

Phrases of the Moon

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Abstract

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Phrases Of The Moon is a collections of prose-poems, parables, riddles, aphorisms, and short stories linked together to form a web of creative mystery and revelation. Kafka, Borges, Mallarmé, and Nabokov are some of the writers that have influenced the theoretical underpinning and authorial design of this thesis. The riddles and parables deal the process of giving key information while simultaneously withholding that same information. The poetics gravitates around the mysterious process of writing and seeks to extrapolate a sensible explanation of writing as a means of mystification and method of solution to the interior life. The short stories explore the enigmatic states of the soul and seek to transcend—through imaginative creativity—crude moral, romantic, and intellectual explications of the literary form they are restricted to. Phrases Of The Moon is a collection of creative writings that hold mystery in common.

Phrases of the Moon

m i c h a e l p a s c h a l l

When I look back at my writing over the last couple years, I am kind of blown away by how much it's changed—trying to *get at* something; it's like trying to dig a piece of glass out of my hand with a needle. But it's not just trying to get something out; it's trying to get *into* something. Get into the moon, into language. Like forcing yourself to take a shape you feel your soul is more fit for, but you can never quite squeeze into. Cloven, riven, hoof. Moonface—a faun's curling horns, split tongue, labyrinth—it's all about getting into, getting out of—language, some kind of beautiful tragic thing that feels more magical, more meaningful, or more real than flesh and blood. Antlers, I have none. But is that *it* at all? I agree completely with Rilke when he says, “With nothing can one approach a work of art so little as with critical words: they always come down to more or less happy misunderstandings. Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered.”¹ That is how I think about my writing: a kind of hidden poetics that struggles the mystery instead of mangling it with the intellect. The intellect will always understand, that is its duty. That's why I love the riddle; the riddle slips out of the intellect's hands.

¹ Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters To A Young Poet*. Translation by M.D. Herter Norton. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. ISBN 0-393-31039-6. page 15.

Moon kid, moonface, moontongue. Blup. A fat moon sinking in my gut. I love the moon. It's in everything I write, like a dim companion. I see hundreds of variations of same thing. The moon is always creeping into my writing, rising into my creeping, taking over my thinking. Blue fingers crawl like worms. The moon theoretically reflects... the phases of the moon theoretically reflect... Until it writes itself into my writing, and I'm following clues dropped by a snitch who is keeping everything from me except—

“Whatever is sacred, whatever is to remain sacred, must be clothed in mystery. All religions take shelter behind arcana which they unveil only to the predestined. Art has its own mysteries.”² My favorite thing about reading Mallarmé's poetry is I start believing he actually had some kind of connection with the so called pure ‘Ideal’, that he was a sort of fantastic alien and had seen the Ideal, and had brought back these glistening little poems, like gems, as evidence. In another essay, Mallarmé writes of the poet, “All he can do is work in mystery with an eye to the future or to eternity, and occasionally send his visiting card, a few stanzas, or a sonnet to the ‘living,’ so that they won't stone him, should they suspect him of realizing that they do not exist.”³ Mystery is not just the unknown—it is the sacred, the eternal, the fundamental. Getting into that, a person is changed, becomes something new, something *different*. A poet, an artist—what is that?

² Stéphane Mallarmé, *Essays, Art for All*, Translated by Bradford Cook. The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1956. p. 9. Any subsequent references are from this edition.

³ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Essays, Autobiography*, Translated by Bradford Cook. The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1956. p. 17

There is something significant in the things that reappear over the years, in writing, in life. In the same way that his novels invariably conceal a puzzle, a pattern, something to be unlocked, Nabokov likens life to a thing that is to be solved. Figured out. Unraveled. Patterns become like puzzle pieces. The moon for me is a puzzle; I hold a thousand little pieces, dimly glowing, and I'm building something out of them—I just don't know what. "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip."⁴ Nabokov's characters are always obsessed with something, some *thing*. Words. A pattern. Cloven, moon, thorn—a few of my favorites, become less like words and more like locked doors that I'm beating upon with a fist made out of more words. But no—nothing is ever right. I can't say it. It doesn't fit, what is it? Take me in wide white ripples. Always the poet, always the dog. Licking vomit off the floor on all fours—filled up with light, scribbles. My thesis, in some ways, shows the patterns of my writing, my writing as a pattern—Patterns of the moon. I like that, trying to unfold something. Phases, the way it comes and goes and sometimes you can't really see it at all but then suddenly it's full. Throwing light on everything, and I'm writing what I want to write and I have no idea how, and then it's gone. Like Nabokov's butterfly, just slipped through the net when he was twelve. There's a hole in my net. There's a hole in my writing. There's a hole in the moon. It all comes down to one's timing, doesn't it? Suddenly you're writing. Then you're done.

⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory: And Autobiography Revisited*. Vintage International. New York. First Edition, 1989. **Chapter 6. Page 139**. All subsequent references to *Speak, Memory* will be from this edition.

The Moon Tales is a kind of reincarnation of *The Moon Kids*, which feels like a discarded skin. Underneath I found a clearer expression of the *thing* I'm writing at. All the different phases and shapes the story has taken—a screenplay, poems, multiple drafts of a novel, short stories, short-shorts, riddles and so on, have slowly become clearer and clearer. *The Moon Tales* is like the first full moon in all these phases and phrases. A kind of lucid expression of whatever I'm trying to say. But in the end, I think, all I can do is reflect. It's all about getting that reflection as full and clear as possible. Around and around in isolation, chasing the sun. Isn't art just a reflection of something going on inside? Or outside? Sometimes when I'm in a library, I start to feel weighed down, like millions of people are silently shouting something at me; all their epiphanies, perplexities, and poetries, like light. I don't want to get too close to anything—I just want to read a little. Sometimes I feel weighed down by how much literature there is, how much beauty, knowledge, and strangeness I will never know. Things I will never understand. Peoples' thoughts, their dreams. Part of me is always in the dark, the other part, catching light from Somewhere. Saint Anthony the Great asked, "What came first, the book or the knowledge?" Have you ever read the trees? the wind? the heart? the sea? The book is a pale reflection. I think insight is born in a cave, in the body, in the darkness of the heart, wrapped in Mystery—then it's written down. What's the moon without the sun?

Day 3, no cigarettes. In a light blue, long-sleeved shirt. Banana Republic. Baby blue. Too small—so I only wear it at night. It glows grey in the twilight of my yellow lamp. My pale, dry face in the dark. There are certain clothes I save for days when I feel pure. When my soul feels clean. They always end up stained in blood, ash, mud, alcohol, saliva—other things. Everything grows dark, dirty. Stories form in the dark just like photographs. There's a little bit of light on the left side of my face. A boy with a dragon face inside. He doesn't breathe fire, and it's only his face that's dragon-like. He has no scales. No tail. And he definitely can't fly. You know when you look at someone and you know they're alive? But writing little pictures isn't enough; there has to be something else too. You know that picture of the girl with blue eyes? Like trying to explain why *In An Aeroplane Over The Sea* is arguably the best indie rock album of the 90s. It's something elusive and so unique that you can't compare it to anything. Once you've talked about it, you've fallen short. It would have been better to keep quiet. And it's like you never really reach the end of it because you never stop discovering it. You can never really say *what* it is. It's always holding something back. Something is hiding on the other side. Something you never see, and never hear. Beneath all the tone and language there's something that's worth hiding. People's faces that you can't put your finger on are always the most captivating. Someone in the dark, dimly glowing, writing about nothing... If there's no mystery, then there's really nothing worth saying.

The Moon Tales

m i c h a e l p a s c h a l l

My little people. Awwwwwww, sometimes I wish I could walk among them. Well, that is dust. They have feet and I do not. Cavernous and hollow, is that what they call me? What is the human heart? Does it beat in their tiny chests like a clock? And when they dance in the dark, is it my light they adore, or my brother's, whom I adore? Alas, I am taken aback at my own lack of understanding. I purge myself of this light; let it bounce off my big round belly. Let them drink—but do they know? Do they know how I love them, how I lovingly, with such soft light, light their ways in hopes that they may walk upright in the night? I fly, but I am not a feathered thing. I fall, but never crash. I rise, but never reach. But who are they, these little things that walk about the earth? Am I not their slave? Is it not for them that I shine? I jest—do I shine? Do I not dimly glow? Crawling blue things—listen to me! I'm speaking—let me be lord of the night; let me be your King! Take this boy, look at him, the way he walks down Moonlight Blvd tonight—such intensity! So vibrant—so focused. And you! Yes, you. Let me say that I only wish to reflect this tale; to reflect is my nature. Never to emit. Is it a curse? Only if I am covered in shadow... Am I not always? But that is another tale; or is it? This tale begins with a squirrel, and a boy who is dying of thirst. Thirst for what, you ask? That is the question! But I, tiny listener, cannot tell you, for I do not know. Unquenchable thirst! How poetic! How romantic! Not a thing I comprehend. And that is why I follow this boy and relate his tale. I must know what ails him, what drives him. It's as if I exist to watch him. It's as if I'm—but what is thirst? Am I not dry dust? Dead as bones beneath the sun? Do I not merely gaze upon bodies of water from the deep blackness of space? Awwwwww, but my gaze reaches into their little heads, and that, my friend, is where this tale begins.

“Anyways, you can’t expect the world to go unfolding at your fingertips. You’re not a magician. And this place isn’t heaven; it doesn’t unfold like a flower. Everything beautiful has a side of horror. Getting older you learn to expect less out of life, and somehow that makes it gentler. But what if you believed you could make it to heaven? What if you believed that on the other side of that horror was eternity, but in order to get there you would have to stop investing yourself in all the beautiful things here. Like that ice cream cone you’re eating right now.”

“You know, for a squirrel, you sure talk a lot.”

“Well, I got a lot to say. Like, for instance, have you ever thought about why—”

“Listen, I get what you’re saying, kind of—but why should I have to stop eating ice cream? All the beautiful things on earth are here for a reason. I get what you’re saying about a kind of sinister side to everything, but that doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy the beautiful side of things.”

The red squirrel scurried up a nearby oak tree along Moonlight Blvd, stuck his furry head into a hole, and sniffed around. While his head was still in the hole he said, “Yeah, but that’s what I’m saying! The beautiful things always end up twisted, twisting you up and getting you stuck!” But Tomas Meekins couldn’t hear a word the squirrel said; it just sounded like dull mumbling. “What!” he shouted, staring at the squirrel’s furry butt sticking out from the tree.

“Get me out of here!”

Meekins grabbed the squirrel by his hind legs and pulled him out of the tree with a *pop!*

“What did you say?” The squirrel was brushing some bark and wood-dust from his head.

“*I said*, you can’t have the ice cream without the calories! You can’t have the nut without the danger. The two go hand in hand—”

“Right... You know, you think too much. You should just relax, take a load off, eat some ice cream. When’s the last time you were in a relationship?”

The squirrel looked morosely up at Meekins and said, “You think life is all rosy because you’re still young—and don’t turn this around, I’ve had plenty of girlfriends—I have trouble keeping them off me to tell you the truth, even a fox one time... Anyway, that’s beside the point, we were talking about *your* problem.”

Meekins’ face turned grave. He stared down at his grey sneakers on the asphalt. One, two. Two feet. Two feet. I have two feet, he imagined—he imagined more than thought. Tomas Meekins didn’t think in words; he thought in pictures, or vague swampy images, like the little dark pools that words are born in. Two feet. Shit. I’ve got to get this figured out or I’m going to be stuck talking to this squirrel all night—and he’s right, if I don’t make a decision soon then it will be too late. And she’ll be dead. And I’ll be dead too.

“Hello?” the squirrel sat on Meekins’ shoulder tapping on his head with a broken walnut shell.

“What?! Stop that! I can hear you just fine.”

The squirrel smiled. “I know what you should do.”

“What?” said Meekins hopelessly, tossing the rest of his waffle cone into some rose bushes. The sun had fallen below the mountains in the distance, shooting up a spray of orange light, like a splattered tangerine on a blue tablecloth. The air was humid and smelt like citrus and flowers. The squirrel, whose name was Bill—Meekins’ didn’t know this, not being polite enough to ask, or too concerned with himself at the moment—was sitting on his shoulder, his feet dangling down Meekins’ red, white striped Nintendo jacket. The light evening breeze was sifting

his furry head and pointy red ears. Bill loved twilight. Twilight, like a world between two worlds, he thought. He loved the soft light, like a cool transparent sheet that draped the flowers and trees making everything a little bit softer. A little quieter, a little less real. He loved the way everything began to lose its shape, the way everything became distorted, and suddenly, was gone.

“At twilight the world shows its true face: its inner self. But only for a moment, and you have to pay attention or you’ll miss it,” said Bill, gazing with a big smile at a large purplish-looking cat sitting in the branches of a tree. The cat’s teeth flashed, and Bill thought he saw a smile, but then he realized it wasn’t a cat at all, just leaves rippling in the breeze. He smiled even bigger.

“What are you talking about? I thought you said you had an answer for my problem?” said Meekins, rubbing his face with his hands and sighing, the way only a teenager can sigh, with infinite anguish, but still lightheartedly. The moon was full and rising. It was huge, and pinkish. Everything was quickly turning grey.

“Right,” said Bill, and jumped off Meekins’ shoulder onto a low hanging branch. “Stop!” he shouted and Meekins froze, mostly out of surprise at the squirrel’s deep voice. Bill carefully walked to the very edge of the branch, light-footedly, without a sound. “What are you doing? I don’t have time for this—”

“Shhh... Just watch.” At the very end of the branch, which was now dipping into the center of the street due to the squirrel’s weight, was a single apple: a perfect fruit, ripe and without blemish. Meekins watched, tapping his sneakers on the asphalt, a smirk playing on his lips—since when can squirrels talk? He had been so preoccupied with his own troubles he hadn’t even thought to ask for the squirrel’s name, and had, for some odd reason, thought it totally

natural that he found himself talking to it. It was almost like he had been hypnotized. Had he? Bill reached the very end of the branch and bit down on the stem of the apple. It was like slow motion, and without thinking Meekins dropped the book he had been carrying and dashed out into the middle of the street—he nearly got run over by a very pretty girl (brown hair, he noticed as her face flashed by) in a blue Volkswagen Beetle—he reached out and caught the apple. The girl honked. Bill jumped down onto Meekins' shoulder and said,

“If you want something in this life, you have to reach out and take it! No one's going to give you anything. In this life, you have to go out on a limb—that's where the fruit is.”

Meekins stared down at the apple, then chomped into it.

“Is it sweet?” said Bill as he scurried up to the book laying open on the street. It was really getting dark now; the street lamps had flickered on as Meekins reached down and picked up the book.

“Emily Dickinson?” said the squirrel, curiously, with excitement.

“It's for class,” said Meekins and then, “So you think I should just tell her then? You know, just tell her—let the chips fall where they may?”

Bill laughed. “You have to figure out what you need to do. Whatever floats your boat—or something like that.”

“Hey, why are you talking to me anyways? You're a squirrel!” shouted Meekins, louder than he meant to.

“And what is a squirrel, Tomas Meekins?” said Bill.

“Stop answering my questions with more questions!”

“Listen, if you want to know why I’m talking to you, or more importantly, why *you* can understand me, then I suggest you muster your courage and make your decision. We—not just I, but the entire squirrel community have been watching you for some time—now I know that you have doubts, that you are not in any way certain, but you also have the feeling that this world is—how to put it... an *illusion*, to be blunt.”

“Yeah...” said Tomas, more to himself than to Bill.

“The truth is, if you want to know why you are able to hear me, you’ll simply have to follow your heart, and I think you know where that is leading. And it’s not home, even though, at the moment, that’s where your feet seem to be walking.”

Bill jumped off Tomas Meekins’ shoulder onto a branch and disappeared into the old oak trees lining Moonlight Blvd. The trees lined the street like a row of ancient guardians, their hundreds of arms reaching into the road, creating a tunnel of leaves. Just then all the trees rustled, and a strong gust of wind blew down the street, knocking Meekins’ blue Red Bull cap off onto the pavement. He felt a tingling on the top of his head, as if someone were dripping water onto his head—but more like into his brain. He leaned down and picked up his hat, touched his head, and shouted into the branches, “Will I see you again?”

“That depends on you,” Bill’s voice crackled through the fluttering leaves and branches, and Meekins had a thought it was all in his head. But he *had* seen him. That squirrel had been right here, sitting on his shoulder. Clear as day.

“Hey, what’s your name!?! How will I know it’s you?” Meekins shouted into the branches.

“My name is Billius Westwest” said the squirrel; his words were drowned out by a car rushing past. Tomas looked up and saw that he was standing right in front of his house; his sister’s bedroom light was on. The white Volkswagen rabbit sat quietly in the driveway. Elliot, Meekins’ black cat, was sneaking around in the bushes. There was a white coat hanging inside the murky window beside the front door; it looked like a ghost pinned to the glass. Meekins took one more look into the trees lining Moonlight Blvd. All was dark and still. The moon was rising into the star speckled sky, slowly, big and cream colored, like the inside of an Oreo cookie.

Elliot squeezed quickly through Tomas' legs as he opened the front door. "Hello?" he said, leaning into the kitchen, dropping his backpack on the floor. There was a blueberry pie on the table, a couple candles burning on the windowsill. Tomas tiptoed on his scruffy white socks, bits of dark lint stuck to the fabric around his heels. He slowly pushed open his mother's door and leaned his head in. She was sitting up in bed, reading. "Tomas," she said, looking up. "When did you get in?"

"Just now," said Tomas. "Listen, Mom, there's something I have to tell you." He sat on the edge of her bed and stared at his socks. They were too long, dangling off the end of his toes like limp, headless puppets. "What is it?" she said, glancing at the needle pumping morphine into her arm. "There's something I have to do, and I know it's going to sound ridiculous. Like I'm deserting you. Or something. But it's not like that, and I just need you to trust me, okay?"

She touched his hand. "Tomas, whatever you have to do—I trust you. Always." She watched him staring at his feet and smiled. "There's still time." Tomas looked up at her, tears forming in his eyes—he dug his face into her arms. He felt angry, and lost, and found all at once. He bit his lip and sat up. "I love you so much, Mom." She smiled. Her pale cheeks shone. Her eyes were like little sparks of fire. Tomas said goodnight and slipped out of the room. He started crying on the stairs, fell onto his knees. Then pulled himself up and climbed the rest of the stairs. He felt like someone had punched him in the stomach and like a beautiful girl had kissed him, all at the same time. He closed his door and lay down on top of his blankets. Plastic stars glowed dimly green on his ceiling. The big pale moon hovered in his window like it was watching him. He stared at it until it became blurry, and slipped into sleep.

Anyways, you can't expect the world to go unfolding at your fingertips. You're not a magician. And this place isn't heaven; it doesn't unfold like a flower. Everything beautiful has a side of horror.

Tomas didn't know it, but Elliot, his slender black cat, named after Elliot Smith, was watching him from the windowsill. Elliot had long known of Tomas Meekins' misgivings with the world. He even knew that Tomas had it in his heart to leave school—to go in search for something more meaningful. The thing about Elliot was, he just didn't care. He didn't care enough to help Tomas along. And actually, this is what Tomas liked most about him. He minded his own business, didn't need anybody. Tomas felt the same way, or tried to feel the same way. But he could never pull it off with the elegance and carelessness Elliot could. Maybe it was the full moon, or maybe Elliot had just had a change of heart, but that night something was different. Elliot suddenly cared about this boy; this tall, pale, black haired boy with his feet hanging off the end of his mattress. He hadn't really noticed him before. He had always known he was there, he just hadn't ever paid much attention. Tomas' eyes were red and swollen and his face looked like it was in pain. "Okay, okay..." Elliot sighed, looking up at the moon. "I'll help it—but only this once!" He didn't like the feeling of helping somebody; it made him feel sappy—not cool. And he was the coolest cat. The coolest black cat.

Elliot used both of his paws to push open the window; it was a struggle, but he got it open. And as soon as he did, a gust of wind blew into the bedroom, and it quickly became breezy and cold. Tomas twisted in his bed. Pulled the blankets over him. "C'mon dummy! Wake up!" Elliot used his paws to push a lamp off the table. It crashed on the floor and the light bulb shattered. Tomas sat up (*or at least believed he did—just kidding, he actually did...or did he?*) in

bed and stared out the open window; Elliot was already outside, hunting squirrels... “What the heck...” Tomas mumbled, crawled out of bed and stumbled over to the window. The giant moon was staring back at him, and for a moment Tomas thought he saw a face in the moon, a gentle, giant face—“Hey Tommy!” A boy was standing in the grass below, hat on backwards, cigarette in his ear, smirk on his face. “C’mon, I want to show you something!”

Tomas grabbed his Red Bull hat and threw it on; grabbed his sweatshirt and ran down the stairs. Calvin Moon. He was a trickster, a bad kid, and Tomas knew it, but he liked him anyway. He liked him because he did whatever he wanted, didn’t listen to anybody; for some reason, that was cool. Tomas quietly snuck out the front door. Calvin lit up his cigarette, “Tommy, I found something you’re gonna wanna to see.” Calvin lifted his white Schwinn bicycle from the driveway, “C’mon! Get on the pegs.” Tomas climbed onto the pegs and Calvin peddled down Moonlight Blvd, smoke tunneling back into Tomas’ face—cherry clove. “You want a smoke?” said Calvin, glancing back at Tomas. “Sure, when we get there though. What is this thing, where are we going?” Tomas shouted into the wind. Calvin smiled wickedly. “You’ll see.”

Calvin whipped the bike around a corner into the dirt bike park. Navigated some curves, and slid to a stop somewhere near the center. “What?” said Tomas, looking around. Calvin jumped off the bike, pulled out a cigarette and handed it to Tomas, pulled out a lighter and held up the flame. Tomas lit the cigarette, inhaled way too fast, and started coughing. Calvin laughed, “Look over here,” and leaning over and looking into the dirt, “I found it right after sunset, right as it was getting dark.” Tomas peered over his shoulder, “I can’t see anything.” Calvin lit his lighter and suddenly he saw it, splayed out in a puddle of blood, “Bill!” he shouted. Calvin looked up at him, “Bill?” “Never mind,” said Tomas, lifting the dead squirrel into his hands. His

belly was slit open and all his guts were lying in the dirt. Tomas felt nothing. He wanted to feel sad, or horrified, but he felt nothing. “Look at this,” Calvin said, holding his lighter up to the little intestines and bloody clumps of dirt. *YOU HAVE THE ABILITY TO SENSE AND KNOW HIGHER TRUTH.* It was written in the dirt, with someone’s finger, looked like. “Isn’t that fucked up?” Calvin said, rubbing his cigarette out in the blood. Tomas stared at the writing. Maybe it wasn’t Bill. To be honest, he couldn’t really tell. It was a squirrel, and don’t all squirrels look the same? Still, he had a feeling it was Bill. But at the same time, he had a feeling Bill was still alive. *YOU HAVE THE ABILITY TO SENSE AND KNOW HIGHER TRUTH.* Sounds like something Bill would say. Suddenly Tomas felt sick, leaned over into the dirt and puked. Calvin smoked.

Tomas Meekins didn’t know what to do with the body, so he dug a little grave and buried the squirrel next to the words in the dirt. He managed to push the bloody guts into the hole. Calvin dropped him off at home. Elliot was sitting on the porch, licking his paws. “What have you been up too, huh?” Tomas said. He didn’t notice the blood on Elliot’s jowls. He slipped into the house as if he were sleepwalking. Made it to his room somehow, fell into bed and fell asleep again. It was 1AM.

He dreamt of a tree. All night long he was reaching up at the fruit of the tree. Bill was climbing around on the branches—the fruit were like apples of water, transparent and glowing light red. Just a drop of water. He was so thirsty, but no matter how close he came to the fruit it was always out of reach. Just when he was about to pluck it he would shrink a little, or the fruit would grow higher. The fruit was so beautiful and smelled so sweet that he could taste it just looking at it; he could feel water rushing down his throat—but still, could not obtain it no matter

how far he reached. He had to find a drink. That was all that mattered. Bill was sitting on his shoulder, jabbering, blood dribbling from his beady little eyes:

Anyways, you're not a magician. You can't just go around expecting the world to unfold at your fingers. It doesn't work like that. You want something, you have to fight for it. Your soul is all dried up like a branch. If you want to quench your thirst you'll have to find water yourself. No one is going to give you anything. You have to find it and drink, so that your flesh becomes chilled, and your blood cold. You have to let your bones fill up with water—you have to open your heart and let it fill your body; until you do that, you're just an empty vessel. A clay pot.

Tomas sits up in bed. 3 AM. His mouth is dry and he feels weak.

In the bathroom, he swallows water cupped in his hands. Then he fills them again and splashes it onto his face. He stares at himself in the mirror. He's so thirsty for something, doesn't even know what it is. But Bill is right. He has to find it, or he'll die. He drinks the same water everyone else does, and his thirst just grows and grows and grows. And it's like he can't breathe unless he finds something to drink. It just goes on and on like this and he can't take it.

He doesn't care about anything except this thirst.

Doesn't care about anything except this thirst. He stares at his wet face in the mirror. Could be hit by a car tomorrow. What good is school going to do me then? Even if I live into old age, what good is that if I'm dying of thirst? Just go. Forget everything else. Like Bill says, *if you want the fruit, you have to go out on a limb.*

What if I'm wrong, though? Then you die of thirst. So then it doesn't matter; I have to go. If I step out that door, I won't look back. I know it.

Tomas Meekins grabs his backpack and fills it with clothes. Toothbrush, toothpaste. Lighter, Swiss Army knife. Flashlight. Half a bag of Reese's pieces. Mp3 player, headphones. Nail clippers. Two notebooks, a handful of pens. Wallet, 23 bucks inside. A pair of dice. Old Spice. A picture of his mom—Snickers bar.

He sneaks quietly downstairs, into his mother's bedroom. He kisses her on the cheek. She moves a little, says, "If you find a fountain, drink from it," but doesn't open her eyes. "I will." Tomas says, "And I'll bring some back for you too. Don't worry, we are both going to live forever, I won't give up till I find it. I promise." Tomas slowly backs out of the room, and quietly closes the door.

“First, you’ll need a new name. I can give you one, if you want.” Bill said, landing on Meekins’ shoulder as he walked down Moonlight Blvd.

“Bill! I thought you were dead!”

“Dead? No, just a bit of blood, a little fun—you know. A gag. A joke. A trick.” Bill said, rubbing his little hands together, smiling wickedly.

“But how did you...”

“As much as you may think it, I’m not just a regular squirrel—I’m a link between two worlds. Your world, and the—well, call it the Otherworld. There ain’t a proper term in your language to define it.”

“I don’t understand.” Meekins said, looking into the dark street ahead. Suddenly he felt cold, and a little scared, as if he had made a terrible mistake in leaving.

“Don’t worry, you haven’t. Now listen—you’ve left, which I assume is at least partly due to our little talk, I feel obligated to help you along the way, at least to start. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not going to babysit you on this little quest, but I will do my best to help you get on your feet, so to speak.” Bill scurried into the branches above Meekins and snatched a nut from one of the pecan trees. A tiny black worm poked its head out of the soft shell. “Damn! Rotten. Your world is really a downer. I don’t understand why more of you people don’t try to get out.” Bill jumped back down onto Meekins’ shoulder.

“Bill—I don’t know what I’m doing. I felt like I knew a few minutes ago. I don’t even have a plan, but somehow I knew what I was going to do. It was like a picture in my mind, clear and bright; but now it’s gone and I can’t even remember why I left. But I know I can’t go back.”

“Like I said, first things first. You need a new name. You can’t go into the Otherworld with a name like Tomas Meekins. Everyone would laugh at you; it would cause uproar! People wouldn’t be able to stop, could go on for years, cause deaths, and stuff. How about River?”

“River?” Meekins said.

“Yeah, River.”

“River Meekins?”

“River Meekins? Goodness no—just River,” said Bill, laughing. “Don’t make me laugh!” Bill nearly fell off Meekins’ shoulder. He stuck his tiny fist into his mouth to contain his mirth.

“Fine. River. Whatever. Just tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

“Well,” said Bill, “We need to establish how to get *over there*. That’s the first thing we need to do. Once we’re there, we can really start looking for this—what was it you said it was? The image in your mind’s eye?”

“A fountain. No, a tree!” whispered River. “Yes! It was like a fountain, but there was a tree growing out of it. The most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen; it was so clear, I could taste the water rushing down my throat, and the fruit of the tree, I remember the sweet taste of it on my tongue—it was like nothing I ever tasted!”

Bill smiled. “Okay, so that’s what we’re looking for, and I think I know where to begin once we’re over there. But first we have to find a way into the Otherworld. Now if it was only me, I could just slip over there through one of these trees. Fun fact: something maybe you didn’t know, but along Moonlight Blvd there are a few portals to the Otherworld. Problem is, they shift from tree to tree, so I always lose track of where they’re at. But that wouldn’t help us anyways

because you couldn't fit into one of those little squirrel portals. But don't worry, there's another way in, but it's dangerous. You're not afraid of the dark are you?"

River laughed, then caught himself. Actually he had always been afraid of the dark. Wasn't that the point of the dark? "I mean, no, not really, why?" he said, glancing up into the dark rustling branches above his head.

"Good," said Bill, smiling, "because we're going to have to catch a Ghost train out of this world. Never fun, always a hasty business. Dangerous. Fast. Limbs can get torn off." Bill laughed, a giant smile crossing his lips. River gulped. "Luckily, once we're on the train we can ride it all the way to the Otherworld. Only problem is it goes through the Abyss, which, as I said, can be a bit dangerous. But don't worry; I've done it a hundred times. You're not the first kid in the world to look for a way out."

"I'm not looking for a way out." River said, his face suddenly changing. It looked rigid and strong and for a moment—immortal. "I just have to find that Tree—I'm coming back."

"Of course, but you know what I mean; once you come back you're never the same. As I was saying, before you got all serious, the Ghost train doesn't arrive until twilight, right at the middle of twilight, exactly at the point between day and night it comes sweeping through this world. So we'll have to be at the tracks around 7, I imagine, and just wait till we hear it."

"What's the Otherworld like?" said River.

"You'll see. There's no guarantee that you'll make it to the other side. Not everyone does. Sometimes kids get scared, try and jump off, end up in the Abyss. Sometimes, by the time we arrive in the Otherworld, they've grown so dim from fear that they've become like ghosts. Can't

talk. Can't hear. Just float around. That's part of the reason why it's called the Ghost train. It used to be called something else, but I can't remember what it was now..."

"HEY! MEEKINS!"

Bill scurried up into the trees. River was standing at the end of the street where it began to curve down the hill. He could see the whole city lit up below. The big blue moon made everything look bright and cool. He looked up to see if he could see Bill, but he was gone. Calvin Moon was sitting in the skate park. Did he ever sleep? He was alone. His Schwinn bicycle lay like a white skeleton in the center of the cement pool, one wheel still spinning.

"What are you doing? It's like 4 in the morning." Calvin shrugged, took a drink from something in his hand. "Just didn't want to go home. It's the first day of summer. No school. No nothin. I'm not doin' anything all summer. I'm just gonna to drink and ride. All day. All night."

"*What an idiot!*" said Bill, hiding in the branches.

"What'd you say—" said Calvin.

"Nothing," said River. "That's cool. Don't you need to sleep though?"

"I haven't slept in weeks. Seriously. I found this stuff in the forest. Come look at this."

Calvin held out his hand and showed the bottle to River. At first he thought it was vodka, but then he read the label. *Dr. Melvin Elvrum's Magical No Sleep Potion: guaranteed to deprive you of sleep until the day you die.*

"Cool." said River.

"You want some?" Calvin held the bottle up.

"No, thanks. I like sleeping."

“Well, I’ve been using this stuff for 2 weeks now and my whole life has become like a dream. I see things in the shadows. Sometimes I even think I’m talking with someone, but no one’s there. It’s crazy.”

“That’s cool. Look, I’ve got to get going though, I have a train to catch.”

“Okay, I’ll see you around.”

River nodded and turned down the winding road leading down the hill and into Midnight City. When he was about a mile away, Bill lunged out of bushes and knocked River backwards in fright; Bill had a good laugh, cackling like a witch.

“I’ll have to have a talk with Dr. Melvin when we get home. The scatterbrain! Keeps dropping his potions about when he slips between worlds. It’s upsetting the order of things. Always falls into the hands of some idiot kid like Calvin Moon.”

“Hey! I like Calvin.”

“Why?” said Bill.

River thought about this for a long time and finally decided, “He’s cool.”

“Whatever. Let’s get going, the train tracks are all the way on the other side of Midnight City; it’s going to take us most of the day to get there—and we have to be there by twilight. And twilight only sticks around for a moment, so we have to hurry. Put me in your backpack so I can take a nap. You know your way through the City, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” said River, unzipping his backpack and letting Bill crawl inside. He zipped it back up, leaving it open just a little so that Bill could breathe. Actually, River didn’t know the city at all. He had only been down there with his mom, and had never paid any attention to where they were going. Since she had gotten cancer and couldn’t drive, they hadn’t

been down there. Now that he thought about it, he had no idea how to get anywhere in Midnight City. Might as well have been entering a labyrinth. But he didn't mind, somehow he believed he would find the other side.

It sure was beautiful at night though, at least far away. The twinkling buildings rose like rigid giants with thousands of blinking eyes. A purple haze lay over the city like gaseous clouds. The stars speckled the sky above the city, and at the very center, right above the highest skyscraper, which looked like the top of a flying saucer, hung the moon, bright and blue, looking down on everyone. Out of the corner of his eye, River thought he saw a crooked smile in the sky—but when he looked up again, all he saw were craters.

“It’s a magic frog,” said the girl, “and if you touch it, you feel your body changing.” A boy and a girl are playing in a puddle of muddy water. He has a blue raincoat on and she has a pink one. The rain is really coming down, and it feels cool on River’s face. Passing beneath some bushes, the wet leaves hit him in the face and he feels a cool rush splash him on his insideface. Insideface? Yes, that’s what I’ll call it. He smiles and breathes out deep, looks up at the giant silver moon. It fills the sky, and looks bigger than normal. But lately, normal has become a shady thing. He’s losing track of the line that separates sense and nonsense, but he doesn’t mind, for some reason, it all makes sense. He listens to the kids playing in the puddle. Why were they outside so early? The sun won’t be up for 30 minutes at least.

“And it’s invisible too, and you can see through its body,” said the boy, “everything changes when you touch it; you can see a world you didn’t even know was there!” He splashed his hand in the puddle.

“Eventually, you turn into a frog too!” said the girl. Suddenly a giant yellow bus pulled up and splashed them with water. They were both laughing as they climbed onto the bus, and it was gone.

River let the cool water stream down his face. It made him feel alive. He walked on, his feet soaking wet. The sun was just beginning to peak through the mountains in the distance, dim red began to rise on the horizon. He unzipped his backpack and pulled out his Reese’s Pieces, popped a handful into his mouth and put them away. He needed to ration; he only had 23 dollars.

“Hey, zip that up—it’s getting wet in here,” snapped Bill. “Let me know when the sun is up.” River zipped the bag up and kept walking. He was alongside the highway now; traffic was slow, but every once in awhile a big truck would drive past and he would get splashed with

muddy water. “How am I supposed to find the train station?” He thought of asking Bill, but he had said he knew the way, so he kept walking, watching the sun slowly rise. Eventually he came to a gas station, sat down on a curb to rest. He unzipped his backpack and woke Bill. “The sun is coming up. And honestly, I don’t really know the way to the train station.” Bill wearily opened his eyes, then suddenly burst to life and dashed out of the bag.

“Of course you don’t. You don’t know anything. But don’t worry. I do. Now I need to find some food and excrete. Stay here, and I’ll be back in a few minutes,” said Bill rapidly, and dashed off into the nearby park. River pulled out his Reese’s Pieces. There was a girl rolled up in a sleeping bag near the dumpsters. She looked about the same age as River. She had long brown hair that curled around her face. River thought she was very pretty and was surprised when she suddenly opened her eyes and said, “Stop staring at me.” River looked abashed.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t—how did you know I was looking at you?” She smiled. “I can just feel it. All girls can. I wasn’t asleep either, just resting my eyes. My name’s Isabel, what’s yours?” River thought for a moment and said, “River. My name’s River.” She looked at him shrewdly and crawled out of the sleeping bag. “River?” He nodded. He liked the name. Granted, a squirrel had given it to him, but he still liked it better than Tomas Meekins. She came and sat down next to him on the curb, “Can I have some of those?” River poured the remaining Reese’s Pieces into her hand, crumbled up the bag and stuffed it in his backpack. “Well, River, where are you headed?”

Her eyes twinkled when she smiled. And her smile was perfect.

“I’m going to the train station on the other side of Midnight City,” he said, trying not to look into her eyes when he spoke; it made him feel embarrassed the way she just sat there confidently gazing at him.

“Really?! Me too—I’ve got to be there before it gets dark. According to my “Letter of Meager Importance.”” Isabel pulled out a golden piece of paper from her bag. *Dear Princess Isabel, you are hereby summoned to the throne of Va’llesthorn to take your place as queen— (please see details below concerning your father’s banishment) Please take the 7th train on the 7th of May at exactly 7 minutes past 7 o’clock...* and it went on. “The throne of Va’llesthorn?” said River, looking curiously at the paper. “It’s silly, huh? Me, a princess!” she laughed, looking at her muddy white shoes. “It’s ridiculous really, I don’t believe a word of it, and I wouldn’t be going at all if it wasn’t that the letter mentioned my father...” She grabbed the letter and folded it up. “Anyways, since you’re going there too, maybe we could go together?”

“I, yeah, we should. I have to be there by sundown. You probably do to, if you’re going to the same place as me. I have to warn you though, I have a friend with me, and he can be a little, well, squirrely.”

Isabel laughed, and rolling up her sleeping bag, she said, “That’s okay, I could use the company; I’ve been walking alone for a couple days now. Hey, why are you going to the train station?”

River thought about it, but the truth is he didn’t really know. He had no *real* reason, only an image of the Tree, which was quickly becoming vague. It was harder to imagine in the daylight. That was why he was going, but it sounded silly to say that. If he could show her a picture of what was in his head it would all make sense, but that was impossible. “I’m looking

for something. And I think that's where I'll find it. Maybe we are both going to Va'llelathorn, I only know I'm going to the *Otherworld*," he said. And just then Bill scurried up onto the curb, spit some shell from his teeth and said, "Who's the broad?"

"See, I told you, not very respectable," said River.

"What? What'd I say?" Bill said, picking his tooth with a twig.

"My name is Isabel Swan, and I'm on my way to find my father—I'm catching a train to Va'llelathorn."

"Swan?" said Bill, gaping at her, "Daughter of the King, Isabel Swan?"

Isabel shrugged and said, "I wouldn't call him a king, seeing as I've never seen him in my life. He left when I was still a baby. He left me and my mother to fend for ourselves. Not really a very kingly thing to do if you ask me." Bill stared at her as if he'd seen a ghost, then suddenly snapped back to his normal self. "Alrighty then, I guess we'll take the trek together, we, (me and this dope)," Bill climbed up onto River's shoulder, "we're also trying to catch the train to Va'llelathorn, though we have different plans than you. I suspect you are going so that you can make a claim to the throne?"

"I don't know anything about a throne," said Isabel, slinging her backpack over her shoulders, smiling at the talking squirrel, which she found fascinating, even if he was a little squirrely. "I'm just going to see if I can find my father, at least find out what happened to him. Give him a piece of my mind. Do you know anything about my father?"

“Lord Swan? Me? No, no, nothing. Nothing at all. We should get going, or we’ll miss our train,” said Bill, sniggering to himself. Then he crawled into River’s backpack and curled up in an avocado green sweater. It was soft and plushy.

If I sink deep enough into River’s head, taking it easy in his backpack...he thinks I’m sleeping. Sleeping. Don’t know why anyone would want to submit his soul to the dark abyss of sleep. Va’lellathornians don’t sleep. But we are always at rest. Listen to the boy, the way he thinks, like a tiny insignificant insect, an ant in an anthill—

We find ourselves wandering through the grittier parts of the city. Isabel says she used to live down here with her mom before they moved onto the hill outside the city. She knows all the short cuts and stuff; she acts like it’s nothing but I can tell it makes her feel cool. Bill spends most of the time sleeping in my backpack, giving me a chance to talk with Isabel without him butting in with his little jokes. For some reason I still feel like he is listening to everything—guiding me somehow, as if he isn’t just a trickster—but like, I don’t know, like he knows more about me than I do myself. Isabel skips in some puddles down a dark, glistening alleyway. She’s chewing on some pink taffy; it dangles from her mouth like a long, pink tongue.

“So why are you going to find your father, I mean, if he left you and all. How come you even want to see him?” I say suddenly, thinking I probably should have kept my mouth shut. But she doesn’t get mad at all, just smiles and says, “I don’t know. I just want to see him, at least once. Before I die. And I could die tomorrow and never really see him, you know? I guess I just want to ask him why he left. And all of a sudden the letter fell into my lap. Literally, I was sitting outside, reading beneath a tree, and a crow dropped it from a branch into my lap and flew off,”

she laughed, “I figured it was my only chance and I had better take it, or it would always haunt me. And also, secretly, I kind of hoped I really might be a princess...” she blushes, “but I don’t believe it,” she adds and looks at me.

You are definitely a princess, I want to say, but don’t.

“Why are you going again? You didn’t really say,” she says, jumping into another puddle.

I watch the ripples circle out and spill into the mossy concrete. When I look up there is a giant fountain in front of a silvery skyscraper. The windows shine with golden sunlight; the water sparkles as it shoots up out of the fountain. “I just had, a kind of vision, or dream—kind of, but not really like either. I just have a feeling deep inside of me that there is something I need—It’s like I’m thirsty and I need something to drink, but the drink I need isn’t in this world. And ever since I started thinking about it, the feeling just grew and grew and it started to become all I could think about. I don’t know what I’ll find there, but I have the feeling that I have to go. It’s just a feeling. A feeling of thirst. Do you know what I mean?”

We stand staring at the sparkling water shooting out of the fountain. “I’m not sure... I think so...” she says. “C’mon, it’s not that much farther,” she runs into the shimmering, sunlit buildings. I follow her. It’s like watching a spirit from another world; she never stops smiling, like the whole world could come crashing down and she still has something to live for. I don’t know, but whatever’s on the other side of this world, I have to find it; and if it’s real, if it’s all really real, then I’m going to find it, no matter what it takes, and I’m going to live forever.

“Well,” said Bill, as they all stood staring out into the ocean, mouths agape, either from weariness or awe, “it’s 6 o’clock, sun will be below the horizon soon, we have to keep walking. If we follow this shoreline, over that hill there, we should find the train tracks on the other side.” Isabel wrinkled her nose, and peered into the misty distance. Fog was rolling in off the ocean. “How can the train station be on the other side of that hill? The city is nowhere near here. And my letter says, *777 East Micheline Dr., Midnight City*, which is on the other side of town!” Isabel put her hands on her hips and looked down at Bill. Bill shook his head with a smile of condescension. The next queen of Va’llesthorn? Surely, she will have become much more shrewd if she wishes to rule, thought Bill.

“My dear Ms. Swan,” said Bill, bowing politely, “that letter, coming as it did from the Twilit Castle, must be taken with shrewdness of mind and alertness of heart! Do you really think they want *you* to take the throne? To be the next queen of Va’llesthorn? Do not get me wrong, I am not defaming your beauty or your right to rule, it is in your blood. But you must understand that *they*, the letter writers that is, live in the very depths of the castle, and they really don’t care at all about royal blood. It is in their nature to write things explicitly opposed to what they are saying exactly! That is, of course, the curse of the castle, which I do not say is something you can understand. Think of it like this: a white dove left the castle 1 year from now with your letter, and flew through a portal into this world, and a black raven dropped that same letter (same, but not the same) into your hands 1 year ago! Do you understand.” Isabel stared at the squirrel who was quite enjoying the attention. “I see that you do not.”

“You made it sound like on the other side things were different—that horror doesn’t exist on the other side of beauty like it does here,” said River. Bill smiled.

“River, River, River... Run, run, run. Splash and curse, and ask the stones—how is it that I am always moving, yet remain unmoved?” Bill put both hands on his furry little belly, laughed a squirrely laugh, and heaved a sigh of satisfaction with his little riddle. “Listen you two, just trust me! I know the way!” And with that Bill jumped off River’s shoulder and landed with a *ploof* in the sand. “Follow me or we’ll miss the train—” His face turned grave, then he smiled and dashed down the shoreline in a flurry of red. Bill was a red squirrel. Not one of those pale grey things from the earth. He was from the other side. And that meant red squirrels.

After some trudging in the sand, which seemed to be getting thicker and sinkier by the step, Isabel and River reached the hill and looked up, Bill was lying on his back catching the last rays of the sun, his little red belly first bulging, then sinking with his tiny breaths. “10 minutes till twilight!” he called down to them, “C’mon, I can see the train tracks, we don’t want to miss it!” They ran as fast as they could up the sandy hill, slipping and falling, and finally reached the top. They sat and looked around, but there was nothing but the ocean before them and sand dunes all around. River was beginning to doubt where Bill had led them, there wasn’t a train track in sight, not even half a train track, not even the hint of a train track, not even a stake used for tracking a train. Bill seemed content to lie on his back and rest; had he tricked them? Was this all a joke? Was he just a prankster? He had already faked his own death once. River began to doubt not only Bill’s good intentions; he began to doubt the entire quest. What the hell was he doing out here on this dune in the middle of nowhere, far from Midnight City, far from his home, with a mischievous squirrel and a girl who thought she might be a princess. It was ridiculous. He suddenly wanted to turn around, march all the way back home, open a box of vanilla wafers and sit down and watch Star Trek reruns. Who needs all these grand expectations popping into their

lives? Illusions of other worlds—let them to stay on television, in books, and movies, he thought. He stared into the ocean. The sun was gone; red was splattered in the sky. He imagined that a giant on the other side of the sea had been stabbed in the back while trying sneak up on the ocean, splattering the sky with fresh, bright blood. But who had stabbed him? The moon? Ridiculous. This is all impossible. I do not believe in Va'llelathorn.

“River—do you have any water, I’m dying of thirst,” Isabel said, who looked so tired, as if resigned to follow Bill to the end of the earth. There was only the hint of a smile in her eyes. Suddenly River snapped out of his trance; he felt anger flowing out of him like warm water. “Water...” he mumbled. “Yeah, do you have any? I’m so thirsty I could drink sea water!” she said, looking expectantly at him. “7 minutes!” said Bill, still snoozing on the sand. Well, he has gotten us this far, can’t hurt to wait another 7 minutes, thought River. He reached into his backpack, pulled out a bottle of water and tossed it to Isabel. She chugged nearly half of it, handed it back to River, and he slid it back into his bag.

Suddenly, as if it had come out of nowhere, a shiny black jeep rolled up onto the dune and two policemen dressed in black jumped out. “Halt!” said they in unison. Both of them wore bronze aviator sunglasses, glowing golden in the sun. Both of them had tightly pursed, pink lips. Both of them were very tall, and both of their shiny black hats gleamed. “Gather up your things and return immediately to Midnight City! This is the end of Midnight City! It is forbidden to go beyond this point! Turn around and return the way you came!” they said at the same time. Isabel put her hands on her hips and stared at the officers. Where was Bill? Suddenly River heard someone whisper from inside his backpack, “*3 minutes, just wait, don’t listen to them—they are not what they seem—*”

“We’re trying to get to the train station,” Isabel said. The cops smiled viciously.

“Unfortunately, this is the end of Midnight City, please turn around. The train station is a lie created by ungrateful citizens of Midnight City. Please turn around, return to your homes, and do not come this way again.” The cops smiled, flung out their arms like stage actors and motioned for River and Isabel to return to the city.

“What do you mean, *the end of Midnight City*?”

The cops flashed their big white teeth.

“*We mean*, the edge of the City; there is nothing beyond, nothing at all, nowhere to go, please turn around...” they paused, looked at each other, considered the two travelers, and then said, “do you understand what we are saying. LEAVE!”

Isabel’s wasn’t having it. She stood her ground, stared at the cops.

“Please, take off those sunglasses and look me in the eye!” she said, defiantly. The cops looked offended, took a step back, and slowly lowered their bronze aviators. Their eyes were like little skulls, vibrating slightly in their empty eye sockets. As River gazed into those skeletal eyes he felt a desolation invade his soul. Within the eyes were skulls, and within the sockets of those skulls were smaller skulls still, and he saw the infinite depth of death in those creatures. He knew they were from a place he never wanted to go. Somewhere far, far below the dune they now stood on. And as if he had smelled it from another realm, the salty air passed his nostrils and he turned and looked into the sea. “BINGO!” shouted Bill from his backpack, and suddenly the wind tore all around them, blowing River’s blue Red Bull cap into the ocean—the cops reached out and grabbed him by the shoulders, holding him back. Everyone stood and listened. Something was coming. At first it sounded distant, but the sound grew. It grew, and grew, until

the world was grey. “*Twilight...*” whispered Bill, and suddenly lunged out of the backpack into the air. Immediately in front of them a window opened and the sea behind it disappeared, and in that large open frame, River saw something he had seen before, but only dimly; this time it was bright and clear, lucid as daylight—it was a fountain pouring glistening water, and from the fountain rose a tree dropping fruit into the hands of tiny, bright colored peoples who shone bright as the sun. River reached out, as if to catch some of the water in his hand, and then, from behind him he felt a fierce cold wind come coursing through his veins, chilling his bones; and someone reached down from that rushing wind and grabbed him by the shoulders, and shouted at him—the sound filling his body—“Not yet, but I will come back for you! You must go to Midnight City and find Cryx! He will know the way to the underworld; it is there you must go!—Your time will come. I will come back for you. Don’t be afraid. Go!”

Then the hand dropped him into the sand, and River lay watching, his head abuzz with wind, tingling; he lay and watched as the hand swept Isabel off her feet, and Bill with her, away into the window—and it was shut. When River looked behind him the cops were gone, and he was alone. Only a symbol remained imprinted in the sand. It was a crescent moon. River stared at it until it grew dark, and he fell asleep.

That night River dreamt that he was beneath a tree whose branches reached over him like a great canopy. The sun sparkled through the leaves and dappled him with splatters of green light. Tiny raindrops dripped down the fluttering leaves and fell onto his face. Birds nested in the branches, chirping, flitting from branch to branch. He thought the tree must go on forever; it had no end that he could see. No end at all... Bright red fruit swayed in the breeze, plump, and glistening. When he looked down at his legs, he saw his feet plunging into the ground. He tried

to raise his arms, and realized they were like two thick roots diving into the earth. Terrified— the wind rushed through the branches and blew across his face like breath, and he fell into a deeper sleep. His chest split open. And a pair of invisible hands, like wind, swept his red heart out of his chest and carried it up, up, up beyond the moon, into the twinkling stars. The wind closed his cloven chest, and River lay on the beach, the seawater washing up against his feet.

The Moon Kids

m i c h a e l p a s c h a l l

I unwrap vines from my ankles and pluck my feet from the tall green grasses; I can smell the morning frost on the blades, the pink dawn shooting through the branches. Sometimes I fall asleep in my bed and wake up in the forest in a patch of yellow-green mosses, my hair tangled up in thorns and the roots of spruces. I pick a fat soft huckleberry from the bush along the pathway, slipping my fingers between the thistles — listening — sucking on the fruit sugar, its dark purple blood dribbling down my chin. Thrushes. There's a rabbit stamping his foot, tangled up in ivy. The strain of a bluebird tumbles, twisting through the trees like a fairy bellowing. It sounds almost divine, the way a bird might sound if it fell out of paradise. I hear it echo in my head; like an ancient language that I have somehow forgotten.

Right now my mother is sleeping in pillows and my brothers are sleeping in blankets and my sister is slumbering. I tug my sweatshirt from my head and listen. Waking up in the forest in the fall is like waking up on the moon. All of a sudden I realize I am alone. And I wonder, putting my shoes down into a thin veil of snow, *what if our flesh is just the shadow of our lives in another world?* And maybe it's how we live our lives out there, where things are eternal and have their shape, that determine the way our bodies fall in the contours of this world. What if we're just shadows? Maybe that is why when we talk all our words fall out as symbols. I unclench my fingers and let fall a small blue feather. I open the door to the house and watch the dust twirling up in spirals, caught by the morning sunlight pouring through the windows, whirled around like tiny galaxies above the hardwood floors; a bouquet of blue tulips rests on the coffee table. My little brother is curled up like an embryo on the couch clutching a Nintendo controller, the long black cord running out from his stomach like an umbilical cord.

When I was a boy playing in the Gulf of Mexico, my mother said to me, *you can stand in the ocean, but don't go out too deep*. She worried about my well-being in a way that my father never seemed to. It scared her that I was alive and fragile, and most all, that I was wild. She was sitting on a wool blanket on the beach a little ways from the shore. As I climbed out of the sea, I remember lucidly, as if looking through a window, her shaking sand off the wool blanket into the salty breeze. It rose and fell like a white wave. And then, as if the wool was being drawn by the tide of the ocean, it pulled her to the edge of sea, her feet digging into the sand. And it rose above her head like a great white sheet soaring in the wind, a wool seraph wing finally taking flight. It pulled her into the ocean and I ran, grabbing ahold of it with her, the wool clenched tight between my fingers. Together we made it back to the shore and the wind died down as strangely as it came. She picked me up and wrapped me in it and carried me up the beach, laughing as I struggled to escape, tangled in the fleece. When we got home my father was standing in the doorway holding it open and my mom opened the fleece and I ran into my father's arms and he lifted me up. I remember seeing through the doorway sunlight flooding the house. It's the brightest memory I have. It stands apart from everything, like a black sheep. Now that blanket hangs off my mother's body. Its off-white mess of twirls reminds me of white horns curling off the head of a cherub girl.

Castled behind white horses: my wounded wild King. Phoenix look at me and smiles, then with his Knight, checkmate's my king. I slap it over onto the black and white marble set and shrug.

“I suck with white!” I say, peeking up at the moon spilling in through the window. It’s almost time. Phoenix rises from his chair and offers me his hand to shake. He has always been better at chess than me.

“You brought your queen out too early,” he says, shyly, but also with pride.

“Ba!” I shake his hand and smiling.

In chess you have to plan your moves and protect yourself. Losing in chess is like having a crown taken from your head. It’s like you’ve been honorably dethroned by someone who is wiser and more kingly than yourself. It’s humbling to lose in chess. Losing your queen is like being silently stabbed in the chest. Losing your king is like death.

Phoenix slips the white knight into the marble set and shuts the box. “There’s a storm coming,” he says with a smirk, like he is hiding some huge secret that even he doesn’t really know. I tousle his hair, jump to my feet, and walk into the hall, listen to the sound of thunder and rain. I can smell incense coming from my sister’s bedroom; it smells like something deep red, and dark. There is a fire burning in the living room behind the hearth, the flames are mostly blue: hiss and sparks, sucked up the chimney by the wind.

“Hey, William!” Phoenix shouts, and I turn from the flames to see him standing near the front doorway, the fire reflecting off the dark mirror behind him, a fiery blue reflection running like a river from his head.

“What?”

“You wanna go trick-or-treating with me and Gabriel tonight?”

“I can’t, sorry, I’m going with Jake and Thomas.” He shrugs and disappears out the door, the flames dancing in the mirror. Fire puts me into a trance. My dad said once that fire flows like

water, just through oxygen instead of matter. I imagined a river of blue fire tearing through a forest, a flowing and wild river. When I was about ten years old I remember spinning on chairs as fast as I could to set the world turning and my head running around in circles. It made me feel sick but there was something pleasing about the effect. I lit everything on fire. As I got older, the things I lit up slowly became myself. My mind and body were more compelling to watch burn than toy trucks and model airplanes.

My mom has a necklace with a tiny golden dove on it like it's soaring down from the silver chain, flying toward the center of her heart. For her it's the symbol of eternity, but I don't know about Jesus Christ and God and the Holy Spirit. How can a tiny bird lift a body to the sky? My little brother Phoenix believes in everything she tells him, but he's only 13. The other day my mom asked me if my sister was promiscuous; I said, *No. Absolutely not mom. I promise.* She is having sex in the basement on the weekends, but no one notices. The guy she is giving herself to tried to rob us, but no one noticed. Chastity to my mother is very important, it is one of the things she instilled in me that I have grabbed onto with both hands. Almost everything else, I let slip through like sand. I always hang out with my friends on weekends, but weeknights I spend with my mom. She is usually somewhere between barely alive and sleeping, but sometimes she is wide awake, full of life. When she speaks it is hard to hear and difficult to understand. But it's not what she says that stands out. It's the light in her eyes—like little diamonds. When she smiles she looks infinitely sad and yet somehow, despite her body decaying into dust, it's strange but somehow, she is becoming more *alive*.

There is a tiny speckled egg hidden in a nest built into a cleft of the chimney near my window. I've been wondering if it will hatch before my mom dies. I have never seen the mother

bird, nor any others, and I wonder if it has frozen in the autumn and died before its time. Peering out the window, that pale white egg looks almost plastic, like those shiny bright manufactured apples that people stick in their kitchen. It's like they want an eternal food to display in their house so that they can forget, for a short time, that everything is rotting. I worry, if that small white egg does hatch, and it isn't plastic after all, that a chalky, wingless bird may fall out and lie until it is only skeleton and dust, blown away like the pages of a lifeless book. But I believe that it will be alive when it's born and I look forward to watching it fly.

My name is William Moon. It is Halloween. In thin white scales I paint my face. The October hours flew this year. I am seventeen. I pull on a white tee-shirt and lay a black cloak over my skeletal frame. My ribs reflect in the mirror—I am way too skinny. I feel like I am more attracted to my own guts than is particularly healthy. Tonight I am a ghost given flesh in a crow's body. Tonight I am exactly what I am. I am William Moon. It is Halloween.

* * * *

“William, wake up... William!”

Ms. Carper watches me raise my head from the desk. Smiling kindly, she mumbles something about poetry and something about the sound of words. My brother's girlfriend, Isabel, glances at me. Her skin is so pale it seems to glow. There is a cube with a dot in it drawn in the center of my palm; It's smeared from sweat and creased with the skin. Isabel has her head down, sketching. She seems more like a shadow than a person when I pass her in the halls, like a ghost. She has on a thin white dress covered with a dark red cloak. Her face is bright, her features soft

and hard at once, but she's so small, a pink rabbit's foot dangling from the silver chain around her neck. My brother and her have faded— they've become washed out, like shoegaze swallowed up by white noise. She looks at me, a glimmer in her eye, and something strange, like a maze: a puzzle that she cannot hide. Ms. Carper talks across the class, everyone hanging like empty bags of sand in their desks. Isabel looks down into her notebook, her brown hair fallen around her cheeks. The bell rings and I open my eyes.

Jake passes me a cigarette, squinting up into the sun. It's bright today, melting the thin layer of snow across the parking lot.

"William, you know the Raven House? I was thinking, if we could break through the roof, you know? We could use an axe or something," he says, looking seriously at me.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I think we can do it," he says, loading his small blue pipe. He takes a hit, burning around the center of the bowl. Coughing, he hands it to me, smoke bellowing. I place a cigarette in my ear. He stamps his out in the wet asphalt.

"I have to get inside," he says, more to himself than to me.

Jake told me that we were not going to be just trick-or-treating this year, but sneaking into garages up on Snob Hill. I am a little worried. Stealing alcohol through open garage doors on Halloween seems foolish, considering all the kids and parents that will be walking around, especially in a rich neighborhood like Snob Hill. There is also the unpredictable effects of psilocybin. We'll be frying on mushrooms like we always do on Halloween. Thomas, Hayden, Jake, and me. We will all be in costumes, so in a way we will be invisible. But still, I have a bad feeling about it.

9:00 pm. There is a little bit of whiskey in the woodshed. I think I'll take an 8th tonight and drink the rest of it. My little sister is staying home and watching television. Flipping through channels, Emily lasts about 3 seconds on each channel, stopping finally on something that sounds like blood being sucked from the neck of an innocent bystander. She loves horror movies. I think because she likes the feeling of being scared. I pull my black winged cloak over my body and step out the front door. The cold wind hits my face and I think it must be cool to be a ghost, always moving through wind, like dead leaves or drifting snow.

I am romanced not by pretty girls, but by drugs and chemicals; I am falling in love with my older brother's girlfriend. I try not to think about it. He doesn't know, which is good. I can wait until it slips between my ribs — my heart is less a cage than it is an hour glass, eventually all the sand pouring in through my eyes will slip down into my mouth and I'll breathe back into the outside. She is beautiful. She has long brown hair and is always smiling. He loves her more than he will admit.

Time grew like me and disappeared. My hair is so long now, strands of black hang down my white-painted face like the feathers of a crow. There is a trick to eating mushrooms without getting too sick. You have to chew them up for a really long time and turn them into mush. They go down smoothly if you chew them up enough. Mushrooms are hard to swallow. Some people like to mix them in applesauce or something sweet to mask the taste. I used to be a boy. I have carelessly grown into a monster. There are some things that just taste right on the tongue. I was never good at distinguishing the sweet from the bitter. I think that is excusable, if you are young.

Clarity in the darkness of Halloween. It seems like some kind of phantom's night, where being alive is obscured and people are reminded that they are like ghosts, more dead than alive.

Relish it and eat something sweet or scare yourself with TV. Maybe we just want to walk around in costume; it seems like we do anyways, but on Halloween we are supposed to, so it feels sublime in way. Tonight I am a ghost given flesh in a crow's body. My cloven black cloak is sown with black feathers, hanging like dead wings from my shoulders. My face is stained with white scales. I am a ghost given flesh in a crow's body.

“Ready?” Hayden smiles big. Hayden is some kind of phantom. He is wearing a black jumpsuit with a skeleton painted onto it. His face is completely white except for a black hole painted around his mouth. I guess he is a skeleton, or just a soul inside of one, or maybe something else. The woodshed is cold. I like eating the caps more than the stems, they are softer, less bitter and easier to swallow. They almost dissolve on the tongue like sugar. “Look at that one. You eat that one.” His eyes wide in white paint. He is not as scared as I. I am terrified of eating mushrooms. For some reason I keep eating them. I always regret it after they go down, but then it's too late to change anything, so I just try to relax. Eventually the Fear will come. It always does. Usually when *Time* loses meaning and words become only sounds, or shapes spit into the air. I will be okay. It does last Forever, it will only last for a few hours. Isabel is coming with us tonight. I hope she doesn't notice me.

Jake has short dark hair. He's taller and cooler than me in every way, but I still look a lot like him. When he laughs he looks like a little kid. He is wearing a complete rabbit costume, like the one Frank wore in *Donnie Darko*. All that's visible through the plastic mouth are his white teeth. He holds out 3 little white ecstasy tablets; they are printed with the Dove symbol, like the soap company, the one my mom uses. He pops them into his mouth and swallows quickly. E is bitter; it tastes like chemicals mixed with metal. I can smell whiskey on his breath.

Thomas is crazy. He drinks way more than any of us, but we don't talk about it. He is skinny like me and has green eyes. He is kind of cheating, wearing a only a white tee-shirt with a huge red tie. "I am vanity," he says, hiding his eyes behind a bag of golden mushroom caps. Jake laughs, "you can't *be* vanity." I think you can be though, or at least get close. Thomas is drunk and doesn't say anything. We all bought an ounce last month and split it up. I drink with him, so I drink too much too, but the difference is is that I don't really need to.

The shed is freezing and we are smoking. My dad is gone, working nights during the winter months. My mom is sleeping. My sister is watching television. Phoenix is probably building a fort, he is always building forts in the forest. Even at night he will be out there, crafting a snow cave, something deep and dark with a hidden doorway. There is fog in air. "It's freezing," Hayden tugs at his skeleton suit — headlights at the top of the driveway. Thomas is probably warm; he smiles dumbly, his drunken gait so loose and familiar to me. I love him. Thomas is my best friend, more or less just like me in every way about, except he has curly blond hair, mine is black and straight.

Jake smiles big and says, "They're coming on." Isabel is walking down the dark driveway. The evergreens are reaching up in purple shadows, falling and growing up into the moon, like digital clay and dark fire. I am invisible, and chanting somehow, on the inside. I always feel close to darkness when I am on shrooms. Isabel is in a light blue dress and a white apron holding a yellow lantern. She is Alice, in wonderland— distorted somehow in the dark, but still beautiful.

There are footsteps on the cement. He is kissing her somewhere to my left. Thomas is smoking a cigarette. "So are we walking or what?" Hayden asks. "Yeah. Or Isabel could drive, I

don't know?" I don't look at her. I don't think she drinks or smokes or does drugs. I feel kind of sick, but it's just the mushrooms. I need to check the time. I feel like I am going to throw up.

There is something Pale in the driveway. It is exactly ten o'clock. Drifting snow shimmers in the moonlight, like tiny silver fish scales through the air. Isabel had something to drink, so we walk.

I am scraping my Vans on the sinking black asphalt, Thomas is behind me chain smoking Pall Malls. I trade Hayden 3 Camels for 3 vanilla cloves. Isabel is walking in front, floating in yellow lantern light. I'm glad she brought that light.

"Wait — there are only 2 here!"

Hayden laughs.

"You're tricking me!" I say.

"No, it was an accident."

He hands me another cigarette.

Jake pushes me in the shoulder I. Feel like I am swimming in cement somehow the sky is brighter than it should be but I cannot see the moon. I am somewhere in between the trees but they are reaching in like arms — I am on the street. 3 blocks to Snob Hill.

"It's freezing. Hayden, did you bring the flashlights?" Jake says, smiling.

I can't tell if we are making any progress. The nausea has passed. My hands are falling so I put them in my pockets. I just need to hold it together until I can get somewhere with more Light.

"Hayden can I have a flashlight."

I flip the flashlight on, it feels better, I breathe.

“It’ll be okay,” Thomas says quietly. His head is hanging, the red tie glowing. We are all divided by some kind of darkness, except Jake and me and that yellow light. I feel like we’re falling. I think I ate too much. There are people near a blue house in ghost costumes, one is wearing a black mask—in some kind of trance. It is Halloween, people are supposed to be dressed up as dead things. Why. My hands are sinking through my pockets. “Hayden you walk too fast,” Jake shouts, whispering.

Jake sounds worried. There are people everywhere, but we are invisible. Snob Hill, full of half dead children eating candy. *Where is the moon?* We need to find some water. I feel like we’ve been standing here forever. I brought music. Bright Eyes.

“William?” Isabel says to me. I look at Jake.

“William, are you okay?”

It’s getting colder; I pull my cloak over my body.

“Yeah, I am just. I’m okay. Does anyone have any water?”

Bright Eyes. Liquid digital numbers swimming in a blue screen.

“I am just going listen to this one song, okay?”

“What song?” Thomas says.

“Poison Oak,” I say.

“Some boyhood bravery,” he smiles.

This is dangerous. Hayden’s going to get us arrested. I don’t feel so dead. I don’t. Feel so dead. I am a ghost given flesh in a crow’s body. Here it is. Listen.

Jake and Isabel are holding hands up by a Tall White House. It looks like a castle, innocent somehow of all the people in costume. Thomas and I are smoking on the side of the street. Hayden is walking ahead in the dark, looking for open garage doors. It's fine stealing beer when you are drunk, but it feels like a really bad idea on shrooms. I think we should just walk. Fingers tug at my sleeve, Thomas is throwing up.

“Water,” he says, wiping his chin on his shirt.

Someone Pale and familiar walks by across the street and looks up at me. He has long black wings falling from his back, his gaunt face bent low, sucking on a cigarette, disappearing into shadows. Ahead of us there's a group of people dressed as fantasy creatures; a faun, a blonde woman dressed all in leaves, and a minotaur looking up into the stars. I look over at Jake, his rabbit fur is on White Fire and he is screaming, but not really, it's like sound is falling out of his body. His eyes are red and blood is streaming down his face onto his white pelt. As we pass, the minotaur mumbles something inaudible; Jake looks up from the asphalt, swinging his head, his ears flop over his face, caught in a perpetual plastic grin. Car lights flash their brights. As they pass they illuminate Jake from behind, outlining him in silver light, a halo around his head. Hayden is laughing really loud over and over, like a shout caught in an echo. Isabel. Jake whispers, “William, we need to get out of here.”

There is a pool of yellow light up ahead. Hayden stops us and points into a dark driveway, the garage door is cracked just enough to slide beneath on your belly. “Okay, you guys watch out for people, me and Hayden will sneak in and check to see if they have a fridge,” Jake says. Black fog seeps out of the garage and noise. I look up into the falling snow, it looks like white ash. I can see the Moon now, perfectly clear. Like a dead diamond in black, but no stars.

The Moon doesn't seem lonely to me. I'm sure that I do not know it well enough— but I still don't think that it is lonely. I think the moon is wise, somehow knowing. He is a dim dead light in the night and he is quiet. Maybe he *is* lonely but, he is always in conversation with the Sun, we just can't hear what they are saying. All we see is a dim reflection of their speech, too distant to decipher as anything but light. Sense. And nonsense.

Nonsense. I feel like I've been out here Forever.

“How long have we been here? Thomas?”

“Everything is digital” he says, smiling.

“How long have we been here?”

“I feel like we've been here Forever”

“William!” — Isabel. She is some kind of yellow. Floating skybridge into Heaven.

I Eat Water in then sip the stones out of our driveway
she is talking to me not half dead at all but Alive
wrapped in seaweed.

The Moon isn't lonely. He is sad
the earth is dying.

“William, let's go, something must have gone wrong, Jake and Hayden never came out of the garage,” Isabel says, urgently, but somehow outside.

“They never should of gone” Thomas says, staring.

He is Pale. When, what time is it— says, “There’s Hayden.” Jake is drinking something out of a golden bottle, it must be whiskey I can smell.

“1 bottle of Jameson and a 12 pack of Mountain Dew,” Jake says, breathing hard, the costume rabbit head held under his arm. He looks like a kid caught in a roller coaster the way his face is turning like a wooden doorknob. Crooked teeth in turn. Hayden is Dark Blue— in some kind of pulsing shadow; he is adrenaline, I don’t know how. A horse’s head falls off of his into a mane of eagle feathers. He wants to light the world on fire and watch it burn; not because he hates it but, because he thinks it would be cool. Jake looks at me, his eyes like rabbit holes. “William, are you doing okay?” he says, his voice shaking, handing me a can of Mountain Dew. “We should find something Pure to drink,” I whisper into the Dark. Crows, a whole mass of black feathers congregate in shadow. A starlight tin man whispering to sand stone pillars. Thomas is just a Red Tie in a black question mark body — his head a Pale balloon clock ticking in rewind.

A dead crow, all splayed out in the yard of a pillared house beneath the trees in snow. The colossal, black-feathered corpse is lying with its wings spread from the stone steps of the house all the way out to the street. Its gut is slit open, spilling out a thin red river of blood trailing to my feet. It’s big enough that I could crawl inside it’s riven stomach. I stare at it as we pass, from it’s closed eyes up to the pillared house that looks like a black castle made of shards fallen from the starry sky. I dip my finger into the stream of blood, wiping it off on my shirt. As we pass the dead crow I feel a tiny tug inside my chest, like a pair of wings is trying to flutter, caught in my rib cage. But then it goes still as if it suffocated beneath my flesh and I feel windless now, like the motion of a shadow.

We are walking up a black hill of stairs, there is a White Door the size of Everywhere approaching, I can see it past the pillars through the trees. Like a White Castle rising out of the forest. Thomas touches the red button swimming in bricks. A thousand doorbells ring. I step back, Hayden has his hands out, Isabel is humming. The door swings open and a lady with a witch hat stands pointing at Jake as he lifts his head from his feet. Watching her point at Jake seems to last for Eternity—and then, she drops candy in their hands, her eyes streaming black colors. She looks right through me, as I weren't even there. I hold up Jake's pocket watch, 1:34 am. two bottles of vodka. A six-pack of Newcastle, and 3 bottles of wine. Isabel is looking at me, her face illuminated yellow by her lantern. Hayden and Jake run up the street, peering into a long dark pathway leading past the houses. Stumbling away from the white mansion onto a forest path leading up to the peak of Snob Hill, I can see the stars and they look like they're swirling in spirals above my head and I can't tear my eyes away. And then, for a moment, headlights from the road shoot into the trees and beyond a fence I see a beast, as tall as a tree, his jaw hanging down like a bull's, horns curling off his head. I'm not sure if he was real, or just the play of shadows. Isabel grabs my hand and holds the lantern out, leading me, almost pulling me through the trees, my eyes staring up into the stars, her lantern stretched out ahead into the dark forest.

As we come to the peak of Snob Hill, I can see the park, the city in the distance, and the strangest thing: 3 crescent Moons hanging in a row, as if in the sky of some alien planet. Isabel squeezes my fingers tight, then lets go. Thomas walks up to me and drops some bottles into the grass and we lay down on the carousel looking up into the stars. Just watching the stars spin around and around and around until I feel sick. Isabel is talking with Hayden drinking vodka at

the bottom of the slide, I watch it slithering snake-like up into the sky, shining silver in the moonlight. They are like two little specks on the tip of a parsed tongue.

Jake is lying in the grass on his back smoking a cigarette; his Pale face shone ivory under the 3 moons. I am lost right now, like I am looking for a nebula to call home. My cloven black cloak is sown with black feathers. I will fall asleep when I get home. I will sleep in this costume and when I wake up tomorrow I'll take it off and never put it back on.

A pair of flashlights shine into the swing set. Thomas quickly hides the alcohol beneath the carousel, but it's just Phoenix. "Hey Phoenix, what are you supposed to be, an elf or something," Hayden shouts. Phoenix looks down at his green leafy costume.

"I'm Link," he says, without any emotion at all, "from *The Legend of Zelda*." Phoenix looks down at me, a small silver box under his arm.

"Can you and Jake take me home?" he says, sliding his cardboard sword into its sheath.

"Why are you out here alone, and why are you carrying that box?" I say, mesmerized by the way it glows in the moonlight. Phoenix lifts it up into the sky and opens it.

"It's got my candy in it," he says, tossing me a pack of Lifesavers from inside.

"Isn't that the box your salamander died in?" There are little holes drilled into the top.

"Yeah, I cleaned it out though," he says softly.

He stares at me for what feels like an Forever. Looking up at him, I feel like I am looking into someone divine. Then he turns and walks over to Jake who is lying in the grass. There is silence— then he shouts.

Jake died before the ambulance showed up. No one noticed. He fell asleep lying in the grass. One arm on his chest under the swing set. His eyes were both open wide gazing up into the heavens, as if he were looking at an angel coming to get him. We found out the next morning that he had eaten 60 milligrams of painkillers along with the ecstasy and alcohol. His body couldn't handle it. A bit of blood dribbling down his nose onto his white fur. Isabel was screaming into the air, but I couldn't hear her. I was watching Jake lie there like he was waiting for someone to wake him up. Phoenix cried all over my shirt clutching my chest with his tiny fists. He hit me once in the face, sending blood down my lip. The ambulance and police cars were flashing, lighting the forest and swing set up like a light show; red and blue rays spinning and shooting across the park, streaking the whole place with bright colors; blue, red, and white: the sirens singing like some electronic elegy.

Shh, Isabel, darling.

They've come to take us Home

In their metallic ship -

Made of ancient stone.

I found a really long poem addressed to Isabel in Jake's pocket. The poem was strange and obscure, about *aliens*, but it was also about his drinking and about his love of the Unknown. Jake was some kind of race car; he never knew how to slow down. That was part of what we all had in common. I don't think that Jake's story will ever end. I think that it goes on, if not in heaven, at least in my mom's heart. But this is where mine begins. My name is William Moon. My name is William Paulus Moon.

A few bright holes.

A riddle is like a mousetrap for the intellect;
it's never about the cheese.

In a riddle, the food of knowledge may be eaten,
but only at a price.

Some say riddles contain wisdom,
some say they contain foolishness;
In reality they contain neither,
this is why people are able to say they contain both.

A good riddle cannot be solved. Rather,
a good riddle solves the problem of the intellect.

The intellect is like a mouse the way it runs to and fro, from one end of the room to the other, as if searching for some secret food. The mouse stops; and looking up at the cat, he says, "where have all the traps gone?" The cat smiles and says, "They replaced the traps with me." "And who are you?" the mouse says wryly. The cat licks his lips, brushes his whiskers back, and says casually, "I'm Reason," and he gobbles up the mouse.

Is my writing the riddle I'm trying to solve, or am I the riddle my writing is trying to solve? If Kafka does not hold the keys to the Castle, then who does? But it seems Kafka did not hold the keys to the Castle, and therein lies the attractive problem of the book. The unsolvable Riddle: Franz Kafka. My writing begins like this: a word, an idea, and image pops into my head—I move my hand—I am in the dark. What is unnerving is the writing seems to know more than I do. I peak my head into a world I didn't know existed a few seconds ago, as if through a window, only to pull it out and say, "This is not what I want to write," like, "this is not the weather I wanted today," as if I have a choice. It's like waking up in a bad mood and trying to be lighthearted and happy—it's very difficult. And then he quickly pushes my head through another window; a young girl is staring up at a fat white moon; it reminds her of someone's pale belly, the way it bulges. Some lecherous faun pokes his head into the pages and I lock the paragraph away in a folder titled *scraps*. Not having the courage to destroy it. Scraps—little riddles I'm not interested in. Words keep unfolding the pages and I become anxious. None of this is what I want to see. But I've learned that I cannot force him; I have to let him write what he must; and he'll go on and on and on, talking about all sorts of odd things. And then, when the moment is just right, when the dumb brute is sitting there, not paying any attention at all, in some kind of trance—I'll take over, and write it just right. He blinks, like some hypnotized animal, and seizes the phrase. Then I sit back and watch him try to figure out how he did it. Watch him mangle the sentence I just gave him.

The Apple

A boy lifted an apple above his head to better see it in the sunlight. The tree looked down at him and said, “What, has it got a worm inside?” The boy turned the shiny apple in his hands, examining it from all sides. “Not that I can see,” the boy said, looking up at the tree. “Then why not eat it before it rots?” The boy put the apple to his mouth and chomped down—immediately realizing it was rotten inside. Half a worm was wriggling around in his mouth. He spit the apple into the grass. The boy turned to the tree with a shrewd look in his eye and said, “You tricked me!” and tossed the apple to the ground. The tree did not respond; only the wind blew through its leaves, for trees cannot talk.

The Fountain

I walked through a valley and saw a fountain in the middle, and by the fountain there was a woman sitting, staring down into a hole next to the fountain. “Why are you staring down into that hole?” I said to her, sitting down on the edge of the fountain. “I am trying to see if there is any water down there I might pull up, so I might drink.” She said this without turning to look at me. I kneeled next to her and looked down into the darkness, for I too was very thirsty. “There must be water, I can feel a cool breeze,” I said, putting my face close to the hole. “If there is water, how do you propose we lift it out?” she said, reaching her arm down into the pit. “Perhaps one of us should go down first to check and make sure there is water, and if there is, the other one should follow.” She nodded and I made ready to enter the hole. As I leaned my head down into the cool darkness, I felt a tingling in my brain, as if danger were near. Then I fell into the hole.

A secret is ruined if it is not kept. And the more secrets you have, the quieter you have to be. The magic of a secret is that it can be spoken with a glance; it can be hiding in a laugh, in a touch, in the stress of a word. It's funny because, the more secrets one has the more things one has to say, and the fewer secrets one has, the less one has to say; but the opposite occurs, it is the people with all the secrets who never speak, and the people with no secrets who can't shut up. Kafka is like one big secret never found out; he never came out of the Castle. I think that is one of the most attractive things about Kafka's writing. He's not enigmatic because he is trying to hide something, but because he is trying to reveal it. The true riddle is unsolvable; one could say that people are the pure original, primal Riddle; the unsolvable problem. Writing, for me, is an attempt at the solution of one particular Riddle; this is where my writing begins, listening at the door, my hand cupped to my ear, waiting for someone to speak—

There is something irresistible about secrets, just as there is something irresistible about speaking; sharing a secret with someone is intimate, even dangerous. Emily Dickinson's poems read like so many little secrets, and it therefore feels like one is in her confidence when reading her poems. She is whispering something to you alone. No one else is listening. After so many words and all these years, she is still a secret. It's like there is one secret she never shared, and that made all the difference. Writing is a means of telling a secret and keeping it at the same time. That, I think, is how the riddle is born. The secret becomes an enigma when it hits the page, so that anyone who glimpses it cannot simply take it. One must already have a sense of it. The riddle only opens for those who hold the key.

The vague lucidity of Kafka's prose: what is happening is never clear, but the indefinite is always clear. It's like a distillation of an interior quandary, simple and exact. Why must K. get into the Castle? Purity is the word I want to apply to Kafka's writing; but how can I call Kafka's writing pure? It is like looking into a very clear lake and seeing shadowy fish in the deeps. I do not know if they are trout or bass, or some other kind of fish, or even if they are fish at all; but the lake is so clear, I am dumbfounded. I stare at the shadows passing beneath my boat. "Rainbow trout," my father says; but when I cast my hook, I pull up an old boot.

The unknown thing that prompts K. ever onwards in *The Castle* is refreshing; exactly what he is attempting to attain is a mystery. It is like a perpetual effort towards transcendence, but without anywhere to go and no way to get there. K. remains below. His inclination to achieve the unattainable is what makes *The Castle* breathe; there is something very genuine about that. It's like he wrote it because he had to. That comes through very clear in all his writing. Kafka *had* to write it. I think, whatever it was he was trying to write, will always be the unfinished part of the last sentence. It will always be in the blank space at the end of that book.

Have you heard the Legend of the Tree that is said to bear the fruit of Everlasting Life? No one knows where this Tree grows, yet I found this Tree. (I cannot tell you where it grows, for I do not know). Although I found this Tree, I could not reach Its fruit. Let me tell you what the Tree said as I jumped, claspings at the air above my head: "You are too short" said the Tree. "What then should I do?" I shouted up into the branches; the leaves ruffled with life; the Tree said, "Eat some of my fruit, it will give you the height you need to reach my branches."

M y W o u n d e d , W i l d K i n g

Of the all the things that work against this vessel, it is my clawed hands I hate the most. They are my two greatest enemies, and yet they are my closest friends: my slaves, my Kings. But this beast is only my vessel, a place for me to direct my will. I dwell in the innermost regions, in the deepest, darkest places. It is I who rule this lumbering giant through the trees. Watch! he places his foot on a thorn; I am relieved. He is in pain; I am at peace. He is my slave. I am his King. He plucks the thorn from his foot; I am unmoved, unchanged. The blood drizzles down his palms; I am unknown. I do not know the pleasure of pain. It's true, deep in the recesses of my heart I am troubled by my inability to know the horrors and pleasures I bring him. He tramples himself into dust, and I, apart, watch the tears fall from his eyes—but I am unfeeling, unaware. I cannot taste the sweet fruit he plucks with his clawed hands, the tart nectar dribbling down his chin; the dumb smile on his face means nothing to me. When he sees a beautiful girl, like being lit on fire, I watch his body shudder, overcome with desire—but I am untouched, unmoved. I do not know what it is to tremble. I rule this wretched man as if he were my slave. And yet when I look deep inside myself I must admit, it is not I who rule this vessel, as perhaps, I wish. He does what he wants; for I have no desires, let alone wishes. I could no more command him to turn his head than a squirrel could overcome a fox. His desires are his own; I am merely watching. He is not my slave. I am not his King—No! this is not the case—he believes it because he feels he must; because he is afraid of his own two masters, his own two slaves. But it is not so. When it is time for us to be united once again, he will attempt to place the blame on me! But he will be ashamed. I am perfect, he will not lay the blame on me. Never have I forced him into any evil thing. I am merely watching, a pawn at his command. I am his loyal slave. He is my King.

If he is a slave to his free will, how can he be the master of himself? If his free will is slave to him, how can it then be free?

To be the ruler of one's will is to bind it, negating the freedom of one's will. To be the slave of one's will is to be bound to a lawless king—for even the king is bowing before it. This is why people act as if they are driven by a carriage of mad horses—Obediently bowing to their own wills, calling themselves Master.

Relinquishing one's will is the beginning of self control. Like a bird that is freed from a cage, the will can only learn to fly when released from the trap of one's desires and whims.

To be at ease with the pleasure of life in this world is the greatest folly. To spend one's life toiling for temporary comfort is stupidity. The first is satisfied with a deception. The second believes the deceit, but has not yet been filled. The first is like an antelope being swallowed by a serpent. The second is like a man plucking fruit from a tree and feeding it to the snake that dwells in his belly; he is never sated, but he does not know why. Who is the greater fool? He who believes the lie, or he who wants to believe it so closes both his eyes.

There are two kinds of food: flesh and spirit. One gluts himself and grows empty, the other starves himself and is filled.

The Wolf

A sheep clothes himself in the garments of a wolf so that he may pass safely unnoticed among the pack. He runs with the wolves in the wilderness and howls at the moon. He spends so much time in the wolf's coat that he nearly forgets he is a sheep. One night he slaughters a lamb, and while licking the blood from his jowls, he prides himself in his deceit. In winter the wolves grow weary and food grows scarce; the wolves begin to devour one another out of hunger. When there were only two left alive the sheep says to the wolf, "I've spent all this time deceiving myself, but I can no longer bear it." and he removes his wolfish coat. The wolf smiles and says, "I always knew you were a liar." and turns to walk away. "Why then, did you not destroy me?" says the sheep. The wolf turns and looks at the sheep shivering beneath the trees; he laughs viciously, he says: "Because you made such a good wolf, it would have been a shame to kill one of our own."

The Caterpillar

“I have a hard time believing I am a caterpillar,” the caterpillar said to the butterfly. The butterfly smiled, flapped its golden wings and said, “but you *are* a caterpillar.” The caterpillar scoffed, shook his wretched form and said, “I am not a caterpillar. I am a worm and I will never be a butterfly.” The butterfly flew down to the caterpillar and said, “But can’t you see the beautiful designs coloring your body? This is proof that you are a caterpillar, and that you will one day be a butterfly.” The caterpillar said, “I cannot see my body, I can only see the endless branches of this tree beneath my legs, and however much time I spend climbing this tree to reach the top, I never see the sky—I do not even believe there is a sky. I have decided I will not climb. I will burrow into the fruit of this tree and taste its sweet delight. I know that I am a worm, and that I will never be a butterfly.” The butterfly looked at the caterpillar sadly, and with an almost sardonic smile, said, “Do you know? You are not a caterpillar after all, I believe you now.” And a sparrow flew down and snatched up the caterpillar, eating him alive.

The Fountain of Life

A clever young man spent all his years seeking the Fountain of Life. He sought it in delicate foods, a beautiful wife, and a fine house with many possessions. He sought it in fortune, fame, and friends—he sought it in all the things of this world. He travelled the globe but did not find it. When he was very old he looked upon his wrinkled body and said to himself, “All my life I have sought this Fountain, and now I am about to die.” He walked into the courtyard of his mansion, and there in the center lay a very beautiful fountain he had procured in a faraway land. A winged girl was pouring sparkling water into a boy’s mouth. The stone girl turned her face to the old man and said, “All this time you have sought for the Fountain of Life in other things.” The boy turned his marble face and laughed at the old man. The girl said, “Do you still not know where the Fountain is hidden?” The old man raised his tired head, he said, “Where, tell me—where?” The woman smiled sadly, she said, “I am bound by God to keep it hidden from you, for it only comes to those who seek it; and you have sought everything else instead.”

These are musings towards a kind of secret poetics I am constantly whispering with; catching glimpse of, broken sentences and then, sometimes, sounds and images faded and blue; like the jeans I wore when I was a boy. The memories that stay with you throughout life can be the most puzzling of all; or the most mundane. The profound things, over time, seem to get lost, and the past is wrapped up in a comfortable veil. The future is always kept secret. As soon as I am about to find out what it is, it's taken away, and I am looking backwards at something, a mess of details, some colors, a girl with a broken arm whom I never knew. Then dreams; I remember flying, falling in love. All my memories are secrets my past self is keeping from me—he experienced everything, something I will always be deprived of. Maybe that is why life looks more attractive when looked back upon; one forgets that one had a sense of what was going on; it seems so poignant and carefree, but it's only like that now, that you are gone. It's like looking back on someone else's life. Writing lets me in on a secret; partly obscured by words—and then, I only glean partial meanings, little gestures, hints at things. I am always trying to coax Someone inside of me into giving me something to write. It's like there is a snitch inside of me; sometimes he'll toss me some crumbs, but if I get too close, or fall too far away, he'll slip into darkness. It's like sneaking quietly through the woods, expecting at every turn, behind every tree, something inexplicable; a fairy to flutter her wings and fall out of a flower, or some lecherous faun to dash and look you in the eye. When I get too close the snitch always vanishes, dropping gems, and then I have to dig through a heap of words, looking for them. Suddenly, without realizing it, without knowing how it happened, I find something good—and he's standing at my ear whispering, "You didn't write that!" And I know it's true. It was a secret I did not know. Or, I did not know I knew.

The snake resides in the same stomach. One diminishes himself by withdrawing inward and looking out from within, beginning to see. The other glorifies himself by moving outward and looking back upon himself, as if into a mirror, seeing himself only. And though the first one has a dim perception of this, as he contemplates it, the other one always comes and takes it, hiding it in his belly.

Some only learn the world is ash after having built the fire and watched it slowly burn down; these are the ones who realize the world is ash right before the final flame snaps out. Others realize the world is ash when they feel the burn of the flames on their flesh; these are the ones who get too close to the fire; they do not tend it as carefully as the former, but leap into it and play with it. A very few others learn the world is ash when they look across the world and see only ash. These are the fools.

Art seems an attempt to capture what is passing and make it last. Or, an attempt to capture the everlasting and make it stand still so that we may glimpse it as we pass. Maybe it is only the eyes that fail to see the infinite in the human face, for the portrait is quite content to hang upon the wall until kingdom come.

No sage ever considered himself a sage. The sage knows that he can never be the sage; for the sage does not exist. The sage was created by the fool.

Untitled

A beautiful girl was standing lazily on the stairs, her hand drifting on the banister, when a mouse scurried across the floor, halting at the small hole in the wall. She sneered at it, and though she had no thought to pay any attention to such a small and worthless creature. She watched the mouse pause at the entrance to his hole. "This is strange," the mouse thought, smiling to himself, and turning around, the mouse stood on his hind legs and said, "Who are you to be so high and mighty, there upon the stairs? Know that I cannot even by the faith of my whole being set even one of my tiny feet upon the lowest step. And yet you stoop to mock me? You who are so tall and beautiful and have no need of anything; who live not in a tiny dark hole in the wall, but in majesty and glory, ascending those steps which seem to rise into the very heavens." The mouse's eyesight was so poor he could barely see beyond the third step. Often he gazed up the stairs at the girl and into the light pouring from the window above; it appeared to him as a majestic white cloud. The girl was taken aback at the mouse's words, then with dignity and scorn she said, "I do not speak to varmints—go into thy hole and leave this house unbothered by thy tiny size." The mouse grew angry and felt a defiance rising within him, a defiance he had often longed for but always held back, knowing he was but a mouse. He scurried towards the steps and stood, looking up at the girl who stared down at him with disgust. "Then squash me if you must!" he shouted with his tiny voice. The girl smiled maliciously and smashed him with her foot.

The Ruins

Walking among the ruins, I sat and rested my hooves upon the wet moss. There was a pool nearby, the water glistening and cool. I imagined myself dipping my head into the cool water, washing the stink and sweat from my fur; it was hot, what was I supposed to do? Passing through the fallen pillars, I noticed the face of man carved into one; he looked forlorn; as I was pulling my eyes away he opened his mouth and said, "Why have you come here? Do you not know that this place is cursed?" I reached down to my leg and scratched an itch I had only just noticed and said, "Cursed, you say? but it's so beautiful here.." The face laughed and crumbles of rock fell down his cheeks into the bright green grass. "So beautiful..." the face said slowly, closed his eyes, and turned again to stone. I walked to the pool, leaned over and gazed into the water; my horns reflected in the ripples. Suddenly the reflection broke and a beautiful young face emerged; her hair was golden and her eyes deep brown; her skin shone gloriously, like gold. She winked at me, smiled, and motioned for me to follow her, diving into the pure, glittering depths. Astonished, I turned and looked at the countless ruins that lay about; I noticed that all were carved with the faces of men, all them forlorn, some even looked as if they were in perfect agony. I laughed lightly, how silly of them to be so forlorn in such a beautiful place, I thought, and dived into the pool.

The Laughing Skeleton

One night at the full moon a skeleton kicked in his grave; he kicked so hard his foot came off and suddenly awoke him. He thrust his fist through the casket and dirt and pulled his bones out into the moonlight. As he stood, swaying, both his arms fell off and lay in the grass. He stuck his leg down into the earth and reattached his foot; then he flopped around on the ground, his bones clacking, trying to reattach his arms. Eventually he got them on, but on opposite sides so that his left hand was his right and his right hand was his left. He then jumped up straight—stretched—and leaned down slowly so that his back gave a great crack, “Awwww,” he sighed slowly, running his skeletal fingers across the face of the gravestone, as if he were reading braille. On the gravestone was written: “Here Lies Mankind.” The skeleton scoffed, swung his bones around, and dashed across the graveyard in a huff. His ribs were missing on the left side of his chest and when he walked it looked like he was folding at the side. Suddenly, he came upon a young boy, sitting upon a tomb, playing the flute. The skeleton looked down at the boy and said, “Why—tell me boy—why is there no sound coming from the flute!?” The boy stopped playing and said, “There is! Only you can’t hear it; for you have no ears.” The skeleton jumped on one foot in surprise, “No ears! Preposterous!” he swung his skull from side to side, “No ears! Ridiculous! No ears indeed!” shouted the skeleton. Lurching forward, he snatched the flute from the boy, put it to his bones and blew: but no sound came out. “Why is there no sound!—tell me now! No more lies!” he shouted. The boy laughed, he said, “Because you have no lungs!” At this, the skeleton flew into a rage and started laughing and dancing around the tombstones like a madman. “Next you’ll tell me I have no brain!” As he shouted, one of his arms flew off—he caught it in the air and held it out, pointing it at the boy. “Tell me boy, what’s your name?” The boy smiled, slid off the tomb, picked up the flute and said, “My name is Truth: Shall I play you a tune?”

Writing is like having a trick played on me; a card trick in which the joker is king. Really, I'm the king. I'm the one with the fingers and the brain and the blank page and the pen, and the crown called Writer; but really, it's something much more bewitching; it's relinquishing control, letting oneself be written, as the Borges paradox goes. This is all moving towards some kind of poetics, maybe some kind of poetics. I don't want to be a terrible intellectual about things, especially about something so subtle and crafty as writing—it all comes down to a more or less vague impersonation of an activity which is very intimate, very mysterious, and very much just writing. Just writing. I'm always trying to find the word for what I mean to say, but I feel like the one word I need doesn't exist, and it's like, if I keep writing, eventually I'll find that word. But every word to me is an abyss. The more words, the greater the abyss; when people are discussing some thing or other, critical or personal, or merely crude, I get caught in a single word. In the oblivion of that single word I am turned over and over again, like a rat, never coming any closer to the meaning and thus, unable to respond with anything I believe in. But nature prompts me; I speak, but I am still in the abyss; and all I have done is lay a trap for you. The abyss isn't a bad thing; it's just a thing. It's not even an abyss. It's not so much that I don't understand what the word means; it's that I don't understand what the meaning means.

The Buffalo

There is a change all around me today. I'm lying here in all my sharp edges; I can still feel the limestone on my back; it is soft and cold and chalky against my carved body. But now, something is moving. I do not know why. It is cold and fast. It is furious, but gentle. A thousand years I have lain here. Right here. Before that I used to fly; this moving all around me today reminds me of ancient times when I used to fly. Before even then, there was a time when I was not, or rather, a time that I was something else. I remember it clearly. In a sense it was my birth, though I was born quite before then—how? I could not say. Who could say? Back then, I was in darkness, deep and cool. Slimy, wriggly things would slide across my belly. For centuries, in the cool dense darkness I lay. Then I felt them close around my body, they were warm and soft and I felt as if they knew some part of me. But how could they know me? Out of the cool deep darkness they pulled me, into bright warm light and then, into my belly came a sharp white bone. It was then that I became this thing I am today. I used to fly, fast and straight, till I found my home. It was there that I knew myself, that I knew my purpose. But that was a long time ago. Now I lay, untouched, without flight. I remember when I found my home, it was thumping, warm, and dark. As I entered it, it grew silent and still. I felt I knew the things called life and death, but now, as I lay here, they seem to me a dream.

The Werewolf and the King

There was a werewolf who lived at the base of a castle. He would stare hungrily up at the peak of the castle, where the King spent most of his time in the upper chambers. There, beneath the light of the moon, the King would play chess against himself. This King had no servants, and though at times he wished to share a game of chess with another, he had grown quite fond of winning, and so he did not seek out— as he had often wished—an opponent from the distant lands. He had heard tell of a legendary player in the Kingdom north of his, but always the thought of losing stopped him from searching out this Master; that and the werewolf kept him locked within the castle walls. He knew the wretched creature haunted the base of his castle, and had long ago determined within himself never to leave, not even if his life depended on it. He would die within the dark walls of his Kingdom. But he was old now, and the desire had grown thick, spreading like a poison in him—his last great desire—to play against another and to win. Only then he could die in peace.

“And why should I deprive myself?” thought the King, castling himself behind white horses. He ran his wrinkly finger down the white marble crown of his King, now safely cornered within a figure of white pawns. “It is not as if the werewolf is out in the daylight, he merely wanders about at night; if I began at dawn I could make it to the Kingdom of the North before nightfall, and there seek out the Master.” This, he thought to himself, all the while planning a crippling attack against his opponent who was now castled behind white horses. He smiled to himself as his black bishop tore across the marble board, checkmating the white King in one swift move. “I shall leave at dawn..” he whispered to himself, flicking the white King over with his gnarled finger. And peering out the window of his battlement he saw the werewolf looking up

at him; the creature was very large. His long thick fur was greying so furiously on one side of his body that it looked as if he were almost half white; the moonlight reflecting off his fur made it shine. The old King turned from the window and hobbled to his enormous bed. He crawled wearily into his soft white sheets. He dreamt only of death that night.

The next morning the King had forgotten his courage and plan from the night before. He was quite content to remain in his castle and play chess against himself until kingdom come. Just when he was about to secure his first victory of the morning, a shout came from his castle window. The King cursed the wretch who interrupted him and leaned out the window to see a young man, all bloody, with wild hair and dark eyes staring up at him. "What do you want, you wretched beast! I'm busy!" the King shouted down at the young man. "Please," the young man whimpered, "I only ask for a bit of food and shelter, you see, last night I was caught in a most dreadful storm and I have lost my way." The King scoffed at the man, for he knew it was the werewolf in human form. "Ha!— likely story! you only want to gain entrance to my castle so that you may consume me, bones and all!" The young man hung his head and said, "I only want to sleep. I only want to rest."

The King, caught up in his fury, cursed the young man. But then, an idea came into his head; what if he were to allow the werewolf access during the daytime, that he might share a game of chess with the wretch, and then, before nightfall, cast him out of the castle? And so, with sly charity, the King invited the bloody guest into his fortress. The young man was calm; he seemed infinitely tired, and only took a bit of bread and water. The King gave him quarters in which to rest, and after a few hours woke him and put his plan into action. "You shall be black,

and I shall be white,” The King said, holding up the two Kings. The young man sighed heavily and the game began.

The game carried on throughout the day; and the King was surprised with delight and fear at what a good player the young man was. As evening drew nigh, they were entering the end game; the young man seemed to be gaining in vigor. It looked like he was about to checkmate the old man. The young man looked the King in the eyes and said, “Tell me, Wise Master, why have you allowed me access into your Castle; For you know who I am, and I’ve always known I could not fool you—after all these years of safety you have finally let your guard down, and now the moon rises into the sky, and you are sitting there, across me, old and feeble, and yet you dare to smile?” The King moved his knight, and in one swift move checkmated the young man. The young man smiled, and looking up into the moon his face began to twist horribly into wolfish face. The old man watched calmly from across the table. The werewolf flashed his sharp white teeth and said, “Tell me, O Wise Master, why have you forsaken your safety?” The King looked at him in earnest and said, “I wished to truly win against another, to know that I am the wiser of the Two— for chess is a game of wits.” The werewolf laughed viciously, tore across the table, and ate the King whole.

The Tree of Life

After feasting on some rotten fruit and nasty worms I dug up from the earth—as I was lying beneath the Tree, sprawled out in a wretched manner, tears running down my face, sick to my gluttoned stomach—a glistening Apple fell upon my head. I looked up into the branches far beyond me, and wiping the tears from my eyes, I said, “Why have you given me this now? When I have failed countless times to reach it myself, and turned to the rotten food at my fingertips—why have you given this to me now, when I least deserve it—” I stood up and looked into the rustling branches. As the Tree spoke the leaves fluttered with Life; It said, “I gave it to you, because you hungered for it.”

The Farthest Sea

They say if you sail to edge of the ocean you will circle back again and end up where you began. So I said, “I shall set my sails for the farthest sea,” but seeing as I had no ship, I only sat upon the shore and dreamed—then, as chance would have it, a Captain said to me, “You shall join me on my voyage to reach the farthest sea!” I smiled and jumped aboard, and we sailed for years and years, perhaps even centuries. After I had grown quite old, my beard dangling into the salty waves from the bow of the ship, I asked the Captain, I said, “Captain, why is it we have not reached the edge of the sea, nor the place from which we began this lengthy bargain?” He only smiled and said, “We have not even yet begun our journey! Raise the anchor! Set the sails! And for goodness sake dear boy, open your drooping eyelids, come up off the shore, and join me on the ship! And we shall sail to the farthest sea!”

The World

At the peak of a mountain, deep in a cave, dark and cool, lived a recluse. A calm silent creature who had not seen the sunlight for many years. He rested in the cool darkness; he lay on the cold stones. He had grown quite old and forgotten how he had come to live so far away and alone, forgotten by the World, which he now recalled only as a faint dream, like the movement of shadows. One morning, before the sun had risen and a soft grey twilight still lay over the mountain, a boy came to the mouth of the cave, cupped his hands around his mouth, and called out: "O wise sage, I have come to seek your wisdom; I have travelled the World in search of an answer to my greatest question—you are the last of the Ancients; will you hear me?" The old recluse stirred and opened his eyes; he pricked his ears and listened. Had he been dreaming? The boy peered into the darkness and called out, "The Ancients teach that the World is Illusion; a beautiful deception; a great trap for all who believe in it. You have left the World and come to dwell in this dark cave—tell me, have you found True Reality within yourself, here in this cave, far from the World?" The recluse smiled wryly to himself, picked up his legs, yawned, and crawled to the mouth of the cave. He cringed at the dim light of dawn. He hadn't seen light in many years. The boy jumped back—the great spider gazed down at him with all his glittering black eyes. "You have come to ask me if I have escaped that great trap: the World?" The boy watched in terror as the spider smiled at him. "Yes," was all that he could mumble. The spider looked down at the boy with pity, and laughed. He flashed his fangs and bit into the boy's neck, wrapped him in milky white silk and pulled him into the dark cave.

The Snitch

I wanted to write something magical; that's how it began. Yes, it all started in a forest. Trees, and the people living there. Little people, like bugs. But not bugs. They were intelligent souls. I had been walking, wandering—I wasn't lost but I wished I was. Yes, that is how it began. I recall it with perfect clarity; it was twilight, a dark purplish twilight, leaves dappled with rain. I had squashed a slug beneath my shoe, and heard a shout sound out by my foot. And lifting up a leaf, I nearly jumped out of my skin. At first I thought it was a salamander, but it was a little man, wrapped in a spotted leaf. He smiled up at me and began to talk rapidly, but his words were so quiet, so tiny that I couldn't make out what he was saying. It sounded like a needle being tapped against a table. I exclaimed, "Little sir, please, speak up, I cannot hear what you are saying!" He plugged his ears as if he were in pain. Then he threw his arms up as if to say, "All I hear is thunder, I do not understand!" Then I had an idea; I scooped up the little man, who was wrapped up snugly in the dewy leaf. It was a yellow, black spotted leaf. I ran through the woods until I came to the mouth of a cave, dark and cool. I held the little man out in my hand; he peered cautiously into the dark cave, then shouted, "Why have brought me here!" His tiny voice echoed in the deep dark cave. "I'm sorry," said I, in a whisper, so faint I could barely hear. "I was wandering through the wood and stumbled upon you quite by accident, and now that we are here, standing at the mouth of this cave, I don't know what to do." He smiled, "It's okay," he said, "just be more careful, there are many of us living here, hiding beneath the leaves." I set him down on a leaf and said, "But what are you?" He turned his face toward the cave and shouted, "I am you, only smaller. Inside of everyone lives a smaller one, and inside of that one lives an even smaller one, and so on for infinity." I looked closely at the face of the little man and saw that he

was indeed telling the truth; he was my perfect double, only tiny. “But if that’s true,” said I, “then it must also be true that I live inside a larger me—” The little me smiled, “You do, he’s sitting at a desk right now, writing.” Stumped, I sat down on a rock at the mouth of the cave and said loudly, “But if he’s writing as I sit here on this stone, who is writing him?” The little me smiled, “We are,” said he.

And I fancied them both liars. But when I tried to make them tell me the trick they were playing, they kept silent. So I cursed them both and called them fiction. But then, I began to feel Someone behind me; a dark shadow moving, and I slowly, cautiously looked over my shoulder. And just as I suspected—no one. Not a soul. But I knew Someone was there. I can feel him. I can feel him breathing up my neck, smirking at me like a little imp. With every word I make him a little bit more my master—Someone’s speaking behind me. A ghost? I drop my pen, run out of the house and into the woods. The sun is setting and I find myself running through twilit trees. Suddenly I don’t know where I am. Twisting into tangled up trees, slipping barefoot on leaves. I wander. Lost. Completely lost. There is Someone up above me. And when he talks, all I hear is thunder.

For a crown, I have two curling horns
My feet are like horses in golden reins
I ride behind them, guiding them
But suddenly I find myself trampled
Beneath their cloven hooves.

Writing is like having a sliver in your finger.
The whole process is like digging out the sliver.
When you finally get it out it feels so much better.
But most of the time you just push it in deeper.

Life wouldn't be such a good riddle if it wasn't so beautiful and tragic at the same time. It's the pleasure and difficulty of living that make it a good riddle. If we were simply stuck inside a tiny puzzle with no stars, no joy, and no sorrow, it would be a very poor riddle, a very poor life. I think writing anything enigmatic, or intellectually stimulating must also mimic those qualities we find in life; especially tragedy, beauty—if it's intellectually sublime but a bore to read, then what good is it?

T h e M o u s e t r a p

“Why not have a bite? Indulge...” The cat was sitting on the edge of the couch watching him all this time and he hadn’t even noticed it; watching him all this time and he hadn’t even noticed it! Now his wretched stink was all he could smell. But the cat appeared docile, lazy, careless, so he remained. The smell was so sweet it sent warmth coursing through the mouse’s body, like a soft poison, or warm milk. The cat yawned, sharpened his claws on the couch and said, “It’s not every day you find such a sumptuous bit of cheese.” He said it in a goading manner, half whispering, half hissing. The mouse knew he shouldn’t respond but, not being able to help himself, he spouted, “You only want me to eat the cheese so that I will be caught in the trap and killed!” Yes. He knew it was a trap, but only vaguely; and he had nearly forgotten, and would have completely forgotten had the wretched beast not openly attempted to deceive him. The cat jumped onto the floor and quietly approached the mousetrap. Stretching himself out on the floor, he yawned and said, “Yes, I want to watch it snap your little neck—but then, wouldn’t I rather eat you myself? I can’t decide; the first is more amusing, the second more delicious.” The mouse had a vague sense to rush back to his hole, but it was like a dream, nothing he could act on—as soon as he smelt the cheese he immediately forgot—glowing the way it did, like pure gold. “Go on then, have a bite.” The truth was, he had already made the decision; he’d made it when he left his hole. And for a glorious moment the truth sparkled in his mind and was gone. He looked at the cat. He thought about his hole; it seemed worthless. He thought about his mother who was gone and what lay beyond the white sky—but then, looking at the cheese, he forgot everything—and with no small aversion, he dashed into the trap and flung himself upon the cheese.

The Labyrinth

I was wandering, feeling restless; so I sat down to write. And without intending to, as if someone else were moving my fingers, I wrote a story about a faun lost in a labyrinth. “Cursed!” the faun spat, pressing his hoof violently into the dirt, “Cursed with two curling horns!” He ran his hand down one of his cream colored horns; it glistened in the sunlight; a milky tear ran from his eye down his pale cheek, and at the same time his lip curled into a small, snickering smile. He stopped, leaned against the labyrinth wall, and slowly slid down and sat in the tall green grass. As he lay against the stone wall, yellow and red speckled leaves fell from the trees outside into the labyrinth. He whimpered, wiped the tear away, and with it the smile went as well. “So be it,” he said, and pulled out a pen and paper and began to write. His dark red tie dangled over his pen, scribbling in the breeze. A soft cold tune seemed to drone down the labyrinth corridor; he perked up his head to listen, as if he heard someone speaking... “Hello?” he whispered. But there was no one there. His horns curled over his drooping head. Vines crawled up the wall behind him as he wrote; little blue flowers bloomed between the cracks in the walls. The labyrinth fell into twilight, and the faun fell asleep. I abruptly finished writing the story, wrapped it up in red ribbon and put it in a small wooden box; and I wondered, what was it that faun had been writing about?

I cannot refute my own words,
though I often try through the use of more words.

Words are like tricks: when you put them together right
you can make them sound like they're telling the truth.

A riddle is like the Devil,
It tells you one thing, gives you another,
then takes it away.

The Moon Castle

m i c h a e l p a s c h a l l

Black feathers lay scattered around the stone walls; I have to pick my way through the feathers like a bird to find my glasses. I sit and listen to the hard fluttering of wings; it makes the forest feel restless. I slide my glasses on, stand up, and wipe the leaves from my sweatshirt. Back away and light a cigarette. The crows are so dense that I can't make out the shape; it shifts like a black jigsaw puzzle. I brush a black feather from my shoulder, blow the smoke out of my lungs. The moon is dim but visible. In the half-light, the tomb looks like a giant corpse. I take my glasses off and clean them on my shirt, rub my cigarette out in the dirt, and put my glasses back on. There is a dull pain in my shoulder from sleeping on the ground, the impression of rocks on my skin. Black feathers lay scattered at my shoes. Feeling drowsy again—I fall down into the cool grass and gaze at the gigantic tomb through slitted eyelids. A faint voice breaks through the flutter of wings, *Help me, get me out*. “Hello?” I whisper, crawling up to the tomb and knocking on the stone. *Yes, hello, can you hear me? I've been locked in this tomb for centuries, and I've learned my lesson, I'm ready to come out now, please let me out, please, I am sorry, I won't do it again. Please, the darkness of this place is too much for me to bear—*

“Hey! No sleepin' in the graveyard!” I jump at the giddy, frog-like voice; the gravekeeper is leaning on his shovel, staring at me with bulging, bloodshot eyes. His body is disproportionate; he looks like a ballerina in a tutu. His long grey hair twirls in greasy strands down his shallow, rosy cheeks; his hands rest easy on his round gut—I glimpse at his tiny feet and smile. “But sir, I heard something, in the tomb, whispering!” The gravekeeper laughs, “Of course you did; that's Tomas—been whining all night; always on Tuesdays—can't get a moment of quiet around here—you'd think, it being a graveyard—I would like to slap him around a little if he weren't a ghost!” I stare at the raven covered tomb. “Tomas—Tomas who?” says I. The

gravekeeper smirks, “Moon of course! The entire Moon family is buried in that great tomb—everyone knows that! But I’ll tell you this, for all the Moons, Tomas is the only one that makes so much as a sound. Always begging to be let out. Wants his life back, wants an apple, wants a drink of water. It never stops. Now get out of here!” I carefully back away from the gravekeeper; “But my name is Tomas Moon!” I say; he prances forward a step, his rosy cheeks gleaming, and says in a strict, disciplinary manner, “Course you are. Now listen here, sleeping in the graveyard is a terrible offense to the dead; I will not stand for it! It is one thing to walk carelessly among the graves smoking cigarettes, but sleeping?—rolling around like a dog among the forgotten souls as if it were a place of rest! It’s ridiculous! Preposterous! I won’t stand for it, I *cannot*—what is your excuse for such desecration?!” I keep backing away, slowly, carefully, like a mouse. Sneaking. Backwards. “Listen, sir, I was only taking a little nap in the evening yesterday and I must have fallen asleep. It won’t happen again, I promise. I’m very sorry. Very, very sorry. Please let me go—I’m late for school.” The gravekeeper shakes his head. There is something childlike about him, something innocent but at the same time grotesque. Obviously, he’s quite right; I don’t know how I was so careless to fall asleep at the foot of that tomb; who would want to sleep among the dead? I feel ashamed, upsetting the gravekeeper. It’s a gruesome job, working for the dead.

I slink into the back of class; someone with my name buried in that tomb? Or is it me? I stab my hand with a pencil and scream—the pain is utter; the blood is dark. Isabel stares at me in surprise. I wipe the blood from my hand. “Tomas, you’re next,” Miss Sallow says from the front of class. “I presume you have your speech ready?” I jump to my feet, wipe some leaves from my sweatshirt, and walk in a dignified manner to the front of class. “I am ready,” I say, shuffling

some papers on the podium. “You may begin,” she says with a smile. I bow to the class. “My speech is about, death—and I wish to begin with the assumption that we are very much alive.”

The class nods and shrugs. “Of course we are!” I shout. “And since we are alive, we know that we are not dead!” The class nods in unison, and begins to perk up as I start pacing around vigorously. I raise my voice to a thunderous roar— “And since we are not dead, we know that we are indeed very much alive!” The class jumps up and begins cheering; I calm them, bow, and say, “Please, listen carefully, for this is the main point of my speech, and I wish to leave you with something of value.” The class grows quiet—I clear my throat, “I have recently come to the belief that the opposite is the case.” Miss Sallow stands up and waves her hands in the air—“Now, now, Tomas, that’s enough nonsense—take your seat now.” I protest. “But Miss Sallow, I am only getting started; If we are in fact alive—as you would have us believe—” I swing my arm out and point at her, making her the object of reproach. Her pale face turns white. “Excuse me, Tomas, but I never made any claim of the sort, I was only trying to”— “What would you have me do, Miss Sallow? I put too much time into this speech to have you take it out of my mouth,” I flash my teeth at her. She stares at me, turns red, and sits down. “As I was saying; It’s a horrible burden. It’s a horrible burden to be alive.” I sit down on the desk, feeling tired, “So I must be alive, the burden of it all is evidence.” A girl raises her hand, says, “Are you trying to prove that we are dead, or that we are alive?” The class laughs. I smirk. “I am saying that you are all dead, dead as corpses, completely dead—and I am alive.” Miss Sallow, so pale I can see through her, rushes up and grabs me by the arms and forces me back into my desk. The rest of the class gazes viciously at me—past me, as if their eyes are glazed over with some kind of milk. Their heads twitch; their mouths hang open, spilling their pink, drooping tongues.

Isabel looks at me. There is purple rabbit's foot dangling from her neck. I remember once when my uncle took me hunting, I shot a rabbit right between the eyes and I didn't feel a thing. She steps out of the class and I follow her; she shifts between the kids in the hall. I'm not sure where she ends and I begin. Everyone is talking. She stops at the water fountain and drinks; I wait, leaning against the wall. She smiles, wiping water from her mouth. She has a white dress on. We share a cigarette on the pavement. I ask her about her family. She asks about my mom. "She dying," I nudge her for the cigarette. She leans her head against my shoulder. I fill my lungs with smoke. "I know," she says, snatching the cigarette from my lips.

She grabs my wrist and squeezes it. "Let's go to my house and I'll cut your hair." She smiles at me; the pink glitter glistens on her cheeks. "You can sit on the chair in my room and I'll take off your shirt, wrap a sheet around your neck and cut your hair. It's too long anyways—you need to cut it." She runs her fingers through my hair. "Come to my house, let me cut it for you," she says, dragging me by the arm away from school. "I'll undress you, sit on your lap, and cut your hair for you," she laughs, tightening her grip. "Then I'll take off my shirt too, while I'm sitting on your lap—okay?" I laugh; If she wants to cut my hair I'll let her cut my hair, she's right anyways, it's too long. She pushes me in front of her, making me lead the way. "Let's cut through the forest," I say, looking into the trees. "No!" she shouts, laughing—"go left up here." She slides her hand beneath my shirt. "Let's go into my room; we'll take off our clothes, and while I cut your hair you can kiss me." She laughs, pushing me through the door. "But what about class?" I say, running my hand up the banister. She laughs and pushes me into her room. There is a chair in the center with a sheet already beneath the floor. I sit down and she pulls off my shirt. She grabs a long pair of silver scissors, they gleam as she dashes across my eyes, like

an animal in the dark. “Be still,” she says—“Wait!” I yell, jumping from the chair. “I don’t want to cut my hair! I like it long.” She gives me a pitying smile. I grab my shirt, run out of the room and down the stairs. She is watching from her window, the scissors held up, her head slightly cocked.

I pull my shirt on and run. The wind is picking up and it feels cool against my chest. I should have let her cut my hair, I don’t know what came over me. What else could I want but to lay beneath her while she cuts my hair? Nothing, there is nothing I want more than that. “What are you doing!” Isabel shouts through her window, her hood held over her head as if she were afraid of being seen. “Come back; if you don’t want me to cut your hair, we don’t have to—just come up here and we’ll talk about it.” I grin, she is always saying stuff like that—sweet lies—she has always wanted to cut my hair; as soon as I am sleeping she will pull the scissors out and I’ll wake up like a butchered beast. No thanks. “Listen, if you let me go, I promise that I will let you cut my hair *tomorrow*—*tomorrow* I will let you cut my hair.” She scowls at me and pulls off her hood. “Do you really think I want to cut your stupid hair! I don’t want anything to do with you, you disgust me, the way you drool over me; the way you kiss me makes me sick—I can’t even stand the look of your eyes on me, it makes me want to vomit. I just pity you, Tomas.” She turns her face sideways. “What do you want from me then? You act as if its some kind of depraved addiction. All I need is a little peace,” I say. Isabel sneers, a glint of longing in her eyes, then turns away from the window—“Wait!” I shout. She smiles; “Come on then!” she says, and I run into the house like a dog.

Isabel sits on my lap, playing with my hair. “Isabel,” I say, turning to look her in the eyes. She looks abashed. “I need to go.” She sighs, and pushes me off her bed. She stands up straight,

straightens her skirt with her hands and bends over to look at me lying on the carpet. “You’re free to go whenever you wish; please, go. I am tired of you being here anyway; your pathetic obsession with me is tiring. For a time, I appreciate your caresses; but you’re obviously starved for affection.” She stands up straight again, smiles. I back quietly out of the room. She bends over on the bed, showing the bottom edge of her panties, “Goodbye, Tomas.” I make a run for it. It’s the only way; one must shut one’s eyes and run.

I step into my mother’s room; she is sitting up in bed. “Tomas!” Her decaying body betrays the life in her voice—her skin is pale with a faint shine; her cheekbones protrude from her face; the needle in her arm pumps morphine into her blood. I sit down at the foot of her bed, open the window and let the breeze in. “Tomas, let me tell you a secret,” she says, peering down at me, as if she is talking to a tiny mouse that she just found in her closet, “You can’t tell anyone about it though—it will be between you and me—just you and me and no one else!” She whispers frantically, waving her skinny arms in the air, as if someone were trying to sneak into the room and steal her words. “Now listen, those who are not able to hear the secret will speak about it carelessly, in jest. But you, since you are able to hear it, will never be able to share it; that is how it works.” I am amazed at the vibrancy with which she speaks, her face glows with the words pouring from her mouth; the light dances across her face; her hair ruffles with life. She looks down at me and places her withered hand on my head, “Do understand? that is the secret—just don’t tell anyone,” she laughs, “I say, *do even not try*, because those who do suffer many things. They spend their whole lives trying to reveal the secret, and are eventually driven mad by the attempt—the secret cannot be shared except between those who cannot speak it.” She laughs.

When she laughs it is like someone is opening an old wooden chest and golden sunlit dust is spilling out.

She reclines on her pillows as if on a white throne, turns her head to gaze out the window and without looking at me, says very slowly, “There is a rat or some other creature in the ceiling or the walls, it kept me awake all night scurrying around; I didn’t get any sleep at all.” A grin passes her lips and she turns her head to look at me; and patting me on the head like a cat, she whispers excitedly, “Go and find it—and get it out of the house!” I leap from the foot of her bed and dash out of the bedroom. I halt in the living room and listen; there is barely a sound, only the tumble of the dryer. If my sisters are awake they are as quiet as the dead. My father is definitely home; he never leaves the house. Since my mother’s imminent death became clear, he hasn’t left the house at all; but he never makes a sound, and I rarely see him—only sometimes at night; but even then, I am not sure it is really him, either because it is so dark or I don’t have my glasses on and he appears as a shadow—like a ghost—and I wonder the next morning if I was only dreaming and I didn’t actually see him at all. Most likely the rat, or raccoon—sometimes I hear it, and it sounds too big to be a rat—is probably living in the attic, not the walls.

I ascend the steps, they creak loudly under my weight, as if they are shouting to the living room that somebody is trying to sneak upstairs; the house is so old it’s almost impossible to pass between the rooms without making noise; the walls are so thin that the quietest sound can be heard through the house like a small crack of thunder. It is a wonder that my sisters are so quiet; I have never been able to detect them in the mornings. Sometimes I lie awake in bed just trying to catch the faintest sound of movement or commotion from their rooms, but there is never a sound; they’re as quiet as mice. The only person in my family that I can hear moving in the house is my

mother; and she never leaves her bed. I snap my fingers; it echoes across the upstairs hallway. I turn my head sideways to listen for movement in the attic: not a sound. There is a hatch leading into the attic at the end of the hall; my sisters' bedrooms lie in a row at the end of the hall. First is my sister, Samantha, she rarely comes out of her room; Second is my sister, Maria, she spends most of her time sitting on her bed; sometimes I see her, but her gaze is always so blank that I immediately forget I've seen her—the way one forgets a naked mannequin in passing. And last is my sister, Emily, the most difficult to catch moving in the house. Like my father, she never leaves. Her doorway is difficult to get to because it is so far into the hallway, and it grows so dark near the end of the hall and I always begin to feel tired and heavy before I reach her door, and turn back without thinking. I pull down the hatch leading into the attic, it thumps loudly as the stairs unfold—something scurries across the attic floor—Emily's door swings open, "What are you doing?" she says, looking up into the attic. "Mom thinks there's a rat in the attic." Her face twists as if she smelt something putrid, and she closes her door. I dash across the hall, down the stairs, past the kitchen—grab a flashlight from the laundry room—and run back up to the entryway. I climb the hanging steps into the attic; it's completely dark, no windows at all; the air is thick and musky. I shine the light into a dark corner. Something moves in the shadows—suddenly the rat shows his black teeth and lunges at me—his jaws close on my neck—I fall backwards, tumbling down the attic stairs and into the hall—the stairs fold up and the hatch closes with a thud. All three of my sisters' doors swing open and they stare at me lying on my back. "Why are you making so much noise?" Samantha shouts; "It's still early, Tomas, what are you doing?!" Maria whines. Emily merely stares at me. "There is a giant rat in the attic! It nearly took my head off! Don't you hear it running around up there?!" Now the rat was really making

tracks, it sounded like thunder was rumbling through the ceiling. All three of them listen intently for a moment and say in unison, “We can’t hear a thing.”

Sunshine splashes the overgrown lawn. I open the mailbox; stacks of letters pour out, spilling into the street. MOON is struck onto the side of the mailbox in big white letters; it glares in the sun. I gather the letters, meander down the long winding driveway and back into the house. “Samantha Moon, Emily Moon, Emily/Maria/Maria/Emily/Samantha—” The World doesn’t know that I exist. I am thankful for that. I don’t know if the World exists either. My sisters, on the other hand, are prolific letter writers; that is the main reason they spend so much time alone in their rooms. They have been known to write up to a hundred letters a day! I slide the mail across the counter, and immediately my sisters come running down the stairs, gracefully, in their socks and nightgowns. Each of them is holding a silver letter opener in her hand. They stand in a single file line and sort through the letters without a word. Then, like ghosts, they are gone. There is a single letter left on the counter. For me? It’s large and white and stamped with a royal red seal. I stare at it for a long time without moving, then snatch it greedily and read the recipient’s name: — Avery Moon. The first name is smeared out; the ink is smudged with a fingerprint; Avery is my father’s middle name. I run up the spiral staircase towards his study. His study is the highest room in the house; a small, cramped, tiny little room with a skylight; the skylight, however, is so covered with black mold that no light penetrates it; the room has a dark gloomy glow. I knock.

There is no answer; I swing the door open. It’s so dim inside, it’s difficult to see; my father appears to be sitting at his desk, moving something with his fingers. “Dad? Letter for you.” His face is obscured by shadow. I meekly approach him and look down. He is resting one

hand on his fallen Queen, the index finger of his other hand is tapping the crown of his castled King. He is playing chess against himself. “Are you winning?” I say, eagerly; he doesn’t seem to notice I am speaking. I look closely at the board; he is densely protected in his corner; his enemy’s Queen is enthroned in the center of the board. “Dad! Are you winning?” He perks his head up, listens for a moment, then looks down again. I sit down and watch him play. His King is not only castled, it is completely entrenched by every piece he has; he couldn’t move it free if he wanted to; but why would he want to? With defenses like that he will never be mated. He rolls his fallen Queen around in his hand, staring at the board, tapping his finger on his King. I set the envelope down on the table, lean forward and look closely at him; his face shifts in the gloom; he looks like my father, but only vaguely; he looks like a bull, then like a man with bulging eyes. Suddenly he sits up very straight and raises his head in dignified manner; the lamp behind him looks like a crown on his head. I jump to my feet and bow. “Farewell, father!” I say, and bounce out of the room like jester.

I scurry into my bedroom, slip my clothes off, and crawl under my sheet. Someone is pounding vigorously on the front door; I lay in my warm blankets. It is only a dream...they will go away. They will leave if I wait long enough. I smile to myself. Let them knock, let them knock all day. I won’t get up; I am asleep. I am deep in a dreamworld, never to be awoken. I am as asleep as the dead; I am a corpse in a coffin; I am the earth. I am an earthworm; I wiggle through the mud— “Open up! I have a package to deliver!” I pull my blankets over my head. “Go away, no packages today—thank you.” The man slams on the door even louder. Why my sisters have not answered the door—they know I suffer from insomnia and must sleep in the

daytime! “Please leave the package by the door and go away!” I shout through the blankets, feeling ecstatic and cold, suddenly, shivering. “Can’t do that, has to be signed for—a certain Samantha Moon—*please* open the door!” The knocking thunders. I curl up in my blankets and close my eyes.

Suddenly, I hear the rat scurry through the attic—I’m up. I throw on my jeans, grab a flashlight and run out of the room. The man continues knocking, but it sounds muffled and distant. I dart into the garage, grab an axe hanging on the wall and run back inside, up the stairs, and pull the hatch down that leads into the attic. Dust tumbles out into the hallway. I quietly ascend the creaking steps. As I enter the darkness, a cockroach scurries across the floor before my eyes. “Back for more, eh?” the rat says coolly, sitting atop a pile of boxes. “Listen, if you think that axe is going to help you, you should know, I am disease ridden, one bite and you’re dead.” The rat flashes his glittering black teeth. His beady black eyes bore into mine. “Listen, I don’t want this to be bloody; I just want some peace in quiet.” The rat laughs viciously, “Peace and quiet? Then why don’t you do something about that damn mailman! He’s the one disturbing the peace around here. I can’t get a moment’s rest with him knocking on the door all day.” “Yes, he is a problem too, but he will go away eventually, you on the other hand...” The rat sneers at me and says, “Let me explain something to you: he is not going to go away—this is only the beginning of his pestering. Mark my words, if you don’t do something about him now it’s going to become a perpetual problem for you, and therefore me.” I consider the rodent’s words, “How do you know he will be back?” The rat relaxes his gaze and says, “I know more than you can imagine; for instance, I know that your sisters are deaf to my noise; that your father is completely unaware I am living in his attic; I also know that even though you can hear me pattering around

up here, you don't have the resolve to end my life. I know that you secretly love having me live here, in the attic of your House. You like listening to me scurry around. It makes you feel warm and comfortable." He laughs carelessly and continues, "You think those packages will go away if you just ignore them? Ignorant fool! Those package will haunt your life more than your sisters—eternal ghosts that they are—haunt this House." The rat laughs, starts bobbing his head to the sound of the knocking down below, which is growing louder by the minute. "I'll tell you what, put that axe down and I'll tell you secret..." he says it with such enticement that I cannot resist; I set the axe down on the floor and he says, "Good, now listen. Hear that knocking on the door? That's the sound of the World breaking into your House; if you don't do something about it, all the packages your sisters are ordering (and they number in the thousands) will begin to cascade into your House and destroy your life." I sit down on the floor and think about the rat's words. He sounds like he is telling the truth—but he is a rat and therefore untrustworthy. Right? "Listen, if you really want some peace and quiet, you need to begin with the underlying problem. I am forbidden to tell you explicitly what it is, but let me give you a hint: the answer lies among the tombs—that is where you will find the answers you seek." "How do you know I am seeking anything—you're a rat!" The rat smiles, "Unbelieving fool! I am indeed, a rat, but who is to say that rats don't know more of the lives of humans than humans themselves? Indeed, only humans hold this conception—which is completely false. We rats have been the ancient guardians of the human race since the beginning of time." I jump to my feet, "Then how do you explain the Bubonic Plague!?" The rat scurries around for a moment, then lunges at me, his teeth flashing in the dark—I swing my flashlight and knock him into a dark corner. "You're a lying rat!" I shout

as I descend the stairs. The rat cackles in the darkness. “You’ll be back, and I’ll have your throat! Tell your sisters I say hello!” The rat laughs maniacally and scurries deeper into the attic.

The sun pours in through the window, outlining my mother’s body in light. “Did you find the rat?” she says without looking at me, thumbing through some pages. “Yeah, but I didn’t catch him, he—got away,” I say, turning my head. She smiles, “You can catch him another time. Tomas, I want to discuss something with you before my death. It is approaching rapidly and there is so much I need to tell you. I want to instill in you the importance of following your heart. I know that you feel like you have two faces; one is preparing to go to school, eat a quick breakfast, find a girlfriend, and so on. The other one is less visible, but more focused—it is looking in another direction, driving you like mad horses in a direction you do not fully understand. We share this second face, and though it often feels like a burden, it is essential that you allow it to gaze in the direction it must, and also that you learn to follow it; it does not actually move in the opposite direction of your other face, the one you are looking at me with right now—it is more accurate to say that this face,” she places her hand on my cheek, “is looking in the opposite direction of your other, inner face; this is the one that needs to be aligned, not the other way around. But you should go now; I need to rest.” She kisses me on the cheek.

I dash out of the house and past the mailman. He throws a package at me; it hits me in the shoulder, but I am too fast for him. I disappear into the forest, deep into the trees I go, without thinking, I move elegantly through the leaves; I am a deer prancing in a meadow; I am graceful doe; I smell the sweet scent of honeysuckle; I dash among the trees; I am a wild horse; I am a butterfly; I flutter on the wind. I am free. Everything is a blur; I am a racing bumblebee buzzing between the trees. “HEY! YOU! Sign here!” Drat, the mailman is tailing me. I duck behind some

bushes and burrow beneath a log. “No members of the Moon family here! Please go away, leave us in peace, we are only a small family of mice among the moss—we don’t even have any fingers with which to give you—what is this?—a signature, you say?” The mailman pulls the bushes aside and smiles at me maliciously, “Sign IT!” he shouts. I stuff my hands into my pockets and run deeper into the forest; I run and don’t look back; no packages for me, no packages at all!

Soon it’s quiet. Just the patter of my soft little feet on the leaves. The mailman’s whining is lost in the chirp of birds. My thoughts, awwwww, my thoughts turn to my mother. My pearl. My mother is always speaking in twilit words; saying things I feel but do not understand. Part of me has no idea what she is talking about; but some deep, secret part of me senses exactly what she means; part of me hears her, listens to her words and stores them somewhere deep. As she nears her death I find that her words are becoming more cryptic, and I am becoming more silent in response. I do not know what I am looking for, and she won’t tell me, and I am too afraid to ask. I stare with blurry vision at my feet; I’ve lost my glasses—

When I raise my head I see that I am nowhere near where I ought to be. I am in the middle of the forest buried in trees—looks like splashes of green watercolor all around. Don’t panic—how did I get so far into the woods without my glasses? The forest envelopes me like a dark green painting, blurry colors and distorted forms. Something bulbous and dark is bobbing up and down in front of me like a ball; I reach my hand out and touch it—“Hey!” it shouts in a high-pitched croak—“Sorry—but can you help me? I don’t have my glasses on and I can’t see a thing.” Fingers pull something from my collar and then, my glasses slide on—everything comes into focus. The gravekeeper’s rosy cheeks stare back at me. “Didn’t I tell you to keep out of the

graveyard at night?" I look into the twilight, a few stars twinkle in the sky. The giant tomb from this morning lies behind him like a corpse, fluttering with crows. The gravekeeper swings his head around and squints at the giant tomb. As I stare, it seems to grow larger and smaller at the same time. He smiles, stabs his shovel into the dirt, and skips up beside me to peer at the tomb. He looks at me and grins; his teeth glistening, his eyes sharp, he whispers, "Lean in close, so they can't hear us.." I lean in close. "So who can't hear us?" The graveyard is empty. "*The ghosts,*" he says, in a careful, respectful whisper, and then, "They don't like it when you talk about *the Raven King.*" I jump back, surprised at the sharpness of his voice. "The Raven King?" I say, looking at the crow covered tomb. "Shhhh!" he whispers, rubbing his sweaty hands together rapidly. "Who's the Raven King?" I say beneath my breath. He smiles and cautiously says, "They say," his beady eyes dart around the graveyard, "They say there was a King who was blind, who lived in a castle. He was a very lonely, very old King who was very near to death. This King had outlived everyone in his kingdom, he was the last one left. His family was dead; his wife, his daughters, his son, were all buried in the graveyard behind the castle. The kingdom had become a ghost town, and the castle itself was full of ghosts. People from beyond the kingdom called it *The Kingdom of the Dead.*" The gravekeeper looks over his shoulder nervously, whispers, "The King was vaguely aware of this, but he had grown so comfortable in his castle that he couldn't leave it even if he desired to. He had one final wish before he died: he wanted to fly. This of course was a very childish wish, but the King was old and had grown very childish in his old age. He prayed to God, he said, *Dear God, please, before I die and leave this castle, let me take flight over my Kingdom, that I might see the lands which You entrusted to me.* God did not respond right away, but after a few days a raven flew to the King's window and said,

I have been sent by God to trade my wings for your Kingdom. The King jumped, *For my Kingdom?! he shouted, How shall my Kingdom come into the hands of a wretched bird?* The crow laughed, he said, *The choice is yours; you can have my wings, and give up your Kingdom, or you can die a flightless man.* The King thought for a long time and finally said, *My Kingdom is my life; no one shall take it from me, certainly not a wretched crow!* The raven shook his head, smiled grimly, and soared off into the sky. The King fell into his throne, his heart thumping with anger, his breath short, gasping for air—he imagined himself flying over the lands of his kingdom, breathing the cool morning air, dipping into the clouds, and then—his heart stopped.”

The gravekeeper’s face turns pale and grave; he puts his lips so close to my ear that I can feel his hot breath on my skin, “They say when the King died he came before the throne of God and said, *Lord, why have you brought me here?* God looked down at him and said, *I offered you the one thing you asked of Me. Your deepest desire I gave unto you, and even this was not enough. Therefore I have taken your kingdom away from you and given it to the ravens. Have your reward.* And God transformed him into a raven and locked him in this tomb.” The gravekeeper laughed, snatched his shovel from the dirt, and danced off into the trees.

I walk up and touch the tomb with my fingers; it’s hard and cold. I put my ear up to the tomb and listen. *Look beneath the ivy...* a faint voice says from inside the tomb. I walk to the back of the tomb and raise a clump of dark ivy; there is an inscription on the stone: *Here Lies The Moon Family, May God Have Mercy On Their Wretched Souls.* First my mother’s name, then mine, then my sisters’, and last my father’s. “Tell me how I die,” I say. *You mean, tell you how you died?* I think for a moment, “If I am already dead, then yes, tell me how I died—but does that mean I am not going to die? My mother is dying right now, but she has already died?”

The voice giggles from within, *You're confused because you're thinking in a linear timeline. You are dead, yes; you have already died, yes; but you have yet to die. If you would only get me out here it would all make sense! It cannot make sense as long as I am in here and you are out there; If you could only get in here, and I could get out there, then it would make sense! I cannot explain it to you from in the darkness! Let me out! Let me out! I cannot bear the darkness! Set me free!* “But if you’re me, and I’m you, and I’m out here, how can you be in there?!” The voice laughs, as if he is going mad; *You are in here! If only someone could hear me! I shout—I moan in the darkness of this tomb! I do not spare my lungs; I give myself no rest! If only someone, anyone, would respond, it would be like cool water on my tongue. How long I have thirsted for a drink of cool water. How long do I only get silence in response to my pleadings for freedom! Not word, not a sound in response for years! I cannot bear it! Somebody listen! Can anybody hear me! Anybody! Please help me! Anybody?* I slowly back away from the tomb. Obviously, he has gone quite mad.

I sit down at the foot of my mother’s bed. I open the window; the white curtains rustle in the wind. “Buried in the cemetery,” I say, looking out the window. “Been dead for a century—entire town is dead... I’ve seen the tombs, read the names—we’re living in a ghost town and we didn’t even know it...” My mother smiles, leans back on her pillows and says, “Dear Tomas, of course we’re dead. The town sees themselves as very much alive—this of course, is a lie—but try telling them this! They see the tombs and immediately forget the names they read. They walk through the graveyard; they think how sad it is to have lost a loved one! They think of someone else as the one who is lost rather than realize it is they themselves who are lost. They mourn for themselves without knowing it!” She laughs—then her face becomes grave. She says, “Isn’t it

silly? Why do you think we have not seen your father and your sisters in so many years? They are convinced that they are alive; and as they slip ever more deeply into that false conviction, they slip farther into the world of the dead, and are thus cut off from us!” I ask, “But we are in the same place as them. We share the same house, we live in the same town, we eat the same food, wear the same clothes; we look the same as they do.” She smiles, “Yes, we share the same house; and what a wretched house it is,” she says, looking down at her decaying body. “But as soon as we realize that we are dead, and do not despair, we have the possibility of life. To be freed, so to speak, from the tombs. If you were to approach your sisters with this they would laugh at you! They have only a vague sense of your great distance from them. Still, they consider you a citizen of their world; the world of the dead. Which of course, you are not. They converse with the others; and deep in their isolation, they believe that they have found friendship among the dead—they have, of course; but what is friendship among ghosts?” She leans back on her pillows and sighs. “Have you taken care of the rat in the attic? He is giving me no rest; no rest, I cannot bear it much longer—though I will not have to.” She smiles, looking out the window into the blue sky. “Tomas, I want to see the ocean; I want to see the ocean once more before I die—go find your father and your sisters and tell them we are going to the ocean.”

I knock on the door of my father’s study; he doesn’t answer so I swing the door open; It is so dark in the room that I can only vaguely make out his shape. He is in the corner of the room, and he appears to be wearing a hat of some sort. “Dad?” I inch closer into the darkness. He is at work with his hands on the table, sculpting something. “Mom wants to go to the ocean, she asked me to come find you. Can you come?” As I peer down over his shoulder I can see clearly what he is sculpting—though he himself remains blurry. He is sculpting a sandcastle! He

has miniature figurines positioned at the base of castle. He is using a toothpick to make markings in the ramparts. The sandcastle is so detailed; it's astonishing. I grab a magnifying glass from the desk. In the courtyard of the castle is a sign that reads: The Moon Estate. I laugh with pleasure; "Dad, it's remarkable. So will you come with us to the ocean?" He does not seem to know I am speaking to him, so I shout, "Mom wants to go to the ocean! Are you coming?!" He perks his head up, as if he just heard something, listens for a moment, then continues sculpting. I take a last glance at the sandcastle, then dash out of the room. Emily will be able to get him to hear her—I will have to rouse her first.

I run down the hallway, first knocking on Samantha's door, then on Maria's, then, after a struggle, I fix my gaze on Emily's. It seems to grow smaller as I approach, but that's an illusion created by the architecture and darkness of the hallway. As I draw nearer, I laugh to myself, "I feel like a little mouse," I whisper, looking up at the door. Then I grow scared, the door is too far away—I should turn back—Samantha and Maria are shouting something at me from the hall, but their voices are muffled, as if they're in another room. I fix my resolve. My mother wants to go to the ocean with the family before she dies; and she will have it! I force my way through the dark hallway and throw my fist onto the door. It seems to slow as it moves towards the door and then—quite suddenly—it hits the door. There is no sound, and I wonder if I have knocked at all, but then it swings it open, Emily smiles broadly at me, jumps forward, hugging me, tears streaming down her face with joy—she says, "Are we going to the ocean!?! Thank you for coming to get me! Let's go, I'll go get father." She runs down the hallway; Samantha and Maria follow her, both of them scowling at me. I feel relieved and the hallway seems less threatening. I

glance up at the hatch leading into the attic; there is a black spot growing on my neck from the rat's bite.

My mother sits in a wheelchair staring out into the sea. Next to her, my father, who is obscured by her, is building a sandcastle; this one is even more detailed than the one in his study. I don't know how he built it so fast—though I cannot see him, I can clearly see the castle he is building; It rises nearly up to my mother's head. She sits there, smiling, looking out into the ocean like a queen. My sisters lie about lazily on the beach, catching the sunshine; I suspect they haven't noticed how close my father's castle is to the waves. He goes on building it anyway though; I attempted to tell him it was too close, but he couldn't seem to hear me. Isabel is sitting on the beach a short distance away; she has both her arms stretched out behind her, propping her up; she is wearing a light blue dress with white stripes. She is always nearby.

The sandcastle is marvelous. It rises up and up, and spreads out with precision and beauty. Soon, a crowd of people have gathered around my father; Everyone is watching him. Eventually I am pushed out of the circle and I must stand upon the dunes to see what it happening. My father stands like a king in the courtyard of his giant sandcastle, the people watching him reverently. My sisters lay about on the beach as if they don't have a care in the world. My mother has managed to push herself to edge of the ocean and is dipping her toes into the sea. I marvel at the sandcastle; it is truly a monument. But to what?

As I gaze at my father's castle, the sun sinks on the horizon. I watch the tide reach up like a hungry animal and snatch a hermit crab from the shore, sucking him into the waters. The tide is rising quickly.