be large sip. The vanilla was quickly spat out of her mouth. Her mother quickly looked up from the spirals her whisk was generating in the yellow batter.

“What...honey, did you drink the vanilla?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Tears of guilt began to well up. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she said, scratching her daughter’s scalp. “We all have to learn that lesson at some point.”

“What lesson?”

“That thing’s aren’t as sweet as they smell.”

HE ROLLED OVER onto his back, the heels of his feet sinking into the soft soil. The butt of his pants and the back of his shirt were wet, as were hers, but neither of them cared very much. She watched him stare up at the pieces of blue sky visible through the apple tree hanging above them. Every few minutes, a small gust of wind would blow through the orchard, making the leaves wiggle frantically, as if they had just been told an irresistible joke. Whenever this happened, he would laugh with the leaves. She did not know why, but the laughter made her smile.

“You hungry?” he asked.

“Sure.” She rubbed his stomach. “Why?”

He rubbed her knee, stood up and walked over to the trunk of the tree. It was an old, sturdy tree, the thick branches permitting climbing. While there were in fact apples within his immediate reach, he began to ascend the tree, having spotted an apple that looked exceptionally good. As he picked it, she swore she could hear the tree sigh in pleasure. He returned to the ground, hopping off the last branch and landing on the grass beside her. He fell to his knees, smiled and handed her the apple.

“Thanks,” she said.

THE OLD HIGHWAY was overgrown with weeds, some of them reaching his knees. The highway no longer served any practical use for the inhabitants of the nearby towns, being connected by more direct rural roads. But it served him perfectly. It led in a straight line from the city to the country, passing through mile after mile of unkempt fields. For two whole days he had walked alone, seeing no one; the hawks, the snakes and the rabbits his only company.

On the third day, he neared the constellation of towns which was his destination. When he came within fifteen miles of the first of them, he saw a line of people working in a field, moving at a slow, leisurely pace. One of the people in the line raised a welcoming hand and he waved back.

The field was to be used to grow corn. The people were spreading the small, golden seeds. At the end of the season, when the harvest was in, much of the population was disappointed at the yield. But no one went hungry that winter. And the corn grew for two more years before the field was given time to rest.

THE BRICK BUILDING only had half a roof and a large hole in its eastern wall. But the fighting had been pushed far away for the moment and now, for the first time in months, they could safely have a fire. They started one in the building, using the destroyed roof as fuel, the smoke rising into the night sky that it had once blocked.

“Come on,” she moaned. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know. Stop asking.”

“I’m fucking starving.”

“You think I’m not? Just cool it. Enjoy the fire.”

This comment seemed to calm her down, reminding her that she had not sat in front of a fire for four months. She stared into the flames and began to see her stray thoughts projected onto them. Comfort and agony, memories of pleasant times seen through a lens of sulfur, awful flashbacks carried by white doves.

“What’re you thinking about?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Stuff.”

“I didn’t think it would stop like this, so fast.”

“Me neither. We haven’t had a fucking break in a month.”

“What do you think everyone else is doing?”

“Sleeping.”

“Are we the only stupid ones who want to actually enjoy life for a second?”

“It takes more energy than you’d think.”

“I guess so.”

A sudden shifting of bricks caused the two women to turn towards what had once been the entrance of the building. Their first instinct was to grab their guns and point them. But the two of them consciously fought this urge and they each came to a similar conclusion: if they were about to be killed, they would want to die relaxed and unafraid. They had nothing to be afraid of, though. Their friend walked in from the shadows and joined them in the red and white glow of the fire.

“What’d you get?”

“A pot...” She laid it down on the ground and began to pull out objects. “Some potatoes, carrots, an onion, two beets and some bay leaves.”

“Nice.”

"Where can I go get some water?" she asked.

"I heard a river down there this morning."

"Who wants to go find it?"

HE SAT ON the stone with his daughter. It was the first time they had seen each other in five years. He was older than she remembered and since they had been reunited she had attempted to ignore the memories of her young, swift father. Their conversations were the same as they had been in the past, however; an instantaneous understanding of what was meant, a nearly telepathic anticipation of what was about to be said, a way of communicating entire volumes without speaking. But when it came to relating what she had seen, their old ways of conversing proved ineffective. Her father had not seen any of it and had no way to visualize what she attempted to describe. All that was exchanged was raw emotion from which he could infer the gravity of what his daughter had taken part in. She was midway in explaining a scene that continued to haunt her when her father pulled an apple out of his jacket pocket. She did not notice this.

"We had to take them prisoner," she said. "Obviously we weren't going to kill them. None of us could do that. But there they were, marching in a line."

"Where were they going?"

"Back to the city."

"They never tried anything?"

"Not really. Nothing I ever heard about. They were so tired...but that's what was so haunting. I sat there, on this stump, staring at them. Men, women, children, and I knew they had seen the same horrible things I'd seen...and maybe this is just arrogance, but they didn't have the luxury of even knowing what they were fighting for. They fought as hard as we did. I don't know what they thought they were holding onto, but whatever it was had vanished. I...they didn't have anything."

"They had the future."

"But to have your...to go through all of the shit, the filth...it was awful, dad, and they saw it, too. Only they didn't get anything out of it. The waste, the utter waste of fighting...when I watched the prisoners marching away, I wanted nothing more than to give them something, to give them what they wanted, to make them feel that they hadn't wasted their lives, hadn't seen their friends killed for nothing."

"You can't, though, honey."

"But..."

"Here."

She looked over and saw that while she had been talking he had carefully peeled an apple with the knife he had carried in his pocket since she was a child. In her childhood he had done this for her, removing the skin which she said she hated when she was five. While she had long ago gotten over her youthful phobia, the sight of her father holding this relic of her rose-colored past made her eyes melt into tears and she allowed herself to fall into his deep, loving, aging arms.

THEY MOVED AROUND the press, the resistance growing stronger and their pace slower. The golden liquid flowed down to the catcher, circled around to the drain and flowed into the cheesecloth covered bucket below. Neither of them watched it. Instead, they pretended they were not trying to look at each other.

Both of them were seventeen. She suspected he had slept with one of her old friends. He did not want to tell her that he had, half believing it would offend her, half believing that the mystery would make her want him. However, he was tormented by the same thing. She had slept with a boy he did not like at all and the rumors had found their way to his ears. As with all youthful stories, nothing could be concretely verified and so he let himself fall into a flimsy denial which was never wholly satisfying.

In circles they went that day, getting as much juice out of the apples as possible. When it became clear that they would not extract any more out of this load they stopped and looked at each other. The stream of juice slowed down, falling in small, patient droplets into the bucket. The two of them looked at each other for a moment, wanting to kiss, hold, caress and make love to the other. The desire was there, but it was not a question of desire. They had known each other since they were three and had grown up side by side. Their friendly antagonisms merely got in the way of what they both truly wanted.

"Want to take a break?" she asked.

"Uh-huh."

He walked over to the stump by the chucker and sat down. She joined him, pressing her hips

against his. Both of them had learned, over time, to create sexual excitement by pressing up against each other. Both of them never took it beyond these seemingly innocent acts.

"What are you gonna do later tonight?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe go hang out in town."

"With Mary?" she droned, smiling at him.

"Whatever. You gonna hang out with Jose?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Why do you care?"

"Why do you care if I hang out with Mary?"

"I don't."

"Yeah right."

All of a sudden, he reached forward and began to tickle her sides. This did not actually tickle her but she pretended that it did. She tried to fight him off but did not try too hard. In the midst of his efforts, he thought he might want to touch her left breast. She saw him thinking this and stopped moving. He mistook her expectation for some form of revulsion and withdrew his hands. Understanding some of what just happened, she forced herself to laugh and smile at him. This smile was enough to set him at ease. He still wanted to touch her left breast just as she wanted it to be touched.

"Let's drink some of the cider," she said.

"Okay."

They got up off the stump and walked over to the bucket below the press. He loosened the cheesecloth and pulled it partway back. They each grabbed a mason jar from the ground and dipped them into the bucket, filling them with cider. Standing upright, facing one another, they took a sip. Neither of them could tell whether the smiles that appeared after swallowing were caused by each others presence or the deliciousness of the cider.

ROSEMARY WAS WEeping. The realization of this fact was accompanied by another realization: she was outside, in the snow, freezing, wearing the same clothes she was in when she finished painting. The sadness and the tears prevented her from caring about the shaking of her limbs and the chattering of her teeth. She cried from a pain buried so deep in her mind that only a forgotten dream could bring it up to the surface. Whatever it was she had seen in her unconscious was so powerful that, despite losing all memory of it and returning to reality, it continued to shake her body.

For five minutes she stayed where she was, squatting on the snow. Directly below her was the fire pit, buried beneath layer upon layer of white, frozen water. When the tears ceased falling, she realized this was in fact where she was. She rose, arms folded over her chest, and looked at the trees above her, hidden in darkness. There was no wind. The trees stood patiently, revealing nothing to her, wanting nothing from her.

A burst of movement drew her eyes back down to the ground. A fox, the same one she had seen earlier, was running. She began to follow it, running as fast as her frozen body would allow her. It stayed within her sight but never turned around to look at her. Its speed matched hers perfectly, even when she changed it. She could never catch up to it, nor would she ever lose it as long as she continued running.

She did lose it, eventually. The fox darted to the left and was suddenly gone. Without her realizing it, the fox had drawn her out of the woods and up to Evelyn's house. Three lamps were burning in the living room. From afar, Rosemary could see that Jones and Evelyn were talking to each other on her couch. The fire in the stove was raging.

"EVE?"

She looked up from her book.

"Yeah?"

"What do you sincerely, sincerely think is going on?"

Evelyn sighed, closed her book, tossed it to the side and leaned back into the leather cushion of the couch. Jones waited for her response, watching her eyes quickly fill with thoughts and slowly focus on something in the air he could not see.

"Rosemary created that pentagram."

"Is she crazy?"

"Jones...you know better than to label someone as crazy."

"Okay, right. But if she put the marbles in the wall and doesn't know or is pretending that she doesn't know..."

"She *doesn't* know, Jones. Nor did she physically put the marbles in the wall."

Jones' expression grew irritated. He leaned forward and shook his head.

"I'm not in the mood for any of this, Eve."

"Shut up, Jones. I'm being serious."

"What you're saying is this, if I'm not wrong...Rosemary created the pentagram but did not physically put it there, it came out of her mind, only she is not aware of her magical powers. Is that correct?"

"Very good, Jones," she said, drolly. "Exactly."

"Where is your proof?"

"I don't have any. But give me another explanation."

"I already did. She's been acting really weird since it happened and sometimes, you know, people can just snap. We've both seen it. I think she put the marbles in there in some sort of...I don't know. Trance. And now she's running circles around her own mind without realizing it."

"You're right about that."

"What?"

"Running circles around her mind. She is doing that. But come on..."

"Wait. What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I'll explain in a second. I want you to seriously consider something for a second, okay?"

"Okay."

Evelyn sat up, leaned forward, picked her tobacco off the ground and began to roll a cigarette. Jones kept his eyes locked on the fire. The extremely brilliant flames were consuming the thick, slow burning logs. The same three had been burning for the past forty minutes. Evelyn walked the cigarette over to one of the lamps, lit it with the small flame and returned to the couch.

"Firstly, Jones," she said. "How the fuck did Rosemary get the marbles in the wall like that? Did she become a mathematical genius? No human can seamlessly just sink some marbles into a wall without there being any cracks or deformities. Right?"

"Maybe. I bet you could do it."

"Go try it then." She took a frustrated drag and exhaled into the air directly above her. "See how it goes and then when it doesn't work come back and talk to me."

"How do you explain it then?" he asked.

"Her mind, Jones. It put it there."

"Since when have minds been known to embed marbles in walls?"

"Since now. The red she made is the same color as the marbles. That's the proof. Once...never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

"No, Eve. What were you going to say? Once..."

"This happened to me."

Jones smiled.

"You went crazy once?"

"Fuck off, Jones. You won't understand. All I need you to understand is that Rosemary is not crazy, as you keep saying. This is something no words or logic or whatever can explain. I can't tell you any more."

Both of them swore they heard the cry of a crow before the door opened.

When it did, Rosemary walked in, skin turning blue, eyes wide in fear.

THEY WRAPPED TWO thick blankets around her shoulders and had her sit down in a chair placed right in front of the fire. Jones put a large pot of water on the stove for her feet. It was nowhere near boiling.

"Rosemary...honey? What were you doing?" Evelyn asked.

She kept her eyes closed and continued rocking her body back and forth. While her two lovers watched her in nervous anticipation, Rosemary was desperately trying to catch one of the fractured, translucent fragments of what she thought she had seen. The chair creaked under her movements. Smoke jumped out of the brick chimney. They seemed so close, so intimate. If she could simply remember even the smallest piece of one of them it would bring back some episode, some magical, hyper-real period of her life which, somehow, she had forgotten.

"Rosemary?" Jones asked. "Come on, Rosemary."

"Cool it, Jones."

"We need to get her to town. Stop fucking around, Evelyn."

"Just wait."

But that promise of recognition soon began to fade and her rocking movements slowed down.

She opened her eyes and saw flames laughing with each other behind the transparent door of the stove. Her mind stopped searching. Whatever it was that had taken her outside and placed her in the cold was not going to let her have those memories, if they were in fact memories.

"Rose?" Evelyn rubbed the back of her head. "Are you back?"

She slowly nodded her head.

"Yeah."

Jones took a deep breath and smiled.

"What...why did you stay out there for so long?" he asked.

"I'm serious, Jones, if you don't..."

"It's okay, Eve. It's alright." She patted her friend's hand and turned to Jones. "You remember what I was telling you? About suddenly appearing in your chair the other night?"

"Yeah."

"It's...it's the same thing."

"So you teleported from the house to the woods?"

"Something like that. I don't know."

Jones looked up suspiciously at Evelyn. He wanted to see that she finally believed Rosemary to have snapped from reality. What he saw in her eyes, however, was not only sympathy, but total understanding. As if Evelyn had been to the place where Rosemary had just returned from. Upon seeing this, Jones not only began to doubt his initial suspicions about his wife but grew inordinately frightened.

"Jones," Rosemary whispered. "Look at me, Jones."

He drew his eyes back to her. The color on her skin indicated that she had warmed back up. What remained of the melted snow in her hair was illuminated by the fire before her. She tightened the blankets around her shoulders and stood up. Jones stepped forward, more confused than was apparent to either of the women. He wrapped his arms around her waist, stared at her eyes and waited. Exhausted, Evelyn sat down on her couch and crossed her legs.

"As soon as I know what's happening, I'll tell you," Rosemary said.

"I'm still worried about you, though. What if..."

"Don't worry about it, Jones. What if, what if, what if. I don't fucking know. You might have some ideas about what you think is going on, just as I do. What we both need to do is assume they are both totally, absolutely wrong. Okay?"

Evelyn closed her eyes.

In the darkness that came to her vision, she saw cider dripping into a bucket.

"Okay," Jones said.

THE LARGE, METAL bucket was filled with now completely cold water. Jones had poured the boiling water into it for Rosemary's feet before heading through the snow back to their house. He said he needed to get some sleep when in truth he had recognized that the only person who could possibly say something helpful to Rosemary was Evelyn. His presence, so he felt, would only interfere and it was with a sense of uselessness that he walked between the layers of snow, eyes fixed on the lamps Rosemary had unwittingly left burning inside. This was not the first time that Evelyn had expressed frustration towards what she had once referred to as his:

"Desire to keep everything on the ground."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Well...I just don't understand why it always has to be so...terrestrial with you."

"Terrestrial?" He turned away from the bedroom window and sat down on the bed beside her feet.

"What should it be?"

"I'm just saying you...forget it. Never mind."

"No. Tell me what you mean."

"I don't even mean terrestrial. I mean...everything, even a rock, has so many explanations for its existence that they cancel each other out. You still just have a rock after you've gone through all the explanations, but at least the rock is richer than if you just said, Hey, wow, a rock."

"So I just look at the rock?"

"No. But you ignore a lot of its explanations."

"And I suppose you don't."

"I didn't say that..."

This conversation turned into an argument which, at its termination, planted a small seedling of doubt in Jones' mind; doubt that what he once thought of as expansiveness in his imagination was in all actuality just a feeble effort at exploration. After this, his poetry, according to Rosemary, took on

a depth it had never possessed. But, regardless of the benefits he had reaped from his argument with Evelyn, he never felt that he had proved her wrong, so to speak.

There was a rivalry between the two of them, however unspoken and well-hidden it may have been. Their medium was the written word; hers the sprawling, loosely reigned beast that was the novel, his the controlled, concentrated hallucinations that were poetry. The difference between them, the difference that perpetuated the rivalry as far as he was concerned, was the fact that he shared what he had written and she did not. Sometimes he even doubted that the novel she was working on was real. He disregarded this thought whenever it arose but, assuming that she was in fact writing it, he felt she had no right to judge his writing and imagination when he was never allowed to judge hers. Only twice in their relationship had he asked to see her writing. The second time was a year after they moved into the area.

"You can see it when I'm done," she said.

"Why can't I see what you have?"

"I don't want anyone else's imagination in it."

"Are you afraid?"

"No. But I started writing it to see what would happen."

"What do you mean?"

"I wanted to have something that came directly from nowhere."

"Except yourself?"

Evelyn never responded to him. She got up from the table and fixed herself another cup of tea. Watching her pick the kettle off the stove, watching the hot water fall into cup, watching the steam explode out of it, Jones was filled with the same fear that he felt upon seeing Evelyn looking at Rosemary before he left; fear of a misunderstanding that was so grand it would forever isolate him from the hypothetical comprehension of a reality that was becoming stranger and stranger as the years went by.

THE LARGE METAL bucket was filled with now cold water. It still sat in front of the fire but neither Rosemary nor Evelyn were anywhere near it. The two women were upstairs, in her bedroom, lying down on the bed. Both of them were smoking cigarettes, something that Rosemary rarely did. It was calming her still sensitive nerves to a great degree and, for the first time since the year after she quit, she thought she would start again.

"I miss these things," she said, halfway through it.

"I shouldn't have given it to you."

"I'm a big girl, Eve. Chill out."

Silence, punctuated by the sound of their exhalations, took over the room until the memories of the last few days returned to the front of Rosemary's consciousness. She turned her head towards Evelyn and waited. When Evelyn met her eyes, she knew Rosemary was about to ask her something.

"Evelyn...you need to tell me what you know. No bullshit. I know you know a lot more than you are letting on. I woke up freezing out by the fire pit tonight, okay. Whatever's going on...you just need to help me. Even if it's all vague, tell me. Okay?"

Evelyn took a drag, exhaled and nodded behind the smoke.

"Okay. But on one condition."

"What?"

"You can't ask me any questions."

"But what the fuck..."

"Rose." With this she silenced her. "Wait. Let's finish this cigarette and then we'll go downstairs. I'll show you some stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Man...how old are you, Rosemary? Finish your cigarette."

ROSEMARY SAT ON the couch as Evelyn gently laid the sliced onions into the bubbling oil. A small mound of diced garlic sat on the counter beside the pan. On the kitchen stove, beside the increasingly fragrant onions, a pot of pasta was boiling. Rosemary was hungry. Her body knew this, but her mind did not. It was completely absorbed by the book sitting open on her lap.

Evelyn had given her five books to start with. The one she was currently reading was a collection of prints, all depicting the Greek gods. In front of her eyes now was a painting of Hermes, wearing a winged helmet, arms spread out to the side, palms open, head tilted up to the sky, eyes closed joyously. This depiction of him reminded her of someone but she could not remember who. She stared at the print for ten minutes before pulling her eyes away from it.

"I can ask about Hermes, can't I?"

"What's that," Evelyn said, stepping away from the pan so she could hear.

"Hermes. I can ask about him?"

"Sure. What about him?"

"Anything. The first thing you can think of"

Evelyn carefully looked her friend over, turned back to the pan and shook the softening onions back and forth. Rosemary ran her hands over the print without looking at it. When the onions were halfway to the desired flexibility, Evelyn swept the garlic into her open palm and dropped it into the oil. The aroma quickly filled the air.

"Okay." She shook the pan one more time and turned around. "Hermes was sometimes referred to as the Greek god of boundaries. He was one of the few who were allowed to descend into the underworld without there being any consequences."

"The other gods couldn't?"

"No."

"Who were the others?"

"Hades, obviously. And Persephone."

"How come he could go?"

"Because he was the one who guided newly dead souls downward."

"So that was his role?"

"No. No way. None of the Greek gods were as simple as that. Like...some people said he was the one who brought us our dreams. And in Greek mythology he was the one who gave fire to the humans. But the most interesting part," Evelyn quickly glanced back at her garlic, stirred it and resumed, "is that originally Hermes, you know, rather than being all muscular and handsome and athletic, was a bearded phallic god. Now, some people say that Pan was Hermes' son. You know about Pan, right?"

"Yeah"

"Hermes, in the mythology, is the son of Zeus. But from some other sources people have ascribed Pan to being the son of Zeus. They both kind of split apart, the two theories and people generally think Hermes was the son."

"You don't think so?"

Evelyn smiled gently, warmly and turned back to the pan. She gave the garlic one last stir and then removed the pan from the stove. She continued talking while she finished the sauce.

"Well, it's mythology, Rose. There's no right answer. Pan and Hermes do share some similar characteristics if you compare them. Hermes was the buffer between humans and the gods, helping us interpret their riddles. Pan was kind of the same, only he helped us understand nature. Both of them played instruments, Hermes the lyre, Pan the pipes. They're both the gods of sheep and shepherds, you know, embodying the controller and the controlled. This is what...what..."

Evelyn lifted the pan off the stove and moved it over to the large, blue ceramic bowl she had set out. The light green oil sauce quickly fell out of the pan with a strange, disturbing slop. She put the still hot pan in the sink, grabbed the pot of now ready noodles and emptied the boiling water into the pan. The remaining oil jumped to the top of the water. Rosemary waited impatiently for this all to be over, still not hungry at all. When all the water was drained, Evelyn dropped the noodles into the blue bowl and began mixing everything together.

"What was I saying?" she asked Rosemary.

"You didn't start your sentence. Sheep and shepherd..."

"Okay, okay. So...I think that Pan and Hermes are two aspects of the same force, only one of them was marginalized. Hermes is extremely, noble, regal, all that. And Pan...he isn't unattractive, but he isn't Hermes. Pan was always tricking people into having sex with him. He even had Echo killed because she wouldn't sleep with him. It's as if everything they didn't want on Hermes they gave to Pan rather than incorporate it."

"Why would they do that?"

"It frightened them. But at the same time they didn't want to ignore it. You know what I mean? Pan was a vital part of who they were, vital enough for the Greeks to hold onto him. Hermes just represents their attempt to extract the refined, elegant, rational benefits from a force which they couldn't process in its entirety. Leave the sex and the lust and the irrational, primal forces to Pan. The Christians went even further with that instinct, though. If you look at depictions of Satan, they all look like Pan."

"Okay," Rosemary tossed the book off her lap and stood up, approaching Evelyn with her index finger extended. "So...okay. So now tell me about how the pentagram was associated with Satan."

"You hungry?" Evelyn asked, holding up the bowl she had finished stirring.

"No, no, I'm not. Come on, Eve."

"Well," Evelyn put the bowl on the counter and grabbed a plate off the counter, "I'm gonna eat."

"Keep talking. Tell me."

"Hold on, Rose." Evelyn served herself a large portion of the pasta, took a fork from the drying rack and walked back to the couch, Rosemary anxiously following behind her. "Alright." The two women sat down and Evelyn took a few bites which, to Rosemary, took an eternity to be chewed and swallowed. "First..." She wiped her mouth. "We should go back to Pythagoras."

"Alright. What about him?"

"Tell me what you remember of what I told you."

"Pythagoras...Pyth..." Rosemary hesitated before realizing that Evelyn had not told her very much at all. "Nothing. You told me that he discovered the...what...the median equat..."

"The golden ratio, Rosemary, the golden ratio. But, yes, that's about all I told you. There's more math to it, but I'll spare you that. I told you that Pythagoras discovered the ratio and that the pentagram was his group's symbol. There is another aspect to it, though." Evelyn ate two small forkfuls of pasta. "Now listen carefully. There was this Greek word, pentemychos, and a basic translation of it is the five caves or chambers. The first Greek god was Chaos and all the other gods descend directly from him. Some people believed that Chaos had to configure himself into the pentemychos before the universe could be shaped out of him. Once it was, the pentemychos became hidden, buried underneath all the new stuff. But it never lost its life-creating power and people believe that all of our souls spring from it."

"From the pentemychos?"

"Right."

"Why do they call it the five chambers?"

"I couldn't really say. I told you that the pentagram can represent the five senses. The early Greeks believed the pentemychos was inside of us, the chambers in our minds. Anyway...to get back to Christianity. Chaos, the god, his other name was Tartaros. Now, Tartaros was the first, darkest darkness that existed deeper down than the underworld. As time went on, it became a place where Zeus sent gods who he felt were too dangerous to be left above, even in the underworld. At first, in the myths, only gods were sent to Tartaros, but later humans were sent down there too. You know, Sisypus?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's where he was. Suddenly, Tartaros became a place where you would reap what you had sown in the terrestrial world. It became a place that was seen as a punishment, rather than the source of all life. More time went on, the Romans stole all of the Greek's gods and then, later, the Christians stole from the Romans. From Tartaros, as it had come to them, the Christians created their Hell and they put Satan in charge of it."

"Shit. Alright..."

"You see where this is going? The source of life became the pit of suffering. Pan became Satan. I told you how the tip of the pentagram represented Venus to the Babylonians. For a long time, to the Romans, it represented Venus because, if you track the movements of Venus across the sky, it describes a pentagram. Lucifer, in Latin, means light-bringer and was what they called the morning star."

"And the morning star..."

"Was Venus. You see? Humans have been scared of it."

"Why, though?"

"You seemed pretty terrified when you walked up to my door."

"Was that what I was seeing?"

Evelyn widened her eyes and slowly put her plate down on the ground. She reached into her pockets, removed her tobacco and began to roll a cigarette. When she finished, a minute had silently passed and in that same silence Evelyn struck a match, waited until the fire had sparked, bloomed and calmed, brought it to the tip of the cigarette and, barely suppressing a smile, took a first drag.

"I told you I wasn't going to tell you," she said, smoke following her words.

"Fine." Rosemary could not help smiling with her friend. "But tell me."

"What?"

"Am I getting close?"

"You've definitely crossed over."

"Into what?"

Evelyn took another drag, leaned her head back and blew a perfect smoke ring.

By the time it had dissipated, neither of them felt like talking.

THE WALK FROM Evelyn's house to her front door was only four hundred feet, but Rosemary's wildly circling thoughts gave each, separate step an eternity to occur in. When she reached her front door, it felt like she had been walking for hours. The door knob sat in front of her. Jones had left one of the lamps on downstairs. Snow fell noiselessly onto her hair. She waited there, staring at the door, afraid of going back into the place where the pentagram lay, afraid of what it might do to her. It was obvious to her that she had to go inside at some point, and that was precisely what kept her frozen, in the snow, outside.

If it had not been for the fox, she would have remained out there longer. It sprinted across the snow behind her, kicking up powder with its small, sprightly feet. By the time she turned around it was gone, but she knew it had been the same fox, now hidden behind the silent trees. She waited to catch another glimpse of it and, when it was clear that this would not happen, she went inside without another thought.

After putting out the lamp, she walked upstairs to her and Jones' bedroom. He was asleep, on his back, mouth wide open and facing the ceiling. Only one lamp was on in the room, casting a faint, orange light over everything. Rosemary got undressed, put out the lamp, climbed under the covers and wrapped her arm around Jones. He mumbled for a few seconds, causing her to experience a sense of worry. For she did not want to talk anymore this night, did not want to try and explain what she had seen or where she had been and, more importantly, she did not want to give Jones any more reason to worry about her. She knew, if she was patient, that the answers would come to her and, if they ever did, she would help Jones to understand them as well.

It was with this sense of hope that she fell asleep.

WHEN ROSEMARY FIRST started to paint, her brush always managed to place an overly large tree on whatever material she was working on. Her childhood paintings were cluttered with various, indistinguishable objects that were all immensely overshadowed by one enormous tree. It never felt right to leave it out of any painting. Sometimes she would hold off and almost manage to feel a sense of contentment with her animals, suns and moons, but it inevitably happened: the tree flooded out of her fingers. Age and skill slowly shrunk the tree until finally it was no more important than anything else on the paper or canvas.

One day, walking with Evelyn through the snow, she followed the flight of a crow until it landed on the branch of a pine. After it did so, her eyes drifted away from the dark bird and onto the tree in its entirety.

"I used to only paint trees when I was a kid," she told Evelyn.

"Why?"

"I don't know. I was five. Man...I haven't thought about that in years."

"So you'd just paint trees?"

"No. No." The two continued their walk, holding hands. "I'd paint other things. No one knew what the fuck they were. You know how kids draw? Those blobs with unfinished lines jutting out all over the place?"

"Uh-huh."

"So I'd take those unfinished lines and make them into the root or trunk of the tree and slowly all the other blobs would melt into it. Sometimes I'd end up with a red tree and I'd have to paint over it with green."

"What made you stop?"

"Growing up. I mean, I still like to paint them every once in a while, obviously. It's weird what you can forget, you know?"

"Yeah."

The women finished their walk and returned home, the topic never coming up again. Later that night, out of curiosity, Rosemary tried to replicate the type of paintings she did when she was young. But she had learned so much since then that she could not help but refine everything she did. And so she gave up. Jones discovered her aborted attempt when he woke up the next morning.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just me being weird."

"What were you trying to do?"

"Be young."

JONES CAME DOWN the stairs, leaving Rosemary asleep in the bedroom. As he entered the living room, the first thing his eyes fell on was what Rosemary had painted around the pentagram. There were no clouds in the sky and the sunlight coming through the window above his desk made the col-

ors more radiant than they had ever appeared to him. The forms smoothly fusing into one another, the almost mathematical progression in themes, the augmentation and mutation of colors; all of this was revealed to him in this moment and for the first time in years he was in utter awe at Rosemary's abilities. In only a few days she had completely transformed the once barren wall into a mural that was more alive and animated than it let on.

Smiling, he walked over the stove, started a fire and went into the kitchen. He filled a pot with water and prepared himself some oatmeal. When it was ready he sat down at the table and dropped a few spoonfuls of brown sugar into it. Rosemary woke up just as the first of the crystals began to dissolve.

She stretched her arms towards the ceiling, briskly tossed the covers off her body and stood up, eager to get downstairs. Before doing so she looked out the bedroom window and took in the blue sky and the bright, blinding snow below. It was the most beautiful day that had graced these mountains in months.

The living room was warm when she emerged from the stairwell, the logs cracking behind the stove door. Jones was halfway done with his oatmeal when she arrived and when she did the last thing he wanted to do was finish it. He stood up, walked towards her and gave a long, warm hug.

"You doing alright?" he asked.

"Sure." She was slightly irritated at his concern but did not want to let it show. "Thanks, Jonesy. I'm alright."

He let go and took a step back.

"You're not feeling sick at all? No cold or anything?"

"Not that I can tell. I really wasn't out there all that long."

"Maybe. Who knows, though."

"Any oatmeal left?"

"Yeah. It's probably a little lukewarm."

"It'll be fine."

She walked into the kitchen, fixed herself a bowl and joined Jones at the table. He ate slowly, occasionally casting concerned glances at her. The brown sugar fell off her spoon and plopped into the oatmeal. She methodically stirred it into the oats, taking her time to equally spread it around.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Jones?"

"You know why, Rose. I'm sorry."

"It's alright. I just want you to know that if you keep it up, I'll get irritated."

"You know I'm just worried about you, right?"

"Of course I do, Jones." She took a bite that required only a minimal effort to swallow. "You've made it pretty clear, baby. Just pretend...I don't know. It's not that big of a deal. Evelyn made me feel better about it all last night."

"What did she tell you?"

"Stuff. Mythology."

"About the pentagram?"

"Partly. She helped me understand what it was."

Jones tightened his eyes, looked down at his bowl and quickly finished what remained of his oatmeal.

"What is it?" he asked.

"She told me about Chaos, the Greek god. He was the first god. I guess he wasn't even really a god, you know. More like the beginning of everything. A force. I don't really remember, but Chaos had to arrange himself into these five points in order for the universe to come out of him. And...there's a lot, but she told me about how the pentagram originally represented that force where all life springs from."

"What about all of the Satanic connections and what not?"

"Okay...let me start over."

For the next half an hour, Rosemary told him what she had learned.

THE LEFT SIDE border of her painting was almost to the front door. She decided to not worry about the right side for the moment because if she started on it she would not be able to stop until it reached the stove. With the left side, she could completely surround the front door with images.

And so she began the day's work. The ocean she had painted, with the surf crashing into one of the serpent's beach-like backs, faded away as it neared the wall. It took a few minutes for her to figure out where she was going to go with it, but when she finally did, the first burst of creativity lasted an hour. By the end, the water had become a thick web stretching towards the door, attaching itself to

the top and bottom corners. Each thread of the web was covered in spiraling coils that could only be seen up close. At the corners of the doors the coils jumped off the webs but she did not pursue this development. After finishing the web she took a step back, inhaled deeply and then began filling in the gaps between the thick threads.

A charred, blackened oven spewing smoke. Juice of some sort flowing out of a drain and into a golden chalice. A piece of bread sitting by itself on a green plate. A field of corn. An apple, rotting on a slab of concrete. The images kept coming and she could scarcely keep up with them. There were over thirty semi-rectangular gaps between the webs and she only filled in seven of them before she felt her energy subside as she painted the final image: a mother and daughter leaning over a mixing pot, patient, determined expressions on their faces. When she finished this one, the last thing she wanted to do was continue working. And so she stopped.

Jones had been at his desk most of the time. Once Rosemary had started painting he had read for an hour on the couch, stared out the window and then began to write. The first words came slowly, reluctantly, but once they were surrounded by others words, it took less and less effort to get them onto the page. While Rosemary cleaned up her supplies, Jones finished the last stanza of the third part of his poem. He put the lid back on his ink, put his pen down and cracked his knuckles.

"All done?" she asked, walking towards him.

"Yeah. You?"

"Uh-huh. Want to take a look?"

"Very much so."

He stood up, took her hand and walked with her over to the front door. They stood there, Rosemary looking for things to improve or erase, Jones trying to discover all of the details which were inevitably hidden in each of her works.

"This is intentional?" he asked, pointing. "These spirals."

"Yeah. Are they visible enough?"

"You have to look for them a little. But I like them."

"Can I read what you wrote," she blurted out, fusing her words.

"Sure. Go ahead."

Jones remained in front of the painting while she walked over to the desk, sat down and pulled the new page in front of her. There were crossed out variations of some of the stanzas on assorted pieces of paper scattered on the desk. The old pages sat atop of each other to her right. Before starting the new one, she read over the last two parts and tried her hardest to remember if his images were in some way connected with what was happening to her. Nothing came of this however and so she began to read the third part of the poem:

*Broken yellow fingers
Stretching thin claws into
The white film of death*

*Metal spinning painful circles
Eyes infected with lust
Watching the juices flow*

*Aphids on muscular husks
So many perfect teeth
Fire nestled under the soil*

*Crumbling castles fall
Tumbling into the ceramic canyon
As the fox chases its footprints*

*When the clocks shattered
And the gears feinted
Five turtles left their shells*

She read these stanzas over and over. Jones had turned away from the painting and looked at her when she finished reading it the first time and was now watching her, waiting for a response. He had never seen her so fixated on one of his poems before and a feeling of pride mixed with nervousness bloomed inside his mind; he had expended a lot of energy on these last five stanzas and, despite the

knowledge that he respected and sought out his wife's criticisms, he did not want to have to rework these. Some may call it laziness, others might call it arrogance, but Jones knew it was neither of these.

"What do you think?" he asked.

She finished reading it for the seventh time and turned around.

"Where is this stuff coming from?"

"Why do you keep asking me that?" He walked over to the desk and knelt down beside her. "It just comes. I see an image and I try to refine it."

"There's something about these images, though."

"What?"

Both of them turned their gazes to the lines.

"The first time I pressed one of the marbles, I went somewhere. I don't know where or what it was that I saw. But I saw something. Later, Evelyn told me about these dreams she'd had, only she couldn't remember them either. There's something..." It occurred to her that there was no point in continuing until she learned more. "Something going on. Anyway...reading your poems makes me feel as if I'm about to remember what I saw."

"That kind of stuff happens, Rosemary. Maybe it's just...I don't know."

"I'm gonna go talk to Evelyn real quick." She stood up and ran her paint covered finger through his hair. "I like this poem, though. I really do."

Jones nodded, uncertain if these words pleased him.

"DID YOU DREAM last night?"

"Did I dream last night?" Evelyn lit her newly rolled cigarette and exhaled the smoke through her nostrils. "Yeah. Why?"

"You remember it?"

"My dreams. Kind of. Just a few images."

"Tell me."

The two women walked through the snow, sinking up to their ankles in the fresh powder from the night before. The sun was still out and unobstructed by any clouds. Both of them had thick, dark sunglasses on. The vapor of their breath danced in front of their mouths.

"There was this part," Evelyn began, "where it was me...no, it was me watching someone who was supposed to be me but I don't think they looked anything like me. So it was her and this boy and they had their hands on these metal bars that were connected to this, like, central...thing. And they kept walking in circles around it, pushing the metal bars. I felt like I loved him, really loved him. You ever...when you were a girl, did you ever feel that love that was hyper-sexual without ever really being sexual?"

"I think I know what you were talking about," Rosemary said, taking Evelyn's cigarette from her finger and taking a drag. "I had this friend, this boy named...you know, I can't even remember. I'd known him forever through some friends of my mother. We only ever saw each other when our families got together, but when we did see each other it was like...I know what you're talking about."

"It's like, before we know anything about sex, we have the thoughts that are generated towards someone you sleep with. Every time I think about it, it makes me feel warm. That's what that part of the dream felt like."

Rosemary took another drag and handed the cigarette back to her. Up ahead they saw one of the outcropping of rocks and headed towards it, not speaking until they reached it and sat down on a squat, smooth boulder.

"Jones wrote a stanza today about metal spinning in circles," Rosemary said, flatly, as if she was unsure what the words meant.

"He did, huh?"

Rosemary looked at her friend and found that she was grinning.

"What's this all about?"

"I don't know. It might just be a coincidence."

"Or it might not be. There's something here. I know it."

"Well, what could it be?"

"Alright." Rosemary pinched the top of her nose and closed her eyes. "You dreamed this image, this vague image, and Jones wrote down the same...a similar, vague image." She opened her eyes and looked at Evelyn but found her friend's eyes completely neutral. "That's what I think is going on."

"So Jones and I are connected?"

"Maybe."

"How does your painting fit into all of this?"

"The old one or the new one, the one on the wall?"

"Both"

"I'm not sure."

Evelyn nodded and took a long drag off her nearly finished cigarette.

"Keep thinking about it, then."

THE TOWN SAT in the valley thirteen miles downhill from their two houses. Over the last three years it had been Jones who made the vast majority of the trips, but occasionally, infused with something akin to nostalgia, Rosemary had made the trip herself. It always pleased the people in town to see the woman who had given them some of their most beloved paintings in person, but Rosemary never went down there to gather her praises. In fact, she could have cared less about what they had to say, although, in truth, she did not mind hearing it. No, she went down there to remember what it was exactly that people did when their lives were not dedicated to art, as theirs were.

What she found were people doing the necessary work to support the town and themselves: working in the fields, making repairs to structures, sealing food for storage, repairing electrical lines. In their free time they would read, drink together, dance, occasionally get into fights and sometimes would devote every second that they did not work to some form of art or other.

One of these people was a middle aged man who lived with his partner and their three children. When Rosemary asked him why he did not move to an artist's commune, he told her he did not want to drag his children up into the wilderness. Rosemary tried to picture herself with children up there in the snow and, after a short daydream on the subject, realized she would never want to isolate those hypothetical children like that either.

She and Jones had talked about the possibility of having children approximately three times. The first time was when they were both leaving town for their new home and saw a mother walking her visibly displeased daughter down the road in the opposite direction.

"Would you ever want to do that?" Rosemary asked him.

"What? Discipline a kid?"

"Yeah. Or just have one."

"Not really."

"Good." She pinched his hand. "Me neither."

The second time the subject was brought up occurred when the couple was looking over a small, pencil sketch she had done of a girl in the process of jump roping. Rosemary thought to herself that it might be desirable to bring a being into existence that would have the opportunity to jump rope. But, again, when she thought of the kind of life the girl would lead up in the mountains with no one her age, the thought quickly vanished.

"If we had a kid," she said to Jones, "it'd have no choice but to grow up in the kind of lifestyle we've chosen for ourselves. And that's just it. The child wouldn't have any choice, whereas the three of us grow up down there and chose to live alone. Seems a little unfair."

"It's always unfair isn't it?"

"I guess so."

The third time it was brought up took place in bed after they had finished making love. Rosemary was on her back, staring up at the ceiling, when the thought returned. She turned onto her shoulder and looked at Jones.

"I think, maybe, we should have a kid at some point," she said.

"Really."

"Yeah. But later. Not here."

"Okay."

ROSEMARY RETURNED HOME, stomping her feet on the mat outside, opening the front door and taking off her long, thick black jacket. She left the sunglasses over her eyes and walked over to Jones, busy at his desk. A cold cup of tea sat beside him, still sending out whiffs of peppermint. After a certain time in the day Jones could not consume any caffeine, not even the mildest tea, and when he desired something hot to sip on, it tended to either be peppermint or chamomile, his two favorites of the herbal teas. This particular cup of tea had been forgotten due to a certain, troubling stanza.

"You're writing again," Rosemary said as she approached.

Without turning around, Jones nodded, wiggling the pen between his fingers.

"Just looking over something."

She pushed her large sunglasses up onto her scalp and looked down at the poem. His long index

finger tapped on the third stanza of the third part. She bent over and began to read it. Jones picked up his tea, took a sip out of the ceramic cup and discovered that it was cold. One thing he loved about peppermint tea was that it could be enjoyed just as much cold as hot, even if it was in a different manner.

“What’s wrong with it?” she asked.

“There’s nothing wrong with it.” He put the cup down and dropped his pen. “I was thinking about...I read this stanza...” He leaned forwards and began reading it out loud. “Aphids on muscular husks-So many perfect teeth-Fire nestled under the soil.”

Jones looked up after finishing, making Rosemary shrug.

“What about it?” she asked.

“I read it and I make all these connections. Images pop up. I think it has something to do with me being scared of corn when I was a kid.”

“You were...” A large, amused smile came to her lips. “Afraid of corn?”

“The kernels were like teeth to me. There’s this one image...I was walking through a field that’d been recently harvested and there were all the old, messed up ears of corn strewn about the ground. I saw one that had its husk rotted off and it was crawling with aphids and it scared the shit out of me. I mean, I literally ran away.”

“Why? What was it?”

“Just one of those disturbing, you know, irrational things. I think that’s where the image came from. But the point, my point is that there are so many connections I could make, let alone other people.”

“Connections with the poem, you mean?”

“Yeah. That’s all it is. I think you’re carrying it a bit too far. Mistaking something that happens naturally for some...I don’t know, supernatural thing. What if you’re simply making really strong connections?”

“Come on, Jones.” She took her glasses off her head and sighed. “I already explained all this to you. It’s way too surreal for it to be me being crazy.”

“That’s...” Jones stood up and firmly grabbed her shoulder. “Evelyn, I love her like crazy, but she’s taking you for a ride, Rose. Not intentionally, but she’s always been out there. We can get away with it because we put it in our art, but down there people can’t live in the world we live in. Besides, I think all the fighting really got to her. It got to me also, but it really did something to her.”

“Like what?”

“Disconnected her. And now she’s making you...”

“She’s just teaching me, Jones.” Rosemary put her glasses down on his desk, turned and walked towards the kitchen. “If there are connections to make then there are connections to make.”

“Evelyn’s making you fall into *her* connections, Rose. And she’s crazy.”

“So now...” She grabbed a piece of bread off the counter and took a bite off it. “Now Evelyn’s crazy? First me, then her? What next, Jones?”

“What next with you?”

“This is...leave me alone, Jones,” she snapped, tossing the bread onto the counter where it sent crumbs flying in all directions. “What if the two of us are fucking nuts? Huh? You just said we can live differently up here. Why don’t you let it happen and stop giving me so much shit?”

“What if you can’t come back?”

“Can’t come back? Whatever. Will you lay off?”

“Fine, fine.” He quickly got up from the desk and walked towards the staircase. “Forget I even tried to care.”

“Don’t give me that. Jones...”

But he was up the stairs before she could even think about what she was going to say to him. Most of her was angry with him, but a significant portion of her thoughts were filled with understanding as to the confusion he must be feeling. While it was hard for her to sympathize with him, especially since she was going through far more confusion than he, she did in fact feel compassion. As she stood there, staring at the empty staircase, hearing Jones engage in some sort of action or other upstairs, these two conflicting desires filled her mind: to be angry with him and justify the nobleness of her quest, or to bring her thoughts and conclusions down to his level so as to ease the turmoil she had helped flood him with. After a few minutes, she decided that, regardless of everything else, the latter option was the one she would choose.

EVELYN WAS ONCE attached to a unit that had been completely wiped out, as far as she knew at the time. Later she was to learn that seven others had survived, but when the counter-attack had first oc-

curred, and she found herself wandering alone, ears bleeding, Evelyn believed herself to be the sole survivor.

Her wandering took her far away from the front. Every time she passed other units headed in the direction she was retuning from, they all gave her saddened, weary looks. The right sleeve of her shirt was charred and the skin below covered in black and dark-red wounds. A long, linear rip ran up her pant leg, beneath it what was to later become the scar that both Jones and Rosemary were to become so familiar with. The wound was not serious and had not hit any arteries. She had been blown to the ground and, amidst the nearly unconscious fugue the explosion had thrown her in to, a piece of shrapnel tore its way horizontally across her leg. Luckily, the jagged piece of metal did not hit her head and instead disappeared into the burning grass behind her.

She walked in this condition for miles. It was not that those who saw her during this time did not want to help her, but they knew she could take care of herself and if she wanted help she would ask for it. Not once did she in fact request help and it was not until she reached a dormant artillery battery that she took a break. By that point, the effects of reality had grown a little bit sharper, penetrating through the shock. As the minutes went by and the sun grew closer to setting, Evelyn began to weep.

What had set off the torrent of emotion were the artillery pieces standing before her, waiting silently for someone to use them. Energy, intense, concentrated energy had been harnessed in order for these machines to be created. And now here they were, in front of her. She had seen what they could do and the long gash in her leg was a product of one of their deadly shells. Not these ones, naturally, but others just like them. What made her cry, specifically, was the fact that people had made these weapons. They were designed for one specific purpose and more or less fulfilled their mission perfectly. Creativity had been involved in their birth, as it is in all things, but this was the first time that she came face to face with what she called the imagination. The human imagination had killed all her friends and damaged her body. She had never known it to be capable of such things before. Upon having this realization, despite her tremendous exhaustion, she could not sleep that night.

THE SKY WAS still clear and because of this, when night began its slow invasion, Rosemary could see a single star surrounded by a dark blue field. She was slowly walking outside, in her black jacket, trying to calm down. There was no wind and her skin was able to remain warm. This brought on the thought that, relatively soon, the grand thaw would begin and the rivers start to bubble with more water than they could handle. Images of small plants, poking out of the ground, birds darting from branch to branch and raccoons traveling in packs so consumed her that she was completely oblivious to the fact that she had walked straight towards the fire pit.

Her gaze fell downwards. She kicked at the snow under her boots a few times and then squatted down for no particular reason. The powder, so brilliant and blinding just a few hours earlier, was now pale and sloppy in appearance. Her eyes wandered between the clumps of snow she had kicked up and then, suddenly, she caught sight of paw prints. There was no doubt in her mind that they belonged to the fox. She stood back up and scanned the area around her. Nothing was moving.

"What are you?" she asked, meekly.

She half-expected a gust of wind or a crow to provide an answer. When none came, she thought that, perhaps, she was not being forceful enough.

"Listen...I'd like to get all this settled," she yelled. "Got anything to say?"

In a few minutes, it was clear to her that it did not.

Rosemary returned home, dreading the conversation she expected to have with Jones. But as she walked through the snow, her breath floating in front of her, she tried to conjure up not only the courage but the tranquility that would be necessary to finally convince him that she was not insane or suffering from some sort of slow, mental collapse set in motion by her friend.

After closing the front door and taking off her boots and jacket, she noticed the nearly complete silence pervading the house. Aside from her heartbeat and the hiss of the lamps, there was not a sound. As quietly as she could, she climbed the stairs to the bedroom and found the door all but closed. She pushed it open, peaked inside and saw that Jones was asleep, head rested against a pillow, a book spread open over his chest. Looking at him, an idea appeared in one of the compartments of her mind, an idea which slyly pushed her out of the bedroom, back down the stairs and into the living room where she found herself face to face with the pentagram once again.

The plan that had formed in the time it took her to come downstairs required no second thought to go through with. So, with a hand tremendously steadier than it had been before in the same situation, Rosemary smiled and pushed her index finger towards the bottom left marble of the pentagram.

As the marble retreated into the wall and vanished, she was able to remain completely lucid as she fell into the void which she hoped, in those last moments, would allow her to come back with something.

THE WHALE WAS dark blue, eyes wide in ecstasy as it descended in a spiral through an infinite ocean. Somewhere within the whale's body was a room. The walls were pink, covered in moisture and constantly moving. Towards what could easily be called the rear of the room sat a desk. On its surface was an oil lamp, a mobile holding a representation of the solar system, an ink well, a pen and two stacks of papers, one of them all blank, the other covered in writing. The number of blank pages was significantly larger than the full ones.

The pen, held by a sleek, slender hand, was dipped into the pitch black ink. The woman holding the pen was wearing a green robe that exposed almost all of her large, overflowing breasts. Her expression was somewhere between intense, consuming concentration and utter boredom. The pen moved slowly across the page, setting down characters that had the attributes of every written language but was not any single one of them.

Every time the whale in which she was traveling completed one revolution, a new chapter began in her work. Neither she nor the whale was aware of this fact, but both of them understood the connection between their actions. There was no direct communication between the two beings and yet, through a process neither of them could ever explain, they felt one another. Beyond language and beyond thought, they could translate the pulsations which they believed emanated from below the infinite ocean. There could not be a bottom, true, but they were positive that there was a bottom and, more importantly, something beyond even that. And they were right.

"MOM?"

"Yeah."

"Why do the planets...like, how do we stick to them?"

Her mother took a drag off her cigarette, set the burning cylinder down in the ashtray and exhaled a thick stream of smoke. Her daughter had a picture book of the solar system on her lap, opened up to an image of Mercury's pock marked skin.

"You know about gravity?" she asked her daughter.

"Kinda."

"Every object has its own gravitational pull. The bigger the object, the bigger the pull. The sun is big enough to hold us and the rest of the planets in its grasp, just as Earth is big enough to hold the moon. Even our sun is being held by something."

"What?"

"The stars all clump together. They're attracted to each other's gravity. Our solar system is near the edge of our galaxy. You know what a galaxy is?"

"Uh-uh."

"Here." She reached over, grabbed the book from her daughter, flipped to a page of the Milky Way and then handed it back. "We're over here," she said, tapping on one of the radiant arms. "But all the stars are slowly, I mean really slowly being pulled to the center."

"What's in the center?"

"No one really knows." Her mother picked up her cigarette and took a drag. "Want to know where the name Milky Way comes from?"

"Yeah."

"Hera, Zeus's wife...remember learning about them?"

"Yep, I do."

"When she was milking one of her babies, some milk shot out. The Greeks believed that the Milky Way...you know how bright it is at night...they believed it was her milk that they were seeing. Imagine actually, sincerely, truly believing that."

Her daughter looked down at the spiral galaxy and squinted her eyes in some sort of confusion that her mother wished she could understand. The two of them waited in silence for a minute until, two drags later, her daughter looked up at her.

"Well how do they know it's not her milk?" she asked.

The smoke that was flowing out of her mother's nose began to come out a bit gentler. She smiled widely at her daughter and nodded her head.

"I guess they don't."

"So...but...but what is gravity? Where does it come from?"

"It...again, honey...I guess no one really knows."

FROM THE TIME she was a baby she had been mesmerized by fire. The stove in her childhood house was protected by a mesh screen. It was put there by her parents who had once caught her quickly crawling towards the flames licking the transparent stove door. After placing the barrier between their daughter and the fire, years passed without her being injured. But when she was older and the possibilities of life and her body grew more intricate and complex, it dawned on her that with only the most minimal effort she could penetrate beyond the screen.

On that fateful morning, she walked up to the screen and folded the edge of it away from the wall, creating an opening. Because this was the first time she had altered a seemingly unchangeable reality, the sense of exhilaration she felt overpowered and destroyed even the slightest possibility of fear.

She opened the door and found the remains of five logs haphazardly stacked upon each other, all of them glowing a brilliant red. For a few minutes she stared at the coals in something resembling a trance. The color was beckoning her, the slow hiss of the burn coaxing her to listen to its secrets. Before she knew it, her fingers were wrapped around one of the logs. The pain turned her world into whiteness. Reality returned gradually, accompanied by the sound of her own screams. At first she was not aware of the fact that those screams were her own and she only realized that they were just as she discovered that her parents were holding her in their arms.

Years later, the memories of this coming to were as fresh as they were the next day. The scar she received from this action completely destroyed the lines on the palm of her right hand. Until she was twenty years old she stayed away from fire and intense heat. She constantly left the window to her room open, even on the coldest nights. But over time, she learned to live with warmth and remembered the pleasure she felt while looking at fire in her youth. By the time she was thirty this pleasure had once again engulfed her and she constantly gazed down at her scarred hand, viewing it not so much as punishment than as a large, violent kiss the flames had given her out of love.

HE WOKE UP with a start, propping his sweaty body up with his bent elbows. The bedroom was draped in moonlight. Through the walls he could hear the sounds of his brothers and sisters snoring. Because it was so small, he only had to share the bedroom with his third youngest sister. His eyes fell on her after waking up. She showed no sign of fear or apprehension and whatever had woken him up had been nothing more than a product of his mind.

Just as he was getting ready to lower himself back into the stiff mattress, he became aware of a stiffness in his lower stomach. Curious, he lowered his left hand downwards and, after passing over his stomach, discovered that the source of the tension emanated from his penis which was not only incredibly hard but covered at the tip in a thick, slimy liquid. For a few minutes, after retrieving some of this liquid, he played with it between his thumb and forefinger. It was not urine, he was sure of that much. Perhaps, he thought, this was what his friends were always vaguely referring to whenever their penis' were the topic of conversation. Neither he nor his friends knew the name or function of this substance that none of them had ever seen, but the existence of this substance was something all of them were sure of.

Excitement flooded his body. At first he thought it was from the simple fact that he had produced this substance and would be able to tell his friends about it in the morning. But, as his hand remained on his penis and began to slowly move up and down, he lost track of everything and felt only pleasure. His eyes closed, the back of his head pressed deep into his pillow, he pushed himself closer and closer to his first consciously experienced orgasm. Lost in white light, perceiving momentary images of boys and girls, naked, smiling, sprawled all around him, blurry private parts and uncertain movements, dancing in the water, lying in the sun, he wanted to reach out and touch that being which was all of them, the fantasy that was moving the forms of his friends that existed now, in his mind, soaked with innocent lust, for him, all for him, he ejaculated onto his sheets, the mystery substance the last thing on his mind, all of his hyperactive thoughts throbbing from the pleasure which, because this was the first time, was more beautiful than it would ever be again.

SHE LIFTED HER foot from the pavement. The centipede which had given her such a start a few moments earlier was now a bloody, pulverized mass on the ground. There was no movement and the mild wind blowing through the trees muted itself. What was once alive was now dead.

"Is it...you killed it?" her friend asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Can't it...how'd you kill it?"

"Stepped on it."

Their two heads, downcast, remained still. Memories of the way the centipede moved flooded

her mind. So elegant, so gentle. The multiple legs which had so terrified her initially became magical in her recollections. Slowly, the grandeur of the insect unfolded and just as she began to feel elated from the wonder of its existence, she became fully aware of what she had done. With that, she began to cry.

"Did you hurt your foot?" her friend asked.

There was no response, only sobs.

Out of fear, her friend ran away, leaving her there, alone.

HE JERKED HIS head to the left just as the fist flew towards him. His opponent missed and the two continued to circle each other, surrounded by a ring of a dozen boys and three girls.

"Kick his ass, man."

"Come on, thought you guys wanted to fight."

"They're wimps"

Again, coaxed by the incessant commentary, he flew at his opponent. His feeble, inexperienced fist flew towards his opponents head. When it softly connected with his chin, he felt a mixture of fear and exhilaration. But the blow was not enough to do anything and merely served to flood his opponent with so much insecurity that he launched his body haphazardly forward. His opponent wrapped his arm around him and the two boys fell down to the ground where they soon began to wrestle. The order and safety of boxing degenerated into madness, bringing the spectators along. Neither of the two fighters could tell what they were doing amidst the frantic yells and cheers from the crowd. Their limbs were moving uncontrollably, with a fierceness that neither of them knew they possessed.

In the middle of this breakdown, when blood had started to flow from noses and elbows, both of them tried to remember why exactly it was they felt such an overwhelming desire to fight. Undoubtedly, their friends had a lot to do with pushing them even further towards violence, but as to what inside them made them want to be here, on the ground, trying to knock the other out, neither of them could remember. Both of them wanted to stop this insanity but the leering faces in the peripheries of their vision forced them onwards.

The fight lasted another two minutes. Depending on who was friends with who, both of them came out the winner. Despite all the backslapping, neither of the fighters felt good about what had just happened. At home that night, both of them made a silent vow to themselves to never fight again, if they could help it. Neither of them ever talked to each other again. Later in life, they both regretted this.

"MOM?"

"Yeah?"

"You know how birds change direction at once?"

"I do." His mother put her book down on her lap. "What about it?"

"How can they do it?"

"I think...maybe, that they can detect just a little movement and know how to interpret it as far as...directionally. I have no idea actually. Something like that. Looks pretty neat though, doesn't it?"

"It does." He picked up his blue glass and took a sip of water. "I wish we could move like that."

"We can."

"Yeah, but..." He wiped his mouth and put the glass down. "Not the same."

"Maybe not the same, but we can read things that aren't visible. You know when I'm angry, right?"

"Okay, but you get crazy when..."

"Whatever. But you know what I mean. I can tell when you really want something but are pretending you don't. I can tell when something happened outside with your friends. I knew when your father was shot, I knew it when it happened, and I don't know how, but I did."

"What was it like when he got back from the war?"

"Like finally being able to sleep. I could live my life and what not, but I had absolutely no idea where he was, ever. There was no paperwork, no communications, no nothing. We were all struggling so hard just to beat them back that we couldn't really worry about things like letters. It took a lot of my energy to keep him alive."

"What do you mean?"

"You can kill people in your mind without them actually dying. I didn't see your father for a year and a half. That man means a lot to me. I've known him since I was three and I didn't...couldn't lose him. So I told myself, every day, that he was alive. But it was hard. Humans are meant to live in the moment, and it's natural to forget about someone who is gone. So it was hard."

"You and Lisa's dad were friends when dad was gone, right?"

"Yep," his mother said with a smile. "We were friends."

"But not like you and dad?"

"Nothing like me and your dad."

"You love dad?"

"You could say that, honey. But love is an awful word."

"Why?"

"All words are lies. And I'll never even be able to express to you the tiniest bit of what your father and I share."

Their conversation ended right there. An hour later, his father came home. Up until that night, he had never looked at his parents as true human beings. After that conversation with his mother, his parents seemed to radiate with mild, red light.

THE SNOT WAS slowly, mechanically sucked back into her nostrils. She was not in control of this process, nor was she in control of the tears coating her cheeks and falling incessantly from her half-open eyes. Evelyn held her on the couch, rocking back and forth. The transition from the void to the couch had been nearly seamless, imperceptible. All that betrayed it was the snot and the tears which had appeared just as instantly as Rosemary had vanished.

"It's okay," Evelyn sighed, rubbing her back. "Calm down."

The urge to speak, on Rosemary's part, was completely absent. She did not know what to calm down from. When her mother had died it was like this, but there was a reason on top of all the irrational, deep pain welling up from inside her. There was no reason to this and the pain she assumed she was feeling might just as well have been happiness.

"Listen..." Evelyn pushed her friend back and looked at her. "Try and remember. Anything. Did you see anything?"

After a few minutes with her eyes shut, Rosemary nodded her head.

"What was it?" Evelyn asked, more expectant than eager.

"Some..." Noticing that the tears had stopped, Rosemary wiped her cheeks, took a deep breath and frowned. "Please, Evelyn. It's about time you told me something. Give me a clue, a hint, a...whatever. Something."

"You already have enough clues."

"Then why do I have no fucking idea what just happened?"

"Think back, way back, to what I told you about what the pentagram represented. Can you remember any of those things?"

"Okay," Rosemary nodded her head and scanned the area in front of her. Sitting on the coffee table was a pouch of tobacco. She rolled herself a cigarette, lit it with Evelyn's matches and leaned back in the sofa. "The five senses. That was one of them. The Babylonians, they thought it was...that the five points were the plants Mercury, Saturn, Mars, Jupiter and Venus."

Rosemary looked up at Evelyn amidst a cloud of smoke and waited, vainly for a response.

"Come on," Evelyn said. "What about them?"

"You tell me."

"Rose..." Evelyn, angered by something, shook her head. "Where do the planets get their names?"

"From the Roman gods."

"Where did the Roman's get their gods?"

"From the Greeks."

"And what are gods, Rose?"

Rosemary lifted the hastily rolled cigarettes to her lips and took a drag. The disinterest Evelyn had shown earlier had now given way to frustration. Whatever was causing this frustration was probably due to the fact that Rosemary did not understand something which should be easy to understand. The fact that this frustration was there comforted Rosemary with the knowledge that she was close.

"Okay. Let me think..." Rosemary put out her cigarette. "So I pressed the first marble and don't remember anything about where I went. I saw..."

"What are gods, Rosemary?" Evelyn asked, louder than the last time.

"Gods are gods. What do they...they have something to do with this. But I can't remember a fucking thing about..."

And then they appeared. A series of flashes, imageless, but infused with description. An ocean with no depth, for depth implies a frame of reference. Two parents at a kitchen table, their son staring at them in wonder. The smell of blood bubbling out of nostrils.

"What do you remember?" Evelyn asked.

"Noth...wait. Wait. It..."

"Just let it come out."

"Semen, semen on sheets. And milk, spilling across the sky."

"Like the galaxy?"

"Yeah," Rosemary said, excitedly. "Yes. And the name, the Milky Way, it came from a myth, from the gods. So..."

"Hold on, baby." Evelyn, completely warm and jovial now, grabbed her hands and held them tightly. "Hold on to those things. Remember them and don't let them go. You'll know what to do with them soon."

Rosemary squeezed her friend's hands tighter.

"You promise?" she asked.

Evelyn pursed her lips, look down and began to chuckle to herself.

"No." She looked up. "I don't."

THE BUTT OF Evelyn's last loaf of bread sat on a cutting board next to an old, slightly rusty knife. Amidst the crumbs were two slices of onion, sprinkled with thick grains of salt. The first bite of the bread and onion tasted awful to Rosemary, but after the fourth bite her appetite returned and in the end, she ate more bread than Evelyn. She did not know this was her last loaf, Evelyn having used up all of her flour. During the war, Evelyn had always smelled baking bread but never seemed to eat any. All she ever tasted in those days was stale, partially moldy bread. The smell always brought forth, as her company made its way through those blasted out town, images of steam rising and butter melting. In those years, she promised herself, continuously, that one day she would do nothing but eat bread. Rosemary knew of her friend's love for bread and if she knew this was the last of it until the next sojourn into town she probably would not have eaten so much of it. But Evelyn, knowing full well her own relationship with bread, did not care at all.

"So," Rosemary continued, mouth full. "Mars. Mars the god. He was who in Greek mythology?"

"Ares."

"And he was the god of war?"

"That's right. He was Athena's half-brother and both of them were war gods. But Athena was more geared towards calm, calculated actions while he was a bit more wild in his manner. That's why Athena was always beating him up. The Spartan's had a statue of him, though, bound down with chains that they would sacrifice animals to."

"Why was he in chains?"

"Because he belonged to them, gave them power. There is a story that Ares killed a dragon and after it was dead its teeth fell into the ground. Those teeth then became the first Spartan's. So he was their father."

"Did Ares ever...was he sleeping with any other gods?"

"Yep," Evelyn said, smiling. "Him and Aphrodite. The two were always getting each other into trouble. During the Trojan War he was supposed to help the Achaeans but she told him to side with the Trojan's just for the hell of it."

"Why?"

"They were crazy."

"Who did Aphrodite become in Rome?"

"She became Venus."

FEELING CALM, FULL of bread, Rosemary closed the door to Evelyn's house, put her hands in the deep pockets of her black coat, and sighed. Her breath floated out in front of her, slowly dissipating until, with a barely perceptible sound that may have only been a gust of wind, the vapor was gone completely.

She walked home along the path, eyes tracking the snow covered trees she was passing, thoughts grasping onto those images; the whale, the blood, the father and the mother. Just as her memory was about to put eyes onto the vague face of the mother from inside the marble, Rosemary darted her head to the left. There it was, right on front of her, walking along the stack of snow beside the path. The fox, its fur a brilliant red, its yellow eyes fixed on her. The surprise was overwhelming at first and she continued walking. Seeing no fear in the animal's movements, she stopped, stood perfectly still and smiled at it.

"How you doing?"

It tilted its head to the left and suddenly darted its eyes down to the path. Before she could even

ask herself what it was doing, the fox jumped off the stack. It so startled Rosemary that she tumbled backwards into the opposite stack. Pushing herself back off it, she was able to just barely catch sight of the fox running around a bend in the path. She started off after it, running as quickly as she could. The illuminated bottom windows of her house drew closer as she ran, the fox always remaining just in sight. In less than a minute, she was staring at the front steps of the house. But the fox was gone.

Walking quietly, she crept towards the door, looking for it all the while. The wind was dead and nothing was moving. She could not hear anything at all. Looking back at the front door, she noticed that it was open, just enough to allow the fox to enter the house. She ran up the stairs, gently opened the door and stepped inside. Closing the door, she found the fire still burning. Jones must have woken up and moved around at some point during the night.

"Jones?"

No response came, either from downstairs or upstairs. Rosemary suddenly calmed down, completely. Jones had bumbled around downstairs, kept the fire going, gone outside for a moment and forgot to close it all the way. She walked back to the door, took off and hung up her jacket, slipped out of her boots and went to get a glass of water before going to sleep. Halfway there, she was stopped by a quick, sharp squeal. The noise pulled her vision over to the couch.

Fear began to rapidly inflate and deflate her heart, charge the air in her lungs with electricity and tighten her jaw. Knowing she could do nothing else, she cautiously made her way over to the couch. The cushions did not come into view until she was three feet away from the back, and when she was there she found the fox, sitting down on its hind-legs. A notebook sat beside it. The instant they locked eyes, the fox jumped over the back of the couch, startling Rosemary again, and running towards the door. Solely because it wished her to see it, she turned in time to see the fox vanish, vanish completely into nothingness.

A few minutes were passed silently, semi-fearfully. Having disappeared and reappeared in the recent past, such a sight did not startle her as much as it would have a few weeks earlier. Nevertheless, she still needed those minutes to think of nothing else aside from the magic that was now invading her life.

When that awe passed, she walked over to the couch, wanting nothing more than to sit back down again. Sinking down into the cushions, her right hand fell onto the notebook that the fox had been sitting next to. It was thick and covered in worn-out black leather. She picked it up and opened it to a random page.

...she did not understand what she was seeing at first, but soon it became apparent that what sat before her, resting between her slender thighs, was the book her friend had never shown them, never talked about, and had kept a secret for as long as she had known her. Upon realizing that this was the same mysterious book, Rosemary stopped reading and looked up.

She looked up but the sentence she had just read, rather than amaze, bewitch or awe her, filled her with anger, for it was only after finishing the sentence that she had looked up and not before. Wanting to break the hold this book had on her, she read ahead two paragraphs.

...and yet, after her attempt to cheat her way out, she realized that, alone, this sentence meant nothing more than she herself wanted it to mean.

"Fuck you," she muttered.

Pulling her eyes back up the page, she continued from where she had left off.

...Rosemary stopped reading and looked up. But there was nothing there aside from anger, anger that she could not control what she was reading, anger that something was in fact controlling her. What she did not realize however, was that if there was no separation between her and the force that was 'controlling' her, if she and that force were actually the same thing, then nothing could in fact be controlling her. Rosemary was controlling herself and had been all along.

Hermes was one of the few gods who guided newly deceased souls down into the underworld. What is a sheep? And what is a shepherd? Hermes was the god of them both. But what does that mean? The bridge between the gods and humans, the common denominator between the two. What is this intimacy between the two? Could they in fact be the same? Why the difference, the separation? Is he there to solidify the connection or the difference? Rosemary was beginning to remember what she had been told, and slowly some of these ideas were becoming clear. Perhaps she was responsible for what had happened that day, when the marbles had appeared in her wall. She herself was creating these things, only she had yet to learn how to predict their appearance. It was all so close now, and yet, after her at-

tempt to cheat her way out, she realized that, alone, this sentence meant nothing more than she herself wanted it mean.

She closed the book, not wanting, or needing, to read anymore. It slipped out of her grasp and fell to the floor. With her eyelids baggy and beginning to fall, she lay down on the couch, curled up in a ball, unconsciously grabbed a blanket, covered herself and, just as the snow began to fall, fell asleep.

THOSE FIRST DAYS, when the battle was coming closer, were frantic and disorganized, with people scrambling to find a role to fill, a job to do or a gun to fire. Jones found himself attached to a reconnaissance platoon which, after only two days of preparation, was sent out to the steadily approaching front. He was stationed in the top of an old grain silo with a boy only a few years older than him. The top of the silo, in the recent past, had been converted into a dwelling with a mattress, a stack of books, empty food cans and a lamp. But this lamp could not be lit due to the danger, and the two boys sat there, barely visible to each other under the faint starlight.

"You think they got scared?" Jones asked, in reference to the former occupants of the grain silo.

"Probably. The whole fucking town. Empty."

"Wonder what kind of shit they're gonna throw at us."

"Whatever they have. This place is a fucking ghost town."

Both of them, in slightly differing ways, thought of those invisible planes, concealed against the night, flying silently, discharging the missiles which never made a sound to those caught underneath them. These thoughts made them shudder, again, in slightly differing ways. Neither of them could see the others unease, but both could feel it.

"Man, I wish I had a cigarette," Jones said.

"I have some, but we shouldn't smoke em."

"Why not? If we hide back there somewhere, one at a time."

"No. You remember what that soldier said. Nothing they can see. Period."

"I know. I know. Fuck...wish we were back on the line. Bet they're smoking like chimneys."

"Stop thinking about it. Just look at the field."

And so both of them stared out ahead. A vast farm, halfway to harvest, sat before them. The army was supposed to be coming across it soon and the moment the two boys saw anything they were to radio back to the old city hall which was serving as the headquarters of the battalion. The plan was to draw whatever was coming into the town which, at that point, would be emptied. A system of bombs had been sunk and meticulously hidden under the roads and inside the buildings. Once the army moved into the town and penetrated deep enough, the bombs would be detonated. Three platoons had volunteered to be the last to leave so as to keep up the appearance of resistance. The two boys were both immensely relieved to be able to be one of the first to leave the town.

"Can't wait till this is over," the boy said.

"Those poor fucks, the ones staying behind. Hope they get out alright."

"Well...they volunteered for it. Bunch of fucking farm boys"

"Hey, come on. This is their town. If anyone should've stayed behind it's them. They know this land like the back of their hand."

The boy merely shrugged at this. Jones thought he could see a patronizing grin plastered on the bearded face of his companion. While this angered him immensely, his anxiety overpowered any desire to have an argument over it.

Three hours later the boys radioed into to HQ, reporting that a line of tanks was poised at the edge of the horizon. Soon after transmitting this information, Jones' platoon was pulled out, along with dozens of others.

As they left, starting the long, silent trek back to the line, Jones saw a group of the locals who were to stay behind. Some of the younger members of that group betrayed an obvious level of fear, but the older ones were laughing, passing a bottle around and excitedly pointing out the most beneficial place to retreat to, the best window to shoot from and the easiest way to move from location to location. None of the locals paid much attention to the retreating column of outsiders, but instead of the indifference bordering on contempt they had shown when they were first pulled into the struggle, they now showed, when they locked eyes on the outsiders, an expression of trust, acknowledgment and solidarity. The outsiders, walking through their town, were fighting for the same thing. The locals saw that all of these strangers from the neighboring towns, from the other side of the mountains, from a thousand miles away, were all on the same side and that each of them had a connection to a place that was theirs, a town possibly like the one they were now in, perhaps bigger, and that they had all left those places to defend others, they had left their homes in order to watch them burn down, to

surrender them to the approaching army, to let them be stolen and occupied, all in order to eventually have those places back. As Jones left the town, he realized that the war itself was doing more to change the way everyone thought than all of the propaganda and agitation of his teenage years. This was the beginning of their new world, right here, in this farm town. He saw this and was terrified because now there was something very tangible, valuable and real to lose. Those people he used to refer to as hicks, who were all very likely to be killed, were the beginning of their new world. Everyone who died in this war, before their consciousness left them, was an embryo of what they were fighting for. To watch them die would be that much worse because of it.

Jones never found out if any of them made it out. He knew that the ambush had worked and that the army's advance had been delayed. He knew the town had been surrendered. But that was all he could glean from those near the radios before the bombs began to fall and the frantic retreat started, just one of the many he was to be a part of in the following years. The boy he was with in the silo vanished one day and Jones never saw him again. He was plucked from one grouping and absorbed into another as the lines shifted across the maps. In every town he went to, Jones saw more examples of those platoons that had elected to stay behind in that one farm town at the beginning of the war. But soon, as the months wore on, he lost track of what it was they were fighting for and could not identify it as easily as he did initially. The bodies and the blood began to mute everything out except its own intensity.

Regardless of the ideas fueling the fighting, the sheer fact that two groups of people were doing this to each other made any reason obsolete. The two sides had engaged in this macabre, twisted dance and the further they went with it, the more firmly they bound themselves to one another with nothing more than their own deaths.

Jones killed his first person from behind a blasted out wall. The soldier, clad in the deteriorating uniforms of her army, ran down the street, the last in the line of her patrol. For a moment, she looked as alone as she really was, holding a gun, with a helmet on her head and a terribly hardened expression on her face, moving along to the plans some officer had thought for her and her platoon. Even though Jones and his unit had thought up their plan of action collectively and no one was ordering them to their deaths other than themselves, it made little difference there, as Jones hid behind the wall, watching her through the cracks in the cement as she ran down the road, hoping that the ambush would happen slowly enough to allow her to act calmly, efficiently and effectively. Both of them, with their different ideas and goals, were fighting each other to the end. It was one idea against another, no matter how grand or shallow each of them was said to be back in the world where everything was calm, where the land of the dead was not bursting out of the soil and always threatening to pull everyone down.

Jones pulled his trigger and two bullets entered her shoulder, three slammed through her neck and one went through the left side of her jaw, shattering her mouth. Her patrol attempted to take position but Jones was just one of many waiting to exterminate the entire group. One by one, her patrol was killed by the guns provided by rebelling members of their own army.

She had red hair and pail, freckled skin. At the beginning of the war, every day before going out she had to put on sun-screen. A week into the war, the thought of asking someone for sun screen was ludicrous. Slowly, her skin had gained some color, but there was nothing she could do about her pigmentation. She was five foot nine. She had seen and fired at enemy platoons composed entirely of women. Being one of many women in her own army to see such things, she soon began to stop associating as much with the men in her company. The women stopped using the men as the model of what they should be, what they should be striving to imitate. They began to hang out together as equals, not as less manly, less violent or less hardcore soldiers. When she had died, she had been one of four women in the twelve person patrol. All of them were in the rear.

Jones never forgot that her hair was red.

ROSEMARY AWOKE WITH the sun shining down onto her face. The clouds were gone and the sun sat between two tall trees, giving the bottom window of the house unobstructed access to the natural heat to which glass was no barrier at all. She sat up, wiped the drool off the left corner of her lip and squinted her eyes. Jones was sitting at his desk, writing furiously. He had heard the now familiar sound of her waking up; the change of her breathing, the volume of her groan, the sound of her bones cracking. He had heard this, but did not respond to it. The new part of the poem was pouring out of his pen.

She sat there for a few minutes as he wrote and then remembered the notebook. Desperately, she reached out to where it was the night before. To her delight it was still there, but she had no desire to open it, let alone read a narration of her own life. So she picked it up and held it closely to her chest.

Jones took a deep breath in to his lungs and held it. The new part was done. There were no obvious inconsistencies, no language that was too weak to remain inside the stanzas. He let his breath out and put his pen down.

"Good morning," Rosemary said, firmly.

"Good morning," he said, turning around. "Couldn't come upstairs?"

"I was tired."

"Of reading?"

She noticed he was looking at the notebook which was still in her grasp.

"You write a new section?" she asked.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing at the notebook.

"Something Evelyn gave me. So did you write another section?"

"Yeah," he said, reluctantly sighing. "Listen...you're coming with me to town in a couple of days. You need some help. Evelyn is making you lose your mind, helping you lose your mind and you need to see a..."

"A what, Jones?"

"Someone who isn't as fucking deranged as Evelyn."

"Oh. Okay. Then I guess I'm going with you to town. No fucking protest on my part, no way, that's..."

"Please, Rose. I'm doing this..."

"Jones! Hold on. I want to..." And then she knew what she needed to do. "Your poem, what you just wrote..." She closed her eyes and Jones shook his head. "You wrote about a whale, a blue whale spinning in circles ever downward. You wrote about the first orgasm, about learning a dark secret. You wrote about the galaxy at night, about the leaking milk falling into the stars. You wrote about the mother sleeping with the other and the blood that flew from the children's mouths." She opened her eyes and saw that Jones was staring at her blankly, terrified. "Am I right?"

There was absolutely no response or the promise of one. He sat there, mouth open, not believing what he had just heard. Rosemary held the book even tighter to her chest and waited, confident that she was in fact right.

"You..." He glanced back at his poem and then at her. "You saw?"

"How? When I was asleep? Just like I put the marbles in the wall?"

"You put the..."

"No! Fuck, Jones! Was I asleep when you came downstairs?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Were you reading the poem aloud to see what it sounded like?"

"No. Not this time. I mean, maybe I was."

"Were you or not?"

"I don't know," Jones nearly screamed. "Maybe."

"Well, you weren't."

"How do you know?"

"Because last night I saw these things. I pressed the third marble and suddenly appeared in Evelyn's house. But I remembered this time, Jones, I remembered. Now read your poem aloud to me."

"Hold on..."

"Please," she said, lowering her voice. "Read."

Jones was about to speak but seeing the sincerity in her eyes, he turned around, grabbed the new section and read aloud what was written on the page:

*Dark blue whale fixed in route
Ever descending where depth is gone
Fire lingers below the infinite*

*Galaxy flowing from stretched tit
Stars filled with leaking milk
The bull flees the castle*

*Mother spreads her swollen legs
A demon drinks her dying egg
Fingers caress the brittle horns*

*Curdled milk bursts forth
Staining the old man's satin
Paradise fell into his lap*

*Dried blood on dead flesh
Both children of the upheaval
Embrace the whore and the madman*

Jones pursed his lips upon finishing. Once more, he shook his head and put the sheet back on his desk. Rosemary tried to not look triumphant but could not help herself. At this point, the notebook was leaving marks in her skin.

"Look..." He snapped out of his stupor and stood up. "There's no way you're going to convince me of any of this shit. Don't snap the fuck out of it and come to town with me. No! No! You're going to town with me, the end. Don't you remember what we fought for? So these stupid beliefs in things that didn't exist would be gone."

Rosemary took five quick breaths in through her nose, threw the notebook down on the couch and stood up. She charged at Jones so quickly and so intently that he fell down into his desk chair. Her index finger, pointed forward, rose to his eyes.

"Do you remember what *we* fought for? So we didn't have to be told what to do, ever. I think your having a hard time remembering what it was we fought for or maybe you just never were fighting for what I was fighting for"

"Fuck that, Rosemary," he said, meekly. "I was. You know I was."

"Not right now. And what the fuck? We were all fighting for something we couldn't see. And now, because I can't explain everything to you rationally you automatically think I'm insane. Why don't you just say I'm hysterical, in a frenzy, acting like a woman!"

"Because I don't think..."

"What *do* you think, Jones?"

He looked down at his knees and picked at something that was not there.

"I think you need help," he said, finally.

"From who?"

"I don't know. Forget it."

Jones stood up to go but she pushed him back down.

"How did I know what you wrote?"

"I don't know. Magic. Is that what you want to hear?"

"I want you to acknowledge that something is going on that none of us can fully explain and I don't want you write it off as nothing."

Jones shook his head yet again and looked away from her. His eyes fell on the notebook she had thrown on the couch.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing.

Without turning around she answered.

"That's Evelyn's novel."

"Okay, that's it." He stood and when she tried to stop him he pushed her hands away and went into the kitchen. "If you two want to have your secrets go ahead. She wants to just give you something... she needs to let both of us read it."

"You can't read it."

"Why?"

"Because you wouldn't understand it. Not yet."

"What does that fucking mean, not yet?"

"It shows you your future."

"It does, huh? Then let me see."

"No, it wasn't given to you."

"Why did you get it?"

"I don't know."

"Cool, Rosemary." He left the kitchen, walked to the front door and started putting on his jacket. "When you figure out your little riddle let me know, okay."

He put on his boots and then was out the door.

The fire he had started in the morning was still burning strong.

JONES HOPPED UP onto on of the shelf of snow above the path. This act took him a full minute and when he finally did get atop of it he was crawling, each limb sinking into the deep powder. Why he chose to do this he did not know. Each impediment to his progress not only caused him to grow more irritated but more determined to accomplish his task. Again, he did not know why he picked this particular task. Despite all of this, he finally got onto his feet and began walking towards the buried fire pit.

Because his departure was so hasty he had not pulled his pants over his boots, the insides of which were now filled with snow. Each step brought on sharp chills but not once did he think of remedying the situation. He walked on, thinking so many things about Rosemary and Evelyn that he was effectively not thinking at all. When he reached the fire pit and stopped he took a deep breath into his lungs. The world was less menacing when he exhaled. His mind was not.

His eyes began to wander and fixed themselves on Evelyn's house, partially hidden behind dozens of tree trunks. Having something concrete for his mind to latch onto, he resumed walking, his new task to talk with Evelyn. In a haze, he covered the distance to her house. When he arrived, he could not remember actually walking there. His knuckles fell against the door.

"Come in!"

Upon entering, Jones immediately saw Evelyn sitting in a wooden chair a few feet from her stove. The flickering red light, juxtaposed against the darkness of the room, gave her a slightly endearing, slightly menacing appearance.

"It's about time," she said.

"What?" he said, remembering his anger. "About time for what?"

He closed the door, took off his boots and shook the snow from his socks. Trying to act fluidly, he walked over to couch without looking at her. Not looking at her would make it appear as if he was above her all-too-obvious schemes. It did not occur to him that he was forcing himself to do this. He sat down, eyes slowly rising up to hers.

"Yes?" she said.

"Fuck, Evelyn. Stop asking me questions. You know what's going on?"

"What *is* going on?"

"See. You're just trying to wiggle your way out of it."

"Out of what, Jones? I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

"Alright." He feigned a smile and shook his head. "I'm not playing these games. You know that Rosemary's lost her mind. Completely lost her mind, largely thanks to you. Giving her books and saying they tell the future. Encouraging her to think she can teleport back and forth. Just stop!" he yelled, nearly standing up. "Stop!"

"Why is she the crazy one?"

"Oh, genius, Evelyn. Because I'm angry now I'm crazy. Nice."

"Why can't you just believe her?"

"Because I know it's you feeding her this religious garbage."

"How do you know that?"

"She's told me. Of course she believes what you say. But I don't."

"That's your fault, not hers. Nor mine for that matter."

"I'm not going to argue about this anymore. Stop. It's that simple. I'm taking her down to the valley to get help and that's it."

"What are you going to do, Jones? Drug her. Carry her on your back."

"If I have to."

"I doubt that very much."

"You want to test me? It's better than leaving you..."

Evelyn rose up out of her chair and took two, angry steps towards him. Her hands remained at her sides, rigidly. Somehow, the fire burning behind her was projecting its image through the back of her skull and into her eyes. Jones sunk his fingers into the cushions of the couch. He was frightened.

"You think she is yours. You think you know better than us. That what you see is the truth. So confident in your petty deductions, covering your raw emotions in artifice which you pass off as logic. You want to know what I told Rosemary?"

"W...what?"

"You ever heard of Pan, Jones?"

"The god?"

"Yes, the god. You ever heard of Hermes?"

He nodded his head, quickly.

"Yes."

"They used to be the same god. Pan was irrational, crazy. Hermes was noble, logical. Pan died and Hermes lived. Hermes continued to mutate. And then Hermes began to kill the Earth because he was so arrogant. Hermes is still inside of you, Jones, because you have not killed him off."

He wanted to tell her this was more lunacy.

But he could not do it this time.

"Hermes?" was all he could force out.

"Yes, Hermes. All of the gods, all humans exist on top of the blackness, Jones. For so long we have been terrified of it and invented things like Hermes to guide us up and outwards, to hold our hand, to invent things for us to make life less scary. But why are we so terrified of it? You and Rosemary and I all fought for it. To let that darkness, that chaos out of the underworld. But it is not chaos, Jones. Do you remember what we called it back then?"

"Of course I do."

"Then how can you try and push it away the second it emerges? Did you really fight for these things? Can *you*, Jones, can *you* remember what it was that you fought for?"

"How did you...did you hear us?"

"Can you?"

"You know what I fought for, Evelyn."

"I do." She said, quietly. She stepped backwards and sat back down. "You fought to destroy what was keeping humanity down. To allow all of us to reach our potential. But you assumed it would be rational, empirical. And I don't blame you for that. That was the world we left behind, a rational world. But you are growing lazy. There is no end for anything, especially what we fought for. So don't try and shut it down before it can grow."

"But what...Evelyn." His head fell into his hands. "Why did you give her your book first?"

Evelyn closed her eyes, inhaled through her nostrils and looked at him. He was not looking up and it was clear that he was crying, although doing his best to hide it. She waited a few minutes to let him collect himself before speaking.

"Is that what this is all about?" she asked.

"No." He indiscreetly wiped his eyes and lifted his head. "Not completely. But how long have I wanted to see that book of yours? Forever. And you know her. She can just take or leave whatever reading material lands in front of her."

"I'll answer you simply, Jones. You did not get to read it because you always wanted to read it and always thought that I should give it to you. And the only reason I should give it you was because you wanted it. Nothing more. Rosemary wasn't thinking about it at all when she received it."

"I don't get it," he mumbled, almost inaudibly. "What is going on?"

"Jones..." She stood up, unzipped her jacket and let it fall to the floor. "What you need to do is follow me."

She took off her shirt and disappeared upstairs.

In less than ten seconds, he was up after her.

In less than ten minutes he felt better.

IT ALL HAPPENED quickly. One day Rosemary was out on the street, shaking a can of spray-paint, filling in the words cut into the cardboard, leaving messages and reminders on cement walls. The next day she was hiding in a cobweb infested basement as the sound of machinegun fire punctuated her every thought. There was not a lot of time to think in those days.

Walking out of an old barn where her four latest paintings were being shown in town, Rosemary remembered those cans of spray-paint and the intricate carving. What made her think of it was the absence of any sort of markings on the walls of buildings in town. While what she did in those days before the fighting was meant to give people hope and direction, she nevertheless felt that art should not be relegated to the canvas.

Being bored with the party arranged for her painting, she snuck back inside, wandered into a storeroom and found a can of black spray paint. It was the only can available but it was more than sufficient for her needs. Back outside, she found a large, windowless wall on a three story building. At ground level she drew a nose with faint, elegant lines. She proceeded upwards, tracing a dark face, its mouth buried underground. In thirty minutes she had finished everything aside from the eyes. At this point she noticed that a group of teenagers were watching her. She pretended she did not see them until she had drawn the outline of the eyes. Once she had finished this she turned around and approached the kids.

"Any of you have paint at home?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," a couple of them said.

“Why don’t you go get it and come back?”

Instantly they were off, running through the afternoon light, back to their homes, asking their parents where the paint was. When they returned she pointed at the unfilled eyes and directed them towards the blankness.

“Divide up the segments of the eyes with each other,” she said. “The eyes need to be alive.”

Rosemary’s words struck a few of them as vaguely intimidating but soon enough the unexpected excitement made them forget her entirely and concentrate all of their attention on the task sitting before them. As they painted, Rosemary walked back to the barn where her paintings were being shown, leaned against the wooden walls and watched the eyes take shape, growing luminous, radiant, unearthly, filled with a multitude of colors and shades. By this time a few of the people her age had become aware of her absence and wandered outside. One of those people happened to live in the building upon which the face had been drawn.

“These kids just start painting?” the resident asked her.

“No, it was me,” she replied. “They’re just doing the eyes.”

“Well thanks for asking our permission, Rosemary.”

“Fuck off, buddy.”

The resident tried to be angry but could not. Rosemary could have cared less about whether or not anyone was angry about what she had done because, once the last of the eyes had been filled with the teenager’s paint, she recognized the face she had drawn.

It was a girl she had seen once. The city had been heavily bombed for the last two weeks. The army had attempted to take what remained of it but were pushed back and largely confined to the northernmost end. Rosemary was working a quarter of a mile away from the front. Moving from blasted out building to blasted out building was not as difficult as it was closer to the line, but there was a good chance of her being killed by a sniper. So, like everyone in that area, she traveled by sprinting from one covered area to another.

On the day that she saw the girl she was carrying a box of antibiotics to a field hospital in an old movie theatre which had miraculously been spared the fate of its neighboring buildings. She crouched behind a burnt out car, scanning the area ahead for the next place to go. Seeing the remnants of a sandbag fortification, she sprinted over to it. The sandbags formed a half circle in front of the doorway to a gutted apartment building. Being close enough, she jumped over the four feet of sandbags. When she came down, her feet landed on a wobbly piece of concrete. Luckily, she did not sprain anything when she landed. Unluckily, she fell to her side, the box of antibiotics flying out of her grasp. She did not hear them land but knew the general direction in which they had flown. When her eyes came to rest on the box, they also came to rest on the girl.

Portions of her hair were matted against her forehead while other portions were being blown and tussled by the wind. Her eyes were as open as they could be and they did not move at all. Her small hands were clenched at her sides. She wore a white dress speckled with blood. Her feet were completely bare.

“Honey...” Rosemary groaned, getting onto her hands and knees. “What are you doing? You okay?”

She crawled over to the girl and tried to gently pull her down below the sandbags. But the girl was stiff and rigid and not once did her eyes move. Rosemary ran her fingers over the matted hair and saw that it was blood that was making it that way.

“Baby, you need...”

The sound haunted her for the rest of her life, although she did her best to push it so far back in her mind that it only came out without her knowing it; the sound of the girl’s skull cracking, of the bullet traveling through her head and hitting the wall. In horror she threw herself onto the ground. Out of instinct she grabbed onto the body of the girl and held her as sand began to explode all around her and the world of concrete and dirt became filled with flames more violent than any human could ignite.

SHE HAD NOT looked at the book since the last time. There was a slight desire to find out what she would paint, but based on what had happened to her recently, she knew that regardless of whether she did or did not read the words, she would in fact paint the same thing either way. And so she continued where she had left off, the forms mutating out of each other, building upon one another, constantly expanding. The web that she had drawn waited to be filled. In each compartment she drew image after image. A crude, brown nipple spewing forth what might either be milk or semen, the nipple itself looking vaguely like an uncircumcised penis. The corner of a mouth covered in blood. A bull holding the galaxy between its upwardly curving horns. They kept coming, one after the other. Her supplies

sat below her in a half circle as she painted. The fire burned away behind the iron.

When she reached the last, unfilled compartment of the spider web, she paused, waiting for the next transition to come. And then it did. The whale. She remembered it all. The blue whale, spiraling upwards in a red tinted sea, bursting out of the web that contained everything else. But the redness of the ocean was nearly imperceptible because it came from a fire that rested below the infinite ocean. When she finished the whale she began painting a vast vagina into which it was swimming. At this point her work was taking place nearly at the limit of her reach. Soon she would need something to stand on in order to continue upwards. The vagina took on shape and when it was completed she began on the thighs; draped in a green robe, the woman, whoever she was, spreading her legs to allow the blue whale to enter. Skin color dark, pristine, elegant. Vagina covered in scraggly hair, worn out, having giving birth countless times, having allowed countless things to enter. When she finished the thighs she started on the feet. The woman would be straddling the spider web. Her bent knees, as of now, were out of Rosemary's reach and she would have to complete them later. She quickly finished the feet and made them bleed in with what lay below them in the web.

"Okay," she said, stepping back and rubbing her sore biceps. "That's it for now."

She smiled at what she had done, oblivious to the fact that five hours had elapsed since she started. All that she could think about was what the face would look like whenever she finally painted it. And then she realized she was starving. She put down her brush, promised herself to clean up as soon as she was done eating and went into the kitchen to fix herself a late breakfast.

EVELYN LAY FLAT on her back, head on one of the two pillows on the bed. A cigarette lay between her index and middle finger and she held it between her breasts between drags. Jones lay on his side, his right leg curved and sitting atop both of hers. His right hand was on her stomach.

"Now do you finally believe I didn't put the marbles there?" she asked him.

"Why? Because you just fucked me?"

"Well, do you believe me or not?"

"I do..." He grabbed her cigarette and took a quick drag. "I do. Assuming that it wasn't you who..."

"Assuming?"

"If it wasn't you...which it was not," he said, smiling, "then what does it mean?"

"What does what mean?"

"The marbles. What are they supposed to represent? A pentagram?"

"Rosemary drew the lines between the marbles. To her they represented a pentagram. To humans, the pentagram can represent a lot. Just take our bodies. If you spread your arms and legs while standing upright you form a pentagram. The number five obviously means a lot to us. There's so much."

"What about all the Satanic stuff? I asked Rosemary about it but she didn't really answer my question."

"The pentagram was linked with Satan through a long, slow process. Satan himself was created through another long process. He was the ruler of the place where sinners went, the place where homosexuals, infidels and pagans were thrown so they'd be tortured for eternity. The old pagan systems were given a definite place in Christendom, but it was a place with horrible connotations. People were taught to fear the afterworld they believed in because, so the Christians told them, it was a place filled with indescribable agony. You can see how Christianity systematically built their idea of hell from the beliefs of the heathens. To a Christian, the pentagram is a symbol to be feared because it represents the beliefs of people they were trying to conquer and repress. But to someone who does not believe in their dogma, it is a symbol of uninhibited freedom. It represents what cannot be explained or put into a hierarchy. It is a symbol which in effect cancels itself out because, once what it represents is understood, the need for symbols vanishes."

"I'm not really following, Eve."

"Tell me what you know about Saturn."

"I...we were talking about Satan."

"Come on." She took a long drag and exhaled through a smile. "Tell me about Saturn. It'll all connect in the end."

"I hope so." He rolled over onto his back and rubbed his eyes. "Saturn. The god, right? Not the planet."

"Uh-huh."

"I remember one story about him. I think this is about Cronus, though"

"It doesn't matter, they were the same."

"Okay. So he was the son of Uranus and Gaia. Gaia was angry with Uranus because he kept all of their kids in this prison or something."

"That's right. And that prison was called Tartaros. Do you remember Rosemary telling you about it?"

"I think so. I didn't know that."

"Keep going."

"Finally Gaia gets fed up with Uranus telling her what to do and keeping her children locked up so she tries to get all of her kids to kill him. Cronus was the only one who wanted to do it. So he sneaks up on his father and castrates him. After cutting off his penis he throws it into the ocean and from the penis comes Aphrodite."

Jones bit his lower lip and shook his head.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm trying to remember more. Doesn't...he gets overthrown by his own son, by Zeus, Zeus overthrows him later, right?"

"He does. And it was Gaia who aided his downfall, just as she had with her own husband, his father. You see, the Greeks, they didn't like Cronus a whole lot. He came before the Olympians and everything before them was barbaric and cruel. But the Romans turned him into Saturn and he became a relatively kind, benevolent god, a god who watched over their harvests."

"Maybe that's because the Romans were crueler themselves."

"That probably has something to do with it."

"Okay, Eve. How does this link up with the pentagram?"

Before answering, Evelyn took a last drag, sat up and put the butt out in the ashtray on her bed table. She coughed, crossed her legs and closed her eyes. Jones sat up with her, laying his feet down on the cold floor.

"I told Rosemary about what the pentagram meant to the Babylonians," she said. "The top point was Venus, the others were Mercury, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Venus was Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Mercury was Hermes, Mars was Ares, Jupiter was Zeus and Saturn was Cronus."

"But not to the Babylonians, though."

"Of course not. They had their own gods. Those five planets, which were just stars to them, were what the pentagram represented. The star which we now know as the planet Venus was, very literally, their goddess Ishtar."

"So what?" Jones said, rubbing his forehead. "How does this connect with the pentagram stuck in my wall? I really would like to know."

Evelyn sighed loudly. She unfolded her legs, laid back down on the bed and got under the covers. She did not look irritated or annoyed. She looked relaxed, calm and patient. Jones, however, was beginning to feel the anger he had been feeling for the last few days.

"You'll see it when you're ready. I'm going to take a nap."

"A nap, huh?"

"Why don't you go write. When I wake up I'll come over and tell you my dreams."

"Your dreams?"

"That's right," she said, closing her eyes. "My dreams."

"I'm trying really hard to not be angry right now."

"Good for you. I don't care. I'm tired."

What followed was typical of Jones and his emotions. But Evelyn only heard a few of the words that began to pour out of his mouth. In a few minutes, while Jones was in the process of getting dressed, she fell asleep.

ROSEMARY WAS CONNECTING the inner left thigh with the vagina she had painted when Jones returned from Evelyn's. She did not turn around. He closed the door, got out of his jacket and stepped out of his boots. The fire, which she had neglected and had gone out forty minutes earlier, was blazing once again, providing more heat than was necessary. This was the first thing Jones noticed upon entering the house.

"Rosemary?" he said, sitting down on the couch.

"Yeah?"

She continued giving the taugth flesh its tones, brush moving slowly along the wood. Between the strokes, she could almost hear Jones gathering the thoughts which, she knew, must be as sprawling and rich as her painting.

"You promise you're not making any of this up?" he asked.

"I shouldn't have to promise."

"But do you?"

"Why would I lie to you?"

"Maybe you truly don't think you're lying."

"I know I'm not lying. Just stop." She dropped her brush into a glass of dirty water and turned around. "Before you get going again, just stop. Why don't you go write or something."

"Both of you want me to write."

"Then take it as a sign, baby." She walked over to him, knelt down and firmly grabbed both of his bent knees. "I don't know what else to tell you. Your refusal to even listen to us is part of the whole thing."

"What whole thing?"

"I can't tell you. But you'll understand if you're patient."

"So I haven't been fucking patient? I've been..."

"Bye, Jones," she said, suddenly standing up.

She was out of the house before he had time to calm down enough to turn around. When he finally did and she was not there, a hint, a small hint of what he was to later learn massaged his mind, briefly put it at ease and then kicked it up to the roof of his skull. All of this happened too fast for rational comprehension. Jones was left alone with only his broken thoughts to point him in a direction with no coordinates.

FOR THE FIRST time, the fox was waiting for Rosemary with no intention of running away. It sat on the path between the snow stacks, head tilted slightly to the left. She cautiously approached it, expecting a repeat of all her past encounters. When she was only a foot away, it was exceedingly clear that it would not flee from her. Exhilarated by the proximity to this creature, she swiftly bent down to pet its head. There was a moment of apprehension in its yellow eyes and a slight tremor in its red coated body, but soon enough the two beings were connected, Rosemary smiling as the fur bristled under her cold fingertips, the fox closing its eyes in pleasure as it pushed its head up to meet her.

"Hey, Rose."

She looked up and saw Evelyn standing beside her. When she looked back down, all she saw were a few paw prints lightly inscribed in the snow.

"Where'd it go?" she asked, spinning around, looking for it.

"I don't know."

"Man..." She stopped looking and walked over to her friend. "It was finally letting me touch it."

"That must mean that it likes you."

Rosemary grinned as she asked:

"What is it?"

"A fox."

IT TOOK JONES an hour to get off the couch. What finally made him do so was a confusion so real, so palpable, that he could visualize it. Being able to visualize it, he knew he would be able to write it down. So he made his way over to his desk, grabbed a fresh sheet of paper, uncapped his ink, dipped his pen into the darkness and began to write the fifth part of his poem.

THE TWO WOMEN walked over to the buried fire pit holding each others hands, both wearing their black coats. Dozens of crows were suspended on the branches of the trees towering above them. All of them were silent, watchful and appearing to be waiting for something. What that could be, Rosemary did not know, and it was this question she was attempting to answer as she and Evelyn sat down against the trunk of one of the trees.

"You alright?" Evelyn asked.

"Yeah." Rosemary lowered her eyes from the birds. "Just wondering what they're doing up there."

"I love those birds."

"Me, too. They're my favorite."

"Crows and ravens are the smartest birds. I read once that they've been seen flying over Mount Everest."

"I'd believe it. Everest, man. When was the last time you thought about that fucking place? Mount Everest. It really is on the other side of the world. Not that I really even want to go there and not that I couldn't get over there if I really wanted to, but why would I really want to? Seems like that happened with a lot of things after the war was over."

"What does that tell you?" Evelyn asked.

"That we don't really need some of those things we had. People could go wherever they wanted to,

but no one had any connection to the place they were. You couldn't even really say you lived in a place half the time."

"Right. The people who lived in the Himalayas felt connected to that place, to those mountains. And when the Europeans came there, they were astounded not by the grandeur of the actual mountain but by their determination to climb to its summit. The mountain was something to be surmounted and conquered, whereas to the people who lived close to it their whole lives, the mountains were the mountains. And then, because so many people were climbing it for so many decades, all this trash started to build up on the slopes. Whatever it was that could be called a thrill that those first Western climbers felt diminished to such an extent that, by the end, people were climbing it just to say they had climbed it. There was no connection besides a mental, rational one."

"The more..." Rosemary coughed and cleared her throat. "The more I learn from all this, the more I hate rationality."

"You shouldn't hate it."

"Why?"

"Because you and I will never be able to get rid of it completely."

"What do you mean?"

"Rationality comes from irrationality. Irrationality, the literal word and term irrationality, is a product of rational thinking. All language is rational. It is ordered and systematic. From chaos comes order. As much as we might try and deny it, we need it."

"But not so much as to give it total power over us."

"Exactly. That is why I told you about Pan and Hermes. Hermes won that particular battle. Jesus' madness lost out to the words of the New Testament and the interpretations of the saints. Humanity saw the power of its mind and slowly became intoxicated with it. Groups who thought alike began to subdue, murder and enslave other groups of humans who did not want to control the world. They did not want to restrict the power of their reason and over time, all of those restrictions vanished. But there was always resistance to this."

"And we won?"

"We won nothing, Rosemary."

"Wh..." She stood up and looked down at her friend. "What do you mean?"

"You only recently became aware of these things we're discussing now. The people down in the valley haven't seen the things you have recently seen. Down there in town, they look back at what we did and they see a victory."

"Well what the fuck do you see? We won the ability to be sitting here, right now, by these trees, talking about this shit."

"You want to know what I see when I look back?"

"What?"

"Madness. One group that wanted less rationality employed rationality in order to destroy those whose rationality was destroying the planet. In those terms you can call it a victory. But there is no such thing as a victory. We are not victorious, nor will we ever be victorious over anything. Hermes and Pan are still two different gods. Ishtar and her sister Ereshkigal are still separate, queens of the over and under worlds. We are still terrified of the blackness inside of us, that fluttering darkness which breathes life into everything. Look at you a few days ago. Look at Jones now."

"What about you?" Rosemary snapped, slightly angry. "I guess you've mastered it somehow then, magically?"

"No!" Evelyn stood up and moved her face up to Rosemary's. "Listen to what I am saying. There is no victory, no mastery, no supremacy over the darkness. There is only change, flux and mutation. There is Aphrodite and Venus and then there is Zeus and Jupiter. We think we possess enough knowledge to separate them but we don't. And we separated them nonetheless. But we could see, even then, what was happening. Zeus was terrified of the powerful children Metis would bear and so he tried to prevent their births by eating her. Out of fear he tried to prevent the unknown from consuming him. And then Prometheus came along, saw what was happening, and began to bash Zeus on the head. Athena sprung from that hole in his head. That's an example of the oneness divided into different parts but revealing the nature of the whole. The rational attempting to repress the irrational!"

"The irrational came out, though."

"Of course it did. None of us can help it. The problem is accepting it."

"Well..." Rosemary sat back down and Evelyn joined her. "It isn't easy."

"It isn't. Jupiter is always terrified of Venus because he sees her power. We need to reconcile what they represent inside of us. No more suppression, no more fear. That is all. There is no moving forward or backwards. There is merely movement. Some movements will destroy us if too many of them

are taken.”

“I think...” Once again, Rosemary stood up, only this time for good. “I think I need a cigarette. You got one?”

Evelyn did not immediately rise. She remained where she was, looking at her friend expectantly. She could see it was there and that it would only be a matter of time before it happened. Just as she stood up, several of the crows cried and the whole murder took flight at the same time. Their departure shook the powder from the needles, causing a brief flurry of snow to fall around the two women.

“Yeah,” Evelyn said, rising. “I got one.”

WHEN IT ENDED, it did not end all at once. Some regiments advanced on an enemy that simply was not there. Others encountered vast columns of troops walking towards them with their hands atop their heads, dressed in uniforms that were, at this point, as disheveled and irregular as their own. In some places, however, the fighting did not stop at once. In those places, the chain of command had been so undermined that communication was impossible and the troops continued on their now suicidal quest. Jones was attached to a regiment that had to keep fighting, even as surrender was breaking along the front like waves.

It was a major city in the farmland, resting on a large, meandering river. It was completely occupied, the last of the heavy weapons in the area stationed within its confines. Jones found himself at the front of the advance, walking through the abandoned subdivisions on the outskirts of the city, constantly terrified. The soldiers up ahead either did not know what their comrades were doing along the line or simply did not care, choosing to continue the fight. Both possibilities frightened him.

Someone to his left stepped on a landmine. Jones only saw the flash and registered a sudden sensation in his right calf. His instinct pulled him blindly behind a burnt out sedan. The first thing he noticed was that no one was firing their weapons. The second thing he noticed was the complete absence of the person who had set off the mine. The third thing he noticed was that a piece of metal was stuck in his calf. He dropped his gun, gritted his teeth and pulled out the shrapnel. While he was bandaging it up, a tank was advancing upon them.

Just as he tied the final knot in his bandage he began to hear his comrades call his name. This synchronized with the sound of the tank coming into earshot. They called his name again, he grabbed his gun and then sprinted back in the direction he had come from. Everyone was retreating to a more covered location, minds collectively on the tank and the soldiers trailing behind it. Jones was the furthest behind. When the tank released its first round it exploded ten feet away from him. He was blown into what had once been the lawn of a four bedroom, two garage house but was now only a vast patch of scarred, lifeless dirt. He remained unconscious for an hour after this. When he awoke, ears bleeding, he saw his comrades advancing towards the city. Thirty feet to the left was the remains of the tank. A charred body was draped over the turret, its legs still inside the machine. That was the last time he saw any fighting.

When the surrender began, Rosemary was stuck in a tiled bathroom with her friend Niki. They had been there for fourteen hours, hiding from the bloodshed outside. For the past week, they had been on the other side of the front, moving through the shadows of an occupied city. The civilian population was about one eighth of what it had been before the war, but Rosemary and Niki found it worthwhile to sneak inside and return to their old propaganda work, using spray-paint rather than guns. They did have pistols tucked into their pants, though, and had used them since they had been there.

With their bellies aching for days, they covered wall after wall with phrases, images and news. They were spotted by no less than thirty civilians and, much to their relief, were never reported. The military had kept the water system working for their machines and dehydration was not a concern for them. But food was another matter entirely. Those who had any had very little, most of what was coming in from the farms going straight to the soldiers. Despite this, Rosemary and Niki were fed two times by two strangers. Both exchanges were wordless and nearly faceless.

The first time, Rosemary noticed a figure suddenly move in front of the window of a building she thought was abandoned. She and Niki put their cans away and scrambled out of view. As they were retreating, Niki turned her head back towards the building. The front door suddenly opened and someone dropped a brown paper bag on the front step.

“Wait,” Niki hissed.

“What?”

Responding did not occur to her. She knew what the bag contained. Obeying one of the oldest of the instincts, she sprinted across the open street before Rosemary could stop her. She grabbed the

bag, yelled out a thank you, and ran back. When she was within reach, Rosemary grabbed her and the two did not stop running until they were back in their hideout. After catching her breath, Niki opened the bag. Within it sat a slightly brown pear, a few dozen peanuts and the cooked thigh of a chicken. The two women began to cry.

The second time they were fed they were both in the same hideout, trying to sleep on the filthy carpet. Suddenly there was knock on the door. Niki was the first one to get up, pistol in her hand. Rosemary pulled hers out and pointed it at the door which Niki was slowly creeping towards. After a brief hesitation, she threw it open and pointed her gun at an old woman, draped in a black coat, her face hidden in shadows. In her hands was a loaf of bread and two oranges. The gun began to shake in Niki's hands. Rosemary, seeing what might happen, lowered her pistol and approached the woman.

"Thank you," she said to the old woman.

After handing off the food, the woman silently turned around and swiftly walked down the alley back to her home. Niki closed the door, put her pistol down and heaved a deep sigh. Rosemary sat down beside her and began to peel an orange which they would share a few moments later.

And so when the surrender began, the two women found themselves in a dingy, tiled bathroom that rested in the basement of a building that had once been ten stories but was now three. Fourteen hours had passed, completely silent. Neither of them had anything to say to one another. For the past week their words had been entirely utilitarian and the reality outside of the building required no language to explain or suppress. The machineguns went off, the explosions shook the foundations of the building and a few of the screams punctured into the bathroom. Fourteen hours stretched into thirty seven. And then it stopped.

The women waited another hour before rising and spent another hour slowly ascending to the street level. When they came out into the light they saw carnage worse than they had ever encountered. One woman was torn in half. Rosemary saw what she thought was her missing legs sitting a few feet away but through the holes burned into the pant fabric she saw a pair of testicles. Two men lay atop of each other. The one on top was not there of his own volition. He had been shot thirteen times and just happened to fall on another man. The other man had only a fraction of a head. The rest of it was presumably the red and white matter spread out on the ground ahead of him. Two still smoking skeletons lay stretched out near a blackened jeep. The bodies stretched up and down the road. As far as their eyes could discern, it did not end. Immediately in front of them, above the half of the woman, was one of their messages, written in red on a bullet scarred wall. Rosemary read what it said but did not care enough to let it enter her mind. The words were empty now. Perhaps they had given hope to a few people living in the once occupied city, but at that point she could have cared less. The two women looked at each other, nodded, and began to walk through the blood towards the front. After walking for an hour they were picked up by a platoon on patrol who informed them that it was all over. What remained of the enemy army would be picked off by the advancing regiments coming in from the opposite direction. The city was taken. The fighting had stopped. Niki and Rosemary never saw each other again.

After being wounded Evelyn had remained in a field hospital for a month and a half. Once she was discharged, she volunteered for infantry, despite her doctor's warnings. On the day she was to head back to the line the camp received word that massive amounts of the enemy had surrendered and that the last cities were being taken. By mid-afternoon, the un-needed regiments returned. By nightfall, five of the seven cities had been taken. When word of the sixth came through, a vast party began to take place in the countryside which housed the camp.

Evelyn floated through the crowd of tens of thousands, kissing everyone she wanted to kiss, smoking whatever she wanted to smoke, drinking whatever she wanted to drink. She had sex standing up with a boy a decade younger than her. Giant bonfires were created and the multitude of people began to swirl around them. The radiant flames licked the darkness above, blotting out the stars. The ever-growing heat pushed the people back as more and more fuel was added to it.

She did not see who started it, but five hours into the party, which at this point was well over fifty thousand strong, someone carried one of their flags towards the fire. Everyone seemed to stop moving as they watched the solid black rectangle approach the flames. Dozens of other black flags were raised and joined in the procession. Evelyn pushed her way through the crowd, wanting to be close to what she knew was going to happen.

The flags continued to arrive and soon there were hundreds of them lining the bonfire. One of the carriers walked forward, stretching the flag out as far as she could. The other followed. The poles extended out towards the fire, hovering above the shifting furnace. And then, all at once, the black flags were dipped into the flames. They were destroyed immediately in the intense heat and the second they were a massive, deafening roar broke out amongst the crowd. Evelyn began to weep so hard

she had to hold onto the person next to her. The darkness had been consumed by flame. The form was surrendered to formlessness. The stranger rubbed Evelyn's back and she rubbed his. At that moment neither of them knew, but everyone in the crowd, everyone, every single human being standing in that field, under the stars, orbiting around the raging fires, all of them had their cheeks covered in flickering red tears.

FOR THE PAST fifteen minutes, Jones had been sitting at his desk, staring at the newly finished fifth part of his poem. Three crumpled sheets of paper lay on the floor, near his feet, containing aborted permutations of the stanzas that now sat before him. He could find no fault with the current five stanzas but was desperately trying to find some error, some unnecessary vagueness that could be excised. It was while he was reading over it for the seventeenth time that Rosemary and Evelyn returned.

"Hey, baby," Rosemary said, stepping out of her boots.

Evelyn closed the door behind her and took off her coat. Both women hung their dark coverings up on the rack by the door. Jones wanted to turn around but at the moment could not face either of them. They had been privy to his absolute and total confusion and therefore, also, his perceived weakness.

"Hey," he mumbled.

Rosemary left Evelyn at the door and walked over to her painting. Her eyes fell on the uncompleted right thigh. All that was needed now was to connect it with the vagina in order to be done with the woman's lower half. After cracking her fingers she picked up a brush and continued her work. Evelyn waited until the process was underway before walking over to the couch behind Jones and sitting down.

"Have you written another section?" she asked, coolly.

"Uh-huh."

"I had this strange dream earlier."

"That's interesting."

"Want to hear about it?"

Rosemary was not listening to their exchange which, since it had started, had not involved either Jones or Evelyn making direct eye contact.

"Not really."

"It's amazing, sometimes, where you go when you're in that state. All you have to draw on are the people and things around you; the culture, limited or expansive, that you're enveloped in."

"I'm not in the mood right now, Evelyn. I'm writing."

"It didn't look like you were writing when I came in."

"That's because I was trying to figure out if...why don't you go bother Rosemary? I'm sure she'd enjoy it more."

"You're being a little child, Jones."

"I don't care. Leave me alone."

"If you are going to ask if I somehow saw it, why don't you try answering it yourself" Evelyn said, taking another drag. "I was outside with Rosemary. I am not that good at sneaking up on people, especially when they're alone in an empty house with all the windows sealed and with only one door."

"Still, how did you know?" he asked, voice cracking.

Rosemary dropped her brush and joined Evelyn on the couch.

"I knew because I dreamt it, just as Rosemary did."

"Are we dreaming the same thing?" Rosemary asked.

"Of course not," Jones snapped. "This is more..."

"Insanity?" Evelyn offered. "No. It's what it is. You may call it insanity if you wish."

"You may call it insanity if you wish. It probably fits with the definition of insanity. I'm sure many people down in the valley would call it insanity as well. Perhaps they'd call it collective insanity, group psychosis. You could call it that as well. Or you could accept it."

"As what?" he asked.

"As the truth. Accept that it is happening"

"What is happening, for fucks sake? What?"

A sudden explosion of thought took place in Rosemary's mind. In the midst of the exchange between Jones and Evelyn, she stood up slowly enough to avoid Jones' attention and made her way back to the wall where she resumed painting.

"Do you need a definition?" Evelyn asked.

"It'd be nice, especially given the fucking insanity...the...first I think you're maliciously trying to drive Rosemary out of her mind because of some sort of artistic jealousy towards me and then I think she's just making everything up and now all of a sudden you both can vaguely describe the poems I write so...yeah, an explanation would do me a world of good right now."

"I've already tried explaining it to you."

"Explain it again!"

Rosemary did not even flinch as Jones yelled this. Her brush was speedily filling in the remainder of the right thigh. The image of those two, strong, dark legs wrapping around the blue whale was about to take on a concrete form.

"What good would it do?" Evelyn asked. "You don't want to hear it."

"Of course I do, Evelyn! I'm fucking asking you!"

"You don't need to yell."

"Oh...come on. Don't give me that shit now!"

"Yelling won't help you get what you want."

"But neither will being calm, apparently."

"Calm is precisely what you haven't been these last..."

"And whose fault is that?"

"Is it mine?" Evelyn asked, putting out her cigarette.

"No, it's the bird's fault. And what about the shit with the novel?"

Rosemary finished the thigh and with a smaller brush began to add the flowing green robe which was to be partially draped over each leg. Above the navel the robe was to come together again, but below the un-painted navel it was pulled apart by the woman's firm, powerful knees.

"What are you talking about now?" Evelyn asked, preparing to roll another cigarette. "The novel. Okay. What about it?"

"Why did you give it to her?"

"She's in the fucking room, Jones! What's your problem?"

"My problem?" He looked at Rosemary and saw she was painting. "Whatever. She's off in the fog you put her in."

"You're not gonna let that go, are you? I. Me. I put her there, right?"

"She wasn't there before."

"How the fuck do you know!" she yelled, shreds of tobacco falling to the floor. "If your estimation of her is so little that you'd think I could just make her insane, that she could just become insane, then you obviously don't know her at all and you sure as fuck don't know me! And this jealousy shit. I've never been jealous of you and your writing. Not because I don't like it but because I don't fucking care to compare myself with you. You don't even want to read my book, you just want to make sure you're better than I am."

"That's a bunch of..."

"Crap, right? Of course! Deny everything, Jones. Keep it all locked away. I'm sure that's the healthy, sane thing to do. It's not lying if no one has any fucking idea what you're really thinking, oh no. That's a bunch of crap right there."

Rosemary pulled her brush away from the green robe. Now both the robe and the thigh were connected with the rest of the body. Toes, ankles, calves, thighs and the large, hair surrounded vagina admitting the whale into it. Green draping all of it. The rest of the robe, the rest of the body would come later. And then the face. But for now she had finished and the lower half of the faceless woman, the genesis of all the mystery below. It had as much form as she could possibly give it. Her eyes drifted down to the pentagram as she put the paint covered brush in the glass of water. There were only two that she had not pressed. She suddenly remembered what Evelyn had told her, about the top marble representing Venus to the Babylonians. But she did not want to press that one. The other was far more enticing, for as she looked at it, the red marble took on the appearance of the largest of the planets. Jupiter, covered in gas. Jupiter, the father. Jupiter.

"Fine!" he snapped, standing up and throwing his chair to the ground. "I'm sick of you thinking you're above me, like you don't even have to talk to me about art or anything because your writing's too good to even show to me."

"Where the fuck did you get that, Jones?"

"Where do you think I got it?"

"And you're calling us insane?" Evelyn said, smiling. "You've made up this elaborate nightmare and have been calling it reality for who knows how long. I've never thought that. Ever. Don't you see, Jones. There's no such thing as sanity or insanity. You can make up whatever you want to. It's all in your mind."

"Jones?" Rosemary said.

"Fine. It's in my mind, it's in your mind, but I'm done."

"Done?" Evelyn asked.

"Jones?" Rosemary repeated.

"I'm getting the fuck out of..."

"Jones!"

With this he finally turned around and looked at Rosemary. Her right index finger was extended and hovering over the upper left hand marble. She had a confident smile on her face, a smile filled with ease, assuredness and calm.

"I love you, Jones," she said.

The instant she pressed the marble, Rosemary disappeared.

THE WOMAN SAT down in the chair behind the desk. The lamp on the desk, which burned oil taken from the whale, illuminated the pulsating walls surrounded her. The constantly expanding and deflating walls excreted a saliva-like substance which trickled down the irregular contours until they reached the floor where the thick streams continued to flow, freed from the shackles of gravity.

"What is it you wish to know?" the woman asked, pushing her chair in.

"Where am I?"

"Inside a whale, of course." She picked up her pen, dipped it in the ink and continued to compose whatever it was she was writing. "Any more silly questions?"

"Why can't I remember anything?"

The woman shook her head and smiled.

"You remember everything, my lovely."

"Not when I wake up."

"There is remembering and then there is remembering. I believe you wish to be able to recount, verbally, what you have seen. But how can you recount a dream? A dream is to have dreamt. It is a feeling to be felt."

"It would make it a lot easier for me."

"For you?"

The woman stopped writing and looked up. Her face could not be seen. It was there; the eyes, the lips, the nose, the ears, the chin, the cheeks, the forehead. But it was not there. A connection is not possible if there is nothing to connect it to.

"No"

"It would make it easier for others," the woman said, resuming her composition. "But not for you. You are the one who had dreamt the dream. If you were to start discoursing on the dream it would stop being the dream and become the discourse. That is something else, but not the dream."

"Then how can I talk about it?"

"With words, dear. Nothing is preventing you from describing it. Only do not expect it to be the dream."

With her right hand the woman pulled up the sleeve of her green robe which was getting in the way of her left hand, the one she was writing with. The whale continued in its downward spiral, eyes open, mouth closed. The lamp burned.

"Why not, dad?"

"Look what you did." Her father pointed at the bag which had formerly held dozens of pieces of candy and now held only two. "You ate all that candy and now you want to know why you can't have more."

"But I want some more."

"I said no"

"But why?"

"Because it's bad for you, eating that much candy."

The father and daughter sat at the kitchen table. His feet touched the linoleum covered ground, hers did not. The yellow, electric light above the sink was on, not strong enough to erase all of the

shadows.

"I don't feel bad," the daughter said.

"Not yet."

The daughter shook her head.

"I won't feel bad," she said, smiling. "I promise."

"Listen, I said no. You woke your mother and me up and I'm tired. I'll put you back in bed and..."

"But I'm hungry."

"Well..." The father rubbed his eyes. "I can make you a sandwich."

"I don't like sandwiches."

"But you...you ate one today," he said, laughing.

"I don't want one."

"You can have whatever you want, just not the candy."

"I want to talk to mom."

"No, no, no. You're lucky you're talking to me. Your mother would be very angry if you asked her for some candy..." He looked up at the metal plated clock hanging above the doorway. "At twelve forty five at night. The reason you can't sleep isn't because you're hungry, it's because you ate so much candy today."

"I don't care. You don't make any sense. You're just being mean."

"I'm not being mean."

"Then let me have some candy. Why is it bad for me?"

"It'll rot your teeth out."

"No it won't. There's only two pieces left. After I eat em they'll be gone and then I won't want any more candy"

For a moment, the father was about to give in to his daughter's reasoning. Her intelligence, which he did not believe either he or her mother were responsible for, never failed to amaze him. He could simply let her eat those two remaining pieces of candy and then put her to bed. Perhaps she would be squirming around for a few more hours, but those two candies could not push off the inevitable sugar crash for too much longer. But he did not trust that tomorrow she would not ask for more candy and throw a fit if she did not get any. At least tomorrow there would be the two candies. And he could get his point across.

"No, honey. You can have them at lunch tomorrow, okay."

"You hate me!" she screamed, jumping off her chair.

She stormed out of the kitchen, walked heavily down the hallway and into her bedroom. The door was slammed but not strongly enough for the bolt to click into place, let alone make any noise.

The father remained at the kitchen table, hands clasped over his mouth. For ten minutes he sat there, trying to pick out the sounds of his daughter from the wind shaking the trees outside. He thought he could hear her crying. Other times he thought he heard her talking. But her mother did not wake up, so his daughter must not have been doing anything too loud. Nevertheless, something did not sit right with him there at the kitchen table. After ten minutes had passed he stood up, turned off the yellow light that hung above the sink and walked to his daughter's bedroom to resume the debate which would last as long as the two of them were alive.

IT DID NOT happen all at once. It could not have happened all at once, the woman's belly suddenly growing distended. Nevertheless, beneath the shimmering green fabric of her robe, the woman appeared to be in the last phases of a normal human pregnancy. She remained behind her desk, writing with the same pen on the same paper, always seeming to be on the verge of finishing a page but never quite getting there.

"Who's the father?"

"The father?" the woman repeated without looking up. "What father?"

"The father of the...of your child."

"Do you see any doors in this room?"

She turned around and scanned the pulsing walls of the room. There was nothing resembling a door of any kind. The saliva-like substance streamed across the floor and, for the first time, she noticed that, when a stream was on the verge of running into her feet it split apart and instead flowed around them. After making this observation she turned back to the woman in the green robe and shook her head.

"No, there isn't a door."

"Then who could have impregnated me?"

"I don't know."

"Certainly not someone who looks like you or I"

"I guess not."

"Then who might it be?"

"I have no idea. That's why I asked you."

"You know..." The woman finished her last sentence, put down her pen and stared at her. "It never ceases to amaze me how, when you finally get here, you do not lose a bit of your sassiness. Why is that?"

"Maybe it's because every time I ask a question you answer with a question."

"Is that so? That's funny. However, in regards to your initial question, I believe I have provided just enough for you to answer it..." The woman closed her eyes, took a deep breath and adjusted herself in her chair. "To answer the question for yourself"

It was clear that the woman was in some sort of discomfort. Her hands had fallen down to her belly and each of her movements betrayed a painfulness that, despite her best efforts, could not be hidden.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. You could help me out of this chair, though."

She walked around the desk and as she approached the woman the air around her seemed to grow thick but not altogether unpleasant. It was as if the atoms floating within the room had grown thousands of tentacles which, as they flew past her body, massaged her every pore and nerve, relaxing them to such a degree that, when she finally had her fingers around the woman's strong bicep, she felt she had known her since birth. She helped the woman up and walked her over to the front of the desk.

"I just...need to lie down here."

Lowering her, she noticed that the woman's belly had grown larger than it had been only a few moments earlier. The woman's pain seemed to have increased along with it. Once she was on the ground, the woman pushed her hands away, laid her head down on the soft ground and raised her knees up to the air. The streams of liquid, obeying the laws governing the room, parted around the woman, forming a shape which, in no little way, resembled a large vagina.

"Now, I need you to think honey," the woman said. "Whose baby is this?"

"But you just said...if no one can get into this room, then..."

"What is this room?"

"It's inside the whale, right?"

The woman shrugged. She pulled up the bottom of her robe, spread her legs and revealed her now dilated womb. The pain had pulled her eyelids and her teeth together. Beads of sweat were breaking out on her forehead.

"You tell me," she said, quietly, impatiently.

"Yeah, we're in a whale," she said, not as confidently as she would have liked to. "But..." And then she began to understand. "Aside from me, there's only one living thing around here."

"And that is..."

"The whale? You're carrying the whale's baby?"

"You know...for someone who dislikes ending sentences with questions, you certainly do your fair share of it. Yes, I am carrying the whale's child."

"How did it get inside of you?"

"Goodness..." The woman bit her lip. "Not now, honey. What I really need you to do is help me, okay. He's obviously really busy swimming in his endless circles. Not that he could...goodness. Come here, come here!"

She motioned for her to get in front of her. And so she kneeled down in front of the woman's spread legs, heart suddenly rising to her throat. The child was coming. Through the dilated womb she could see the head, just barely protruding out of the comfort which it had known and into a world which was as absurd as it was inevitable.

WITH BLOOD DRIPPING from his nose, the son slowly made his way back home. A path, made more by the deer than by his family, extended all the way from the grove, through the meadow and up to his house. The kitchen window was aglow with light from the electric bulbs burning on the ceiling. This normally comforting sight, seen after a long day of play, now became one filled with menace, for within this light, behind the window, lay the person who would soon judge him for his actions.

The trampled down dirt flowed under his feet unseen. Crickets sung in the tall, spring grass all around him. With the purple sky behind it, he could make out the branches of the oak tree which lay beside the path. As he walked by he instinctively ran his fingers along the bark, something he

had been accustomed to doing since his mother first allowed him to wander in the wilderness alone. Without knowing why, the tree comforted him. Some may say it was merely conditioning. Touching the tree was linked with the return home. That return may have signified an end to the days play but it also signified food, attention and love. The remaining steps from the oak tree to the house passed with more ease than the steps from the grove to the tree.

His footsteps made more noise on the stairs to the kitchen door than he would have liked and before he could open the door his mother was there, nearly ripping it off its hinges in her worry which, as in many cases, is all too easily mistaken for anger.

"Where have you...what happened?" she said, kneeling down and immediately wiping the blood from his upper lip. "Did...who did this to you?"

A shadow approached. When he looked up he saw his father, arms crossed over his chest, staring down at him. He knew that, once the story was told, the blame would fall on him. He knew that he was in the wrong, at least in his father's eyes. He knew he could not escape this. And so he launched into the story, holding back the tears which he knew would not garner any sympathy.

"Jack didn't let me hold the stick."

"What stick?" his mother asked, wiping the blood onto her pant leg.

"We found a stick that looked like a sword."

"Did you find it or did Jack find it?" his father asked.

"Jack," he replied, keeping his eyes on his mother. "But I kept asking him. I just wanted to see it for a little bit. I would have given it back to him. I tried to take it from him and then we had a fight."

His mother tightened her lip in halfway suppressed smile.

"I take it Jack won," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"Did he hit you with the stick?" his father asked, calmly.

"Yeah, he did."

"Does your nose hurt?"

"Kind of."

His father sighed as he knelt down and beckoned his son forward. At first he hesitated moving towards his father, expecting a beating like the one he received for stealing his sister's doll and giving it to a girl he was in love with. But that seemed completely different. He cautiously approached and was met with gentle hands landing on his shoulders and pulling him forward.

"Tell me if this hurts, okay."

"Okay."

His father placed his right index finger on the middle of his nose and slowly applied pressure. No serious discomfort was felt in his nerves and his father, seeing that there was nothing wrong with his son's nose, pulled his finger back.

"It's not broken."

"Good," his mother said. "You okay, honey?"

"I'm fine," he said, now keeping his eyes on his father.

"Go wash your nose off and then we can eat, alright?" his father said. "I'll talk to Jack's mom tomorrow. Just don't be too mean to him, okay. Both of you brats can be pretty greedy when you want to be."

"Sorry, dad."

"You don't need to be sorry to me. Go on. Go wash up."

When he was halfway to the bathroom, he could not remember walking out of the kitchen. When he was in the bathroom he could not remember walking there. Expectations die slowly and his expectations were no exception. Why his father had not reacted as he had in the past he did not know. The laughter coming from the kitchen, heard through the sound of the running sink, only perplexed him more. In fact, everything that followed that night; the jovial dinner, the second serving of desert, the extended bedtime and the indifference as to whether or not he was actually going to sleep after they tucked him in, all served, in the course of six hours, to completely change the image he had of his father. Looking back, later in life, he recognized this moment as being the first time the static image his father had attempted to implant in him first began to disintegrate. As to why his father abandoned the way of parenting that his own father had practiced on him, he never received an answer. When he died, his father took all those secrets with him.

THE CHILD'S SKIN was translucent. Quickly pulsing through the flesh were countless streams of light. The more that the woman in the green robe pushed, the more that the baby emerged from her womb, the more the light increased in luminosity. Her screams were absorbed by the fleshy walls of the room

and released with more volume than when they had left her throat. The whale opened its mouth. Salt water began to flood into the room. Neither she nor the woman noticed this. When the water had reached her mouth, she found that she could breathe. The baby continued to emerge, the whale continued in its endless spiral and the woman continued to scream, bubbles taking the place of agony. The water soon ceased to be a concern, not because oxygen could be extracted from it but because the child, now nearly out of its mother's womb, was emanating so much light that nothing else could be seen. All she could do was feel its slimy body sliding further into her embrace. She felt the thighs, the knees, the ankles and then the feet. Soon the light began to mute the sensations in her fingertips. The last thing she felt was the umbilical cord streaming along. And then she felt nothing. The only sense remaining was her sight and it was completely dominated by the white, blinding light. After a few minutes had passed, stripped of all senses but one, she realized that she could be anywhere. Once this realization occurred, it dawned on her that she might have lost her sight as well. The only thing she now possessed was her consciousness. If she could not see anything except this whiteness, then her sight was effectively gone. She was nowhere now, feeling nothing, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, tasting nothing, smelling nothing. And yet she could think. Her memories flooded back into her consciousness. The first memory was one concerning a tree. She was walking along a path that ran from the grove to her house. Standing above the path was an oak tree. Sitting with his back against the trunk of that tree was a man. He was made entirely of ants and eucalyptus leaves. A sap-like substance began to trickle down the tree. When it reached the man the ants making up his back retrieved droplets of it and brought it into his body. His forehead split open and within his head she saw a bull walking through a field of grass. Despite its limited range of expressions, the bull seemed relieved to be there. Its horns turned to iron. They were flung into a furnace where they slowly began to melt. Two nails fastened two crow's wings to the back of a young man. Blood flowed out from the puncture wounds. An old woman, her hands covered in warts, ran her fingers through the blonde hair of her granddaughter. The forehead sealed itself back up and the man made of ants stared at her. She stared back. Nothing was communicated. Everything was understood.

"WHERE THE FUCK did she go?" Jones asked.

When Rosemary had disappeared, Jones had stopped thinking. His mind was perfectly blank for one, single instant. And then the process of trying to explain what happened set in. Stutteringly at first, his reason and rationality having nothing upon which to expound on. Rosemary had vanished and this alone threw his world out of order. He remained where he was for three entire minutes after she had departed, slowly realizing there was no explanation that would deign to express itself in words. Jones unconsciously moved over to the painting, hovered in front of it and then turned his head to Evelyn, who had by this time gotten quite comfortable on the couch.

"Where the fuck did she go?"

"I don't know, Jones. But you saw here disappear, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then she's obviously not here. That's all that really matters."

"We need to go find her. If...last time it tossed her out in the snow."

"I think this time she'll be fine."

"Hold on a second." Jones said, rubbing his forehead. "I don't..."

"What?"

Jones sat down beside her on the couch, rested his elbows on his knees and massaged his skull. Evelyn, still influenced by the anger he had aroused in her, sat there, perfectly motionless. A small amount of sympathy was beginning to boil inside of her, however, sympathy which, at the moment, she was reluctant to give him.

"Rosemary just disappeared."

"Are you going to be saying that for the next hour?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"She disappeared. Period. Is it so hard to understand that you have to repeat it?"

"I only just said it."

"That's true. I'm just trying to tell you that you will not be able to figure this one out. Nothing is going to explain it to you. And if you keep trying to explain it, it will merely keep eluding you. And then all you'll be able to do is repeat the obvious." Evelyn reached over the side of the couch and grabbed her book from off the floor. "Now, Jones, I want you to read something."

"Read something?" He lifted his head and looked at her, exasperated. "What the fuck do you want me to read?"

"I want you to read my book."

Jones was about to say something but stopped himself. The book, now held in front of him by Evelyn's worn out hand, had been a mystery for so long that he could not help but feel an overwhelming urge to snatch it away from her, disappear into his bedroom and read it. Still feeling intense anger towards her, Jones pushed most of these feelings back and tried not to reveal too much eagerness.

"Why do you want me to read it?" he asked.

"You'll see when you read it."

She raised the book to his chest and, after a few seconds, Jones took it. Not wanting to disturb him, Evelyn walked over to his desk and sat down in the chair. She picked up the final draft of the poem sitting beside all of the other crumpled ones and began to read it:

*Broken bull returning from exile
Green stems licking each other's veins
Through clay, relief intrudes*

*Conical iron flies through smoke
Within fire properties merge
Red diamonds collude together*

*Man made of ants cannot lick
The white sap bound for his spine
Fallen from the black oak tree*

*Nailed on shoulder blades
A crow surrendering its wings
Dark river through the snow*

*When grandmother sighed
Her fingers glided through my hair
Warts stealing the bad thoughts from my mind*

Evelyn smiled upon finishing the last section of the poem. Outside, the wind was bringing the powder down from the branches. The tips of the trees swayed back and forth. Between two trunks, a fox appeared, dragging Evelyn's eyes along with it as it ran through the snow, heading for something she could not see.

Once it was out of sight she turned around. When she did she found Jones' eyes locked on hers, the book spread wide open on his lap. His lips were parted in expectation of words. He had been trying to speak since he finished the first paragraph in which he had read exactly what was unfolding in the room while he was reading, what he was thinking while he was reading and why he was compelled to eventually stop reading.

"Yes?" Evelyn said.

"You..."

"Don't. Never mind. Sorry. You saw what that was, right? So just ask me a straightforward question about it. Go on. It'll help."

"Well..." Jones looked down at the book, read one sentence and quickly looked up, visibly startled. "How the fuck did you write this? Did you know you were writing the future?"

"Not at first, no. I was just writing whatever came into my head. It involved the three of us at first, but they were just things I was making up. There are a lot of other things in there. I have entire notebooks filled with scenes from the past. But every once in a while I would just start writing about us. And then one day, the first one of those things I had written came true. I randomly started reading over a section and instantly I was seeing what was happening all around me. I thought I had written the future, but later I realized I had no control over anything. Every scene I flipped to depicted the current moment. I couldn't *not* read the present. Even today, whenever I read it I see the situation around me."

"How is this possible?"

"It isn't, Jones."

The anger was gone inside of him. He pursed his lips and nodded his head. The walls had crumbled within his mind. There was no hope of explaining it and rather than fall into sadness, Jones felt himself filled with relief.

"I guess it isn't."

"I liked your poem," she said, quietly.

He took a deep breath, smiled at her and let out a slow laugh.

"You already knew what it was about," he said.

"But not the form it would take."

"Does it really make that much of a difference?"

"Jones..." She stood up, walked over to him, grabbed his hands, pulled him off the couch, clutched his shoulders and looked him in the eyes. "It makes all the difference."

His eyes did not know where to look. Her expression made him feel a mixture of fear and shame. She saw that his eyes were darting around all over the place, taking in everything beside her. With one final burst of aggression, she clutched his cheeks and raised his eyebrows with her thumbs. When she had his strict attention she slowly began to release him. The fear burning inside of him disintegrated into nothing as he saw the way her lips were raised, the wideness of her eyes, the feel of her hands moving over his shoulders. This woman in front of him, a woman who had seen the same barbarity and pointlessness as he had, who had come up to the mountains to write a novel and ended up describing the future, this woman who had not him let flee, this woman was now standing in front of him with the intention of helping him give up the goal of naming the unnamable.

"What are you going to title your poem?" she asked.

Jones smiled and closed his eyes.

After a few moments he opened them.

"I know," he said.

"What?"

"I'm going to call it, 'Praying to the Wrong God.'"

THE FIRE PIT, recently buried under foot after foot of snow, was exposed to the air. The rocks circling the clumps of coal were covered in quickly evaporating water. Steam rose up from everything. The sun was not causing any of this. Rosemary felt warm standing there, beside the pit. Clouds covered the sky and trees hid the clouds. Something had done this, burning a pentagon into the snow. She could not explain what it was but she nevertheless knew what it was. And it made her laugh.

Feeding off the slowly dissipating energy still clinging to the rocks and the soil, Rosemary began to peel off her clothes. Piece by piece, they formed a circle around the pit, a circle she frantically danced around. The warmth from below charged her skin and kept the chills away. The crows began to cry up above. Unseen, the fox crept from trunk to trunk, following her on her course. In the surrounding dens, the hibernating mammals woke up for a brief instant. The clouds parted.

After ten minutes the pentagon began to lose its defined corners and lines. The heat had made the surrounding snow melt, but now that the ground was cooling, that melting snow began to freeze once again. The body heat Rosemary had generated gave her a few more minutes before the cold began to reach her. She picked up and put on the articles of clothing as she passed by them and when she reached her pants she stopped dancing. The fox was staring at her, although she was not aware of it.

"Thank you," she said to the sky.

The crows stopped their crying. The woods became motionless. There was not a single noise. Rosemary smiled at the swaying branches and then began climbing up the wall of snow in front of her. After reaching the top, she realized she could not just walk back home. It was far too cold. And so she sprinted through the snow, hoping she would remain warm enough to keep the blood flowing through her feet. Behind her, muted by the sound of her own breathing, was the fox, running along with her. Together they passed through the tree trunks. Together they headed towards the house with strings of black smoke extending from its chimney.

EVELYN SAT DOWN and wiped the water from her chin. She placed the half-filled cup on the ground, leaned back and spread her arms across the back of the couch. Her left arm went around Jones, fingers slowly scratching his neck.

"Let me just..." Jones took a drag off his cigarette, blew two smoke rings and then exhaled the rest. "You dreamt what Rosemary saw. I wrote what Rosemary saw. But what is it that you dreamt?"

"I don't know. It all feels familiar, though, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. Yes. My poems always feel familiar because they come from somewhere inside me. I compress whatever's in my head and put it on the page."

"I think that compression, that molding, that conscious, willed effort is the only thing that makes it yours. But it's not really yours, you know. How much shit have we started because one of us said, Hey, this is mine and not, absolutely not yours? We all feel connected to something, in some way, to the same thing. But some people got so arrogant as to think they created it, it was theirs, they owned

it. When you write your poems you leave your imprint on that thing you drew from.”

“What thing?”

“Whatever it is we’re talking about,” she said.

“We know exactly what we’re both talking about but we have no idea what we’re talking about.”

“We have an idea. But not the words.”

“Not the words,” Jones repeated, smiling.

The cigarette continued to burn in his fingers, forgotten at this point. He sat there, staring through the window above his desk at the trees, motionless at the trunk but swaying back and forth at the top.

Evelyn sunk back even further into the couch. When a minute had elapsed and Jones had still not taken a drag she took the cigarette from him, tapped off the ash and placed it between her lips. Jones hardly noticed. The two of them were completely content in the same room together for the first time in days. Beyond not yelling and being enraged at each other, they felt that their secrets had been smashed, pulverized, their remains diffused out into the house and the trees and the snow, releasing all of the mystery which they had once clung to so dearly but had now let go. The mystery was not something to be stolen or won or reclaimed and made visible; the mystery was their thoughts, their dreams and their lives.

The door suddenly opened, carrying with it a flurry of snow and a barefooted Rosemary, face flushed and breathing heavily through a smile. She slammed the door and walked quickly over the fire. Putting her feet as close to the heated metal as she could without feeling too much pain, she stood upright in front of her two friends, hands on her hips. The fire began to warm the blood in her chilled feet. It was not a pleasant sensation but she knew it was necessary.

“How was it?” Evelyn asked her.

Rosemary lifted her hands and ran them through her hair, elbows pointing outward, the right one towards Evelyn, the left one towards Jones. The two of them felt something stirring inside of their stomachs. Jones remembered the first time he kissed her. The air was thick that day, the sunlight uninviting but causing the shade to grow welcoming. Jones kissed her below an oak tree. Evelyn remembered a story Rosemary had once told her. She was sitting on the steps of an old theatre when a dog passed by, walking along the torn up, concrete road. In its mouth was a plastic baby bottle. The dog did not look at her. When Rosemary finished telling this simple story, Evelyn immediately kissed her.

Rosemary lowered her hands and sighed. She walked away from the fire and headed up the stairs. Within seconds, both of them were off the couch, following close behind her.

ROSEMARY’S GRAY AND brown hair flowed backwards along the pillow. A few of the gray strands above her forehead were glued to her skin from all of the sweat. She ran her left hand over Jones’ pale chest as he lay above her, looking down into her green eyes. Evelyn had both of her arms around Jones’ waist, holding on tightly, kissing his back all the while. The only thing she was wearing was her jade bracelets. Jones’ back held nearly a dozen moles, none of them bigger than his small, red nipples. Rosemary tilted her head back, closed her eyes, opened her mouth and let out a soft moan. Jones caught a glimpse of her teeth. The bottom row was slightly crooked, the small white, saliva-coated bones each going in separate directions. Evelyn let go of Jones, kissed him on the middle of his spine and pushed herself upwards until her head was level with Rosemary’s. Feeling her breath, Rosemary opened her eyes and turned towards her, seeing Evelyn’s sharp, angular nose sitting perfectly below her eyes, exaggerating the roundness of her eyes. The two women began to kiss. Rosemary’s mouth was stale and vaguely sweet. Evelyn tasted of cigarettes. Jones continued to move up and down, slowly, pushing his body up so that the tip of his penis ran along the front of her vagina. A snow storm had begun outside. Rosemary had one hand on Jones’ bony shoulder and the other on Evelyn’s rough cheek. Her skin was worn with deltas of wrinkles exploding out from the corners of her eyes. The hand crept away from the cheek and into Evelyn’s partially gray hair. Jones lowered himself so that his chest was on top of Rosemary’s. The two women kissed him, Evelyn on his cheek, Rosemary on his lips. In the middle of one of these kisses, Rosemary moved her hand from Evelyn’s hair down to her wet vagina. Her fingers curled inwards, two of them landing on her clitoris, the other three sporadically grazing her lips. Rosemary’s pubic hair was light brown and nearly straight. Evelyn’s was curly and black. Jones’ was almost just like hers except a little lighter. If the three of them were alone they would have been cold. But because they were together they were not. Rosemary felt her orgasm coming, bringing with it the desire to put not only her whole hand but her entire body inside Evelyn. Evelyn felt all of the fingers close in upon one another and begin to move upwards. She bit Rosemary’s freckled shoulder. Jones suddenly took a deep breath and closed his eyes tightly. They had

their orgasm together. Evelyn was grinning wildly. She closed her eyes. With a little concentration, she soon discovered that she was feeling everything; her nerves were wrapped around those of Jones and Rosemary, her heart connected with theirs through the same veins, pumping the same blood; as the semen exploded out of his penis, she felt it flow up her womb; she felt her ejaculate, coating the sheets of the bed in moisture. Evelyn opened her eyes. She stopped feeling those things. Curious, she reached out and put the tips of her fingers an inch away from Rosemary's shoulder. She closed her eyes, concentrated and, with a rise in heart rate, felt herself touching herself. Some might say it was Rosemary's fingers that caused Evelyn to orgasm. Others might say something different. Nevertheless, after touching Rosemary's shoulder, she had an orgasm unlike any she had ever experienced before, woven of the thinnest, most finely interlaced, transparent threads which jumped up and down from the center of her body, brining electricity to her head and her toes, so much electricity that in a second she could feel neither and lost all connection with her body, falling into the same sleep which took Jones and Rosemary into its resigned embrace, kept them until their minds were quiet and then gently let them float away on rafts made of pine needles in a sea of snow.

THE FIRST TIME Jones ever saw his poems printed was in a small barn. The wooden floorboards were old and smooth from the decades of feet that moved over them. Sitting atop the boards was a large, iron printing press. After being shown the whole barn, which only took twenty minutes, Jones had watched the machine put down onto paper the words he had written, the words he had obsessed over for three months. Sheet after sheet was removed from the press, the same stanzas over and over again. The machine was powered by hand. The workers had explained that they each took turns doing the various tasks involved in making a book and all five of them knew just as much as the other.

Within minutes, the movements of the machine had hypnotized him and he could not look away. There were a little over two dozen pieces to the press; some of them remained motionless, supporting the pieces which were constantly in motion. What impressed Jones the most was the complete lack of purposelessness. Everything had its function which added to the larger function of the whole. And that function, in this instance, was replicating the words he had written.

Rosemary was outside at the time, walking through a garden sitting beside the barn. The workers had cultivated it and it had been there, every spring and summer, for the past five years. Most of it was dedicated to corn, carrots and potatoes, but growing along side the various types of salads were purely ornamental plants, placed there solely because of their beauty. Rosemary stopped her pacing in front of three purple foxgloves and their poisonous bells. Just at that moment, Jones emerged from the barn, saw Rosemary and walked over to her.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing at the plant.

"Foxglove, I think"

"How you doing?" He reached out and rubbed between her shoulders. "Feeling better than last time?"

"Yeah...yeah," she said, nodding. "Still a little disoriented. But what I'm really confused about is this plant"

"What...what about it?"

"Why is it here? You can eat that, and that, and that," she said, finger moving from plant to plant, "but not this thing. It looks nice, that's all. And then I was thinking, is that all our art is?"

"What? A foxglove?"

"You know what I mean, though?"

"No"

"You can't eat foxglove and you can't eat your poems."

"You could if you really wanted to."

She quickly squinted her eyes and kicked his knee. Despite the fact that he was smiling, the blow caused him a significant amount of pain.

"I'm being serious," she said. "That book of yours is being printed for the same reason that these foxgloves are growing in the salad. People want something more than survival. People want beauty."

"There's always the possibility," Jones said, taking on a serious tone, "that those plants were there before the garden and they planted the salad around them."

"Yeah, but it would still be the same reason."

"I guess. Well...so what? What's your point?"

Jones saw the anger cloud her eyes and knew he was doing something wrong.

"I already made it," she said coldly.

"You did. Sorry."

"Jones, Jones, Jones," she muttered, walking away.

He stood in front of the foxgloves for a few minutes, watching her slowly meander along the path that cut through the garden. After her figure passed behind some corn he returned to the barn. The thick, metallic sound of the press filled his ears.

"Check it out, Jones," one of the workers said.

Jones looked and saw that in the woman's hands was a bound copy of his book.

"Wow," he said.

"We did this one last night. Sorry it took me so long to find it."

"No, no..." He flipped through the pages, sending the scent of the paper up into his nostrils. "It's..."

"You like it?"

Before he replied he realized that, at this moment, holding the first edition of his first book of poems, his words meant absolutely nothing to him. To other people they might mean something, but he had already extracted and infused them with all the meaning they would ever have and now those words were nothing more than ink on a page. He closed the book and smiled, genuinely and hollowly at the same time.

"I do. Thanks."

Rosemary left the garden and the sound of the press soon faded into the chirping of birds and the cries of children. The dirt road beside the garden ran centrally through the town and, sprinting past Rosemary, was a group of four children. Their noise and movements had disrupted the sparrows which nested on the sides of the barn, causing them to fly around angrily, attempting to scare off the children with chirps which merely turned to music in their young ears.

She followed the children into town, passing houses with their doors opens, emitting the smells of cooking vegetables and dozens of spices; families sitting on the front steps of their buildings with laundry hanging from the windows above them; passing the water tower, its metal tank covered in the painting she had done for them the previous year; passing the market with its racks of onions and garlic, its boxes of grains and nuts and rice and its tables covered in vegetables and fruit; passing the five windmills that loomed over to the right, left over from before the war, machines which had continued spinning after they had been abandoned.

Once again she stopped, this time staring at the rotating blades. Laid down, two of these machines would span the length of the town. Compared with the press she had just seen, these windmills seemed as if they fell from another world. The town had people who were capable of maintaining them but the knowledge was so specialized that, unlike the press, only those few people could be responsible for the flow of electricity.

The windmills were connected to the town substation by lines that ran underground. Until the children were taught this fact, they did not know where the energy came from that caused the bulbs to burn when the sun went down.

Up in the mountains, where the sun and the fire was their only light-bringer, Rosemary had an intimate connection with what allowed her to see in the darkness. But down here it was not so simple. The wind blew down the mountains and caused the blades to spin; the spinning of the blades created electricity which was stored during the day and released at night; at night the town had all the light that it needed thanks to those people who served as intermediaries between the wind and the population, who knew by heart the strange alchemy that was necessary to harvest that force which danced over the ground.

"Rosemary?"

Someone tapped her on the shoulder and she turned around. Standing beside her was one of the people who ran the gallery which put up her paintings.

"Hey, how's it going?" he asked her.

"Good, good. Just looking at the windmills."

"I heard you three had come down."

"Yeah. I was just on my way to the gallery."

"Did you bring anything down with you?" the man asked, hurriedly.

"I brought that one I was telling you about last time."

"The one with the labyrinth?"

"That's the one."

"Where is it?"

"Back at the printers. Want to see it?"

"Yeah I want to see it! We've been waiting for it forever"

At this point three others from the gallery had approached. Rosemary had been introduced to these people and recognized them but could not remember any of their names. As they showered her

with comments filled with eagerness and impatience, she found herself listening to the sounds of the sparrows flying overhead. As they followed her back to the barn, she found her eyes floating upwards and following the movements of the small, winged creatures.

"The last one...I can stare at it for hours."

"So beautiful, Rosemary. It's about time you did something in town again."

"Maybe next time," she said, eyes in the sky.

"Next time, next time, next time. Always next time."

"Next time," Rosemary repeated.

"What are the dimensions?"

"Jones hasn't mounted it yet, has he? He always does something wrong."

"That's Jones."

"I hope it'll fit on the west wall."

"There's some good beets this week, Rosemary. Make sure you all grab some."

"We will."

"I can't wait to see it."

And so she walked them all to the barn where she and Jones had left the canvas. There the new creation was seen for the first time by the people from the gallery. But as Rosemary viewed it with them, standing beside Jones, she had the exact same thought that he had about his poetry. The press continued printing. The windmills kept spinning. The sparrows returned to their nests.

OUTSIDE, THE CLOUDED sky was beginning to lighten. Cracks of purple light were visible through the gaps between the swaying trees. Evelyn had only slept for forty five minutes after her orgasm and had spent the past six hours lying on her back, staring either at the ceiling or out the window, seeing nothing but darkness. As the light continued to increase, Rosemary's features lost their vagueness and became visible. Evelyn was under the impression that she was asleep and did not turn towards her when the room became lighter. But Rosemary was in fact awake and had been for the last thirty minutes. The two women looked at the window, both waiting for the clouds to become gray once more. They would have spent the next hour unaware of each other had Evelyn not suddenly turned her eyes back towards the ceiling.

"You awake?" Rosemary asked.

Evelyn quickly turned to the right and saw her friend.

"Uh-huh. I've been awake all night," she said, whispering.

"Really?" Rosemary whispered, following her lead. "Why?"

"Too much has happened. I haven't been sleeping very well for the past weeks."

"What were you thinking about?"

The two women turned onto their sides and faced each other. Behind Rosemary, on his stomach, Jones slept soundly.

"Everything. Everything I've told you, everything I've learned. I don't...all I knew was that I needed to let you two know about it. But now I have no idea what any of us are supposed to do."

Rosemary bit her bottom lip a few times.

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

"Uh-huh."

"Why Greek gods? They keep getting brought up."

"Whose culture were we living in, Rose? Whose culture is still inside us? The Greeks gave birth to Western civilization and we were the unlucky recipients of it. Our civilization chose to listen to Plato rather than Zeno, to worship Hermes rather than Pan. But all the gods, the revered and the despised, are all still dancing inside of us because it was in our minds that they were born."

"Why Greece, though?"

"I don't know. That's just where it happened. For Western civilization, that is. India was the same for that area, just as Babylon was for the Middle East. So many of the immortal ideas were left to die in Greece and so many of the basest ideas were placed on a pedestal solely because they were quicker, more efficient. And those ideas were the ones that had the most people behind them. The other ones did not die, thankfully. But still, exalting the unseen over the seen, believing in a preconceived perfection, trust in dialectical thinking, belief in the state, those ideas left Greece and spread all of the Mediterranean. The gods had died and been replaced with ideas. The Romans still had their gods, but those gods were meaningless. In Greece the gods belonged to those who worshipped them. In Rome the people belonged to the gods. Humans became nothing, not only in the face of worthless gods but in the face of all authority. And then Rome went on to conquer Europe."

"So Christianity was the same thing?"

"What do you mean?" Evelyn asked.

"It was a continuation of the same trend. God, this time just one god, was everything and man was nothing. It makes sense that Rome became Christian. It fit them perfectly. They had a more effective way to control everyone."

"Exactly. When Moses came down from the mountain he brought back with him laws, prohibitions, restrictions and hatred. We will kill you if you do this, disobey us and we will stone you to death. All the formlessness and freedom that the Greek gods exhibited was completely absent in the Christian god. He was nothing more than a tool for those who had the ghost of Rome inside of them, those who wanted nothing but power, wealth and luxury."

"But those old ideas...everything Pan represented, it never went away."

"No, it was just buried. And of course the Christians burned alive those who believed in the darkness, the people who would not accept laws made by man in the name of God, the ones who knew, who knew we were creating it all as we went along. The Christians waged war on those who saw fluidity and flux because all they knew was stasis and coldness. And it was that culture, that civilization, which spread all over the planet. Western Civilization."

"At least it's stopped spreading."

"Physically, yes," Evelyn said. "But look at how difficult it was for us to get here. Especially for him." She pointed at Jones. "There is so much crud left in our minds. Those kids in town will grow up never knowing what it was like, but us...us...we had to see...what we saw."

The two women both closed their eyes.

Jones had not stirred at all the entire time.

"Those kids won't be free from it, though," Rosemary said.

"You're right, they won't be. As long as men are still talking over us, as long as women are trying to emulate the way they think, as long as we are still using men's old, worn out logic, none of us will be free from it."

"Men didn't invent logic."

"Maybe not, but it came from them. And they are so stubborn that they can't even entertain the notion that it is not the end-all. We have our...non-logic and they have their logic. Neither one of them is the correct way of looking at the world. But for thousands of years the one had won out over the other."

Rosemary took a deep breath and folded her hands over her chest.

"What have we been seeing?" she asked.

"Non-logic. Darkness. Our minds. Energy. I don't know."

"Energy. It's where it all comes from. What we're seeing is where everything gets its power. All ideas come from there."

"I think I know what you mean. The same energy that went into making a pen is the same energy that went into making all those temples in Greece. It is what makes us create, what allows us to even have concepts like logic and reason. But we trust the concept more than what created that concept. And that's where all the trouble has come from. Putting our gods, our concepts and our beliefs over ourselves, the creatures who have that energy inside of them. It is ours. We are that energy. We don't..."

Before Evelyn could finish her whispered sentence Rosemary had flipped over and gotten out of the bed. The cold hit her immediately and made her quickly put on as many pieces of clothing she could find. Outside, the clouds had finally lightened and become gray.

"Where are you going?" Evelyn asked in a normal tone.

"I'm going to go finish my painting."

"O...okay."

This was the first time the two of them had been able to feel as if they were on the same page. For Evelyn, who had spent the past months keeping her secret from both her and Jones, the words, the free, uninhibited words were a welcome blessing. And so she felt hurt as Rosemary made to go downstairs.

On her way out, Rosemary saw something resembling sadness on her friend's face. She paused before descending the staircase, smiled and then bounded back over to the bed. She knelt down, tussled Evelyn's hair and kissed her on the lips.

"You knew what you needed to do when you were writing your book," she told her. "And now I know what I need to do."

Rosemary gave her one more kiss, stood up and left the room.

Jones remained asleep, dreaming of a woman in a green robe.

THE PROCESS OF getting out her paints, haphazardly setting them down on the ground below the wall, grabbing a dozen brushes and tossing them on the couch passed without Rosemary actually seeing any of it take place. She suddenly found herself, brush in hand, painting the rest of the woman's green robe. First the darker of the greens, a green that shrugged off the name and became something unclassifiable, touching the tips of each primary color and taking just enough from them to maintain its ambiguous existence. And then the greens that basked in what they were and made no claim to hide it, greens that wrapped around their dark cousins, attaching themselves like parasitic, neon skeletons. And then back to darkness once again, the void pouring through the cracks, a faint glimmer of electricity within it, implying motion, making the fabric appear to be shifting, one fold mirroring the movements of all the other folds and bending to their movements simultaneously, each shape just one manifestation of the force that moved the fabric, the energy that was released from the woman as she moved to let the whale enter her womb.

After two hours Rosemary had finished the robe. Its bottom half carried the woman's legs and waist. The top half was empty, waiting to be filled. Before starting in on the next segment Rosemary walked into the kitchen to get a glass of water. On the way to the sink she found a half smoked cigarette sitting on the wooden counter. Beside it was a box of matches. She put the butt in her mouth, opened the box, removed a match and struck it against a cutting board. As the first drag escaped her mouth and traveled in front of her eyes, Rosemary became firmly aware of an anomaly in the area around her. She shook out the still burning match and tossed it into the sink. As it fell into a puddle, the still warm end of the burnt stick emitted a small hissing noise. What or where this anomaly was proved to be a question she could not immediately answer.

Outside, the sun had nearly finished setting and the purple light was strong enough to allow the forms of snowflakes to be just barely perceptible. Rosemary took her second drag off the cigarette, keeping it firmly between her lips. She grabbed an empty cup and turned on the tap. From the tank, which hung over the fire, hidden in the wall, came the ever-present, lukewarm water. Rosemary filled it, removed the cigarette from her lips, took a sip and returned to her painting, a trail of smoke following her.

A crow called as she put the cup of water down on the floor, next to her paints. The black creature pulled her vision away from the painted wall and over to the window above Jones' desk. The crow sat in a puddle of raw, unobstructed sunlight that fell down perfectly from between two nearby trees onto an outcropping of rock. On top of the rock the bird stared at Rosemary for a moment. And then the two broke eye contact; the crow flying towards the sun, calling out to its friends; Rosemary smiling as she turned back towards her painting, colors standing in strange contrast to the glow of the stove, the only source of light in the warm, quiet room.

Within two minutes Rosemary had started on the left breast of the woman. Underneath the robe she traced the outlines of the erect nipples and the curves of the breasts. She connected these ghostly forms with the flesh concealed by the robe, infusing the skin with invisible lightning and a sinister immediacy.

WHILE THIS WAS taking place, Jones and Evelyn had been talking. After Rosemary had gone downstairs, Evelyn stared at the ceiling, trying to get enough of her thoughts together to relate them to Jones. When she had formed a beginning for what she thought she wanted to say, she turned onto her side and whispered into his ear:

"Emotions."

Jones did not make any movement.

"We had given our emotions and the forces of nature the status of gods. The Christians would have had us look at gods like Apollo and Athena as crude imitations of their Jehovah, but in reality the Greek gods were not even of the same species as Jehovah and his ilk."

His eyes opened and he felt Evelyn's warm breath in his ear.

"Athena didn't dispense human wisdom, she wasn't its repository. Athena, very literally, was human wisdom. And a lot of other things besides that. The gods were the forces they supposedly represented. But there was no representation there. Humans were in direct communication with their emotions, their hallucinations, their tendencies, their dreams and their behaviors. By worshipping the gods they were worshipping those traits within themselves embodied in Ares, Hermes and Aphrodite."

"Evelyn..."

"Yes?"

"Where's Rosemary?"

"Downstairs, painting."

"What time is it?" he asked, rubbing his squinty eyes.

Outside, he saw moonlight falling on trees.

"Sometime in the evening," Evelyn replied.

"What were you talking about?"

"The fact that Greek gods were a wide cross section of human traits and behaviors and tendencies. Did you catch all that earlier?"

"Yeah, I think so. Why are..."

"Light me a cigarette, would you."

At a loss for words, Jones grabbed her pouch of tobacco lying on the floor next to her clothes and began rolling her a cigarette.

"But some of those tendencies won out over others. Pan and Hermes, once equal, became rivals. Pan would not take on the traits which Hermes did. He was too rough, unpolished, non-rational. And Hermes, oh was he clever. He could do something incredible and then explain exactly how he did it. Pan wouldn't even show you anything incredible. You'd have to actively make him do something, you had to trek through the woods and beg him for just once glimpse of his magic. Between a god who flaunted his tricks and a god who couldn't give a fuck about anyone, most people chose the more visible, rational one. That's how Hermes killed Pan. That's how we killed Pan. Every time we rejected him within ourselves we helped kill him. We are both Hermes and Pan, and we were killing ourselves."

"But..." Jones folded the top of the paper over the rolled tobacco. "But what does that mean? Hermes killing Pan within us?"

"It means that over time, rationality beat out non-rationality. The city states of Greece found themselves under attack and forced themselves to grow rigid and tough. Their autonomy and independence from one another began to disintegrate and with that, so did their gods. More discipline was needed, more firmness. Suddenly things had divine, immortal forms which were expressions of purity. Every object or creature could only be various, imperfect derivations of those forms. Things couldn't be loose and vague and indefinite. No, no, everything has an order and its place in a structure which we can't see but is still there there, somehow. Flux was outlawed because it could not be tamed. In order to make a blade, metal had to be tamed. You needed a blade to preserve your city, to fight back the darkness. The Persians that existed in the minds of Greeks were only projections of their own imaginations, and vice versa. Neither side was as nightmarish as they thought they were. But they succumbed to their fears of themselves and went to war. After it was over, Sparta started another war, this time against its Greek neighbors. And it was this war that started the decline which led to Greece being absorbed into Rome. Rome of the blade, Rome of the cross."

"Here you go," Jones said, handing her the cigarette.

"Thanks. Toss me that light over there."

Jones leaned over and grabbed the matches from the floor and tossed them over. Evelyn took one out of the box, watched the flame come to life in front of her eyes and then slowly brought it to the tip of the cigarette. She blew the match out with the smoke of her first drag and flicked it onto the floor.

"And Rome knew only how to fight," Jones said.

"It knew how to fight. But also how to build and acquire and to hoard. Rome neutered the Greek gods and made them things that must be obeyed. They were not us, they were gods; separate, isolated, objective forces. The behavior was judged not by its part in the grand palate of human emotions, the behavior was judged by what it could reward the Empire. The gods must be obeyed, Caesar must be obeyed. Give tribute to the Gods, not to yourselves. Likewise for the Empire. You and it will never have anything to do with one another. Caesar is beyond you, above you, with gold in his blood. Submission to authority. Discipline. You need discipline to fight a war. And we know that, Jones. Don't we?"

"We do," he said, tears in his eyes. "We do."

"You have to become hard and cold and materialistic. That's what has to happen. The pentagram has to be turned upside-down. You cannot fight an army without discipline. And that is what Ares is, that is why Sparta kept him chained down. War brings the same thing time and time again. Juts like love. But war is something we want to shorten and suppress and not ever see again. And in our efforts to suppress war we try and use it against itself, fight war with war. Again, just another example of us killing ourselves. We cannot suppress that part of us, that hard, disciplined, cold, efficient beast within our minds that lets us build bridges and windmills and water towers. It was fear that drove us to fight war after war. Fear of ourselves. Rome fought against its own nightmares at the expense of the rest of the known world. The different tribes were threats to be contained. The walls stretching for miles and miles were there to keep the nasty, wretched, scary barbarians out. And in the end, one of its own nightmares destroyed it. The worst nightmare the world has ever seen."

"Christianity," Jones said, nodding.

"That's right." Evelyn put her cigarette out in the ashtray on the stand beside her. "Christianity attempted to destroy every god but its own. It set out to make the entire world believe itself to be worthless. It wanted to teach them that God was completely separate from them and that he had cursed them at one point, cursed them to have all the good, beautiful traits they had. Christians tried to teach everyone that all of their originality, urges, desires and dreams were wretched and sinful. The only way to salvation, which would come only after death, incidentally, was through the Church."

"Pretty convenient."

"Pretty damn convenient. And then from that Church, which grew to be a more efficient, all-encompassing Rome, came the secular state. The apparatus devised by the Church to control people's beliefs soon became an apparatus to control every aspect of people's lives. The Church and the State began to grow apart and eventually split from one another. The State was believed in and treated as if it was a god; a system independent and above the humans who, in reality, created and perpetuated it."

"But..." Jones rubbed his eyes and let out a deep sigh. "So what is the problem? Logic? What are we supposed to do, though? Get rid of it."

"No, no, no. We can't get rid of it. It just needs to be balanced."

"With."

"I've been calling it non-reason, but it does not have a name. It is the absence of words, the force that brings words into being. It is the indefinable, the river that is there before the map, the planets before they stopped being stars. To reject logic and systems is to reject everything that is our world as we have known it. We could go back, maybe, to the beginning and start again. Develop along different lines. But that isn't going to happen. We have used noises and symbols to express the unknown for so long I doubt we could abandon it."

"Then what are we supposed to do?"

"Balance the rational with the non-rational. And grow. What do you think has been happening to the three of us here, Jones? We are changing. Learning how to communicate without symbols or words."

"We're talking now, though."

"Of course we are. And we'll probably have to for the rest of our lives. We have to use our symbols. The thing is, our symbols don't always have to have meanings which are set in stone, that can't be changed. Our symbols have to have infinite meanings and we need to be able to accept that. Otherwise it will be a constant war of one person trying to force their definition of something on another person."

"It's hard to not want to be right."

"There's no point in being right. It's the dumbest idea we've ever had."

"What?"

"The idea of being right."

ROSEMARY FOUND HER own words fluttering into her ears as she painted. She was not sure of what she was saying. Her words were muted by the loud daydream unwinding itself in her mind. The chest and the neck and the chin and the cheeks and lips of the woman had been painted. Outside the sun was setting and still Evelyn and Jones had not come downstairs. Not that Rosemary noticed or cared. The woman in the green robe, slowly taking on more and more form, was talking to her. Initially it was just vague, indistinct whispers. But as the nose was completed and Rosemary began on the eyes, a few words became audible. They were still indistinct, but their meaning was somehow clear. Relinquishing nothing while also concealing nothing. The sun rose out of the snow, making the fresh powder burn its way through the windows and into her eyes. The eyes were no color. Green covered in white covered in purple covered in white. And yet they were a color. Rosemary had no idea what she was doing. The eyes began to consume paint, gathering layer upon layer until something was formed, something unintentional but nevertheless perfect. The woman continued to speak. Her entire face was finished now. Everything except the eyes.

"WHAT ARE WE supposed to do now?" Jones asked.

"I don't know."

"Everything feels as if it's breaking down."

"How do you mean?"

"Where can our art take us? What is it for?"

"For this, I guess. To make us learn this."

"Okay. But now what? You get what I'm asking?"
 "I do. And I still don't know."

ROSEMARY TALKED TO herself, unaware of what she was doing. The eyes, infinite and dense, staring at her. One minute earlier she had told herself:

"What's the point?"

"There is no point," she replied to herself. "Keep going if you want."

"It is the same perfection no matter how much paint I apply."

"That's true."

"So what's the point?"

"I don't know."

This same conversation was repeated in every possible way. The moon hung above the trees and shot down a beam of ghostly light through the window above Jones' desk. Finally, Rosemary dropped her brush and sat down on the ground. Her heart was beating wildly and her skin was coated in sweat. The metal of the stove was bright red, on the verge of melting. And then, suddenly, she remembered. Sitting right in front of her. The last of the red marbles. The tip of the star.

"Venus," she whispered.

Her extended finger rose of its own volition and began to move towards the marble. A thousand crows called out at once. The fox ran long, frantic circles around the house. Smoke escaped from the chimney. The woman reached out from the wall and stroked Rosemary's hair. She closed her eyes. The stove exploded and fire flooded the darkness. All around. Tender flames grazing her lips. Into the wall. The sphere of lava retreating into the wood. Rosemary, eyes still closed, laughed hysterically as she vanished into nothingness.

"BUT UNDERSTAND, DEAR," the woman said, gently rubbing Rosemary's skull. "Understand that the machine, the steam powered apparatus that took the place of the Christian god was worshipped with the same fervor as was their previous master. Humans did not lose me, they merely broke me into pieces and worshipped only the darkest halves. I do not disdain you for it any more than you do yourself. The darkness is fascinating and enticing, always pulling you closer. The light is soon left behind, serving as nothing more than a nuisance. But you know that, don't you, love?"

Rosemary dug her face deeper into the folds of the green robe.

"Are you alright?" the woman asked.

Rosemary quickly nodded her head, lifted it and wiped the tears off her cheek.

"I'm fine. But what are gods?" she asked.

"They are you. Nothing more and nothing less."

The room pulsed around them as the whale proceeded on its course.

"Tell me what that means. Please."

"All gods are you. They are all of you. The expression of your own power, strength and capabilities. You have been so terrified of it, my dears, terrified of it for so long. You could never just keep them within you. Always an altar, a drawing, a book or a temple. You basked in your creations, then you enslaved yourselves with them. That power, suppressed for so long, began to burst out of the dam. All around you was horror, caused by people running amok with their volatile discoveries. But let me start earlier. Athena was simply that force which kindles the fire that prevents you from doing any wrong. Nothing you do can fail, you are guided by a steady, un-erring hand. And you loved her. She was the one who protected you, at least until your intellect replaced her. You discovered the eternal, the immaculate, the pure. These forces, these blind, perfect forces were what guided everything. You could never be like them. You were impure. From there the pure became something which could descend from the sky and completely fill a single human being. These were your first little steps, but misguided, dangerous ones. The Caesar's became bloated with the power they realized was theirs. It stunted their imaginations and made them concerned only with how much they could conquer and amass. Tribe after tribe fell under the bane of the Roman gods, those neutered shades of your former guardians. Athena had become Minerva. She was untouchable and distant, a thing to be worshipped and feared. She was divine justice and order, but order that served the Caesars more than the worshippers. The so-called barbarians had to bow before her metal clad feet and renounce their gods because they were less pure than Venus and Saturn and Mars, especially Mars, the one who lived behind your eyes and made you build the endless walls, stretching to the ends of the earth, who pushed you farther and farther North. You took and you took and you took, in love with your minds. You had nearly freed yourselves from the gods and discovered the fire burning within you. And then one of your slaves, whom had kept you aloft on your thrones and allowed you to learn all of those

wonderful things, whom you had kept in misery and despair, one of them awoke. He went far beyond any of the Caesars and understood what true power really was. And when he awoke he ruined all of your little plans. He tried to teach you about being God and bowing to one. But you did not hear him. As soon as Caesar had him up on the cross you kneeled beneath his ravaged body and turned him into a hollow god, just like the ones Rome worshipped. And so Rome, seeing what was taking place, tried to quell this rival God, this God who had come from the desert, who had been beaten and trampled in Egypt and Babylon and Palestine. The new God accepted no others. It had to be the only one in order to keep the persecuted together. Rome, which had lost the ability to be truly connected with its gods, could not withstand this assault. For they were up against people who still knew what it was like to possess a part of themselves, a part they would never put on an altar and sell. But of course Rome did what it always did. It fought. The Christians had brought along a religion which left ample room for exploitation. Because God was separate and he would only talk to certain people, those certain people soon became the children of the Caesars. Rome, through the cloak of the Roman Catholic Church, continued its conquest. But it came up against a few challenges. Again, another group of its slaves, the so-called barbarians from the North, knew Rome in its blood and would not be fooled by its new disguise. They had been conquered by God and Jesus, but they would still not accept the God and Jesus of Rome. With this, the Christian God began to split. None of you could resist it. You are so varied and complex that one god is never good enough. On top of that, you were faced with something that had grown independently of you. Another one of you saw what it was to be god, but you had learned and knew of what had happened in the land of the Romans and so did not try and spread belief in Allah at the tip of the sword as they had done over there. But the Christians did not share this belief and knew no other way than the sword. But you were no fools. You would not turn the other cheek and let them enslave you. You fought back. And so began the religious wars which continued for centuries, unabated. Fighting with each another, constantly. Making it necessary for the churches to keep tighter control over their followers, to administer their lives. Because it was easier to fight and advance and invade when you controlled your followers. Soon you thought up the idea of creating positions you could fill, charging you with overseeing the conduct and movements over massive numbers of others. The secular arm of the churches began to rise over Europe and started the slow separation from the gods. The Royalty arose, telling all of you they were bathed in the light of God, becoming as infallible as the Caesars before them. You walled off your kingdoms and protected yourselves from each other. But slowly you saw that these new lords cared little for the shackles of religion and dedicated themselves to plunder and riches. The priests allowed the kings to rule in exchange for keeping the followers in order. The science of administration grew increasingly sophisticated and complex. And then you discovered another world, on the edges of your maps. By this time all of Europe had been ridden with borders and walls and laws. You went out to this new world, taking along your belief in order and the divine right of plunder. Living there were different tribes of people who still understood that the gods they worshipped were a part of them. But you, so arrogant and greedy, felt superior to them solely because you had lost your gods and worshipped gold. Your hollow cross was slammed into their soil where you forced it to take root. Your God was not something to be believed in, it was something to submit to, unconditionally. You raped this new land, placing the natives below even your white skinned slaves. God was your excuse for this, although not even you believed it. The smartest of you understood it was about power, but even the smartest of you were too weak to resist to immediate rewards of living by force. Rather than destroy this corrupt philosophy you perpetuated it, selling your knowledge to the kings and the priests. The curse of Europe, the curse of God, the curse of borders and walls and constant fear was forcibly transplanted onto the new world. New world. Only you could have called it new. It was far, far older than you. Century after century rolled by, Europe living its slow death, the new world beginning to die under your fingers. But, again, your slaves, your white skinned slaves had been plotting against you. Tired of your rule, receiving none of the wisdom and gold you had stolen, they began to resist. At first you could put them down, but no matter how hard you tried the problem always returned. Soon, the grand eruptions commenced. You called kings into question, you shared the land, you reminded each other that you were all equal. The blood the kings had spilled became a tidal wave which drowned them all. Everyone who lived off the sweat of others since the days of Rome grew scared, frightened, and in their panic repressed you even more. Sometimes they crushed you, sometimes they didn't. But you found that two thousand years of their laws and restrictions was not an easy thing to erase. People, obsessed with attaining the power the kings once had, failed to see that all of the castles and all of the gold would bring them to the same fate as the headless tyrants. Slowly, more and more of you awoke. While some chose to mimic and mime the dead language of the priest and the king, using their tools to bring equality, the awakened ones understood that the entire development of your culture had been centered, hugely, on gain, on

exploitation, on trickery and lies. You did not want a more equitable system in which slaves still existed. You wanted no slaves. But you were betrayed, time and time again. Power was still too hard to resist for most of you. Independence from the kings led only to a less centralized monarchy, with a congress or parliament instead of the crown. Man was the highest of creatures, you said, possessing an intellect and reason, your beloved reason. Rather than just one of you, you told yourselves that you were all powerful, all equal. You came close to realizing what you were then, but of course you were still too timid to take those last steps. The universal equality you preached soon turned to more equality for some and less for others. Administration became your new god and you placed all of your faith in its supposed fairness. You tried to turn yourselves into impartial cogs in a vast machine. But you cannot be impartial. Your idea of perfection, which you thought was embodied in your courts, continued to elude you. This caused some of you to reject perfection, reason, intelligibility and clarity. All of the wars which your new States started only provided more evidence that all the talk of equality was a sham. You saw the same kings murdering each others populations solely to squeeze a little more gold out of each other. Equality was an illusion they kept you pacified with. Everything fell into question as you ran through the trenches you had dug only to aid you in murdering one another, as you dropped bombs from the machines which allowed you to enter the sky, as you saw every innovation and new discovery taken by the exploiters to either rob or kill you. The product of your own hands was being used to strangle you while your children died and your back broke. The eruptions continued, the explosions growing increasingly powerful, the backlash intensifying. The ideas which had come from Greece and seeped into Rome had now taken over the world, fighting relentlessly to kill off every other religion and alternative. You infected the minds of everyone thirsty for power. You were no longer raping the new world, you were raping the entire planet. And, within a short amount of time, you began to kill the planet. Everything broke down. Laws became meaningless, pliable. Everyone understood their irrelevancy but practiced them out of habit. Doused with electric illusions, having no faith in what resisters of an earlier time said and searching desperately for a way out, showered with sparks and glitter, diamonds parading before dirt, poverty of the mind seeping out into the land of living, broken brothers in the bushes, nothing made any sense, ruler and ruled, it all began to implode on a worldwide level, crashing down, the Caesars, who had never died, still among you, knowing their time was up but still trying to buy a little more time with their worthless gold just as more and more of you woke up and could not hide from the truth any longer. None of those ideas, based around perfection, around the Christian God, the Church or the State had done any good for you or the planet. Authority, whether it came from some external god or from an alleged mandate from the masses, was all the same. And then you attacked it. Nearly all at once. All over the world. You accepted each others differences and united against those whose ideas and laws were so bankrupt that they had to be forced at gunpoint into your minds and communities. It was then that you rediscovered what gods were. They are you, Rosemary, they are whatever you want them to be. You are whatever you want to be. Reality can be whatever you want it to be, the only question is do you want it too be awful or beautiful. You have to control the fire within you and understand your relationship with it. Otherwise it will consume you, as it nearly did. You can do whatever you like with it, just as long as you do not run from it, as long as it remains where it belongs. Within you."

"But why Greece, mom? Why did you show me those particular images? Why did those five marbles represent those five gods?"

"Why? You don't know?"

"No."

"Your culture came out of Greece, Rosemary. The history of Western culture is your history. Culture is the expression of all of you. It moves like religions did. If you were in India now you would see something entirely different. This is your culture, for better or worse. As for those images, they came from you and those around you. You picked them, not me. The five gods were those five gods because they were the ones which you had chosen, which you knew represented you the best."

"But you put those marbles in the wall."

No I did not. You did.

"How?"

"With your mind. You picked that old Babylonian myth to mirror what you were going to do to yourself. Just as Jones and Evelyn picked their own myths and stories. It was you. Every single thing that happened to you was your fault."

"What's happening, though?"

"You are learning what it is to be god."

"What am I supposed to do, being a god?"

"Nothing. Be yourself."

"Is it just us?"

"What do you mean, dear?"

"Are we the only ones who are waking up?"

"You will have to find that out for yourselves. But rest assured, Rosemary, people have been waking up for a long time before you and for a long time to come. Just look at Islam. A new monotheistic god was born, a vengeful god, yes, but a tolerant one. All of the religions were able to coexist in the Islamic lands. It was clear that cooperation and acceptance made more sense and so Islam flourished. And then it came under attack. Centuries of warfare hardened your hearts, on both sides. Hindus and Christians and Communists fought against it. Because your prophet told you to fight back, you fought back. Soon you grew to be just like your enemy. Intolerant, aggressive and blind. But at its birth, Islam was an attempt to move beyond, to move towards the place you and Jones and Evelyn have now reached. Just as Christianity was an attempt to move beyond Judaism, Islam was an attempt to move away from Christianity. After that the secular began to rule, as I have already told you, and the new, rational systems of governance replaced the old religious ones. Capitalism became the one religion and it murdered billions of people to establish its rule. And as it spread, so did the counterforce, sweeping you along with it. You awoke along with millions of others. And you continued to evolve. Now, here, sitting on my lap, you are about to wake again."

"But if I picked all these things, why don't I know what comes next?"

"You do know what comes next. You have always known."

"No I haven't. I don't know anything."

"You know everything you need to know."

"I don't. I really don't. I don't even know who you are."

"Yes...you..."

"...do. You are Aphrodite, goddess of love, wind that breaks branches onto the heads of sleeping children, jolting them into the mercurial wonderland rotating above their heads, you are Ishtar, goddess of the over-world, land-of-the-seen, land of comprehension and belief, lucid and clear, varied and uniform, you are Aphrodite, goddess of love, bed maiden to Ares, your secret, your fire, the one who pushes you into the furnace only so you may arise anew, more beautiful than before you were engulfed in the blaze you yourself ignited, you are Venus, projection of perfection, encased in bronze, authority over the men in robes, bowing down to your immobile feet, worshipping their fear, their fear of you, you are Saturn, giver of bread, handing out bloated light to all who need it, you are Mars, Ares' pale shadow, battle seen as a concept and not as a force, un-sublimated and hysteric, in love with yourself and your power, you are Jupiter, sure of yourself and your actions, arrogant and afraid of the angels bursting out of your forehead, you are Mercury, the finder of solutions, metallic snake indifferently aiding the poorest of souls, tossing them the puzzle pieces they have sought for centuries, you are Aphrodite, goddess of love, sister, whore, mother to Ares, you are Ishtar, descending into the underworld, realizing you and your sister are the same being, you are Aphrodite, goddess of love, coupled with Ares, god of war, perpetually struggling against each other, always at odds but never being able to resist each other, you are Aphrodite, one before the split, the original source of life, ejecting Ares who carried away a piece of you, buried within him, you are Aphrodite, mother to all, but needing him, you need him, don't you, life cannot exist without him even though for so long he has destroyed and slaughtered and raped you over and over again, for so long he has been in control of the planet, for so long he has struggled to understand who you are and why you will not go away, for even all of his arrogance cannot wipe away the knowledge that you will be forever with him and one day, today, today, today you are bursting out of his forehead, Athena of the sword, his suppressed nightmare coming to turn Olympus upside down, but he realizes that his nightmare was not you, it was the limit of his knowledge, the dead end of his logic and the bankruptcy of his authority, yes, Zeus, betrayed by his lover, gave birth to a being more powerful than he, the spirit of humanity, Athena, the wisdom which, through his reason, he hoped to attain, always in his head, always within him, the wisdom, eternal and ever present, the key to unlocking it not being struggle but surrender, and now you will take your father by the hand, Rosemary, and tame his reason so that it stays within its boundaries and does not try to kill the children he is afraid of, the children, clad in black, dancing behind his eyes, product of his own corrupt imagination, you will teach him to let the children arise when they will, you will teach him to trust them over himself because they are the future, they are change, they are wisdom, they are flux, mutation and evolution, you will balance stasis with the

ever-flowing, you will balance the darkness with light, fire with snow, crow with fox, balance, balance, balance, his eternal feminine will turn out to be nothing more than that which he refused to accept, you, you, woman, female, wrapped in secrets to all those scared little boys, revealing nothing because he will not let you and you merely smile and in that smile is the wellspring of his fear, he knows you are hiding something, but your smile is just a mirror for his childish pride in his muscles and his speed, he has only known how to see himself, to see a male within you, but you will teach him, Rosemary, you will teach him to see the female within you, within everything, and then, only then, will he understand all of himself, only then will humans be whole, complete, hermaphroditic and..."

"...awake."

"Rosemary?"

"Mmm."

"Are you awake?"

Her mother rubbed her shoulder again, slightly more irritated than the last time.

"No," Rosemary mumbled.

"Come on, baby, wake up."

"Please let me sleep."

"You've been sleeping long enough"

Her mother turned and looked out her daughter's bedroom window. The oak tree in the distance blocked the rising sun, its branches beginning to glow. A murder of crows had their talons clasped around those same branches and bobbed up and down with them as the warm wind blew in from the East and caused the tree to shiver.

"Alright. Fine," Rosemary said, throwing the covers off her and getting up. "I don't even know why I have to get up"

"Don't be silly. Let's go."

Clapping her hands three times, her mother got off the bed and walked out of the room, finally being able to relax and finish the rest of the work she had before her. Downstairs in the kitchen, she began greasing a muffin pan while upstairs Rosemary got into her play clothes. Just as the muffins went into the now adequately warm oven, Rosemary walked loudly down the stairs.

"Breakfast ready?" she asked.

"You get out of here, kid. It'll be ready when you get back."

"You're so mean to me."

"Out, out, out," her mother said, chasing her outside.

The screen door slammed shut behind her. The sun continued to rise in the distance, bathing everything in soft, red light. Rosemary started walking down the path that led into the grove. For three hundred yards there was nothing but tan, overgrown grass, dry under the sun which had been exceptionally hot that year. The only thing that broke the uniformity of the grass was the tree; an oak, over a hundred years old, its branches imitating, to an astonishing degree, the dendrites of the human brain.

At least that is what Rosemary always thought. She was indeed thinking this same thing as she walked along the path. As she drew closer to its large trunk, she noticed someone sitting with their back leaning against it. Soon, it became clear the person was a man, eyes closed, cigarette between his lips.

She stopped walking, bare feet motionless on the hardened dirt path. A warm wind blew through the grass, tracing insane patterns that only the birds could fully appreciate. Just as she was hoping the same wind would not rouse the man, he opened his eyes and took the cigarette from his lips. He put the half finished cylinder out on one of the tree's protruding roots, brushed off the burn mark and put the cigarette in his pocket. A few leaves fell from the tree.

"What are you doing here?"

It happened too quickly for her to process. She could not understand how he had seen her, let alone how she had heard him. For his words entered her ears as if he was right in front of her when in fact he was over fifty feet away. While her mind struggled through this, Rosemary fell victim to what is commonly referred to as teleportation. She found herself standing directly in front of him before she could finish her last breath.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked again.

His face was a composite of red ants and bay leaves, all seeming to be frantically moving while remaining motionless. Despite this, all Rosemary saw was the face of a man she had once known.

"Who are you? I...where do I..."

"Know me from?" he said. "That is for you to discover."

"Well..."

She was surprisingly calm, being that she had just been teleported, even if it was only a short distance. If she could have seen the true nature of the man's face, perhaps she would have been more alarmed but due to this man's as of yet un-catalogued powers, she could not. His hair was black and flowing down to the bottom of his back. His eyes were green. And he talked without opening his mouth.

"What I need you to do," he said, "is return to your home."

An image of burning furniture filled her mind.

"Why?"

"You live there, do you not?"

"Of course I do, it's my home..."

"Once you have returned..."

She waited.

And waited.

But nothing followed from his frozen lips.

"And once I have returned," she said, "what should I do?"

"Wake up."

"ROSEMARY!"

Flames clawed at the walls and flowed down the stairs. The heat was the first thing that hit her, dense and threatening. It appeared to her that there was a star burning where the stove should have been but was not. White light bleeding into red. She stared into it and could not move. She would have stayed there forever and perished in the flames had not a hand fallen on her shoulder and pulled her away.

"Rosemary!" Evelyn screamed, carrying her friend towards the door. "Come on!"

And then she realized, slowly remembering how to use her feet, that her house was burning down. Immediately she scanned the inferno for Jones. When she did not find him anywhere she began to panic. But despite the terror which took control of her heart, she was unable to say anything and could only weakly start walking towards the open front door.

After stepping out into the snow the blast of cool air calmed her body down but did nothing to help her understand what was happening. Wood cracked and hissed, glass blackened and shattered, crows screamed and screamed. Evelyn pulled Rosemary until they were far enough away from the blaze that was melting the snow around the house. When Rosemary was finally able to collect herself, she noticed that the heat had burned a pentagon around itself.

"Where's Jones?" she whispered.

"He's over there. Are you okay?"

The heat, which she thought she had escaped from, was increasing.

"Rosemary! You okay?"

"I'm fine."

The two women walked back twenty feet into the coolness. As they did so, Rosemary saw Jones running towards them through the snow. Behind him was Evelyn's house, burning as well. The flames reaching up from the two houses were nearly the same height. Surrounding the second fire was another pentagon, burnt into the snow.

"We have to go," Evelyn said as Jones approached. "We don't have a lot of daylight left."

"Do we even...do we..." Jones bent forward, panting. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. But we have to get to town."

All at once, the three of them looked down at themselves. While none of them remembered putting these clothes on, they were all in their boots and jackets. The heat continued to increase, pushing them further away from what had once been their homes. Inside Evelyn's house, all of her books were burning. In Rosemary's house, the painting she had done on the wall, Jones' poem and Evelyn's book, the book which knew the future, were all gone, nothing more than black smoke, floating up to the clouds.

"Come on," Evelyn said to both of them. "We need to go."

She started walking. Jones followed. Rosemary lingered in front of the fire for a few moments. In that time, she noticed something. The trees, which were close enough to the house to be burning along with it, were completely unharmed. From where she stood, it appeared that flames were making a deliberate, efficient effort to curve together and away from everything other than the house. Just before she followed after her two friends, she saw hundreds of crows in the trees around her. A few minutes earlier they had been crying incessantly. Now they were completely silent, waiting for her to leave, black eyes looking down from the swaying branches.

“Rosemary!”

Evelyn's call pulled her away from the inferno. She took one last look at the birds and then started her descent from the mountain which she was never to visit again.

As they walked, each of them thought of their mother. Their mother's were the last things they had seen before repapering in front of the fires. They had been walking for an hour, slowly moving through the snow, and none of them had said a word. Vapor blew out of their mouths. Snow began to fall and then suddenly stopped. The journey to town took two days.

Rosemary remembered everything she had seen, even the images and ideas which had been kept from her before. And yet, somehow, she could remember nothing. What was different this time around, however, was the fact that she was making no effort whatsoever to recall what she had just seen. It had sunken so deep into her mind and into her body that it was overpowering the urge to speak or to think. It was the same for the other two. And so they walked. Silently.

Years earlier, the trees had been marked with symbols in the absence of a path. The three followed the string of carvings very slowly and haltingly. Jones usually made the journey with snow shoes. The four pairs of shoes had gone up in the fire which, from what they saw every time they turned around, was still burning. Every step of theirs sunk them up to their knees in powder. After two hours the three had only gone a mile and a half. The sun moved across the sky, hidden behind the clouds, getting closer to the unseen horizon.

The three moved along, single file, down the imperceptible slope. The powder exhausted them but their minds did not register it. No one spoke. After four hours the snow began to fall again. This time it did not stop. Luckily there was no wind and the large flakes fell silently, softly into the powder around them. Occasionally they would have to wipe the snow from their eyelashes.

None of them knew what time it was when they saw the fire. The darkness, which they thought would arrive sooner than later, continued to be held off. The position of the sun could not be seen, but through the clouds it was clear that it was, at the latest, midday. The miles and the symbols passed behind them. At some point, Jones was expecting to see the old cement road; a large, straight expanse of bareness which ran across the mountains. When they reached it they were to take a right and follow the road into town. It usually took Jones a little over five hours to reach the road from the house. As the fifth hour rolled upon them, it was evident to Jones that they were nowhere near it. The trees, from what he remembered from his journeys, thinned out just before they disappeared near the road. At the moment, the trees were still densely standing beside one another.

All of them were in their thick, black jackets and boots. Rosemary's was the only one with a hood. It hung over her head, blocking out everything but what was directly in front of her. Snow had gotten into all of their boots. In the past, because of the snow shoes, none of them had to worry about this. None of them were worried about it at the moment, but that was because they were simply not thinking about anything besides what they had seen just before the fire. But it was Jones who, taking stock of the situation before him, made them acknowledge their predicament.

“We have to get to the warming hut soon.”

There was no response on the part of the women. Nevertheless, they understood what it meant. Six and a half hours had passed when Jones noticed the trees beginning to grow farther apart as the slope took an abrupt dive towards the valley. Ten minutes later the party came to the road. The powder was thicker than it had been in the trees and stretched off into the distance. At this time of the year, the snow would remain thick for miles and it was a certainty that the powder would be deep the whole way. Jones sighed, led them down to the road and, heading to the right, continued walking towards the valley.

An old snowplow storage garage had been converted into a warming hut years earlier and it had been used by Jones, Evelyn and Rosemary every time they made the journey. It rested two miles from where the symbol-path met the road. Jones looked up at the clouds and noticed the increasing darkness. His thoughts darkened along with it. Soon all thought of his mother was gone and his thoughts were concentrated on quickening his pace. He did not have to tell the women to walk faster. Just as he began to move faster they did as well.

What finally drew the women's minds to the powder and the distance was the hunger that began to gnaw at their stomachs. The fire faded in their memories and the prospect of falling asleep on an empty stomach did nothing but haunt them. They knew there would not be any food at the warming hut. There had never been any before and they did not expect this time to be any different.

Night fell. Their exhaustion only seemed to bring it on more swiftly. Jones had no idea how far they had gone, but as it became more difficult to see, the prospects of reaching the warming hut while there was still light grew dim. The powder below their feet was a dark purple. The trees became

indistinct spires. All of them were starving, dizzy and tired. It was with a feeling far beyond relief that Rosemary first saw a domed shape standing to her left. They would have walked past it if she had not noticed it.

"Is that it?" she asked.

"Yes," the other two said as one.

A LARGE PILE of dried wood stood against one of the walls of the warming hut. After shutting the door behind them, Evelyn immediately started arranging kindling around crumpled pieces of paper. The paper had come from the pages of one of the many old phone books, stacked adjacent to the wood. She had not known it was there, but a box of matches had been in her jacket pocket. Instinctually, her hand went to the place it always went to when it wanted to start a fire. It did not seem odd to her that the matches would be where they were. She lit the fire mechanically, obeying a drive that was more deep rooted than some would care to imagine. The paper caught, burned intensely enough to ignite the slivers of wood arranged in a pyramid above it and soon the fire was alive. Evelyn fed it with increasingly larger pieces of wood until the flaming pyramid was waist high. The smoke escaped through a steel chimney extending up through the roof of the hut and the layers of snow covering it.

Evelyn sat back and the three of them stared into the flames, knees folded up to their chests, hands crossed at their shins. Indistinct thoughts externalized themselves in between the transient tendrils of fire. But they moved too quickly to be grasped and, because none of them cared to hold onto those thoughts, what they watched was simply fire and fire alone. Every fifteen minutes or so Evelyn would add more wood, slightly disrupting their gazing. When the hut grew warm and radiating, Jones' eyes became baggy. He was the first of them to fall asleep, curled up in a ball beside the heat. Rosemary yawned. Her thoughts grew dense for a moment and she turned her head towards Evelyn.

"Evie?"

Her friend suddenly blinked her eyes, turned to Rosemary and sighed.

"Yeah?"

"I feel it inside me. That darkness below the pentagram."

"I do, too, Rose. But we've always felt it. Only before we were ignoring it. Now we are letting it do what it will, using our imaginations to let it move faster."

"Faster to where?"

"We'll see, I guess."

Rosemary turned back to the fire just as Evelyn did. Five minutes later Rosemary lay down on her back, closed her eyes and fell asleep. Evelyn gathered her energy, stood up, grabbed three logs from the pile, arranged them over the fire, lay down on her side and watched the wood ignite. She fell asleep with the rising warmth touching her face. The five sided pyramid burned in the center of the hut.

Outside the hut, snow was melting before it had a chance to land. Just as it had been when they arrived, a patch of heat was surrounding the hut in the shape of pentagon, keeping the snow from piling up in front of the door while they slept. Before they had arrived the hut had been inaccessible, covered as it was in seven feet of snow. None of them had noticed the absence of snow when they finally did arrive. They had been far too exhausted to care even if they had noticed. As the three of them slept, they slept around a fire which, could it be seen from directly above, resembled a burning pentagram.

JONES WOKE UP, his first thought being to restart the fire. Within five minutes it had risen to his knees. After doing this he opened the door. Only a thin layer of snow now lay in front of it. Up above, the sky was completely clear. In the distance he could see a plume of black smoke still rising from their homes. When he returned inside the two women were awake, crouching in front of the fire. They warmed themselves until the heat began to decrease, put the fire out and left.

When the clouds were blown away during the night, the following drop in temperature froze more of the powder together, thus making their pace quicker than the day before, although not much. They walked along the old road, following the long absence of trees. It would take decades for the concrete to naturally wear away enough to allow for the growth of new trees. But at some point in the future, the long path the three of them walking over would fade into the forest, the seedlings eventually causing ripples to spread along the river of concrete.

Occasionally they would scoop up handfuls of snow as they walked. Like the previous day, no one spoke. The sun rained down on them and, along with the decreasing altitude, allowed them to unbutton their jackets. All of them were starving but they pushed it back, concentrating on escaping the grasp of the falling snow. Four hours passed silently, interrupted only by the calls of roaming bands of crows soaring between the trees. At the end of the fourth hour, the three came around a bend in the road and caught their first view of the valley, the town nestled inside of it.

Twenty five miles downhill, the tall windmills spun above the buildings, catching the wind that blew down from the mountains. They paused for a few moments, enjoying the clear, unobstructed view of the long valley. Rosemary turned around and saw the smoke, still rising in the distance. It would be visible from town by this point. This realization made her resume the journey. The other two followed behind her.

Starting at that first bend, the road followed the edge of the cliffs for ten miles. For those ten miles, they would be able to see the towering mountains all around them. Covered in snow and riddled with trees, the mountains stood seemingly motionless. But all the while they were slowly moving, waiting for their chance to sink back into the depths of the planet.

When they had covered those ten miles and were almost halfway from the hut to the town, the snow began to give way to soil and the first plants. Their pace increased and in less than an hour they were walking on concrete. On the sides of the road, rivers flowed, fed by the melting ice resting above them. The heights were delivering their bounty, stored and frozen for the winter, released as the planet turned closer to the sun. In town, people would be quenching their thirsts and washing their clothes with this water. In town, this water was powering a few mills and sending several boats down into the lowlands. This water was channeled into storage tanks and pumped, by hand, into the tower. This water, given to the mountain first, this water that had sat alone and immobile for months and months, that had been ripped apart by the fire of the sun, now gave life to the town and the valley.

The three continued on. When they were seven miles from the town and could no longer see anything other than the trees around them, Jones turned around. Once again, the smoke from their homes could still be seen. When Jones saw this, the others did as well, although they did not turn around. All of them thought as one that they would be meeting with people from the town soon. They would have to talk and explain. But what was it that they would explain? All of them stopped, gathered together and looked at one another.

"If we couldn't explain it to each other," Rosemary said, "how could we explain it to them?"

"We couldn't," Evelyn said.

"And it would...people would be as untrusting as I was," Jones said.

"It doesn't matter, though. We won't tell them anything. And if any of them want to go up there, if any of them want to go off by themselves, they will see what we saw. I think we just need to go down there and live our lives. Whatever we have now will be visible to those around us, even if we offer no explanation as to what it is."

"I agree," Rosemary said. "We should be around others. We need to be around others. There's only so much you can achieve on your own and I think we've exhausted what can be achieved."

She lifted her arm and pointed at the smoke. Her finger remained raised in the air for just a moment. But for that moment they all paused and, through the hiss of the wind and the incessant whisper of the springs, heard the sound of wood burning. She lowered her arm. The moment passed.

"You're right," Jones said. "And soon, hopefully, we'll be surrounded by others like us. It's funny, though. Whenever we are surrounded by others like us, we won't even be able to tell and won't care to wonder if they are. We'll just..."

"Know it," Evelyn said.

"We'll know it," Rosemary said, agreeing.

The rest of their journey passed as silently as it had for the past several hours. In less than an hour there was not a trace of snow to be seen. The hunger in their bellies tormented them as the thought of food-bearing townspeople filled their minds. Evelyn wished she had some tobacco. When she got to town, after eating, hopefully for the second time, she would walk to the dispensary and claim the tobacco which was brought every month from the lowlands for her and the ten other people who smoked. After doing that, she would sit down on whatever looked inviting and smoke a cigarette as the night descended on the town and the electric lights came on. The town would be frightened at first, worried about what happened, but soon the mood of the town would turn to one of relief and excitement that these three special human beings had returned from the mountains, albeit for strange reasons. A small party would take place with everyone out on the road, doors open, fires burning, unused beds waiting for the forms of the three tired and, at this point, stoned artists. They would sleep soundly through the night, wake up early, and cook breakfast for their hosts. Later that day, they would find quarters for themselves and begin to think of what they could do around town. But that would all happen later. They still had the remaining miles to walk.

They did not feel surprised when they saw the party of townspeople. They felt comforted. The townspeople ran the remaining distance to the three travelers who stopped walking and waited. In that span of time, the sun whispered something to them which they did not hear. Sooner or later, ever and anon, they would all return to themselves and find that they had never left. The world will open

up and take the lost children into its embrace, reminding them of what they had when they started and, most importantly, what they can have again whenever they wish. From the flames comes light but to create the flames the branches have to be gathered and the trees felled. The life has to be dried out of them until they are so fragile that a few licks of fire are enough to set them ablaze. All fires die out. If all fires are viewed as one entity, then the idea that a fire disappears is meaningless. It is merely burning elsewhere, most notably within the minds of the beings who know the secret to wielding it. Sooner or later, ever and anon, the pattern of the fire will become the pattern of life for human beings who have, up until recently, stayed in the burning house and let the white light engulf them. One must live one fire at a time. One must know when to put out the fire and go to sleep. The sun whispered these things to them. They did not hear it. But that was because they already knew what it was telling them.

The party arrived in front of the three artists, panting, out of breath.

"Are you okay?" one of them asked.

"We're fine. Hungry," Evelyn said.

"None of you are hurt?"

"No," Jones said. "We could just use some food."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," one of them said, digging inside her bag.

"But what happened?"

Rosemary felt the urge to smile.

"There was a fire."



WILDERNESS

PUBLISHED IN 2009 BY STRANGERS IN A TANGLED WILDERNESS

