

## BOOK ONE

## 1

I WANT YOU TO CONSIDER, if you will, a room empty of artifacts. In the middle of the room, suspended from the ceiling, is a single pendant light bulb. A piercing, sun-like light emanates from the bulb. The four walls phosphor the bulb's returned light. The floor, walls, and ceiling are smooth. There is no carpet, no paint, no wallpaper. The ceiling itself has no features save for the single cord holding the light bulb. As you enter the room, the bulb disappears. The light remains, but in the space directly under where the bulb used to be a single rod of gold has now appeared. You reach out to take hold of it, but as your fingers curl around the rod, it bends, twines around your fingers as if it were only a shell of leaf. The leaf fills the crevices of your hands and then melts into the pores of your skin. The hand then becomes the light. You turn to face the door to run away, but the door is gone, replaced by your doppelgänger, who reaches out to grasp your golden hand.



It's five o'clock in the morning. The clock beside my bed goes off. The klaxon is so loud now I can't bear to hear it anymore, so I tear its plug from the wall. I put my feet on the floor and slowly move my body to the edge of the bed. My head feels like Satan himself has pushed his thumb through the crown of my scalp.

*Where is the aspirin? It's in the shower, isn't it? That's where I put it last? In the shower.*

I pull my feet across the floor and hit the bathroom door.

*The shower. That's where it is. Please, dear God, let it be there.*

It feels like a quarter full bottle. Just right. I open the lid and pour out a moisture-clotted knot of tablets. I turn on the tap and drink from the shower-head, letting the bitter lump dissolve down my throat.

*Ahh.*

*Let me just wait here for a minute, please.*

I put my hand on the wall of the shower and rest for a few minutes. My skin feels...thick. It's hard to move.

*Ah, yes. I have clothes on.*

*Wonderful.*



It's hard to believe—for me at least—that I function as a person. Since you have just come into this narrative, I wouldn't blame you if you have already guessed that I am suffering from just too much liquor. You would be incorrect, though. I suppose

I'm too banal for that. You see, I can't hold my drink, or anyone else's, for that matter—I've been called the world's cheapest date.

I suppose that someone might guess that there are other reasons that might explain my sorry state: Migraines? Brain tumor? Schizophrenia?

No, it just wouldn't be right for me to be afflicted with any of these. First off, these are just too damned exciting. I would be the topic of so many conversations at work—

Question: "Did you hear about Paul?"

Reply: "I know! They say he's not going to make it. I'm so sad for him."

Response: "I hear his doctors finally think that it's multiple sclerotic carcinogenic schizophrenia.

Reply: "Didn't they say that it was brought on by smoking too much crystal MSG?"

Response: "They've said that his death will be agonizing in some grisly, most violent way."

Conclusion: "Yes—a blessing, really."

No, I'm afraid that I will not be the column heading for any of these heartrending exchanges. No office flower list, no mention in the local Mormon "prayer concerns" service.

I do feel that this day is worthy of mention, though. It will have meaning, for perhaps two or three people.

I do know, for example, that I will become lost at one point during the day.

I do not know if, like some Prodigal, I will be found.

Having said that, I cannot even tell you if I live through to the end of the narrative. I think that you (and I) should prepare

ourselves for that right now. In fact, I don't think that I can tell you anything uplifting about the narrative which you have started. Except that like getting up and finding a viscous goo of aspirin waiting to cure you, fortune (or happenstance) will keep you alive, or keep you from living, through sometimes vicious and ugly means.



I work my way through the shower, managing to remove my clothes without falling to the tub floor. But, unfortunately, my headache moves from the crown of my head and follows the aspirin into my stomach:

*Just let it go, Paul.*

I begin to retch just as I brace myself between the edge of the tub and the wall.

*Just let it all go. The faster the better, Paul. Don't try to keep it down.*

I watch the vomit fall through the drain-guard, and, in a controlled collapse, move to the floor. I raise my head into the water stream. The warm jets have actually started to feel good, and I let the water collect in pools in my eye-sockets and the corners of my mouth.

A voice in the other room:

“Doth thou live, Paul?”

A voice—male—in the other room:

“Again, I say: are you alive?”

*No. This is only a pale imitation of that which you refer to as “alive.” And, by the way, why does your voice seem distant?*

“Yes, I’m okay. I’ll be out in a minute.”

I turn off the water and creak to the toilet seat.

*“This isn’t right—why does even my teeth hurt?”*

I collect myself and swish some toothpaste in my mouth. I clothe myself in jeans and t-shirt and make my way towards the kitchen. Here, the male voice sits at the kitchen table reading an aged and folded copy of some book—I can’t see the title. The voice, on the other hand, I think I can name. His name is Paul, too. Yes, I believe that would be Paul Fischer, Senior. I believe that would be Dad.

“Are you all right? I heard that last one in here.”

“I’m fine. I think that last night is still here this morning.”

“Sit down. Drink something. I made coffee. Would that be too much for you?”

“No,” I lie, “coffee’s fine. When did you wake up this morning?”

Dad pours a large cup of black coffee for me and sits down at the table. I sit across from him, my stomach vibrating at the very vapor coming from the cup. “About four o’clock. I saw your light on under the door. You didn’t answer at my knock, so I came in and turned it off. I wasn’t tired anymore, so I stayed up and read.”

“Thanks for turning it off,” I reply.

“You seem...ill-fitting this morning. Are you sure everything’s all right?”

“Yeah, Dad, I’m going to be fine. Listen, I’ve got to go to work. I see you’ve found your way around the kitchen. There’s nothing I’m saving, so eat whatever you want.”

I get up from the table and go to change into something for work. There is something vague and heinous about my available choices: tie (check), slacks (check), button-up shirt (check), black shoes (check), black socks (ugh). They are the cheap Tupperware of clothing: vague, unremarkable, guaranteed to keep their contents fresh, pliable...edible.

I regard myself in the mirror and leave my apartment. The trip down the seven flights of concrete stairs down into the metro are long, tiring, almost endless. At every landing, a small window—perhaps a square foot in size—is set in-between the cinder block bricks about six feet above the floor. Each window's singular view of sky feels as if it is a glossy industrial-blue lozenge cemented into the wall. I have passed down these stairs hundreds of times. I've passed each lozenge hundreds of times and noticed that sometimes the windows are brassy, or the dinge of smoke or smog, or, on rare occasion, almost bleached white with sunlight. And even though I have seen their variances, until today, I have never seen the ground. I have never looked down upon the street. I imagine that the street from this view might seem as if I were berthed in a ship below the waterline, never seeing either the floor of the ocean, or the sun. I feel caught within the surface tension.

I open the door to the metro and instantly I catch its smell—its humanity. Its humidity, sweat, concrete, engine grease, dirt, earth. I pause. I always pause. I always expect it to smell better, somehow. The metro is quiet today. No packing. No one laughing, crying. No complaining. It feels like a funeral procession. Everyone just sits. People look at their books, but no one reads.

People have their earphones on, but no one is listening. We, friends, are in a painting. An old, grimy piece of propaganda created years ago to promote the new subway—its setting never having been replaced by the newest in metro style, its characters frozen into the continual fade of age. We are in dehydrated time, waiting for a wash of water to revive us into action. The announcement for my stop breaks my reverie:

“Next stop: Monument Place.”

Monument Place. Its name is a misnomer, for it is a small side street that runs parallel to the widest street in the city: Center Avenue. I know that Monument is, in fact, older than the Avenue. Monument’s street is cracking between the pavement patches. Its buildings compete with each other to see who has the more archaic design. Its signs have faded, obscure names, their display windows cracking—their contents in need of dusting.

The sun rarely hits the earth on Monument Place. When you scuttle down to the side, you are in constant dusk, except at midday. When the sun shines at midday, the street’s age multiplies by a factor of ten. For every hole in the walk, there are five whispery cracks emanating from its diameter. Sun dries the mortar in the walls, the weeds in the abandoned lots are desiccated for excess of haze.

If you were to walk to the terminal of Monument, you will find that it ends in a small square. In the middle of this square is a life-sized copper statue on a rough marble block. No one sits on the benches surrounding its pedestal, which would prove painful, because the benches have eroded, splintered, and

chipped. A few people leave their buildings, their businesses, and homes; they enter the same and never pause. They are not inhospitable, they just—move from place to place.

The statue itself is of a man. His feet are unfinished, with his legs planted in a block of metal, like the artist wanted his viewers to believe that the man was literally carved out of an oversized ingot of copper. He is clean-shaven, his eyes closed. His clothes, shoes, hair are from another time—the American Civil War, maybe. He looks towards the east, his hands raised, each facing the northeast and southeast, as if holding back the mass of buildings. Maybe, in that other time, he was facing the morning, his hands keeping the evening clouds from blocking his view.

Now, the triumph of time has turned him—his hands, his clothes, his primordial block—green. When the sun strikes the metal, you would almost think that moss has begun to grow. I don't know who the statue honors. There is no plaque, or memorial. The street was, I think, named for him—for this square. He, too, stands in lifeless time, keeping a perpetual glance towards the morning.



I work in a small shop just up the street from the copper man's square. Every morning I turn into this small dusty nook and take my place behind the front counter. The purpose of the store is to sell necessities. It is, in other words, what could be called a convenience store, though no one seems to notice its convenience any more. The products are dusty, price labels lose their strength and fall to the floor. The owner never notices. In



fact, the owner never comes to the store. The manager arrives later than I do, sits, and leaves early. I receive a paycheck (I have no idea where the money comes from) every two weeks. I sit and stare out of the window waiting for business, but no one arrives.

This morning, I arrive and find the door is barred shut. The lights are out. It's dark inside except for the shafts of light falling from the outside. I see the manager sitting, staring at the store-room door in the back corner. I knock at the door. No movement. I knock on the windows and call his name—

"Mr. Casey! Albert!"

Albert raises his head and stares out through me from his dark corner. Correction: he stares out from his dark corner directly at me. He moves slightly, shifting his weight from his left foot to his right.

He says something. I can't hear him.

"Mr. Casey! It's me. It's Paul. Is there something wrong? Albert...what's wrong?"

Albert moves from the door to the window in front of me—looks at me and whispers to the glass between us.

"I can't hear you," I say, "open the door, man."

I see foam piling in the corners of his mouth. He moves to sit on the floor, his legs flat on the floor, his hands bent backwards at the wrists against the tile as if his arms were too long for his body.

"My God, Albert!"

*Call 911, Paul. Get inside there, Paul. Now!*

I rush to find anything to break the window. Nothing.

*Kick it in!*

I push my foot against the window until it cracks, and I fall backwards through the glass. I land on the floor next to Albert. I hear him gasp.

I get up and raise his head.

“Albert! Can you hear me?”

Albert’s eyes roll into the back of his head and he passes out.

I call 911. His heart still beats. He still breathes.

*He’ll be okay. I’m sure he will be okay.*

I hold his head, so he won’t choke until the ambulance comes.



The storeroom of the shop is normally empty or locked. I have never been in the room when there has been anything but open space. As the paramedics are loading Albert into the ambulance, I walk back to the door. The doorknob feels as if it might be locked. It doesn’t give. I try to turn with a bit more force and the handle pops and swings around. The door opens. Nothing but darkness. I find the light switch, turn the lights on. In the middle of the storeroom floor is a table. A single table. Resting on its side in the middle of the table is a dusty bottle, white pellets having spilled on the table, its label fading and falling off: rat poison.

*Albert—*

I have never met the owner of the store; I’ve never even spoken to him over the phone. I interviewed with Albert. He gave me my paychecks. He rarely spoke about the owner, except to say, “the boss is closing the shop today,” or, when handing me

my check, “the boss thanks you.” After seeing Albert, seeing the rat poison on the table, I don’t care if the owner had nothing to do with what happened today,

I don’t think I want to meet him.

I find some old packing boxes behind the store and tape them to the inside of the window. I write “Closed until further notice” on a sign taped to the front door and leave for home. Instead of taking the route back to the metro entrance, I decide to calm down. I turn right and head down to the square. In the short distance I can see the disembodied hands of the statue extend from behind one of the buildings that line the sides of the square. I walk slowly. I concentrate on the green on burnished gold, trying to keep the memory of Albert out of my head. I didn’t —don’t know him all that well. He was—is nice to me. He wasn’t even what I would call my friend. But the foam spilling out of his mouth, the glass. What was he trying to say to me?

I reach the statue and find, like always, no one waiting. I sit on one of its crumbling benches. I start to sob. No one stops, no one watches. Why should I care?

*My head hurts. I need to lie down.*

I fall to my back on the bench. I let my head fall to the cracking concrete. I look up at the statue. His mouth is moving.

*What is he saying?*

All is quiet. Then, nothing.



I wake up to find that night has grown over the square. I've never been here past nightfall before. There are a few lights in some upper story rooms.

*Has no one noticed me?*

My head feels like Satan found me again and spent the last few hours marking time with his knuckle on my scalp. I don't like the idea of waiting here any longer, but since I'm all right thus far, I should be able to make it back to the metro before it closes. Before I leave, I look up at the statue. His mouth is shut, his hands still upraised.

*I need some aspirin.*

I make it to the metro, fall into a seat and find my way back home. The lozenges are now night-filled as I climb each flight of stairs. I open the door as quietly as I can.

*Ugh...Dad's still up.*

"Where have you been? Are you all right? Where have you been?" he asks.

"We had an accident at the store. My manager tried to kill himself."

"Jesus—I'm sorry. How is he?"

"I don't know. He's at the hospital. I don't know if he will make it or not."

"I was afraid. You were sick this morning. Paul, I was afraid that you were not going to make it home."

"I'm here, Dad. Don't worry"

"Have you eaten? I'm sorry I'm not hungry, but I'll sit with you while you eat."

“No, Dad. I’m just tired, and a bit upset. Would it be all right with you if I just go to bed?”

“Sure, Paul. Go to sleep. I’ll wait up a while longer and read.”

I see my father walk into the living room. He turns on the radio and listens to the classical station. From my bed, I can see his shadow on the living room wall. He sits in a chair. His head rests in his hands. I can hear from his stifled breaths that he’s crying.



It is dusk. I am standing in the middle of a field of long-stemmed grass. The skies are cloudy, metallic. I can feel the breeze on my face. It is cooler than the summers I am used to. I walk between the stalks. I look down at my feet. They are unshod. There is no pain. No roughness. I feel the blades move against my thighs and hips. The top of each blade moves between the outstretched fingers of my hands; they move like an opening gate as they reach the palms. I stop and look at the horizon. There are no roads around this field. No borders. Just open green in every direction.

As the evening grows darker, I see a glow in the distance, and I walk towards it. As I get closer, I see that to my right, a ringed sun the size of a saucer has been impaled on a stalk of grass. I smell the heat of the burning blade and reach out to touch the sun. I am only able to move my fingers through its rings when it cuts my hand in two at the thumb. Out of the stump flows not blood, but a molten metal—mercury with a skin

of gold leaf. The more the metal flows, the more the light from small sun fades. Finally, the husk of the sun crumbles from its blade and falls into the pool at my feet. Night has arrived and all falls to black.



It's eight o'clock in the morning and the alarm doesn't go off.

I have slept all night.

## BOOK TWO

## 1

THE DEEP FALL HAD MOVED across the forest and the old man shuffled from his work at the forge to his empty house in the dale just a few miles away. He travelled along a dry creek bed amongst tall willows and gnarled cypresses, both of which had stretched their roots into the bed looking for water that had long dried away. The man looked at the moon. Night was just beginning. He sighed, leaned over his feet, and bound his shoes again as they had become loosened by shifting across the smooth river stones. The air was chilled with every breath more visible than the one before it. He looked through the cypresses and saw the lights of the village fluttering through the branches bending in the wind. His aged squint twinkled with their reflection. He could not wait. It would be cold soon and he had to get home before he might lose his way through the forest. He knew also that his house would be cold too, and that even after he got

home, a fire would still be more than an hour away. “Too cold—and too dark—too soon.” he thought as he walked.

His house was at the base of a crevice that had split into the side of a towering granite mountain—one of a range that bounded the wooded valley containing the river bed, the village, and the forge. It stood as if it were a crag of rock that had weathered down to a nub when the mountain halved. The old man emerged from the glade and smiled when he saw his home lit by the cold light falling from the moon overhead.

He loved his home, loved the fact that no one ever came there. The mountains on one side and the valley glade on the other was just too forbidding for any visitor to travel on a whim for a visit. No, if someone found his doorway, the business was important, or dire, or both. The air of the mountains moved only for the old man and, of course, the Earth.

The only door skidded along a groove worn in the floor as the man entered the house, threw his pack to a chair, and began to start the fire. The amber glow the small flame cast across the room brought a glance (almost) of love to the place, and the stubborn chill fought it as long as it could, then retreated. The old man walked to his pack and drew out some bread and potatoes he had acquired at the village through a trade of some tool work. His forge, the great Machine that had brought him here from across the mountains, would take his life in an instant, vaporize him where he stood if he got too close. He loved it with his whole being. He created it, nourished it with wood and coal, allowed it to create, heal, and destroy as much as it could possibly desire. It allowed him to live by trading its creations for the



stuff of survival: food when he needed it, wood for the furnace (and home fire), and the primeval metal that was shaped in the maw of the Machine. He loved the Machine, and even though it would vaporize him if it could, the old man felt that the Machine loved him, too. They both lived for each other, and one's death would be inextricably corded to the other.

After dinner, the old man drew out several folded sheets of parchment. Each sheet—about the size of a grown man's back—contained diagrams of tall, monumental buildings of stone, with large streets cutting between the buildings like water drawing fissures into land. The buildings, too tall for any living man to have actually seen, had uncountable ports, windows upon windows upon windows. The sheer mass of the structures dwarfed any hope of seeing people interacting with, or around, them. They were monuments, unpeopled by their own existence.

The old man brought a square of wood up to his face. It had a miniscule aperture in its center, and he narrowed one eye to peer through it. The flames behind him, now having grown to sufficient strength for heat and light, illuminated the drawing. What was (to the distant eye) lines were tiny trains of manuscript—handwriting so small and so drawn together that it gave the illusion of lineage. The old man took a small pin of iron in a pair of tongs and thrust it into the fire. When the spire of the pin grew white hot, he withdrew it and placed the blunt end into the blackened hollow of a small finger-length tongue of wood. As the pin seared the end of the tongue, the man moved its glowing tip across the page, pulling the minute script into existence. Each letter of each word issued a fragile wisp of smoke before the

writer's breath erased it from the air. When the pin grew cold, its tip began to drag and scrape against the hide and the process had to begin all over again.

He repeated this ritual a hundred of times a night, placing the pin in the fire, threading the pin into the tongue, then writing perhaps twenty words in the fine script before starting all over again. The man loved this task with its purpose so much that the sheer repetitiveness of the work was turned into ritual. The shape-sharpening view through the pinhole was his oracle, the glowing pin the bringer of knowledge and wisdom to the vast unknown. Even the letter wisps were both spirits and incense, released to bless him from the dark emptiness where they had existed incorporeal and dumb.

His words were in his own language, but not in his own tongue. They spoke of likenesses, or "symmetries;" they expressed thoughts that the old man scarcely knew he could even form, but, as strange as those thoughts were, the words, he felt, were his own. He was not possessed by a demon, nor was he a heretic; he was never *absent*, but it was a work of life he would reveal to no one else. The people in the village were kind and understanding, having themselves come there for its isolate nature, but to show them the night work in the house at the boundary of the glade might be too much for even them. The old man and his Machine chose the valley for its quiet reverence and showing his vocation to others might tempt old religions to find their way here, ending his work and rendering his failure, no matter how obstinate the previous work, the only testament to his existence.

Hours passed and the old man's back strained from leaning over the parchment. His hands, though toughened by tangling with the forge, could hold the stylus for only so long and his eyes began to close on their own account. Lest he damage the work, the man stood up from his chair, placed each instrument back into its place and crawled onto a pallet beside the dying fire. As the fire slowly worked its way back into the ashen husk, the wind blew through the cracks in the walls and cooled the words into the parchment, rendering them oil-black and cold as sin.



The old man drew a breath as he walked along massive avenues of black granite. Each avenue, dark beyond dark, was quiet and cool to his unbound feet. He stopped and looked for the sun. There was light there, but it did not come from a point in the sky but emanated from the blue—bright as a lake drenched in morning light.

As he moved along the street, the light moved across its surface in waves, as if the old man were walking across water, each step causing a ripple upon the stone surface. He leaned over to examine the ripples and saw that each wave was not a fluid, nor was it, as he suspected, an ocean of words having left their pages to support him, but the essence of smoke made firm. The stone path seemed to be solid, then melting, then solidifying just in time for the soles of his feet to meet it.

The old man drew his finger across the path in the shape of a word he had written over and over again in his evening reveries. The black path opened as a maw waiting for carrion and golden

teeth, long and daggered, glowing almost too white, snapped off the man's finger at the hand. The man raised his hand to the sun-blue sky and saw that his finger had returned as a tongue of wood, a cavity at the end scorched black by flame.



The old man awakened to the sound of footsteps through the long grass outside his door: a visitor was waiting.

## BOOK ONE

## 2

I WALK DOWN THE STAIRS, passing each lozenge in the wall, but meeting no actual person until I get down to the metro. My head isn't much clearer today, and it needs to be. I used to think that Monument Place was not for the lively of heart (or intellect), but now I feel something waits for me there. I'm not sure how much I like that particular feeling.

I walk the steps from the metro into the open street. Monument Place is always slow, always feels like it's waiting for something that never comes, but today, it feels like it's holding its breath against the tidal wave. Of course, I may be the one who's holding his breath. I don't enjoy feeling like a silent train is waiting to run me down the moment I turn away.

*Go, Paul. You aren't moving.*

I look down at my hand. It's gripping the stairway rail. I peel my fingers off the rail, their sweat sticking them to the metal, and start walking down the street towards the statue in the plaza.

The few people on the street don't regard me and that's fine. If they don't notice me, then I don't have to pretend that I'm fine, I don't have to pretend that I don't somehow suspect that the street wants to mangle me in all sorts of new and untried ways.

*No, it doesn't want to mangle you, Paul,*

*It wants to swallow you whole.*

Even though it's morning, the street maintains its somewhat age-neutral malaise, but with each house that I pass, I feel more and more like everything is breathing around me, inhaling each step's worth of shed skin I create just walking down to the store, inhaling me as much as I try not to inhale it. It's the underlying menace of the place, the crude imitations of people going about their day, the puppet show facade that is presented as an abandoned grocery store here, an unoccupied tenement there. Not to mention the statue at the end of the street, facing the east, waiting the nuclear furnace filtered by smog to rise and burnish him just a little bit more, creepify him just a little bit more.

*God, I'm not even to the square yet, and that bronzed bastard is already messing with my head.*

I decide not to visit him today, or, hopefully, not to see him ever. Period.

One thing about Monument is that it's not even important enough to have any graffiti. No artistic notions, no gang tags. If anything, it's probably the least disturbed neighborhood in the city. Aside from the store yesterday, it seems like fate ignores the goings-on here, and I'm not surprised to see the cardboard still covering the window frame when I get back to the store.

I push through the cardboard on the door and work my way through the store to the back where the poison stood yesterday. My mind is considerably calmer today, though I can't find anything different in the room. The bottle is still there, its label having finally lost its cling and resting on the floor. The room is still, quiet, even mustier than yesterday, or seemingly so. I take an old inventory slip and scoop the rat pellets into the bottle and return the cap to the top.

*Where's my stuff? I left my bag around here somewhere...*

I think, in any other circumstance, I would have let the bag be. I could have just quit my job and walked out on any other day. The bag was (is) inconsequential.

*Why are you here, Paul? Why did you drag your ass back? There is absolutely no good reason to return to this place. Go home, fool. Go. Home.*

I turn to leave the back room and walk down the lone hall to the front of the store. My bag rests next to the rummaged stack of merchandise boxes from which I had retrieved the covers for the windows.

*—it's my bag, just take it.*

I pick up the bag and raise my hand to push the cardboard open again and leave—

At this point, I would like to say that I swore off seeing the statue, but you have to look at it if you want to turn your head at all. To actually get out of the door you have to turn your head in that direction. And I notice...*something* about the statue, or, more precisely, I notice something odd about everything in the square besides the statue. It's the color. It's noon and the termi-

nal of the street should be creaking in the heat, I should smell the asphalt must baking in the glare, but there's nothing. Is there less to the place than before?

*Please, dear God, don't let me be having one of those headaches again. Almost anything but that.*

Why do I feel like the place is less substantial? I snarled before about the Monument Place being a puppet's facade, but this—this truly feels like it. Why do I feel like I'm the only one to have ever been to this place before?

I walk to the edge of the square and I face the statue with his arms and hands grasping for something “thataway.” My hand starts to move up and out, mimicking the statue. I look to the east and wait.

*The sun rises in the east. Jesus is supposed to return from the east. Every denizen of every cemetery will know before we do because we've faced them that way in death like Campbell's Soup cans, so Jesus can walk along and pick out the ones he wants to eat tonight—calm down, Paul—blasphemy will get you nowhere, besides, I don't think Jesus has ears.*

I look across the eastern horizon created by the rooftops to the sidewalk that perimeters the square.

*What the hell—let's walk. I've got nothing else waiting for me but another splitting headache and possible catatonia.*

I walk along the pavement, looking in the windows, trying to peer into their dark recesses. Nothing. Shelves, dusty and ignored. In fact, if it wasn't for the utter lack of people in the stores, they would be a stylistic match for my place employment. (Mental note: am I still employed? Or am I merely “former?”)



As I make the circuit, I feel oddly out of place.

*I am not a detective. I have no desire to be the gumshoe who gets gut-shot at the end of the book. Take your bag and your pale, scared, little self and go home. They have people who get paid to write reports about this weirdness.*

I turn to leave. My foot actually moves about one inch above the ground. I see it.

*My God, that statue—it's black!*

I creep to the edge of the statue's plaza.

*It wasn't black before. I just saw its yellow skin not a second ago. I need to go home. Leave now, Paul, before you can't.*

I back off the plaza, the statue retaining its black film, but, instead of old, dry, rusting, I swear I see the film flex into liquid and drip off the hands, as if the sun's light were melting the arms like two staves of wax.

I turn and run back towards the metro entrance, never noticing that I dropped my bag at the edge of the plaza.

*Go home, Paul. Go home and don't tell Dad what you saw here. You don't need to be here anymore. Find work at a fucking McDonald's or be a waiter somewhere. Don't go back, and don't tell Dad.*



I don't stop moving until I am on the next metro train in the station. I don't care where it goes, just as long as it goes. I catch my breath on the train and make it back to the building where I climb the steps, pass the lozenges (*so nice to SEE you, my dear lozengy friends!*), and walk to the door. I pause to deflap my being

and place the key in the lock. The door opens, and I feel a blast of chilled air falling out of the apartment.

“Dad! Are you hot? What's going on with the A/C?”

The TV is blaring commercials and I can't hear anything else coming from the other room.

“Dad? Are you here?”

I open his room. On the bed, naked, holding a shotgun to his mouth is my father. Sitting in the middle of the bed, the butt of the shotgun resting on his outstretched feet, both hands on the gun, both thumbs on the trigger. He is crying. He is looking past me through the door to the empty room. I walk to him slowly, pleading with him “Dad, what are you doing? It's OK. Whatever it is, we can fix it. It's OK. Put the gun down, Dad. I love you, Dad. Put the gun down.”

Dad looks at me, startled, awakened from that dream he was staring at down the length of the barrel. He pulls the shotgun out of his mouth and rests the barrel on the crest of his sternum.

I reach to take the gun from his hands.

“It's OK Dad. I'm here. It's OK”

He takes his left hand from the gun, takes my hand, and moves it to his pallid brow. As my hand caresses his forehead, my father pulls the trigger. His body falls to the side and his head falls unburdened to the bed.

## BOOK TWO

## 2

THE OLD MAN NOTICED the curious stillness outside his house. It was as if the birds and the wind had left for fear; maybe something greater than them had managed to fight its way through the mountains, through the forest, to this doorstep. The air itself seemed absent.

The old man took his staff and picked up a stone from the hearth. He shouldered his rucksack, swallowed hard, and yelped a hoarse cry. He burst through the door into the sunshine with stick and stone raised above his head, ready to knock the bringer of vacuums in the head. The sight of a young woman froze him in mid-strike.

After he collected his wits, he found his voice. “Why have you come here?” the old man whispered, “I told you not to follow me.”

The woman looked the man in the eyes and smiled, as if to say, “I heard you, but I could not keep away.”

In her silence, the man repeated, softer, "I told you not to follow me. Why did you come here? I told you not to follow me so you would be safe. I would I had not met you, rather than you follow me here. There is no escape for me, now. You should leave now. *Please.*"

The woman moved her fingers through the man's hair at his temple, smiled and then moved past him into the house, dismissing the panicked old man who moved from gaping at her to scanning the landscape for the fear that something might have followed her.

The woman moved around the solitary room of the house and regarded each item in its place, perhaps making a mental inventory of the life the man had made for himself, by himself.

After reflecting on the scene, she spoke: "I'm not leaving. And wherever you go, I will follow you there. Your life is mine, and mine yours. That machine of yours is not me. It will not die in your stead when the time comes."

"If it comes. No, that time will not come. You do not need to worry about me anymore. What do I have to say to you to convince you to leave here, to go home? I'm not anyone to you. I'm not your father. Go back to him. I'm not your love. Go back to her. I know they love you and want you home again. Why have you chosen now to become their grief?"

"You are more important."

"I am not. I just want to be left to myself and by myself. I'm not important and you being here just makes the other think I'm more important than I truly am. Why will you not go home?"

“You left, and I followed, because, I think I realize what it is you really are. What you have chosen to do—no—I know what chose *you*. You left because you thought this place at the base of the mountain would allow you to find the peace that you sought to complete the world. I know that you work on the world. It lives and those that live in it cry out to you in their half-sleeping, half-drunken stupors to save them. They know, even if they do not realize it, that their creation was their death. You have birthed them and martyred them through the breath of your love.”

“You are wrong,” he replied, “I don't love the city. I did not ask to be its creator. But God sought me to create it for him. I think God has grown tired of lighting life and seeing it sour. I don't cherish it—I hate it. But, I cannot but let it grow through me. God has them in reserve for it. I do not have six days. I do not know how many days I do have, but I know that I have no seventh. No rest. God did not give me even that. He gave me the Machine so that I can live and create for him. But that is all he gave to me.”

“He sent me to you to let you rest. I know you want to rest. Where is the parchment? I will write what you tell me to write.”

The woman took the pack from the old man's shoulder and started to sift through its contents. The old man moved to try to take it away. His attempt, as serious as it was, was gentle, as to not destroy the sheaves. “Please—let them alone. I cannot tell you what to write. Even if you are one sent by God, you cannot do what I have done. Even if you were to copy every word, sketch every blot, the scheme is not in the words, not in the pic-

tures they form, but in the breath of life that flows through me in the page. I am the candle wick burned long and bright to kindle those that wait. You were never like this. If God did send you, you cannot know the pain of creation. If you do know the agony, then God did not send you. I cannot force you to leave. You know I cannot force you. But leave anyway—I plead with you for this. If you value what I do, if you understand what I do here, you will leave straightway.”

The woman's countenance darkened, and she stood closer to the man and took his hand in both of hers. “I know creation. The formless hand that created you created me. I came from a mother like you did. I have a father, you once called him your friend and he still calls you his. Perhaps I cannot handle your burden for you, but I can be here—when the time comes—to ease your burden. Do not send me away. I will not go. You can cause me to leave, and I will return. You can run away, and I will follow. I do not ask for you to pay me for my respite. You do not believe in who I am, but I know that in your disbelief you care for me, the one you saved from the mob, and I am repaid double. I will not leave.”

The old man blinked at the announcement, sighed, and scratched at his beard. He turned from the woman and walked to the door, opened it, and watched the edge of the glade. The sun had moved through the day, and it was evening, as if by the command of God saying, “My son, my child, I have set the sun through its course and it waits for you to rest.” The old man waited at the doorway, afraid to close the door because the woman would stay, but afraid that if the door did not close, she would

leave him to his work, his holy loneliness, forever. He felt his sacrifice to be soon. He believed it, even though he would not admit it to the young woman. He would not allow her to lay down her life for his. He would die, and the parchment would move on. But she was here now and waiting for him to return inside. She was not going to leave. He turned around to face the room and saw her waiting, standing in the middle and facing him.

“Please, my friend, please come inside. It is dark outside, and no one waits for us out there tonight. I think God will let you sleep tonight.” The old man looked back briefly at the amber sky bordering the now darkened glade and shut the door.



The next day, the old man traveled the creek bed to the forge. He wondered if anyone actually realized that he had missed a day. He always tried to keep his work finished so that he could focus on the parchments, so it was no surprise to find the forge quiet and unattended. He opened the door to the barn housing the Machine and surveyed the interior. No one had been there since he left two days ago. He set about waking up the Machine.

The Machine was a beast: a massive creature that cradled Hell in its belly. The villagers were never allowed into the barn, as not only would the Machine allow tools to be made, but it also melted down the slag and drift of the old and worn-out bits that the old man fed it in order to make his living. The Machine craved the dead and spit out the bile and sputum of life. It hated

the living. It hated the old man because the old man allowed things to live that had suffered the torments of Hell. The Machine believed that God made it to swallow fire and burn the souls of the living and it hated that the man tamed it. The old man was its savior, its tormentor who pretended to be God. And, someday, he would be gone, and the Machine knew that when the old man was gone, it would die as well. Even being awakened from sleep after a day of the cold was like death to it. It prayed to God every night that when it died, it would be consumed in the fires of a greater Machine, for even though it held everlasting torment for the children of earth, it courted Hell as an everlasting home. It would never permit itself to live outside, to be made to suffer in the cold like those other, weaker forms. No, it waited to hide in the recesses of the Pit, lining the floor of a greater furnace and be cradled while all others wept.

The old man started loading wood from the bin at the side of the barn into the furnace. As he took up each piece of wood, he would glance at the Machine. It stood there, hungry, waiting for him to feed it. The man moved with a deliberate, measured pace, opening the door, and laying each log in the furnace. As he returned with more wood, he placed them in a pattern in the bottom. It was not a pyre meant to generate heat with efficiency. Like all things with the old man, it had a different purpose: not to generate fire for molten metal, but to ignite the life in the Machine yet again. Each day, the old man would go through the ritual. Picking just the right size of log, just a certain grain—only the perfect kind.



He knew the Machine was born in Hell. God had created it, placed in the center of that pit, and let it chew through the spirits that were sent there, the souls that had been downcast and not able to get back up. He knew that Hell missed it, as it was the Machine's source, its sun. The old man knew that if, in a moment of carelessness, he chose the wrong pattern, or the wrong tree, he could bring to life something worse than the Generator of Hell. Something that would see Hell as a Heaven and the living world as feast. The man also knew that the Machine hated him but hated those others more and would help him create the tools the old man needed to survive. The old man had saved the Machine and nourished it and the Machine tolerated the old man.

When the fire was built and the heat from the furnace made the air to glisten above it, the old man fed waste metal and broken bits into the crucible. As he pushed the pot into the furnace, he could smell the wood, hear it cracking, echoing inside the chamber and it entranced him, hypnotized him. As he listened to the fire, he smelled something else—a dark smell of stone made hot, the steam of the world being purged from the metal. Here, in the stomach of Hell, he was purifying the sullied gift of earth, man's cast-off, ignored gift. The Machine abhorred this glorifying, and it made the old man smile.

When the Machine had been started and the metal set to melting, the old man went outside and breathed the air. The sun had a smell of its own, like the clean heat of woods in summer morning, separate from the ashen stink of the Machine, and the man paused to warm in the sun's light. The taller trees filtered

light into discrete rays, falling in patches across the ground and upon his face. The old man stroked his newly warmed beard and headed to the well to retrieve water.

As he moved into the forest, the old man heard a rustling of the grass behind him and, thinking that the woman had followed him, said, "I know you're here. I told you I was fine. I need to work, or others might wonder where I am."

...Silence...

"Why don't you say something?" He turned around to face the path and person. Behind him stood a wounded stag, bleeding from the chest and nose, barely able to keep to its feet. The old man, startled, stepped back, but regained his courage and approached the animal. The stag fell to the ground and the old man came close to the its muzzle. "Where did you come from, hmm? Who did this to you?" He sighed, "I am sorry."

The old man stood up to look for a sharp point with which to end the stag's suffering. As he raised his head, he caught a glimpse. A glimpse of a dark shade that chilled his blood as cold as the night.