

*It's no secret that the stars are falling from the sky
It's no secret that our world is in darkness tonight*
—“The Fly”/Bono

Cunningham didn't realize he'd dozed off until the door banged open. The hands sealed his mouth, yanking his head against the back of the recliner. Looking up, he saw the face, his own eyes freezing in recognition. “Yes, it's me,” the face said. “You probably didn't think you merited the attention of Malachi himself, but I personally execute the law with even the least.”

Other sets of arms grabbed his feet and tied them together with barbed wire. They hovered around him, behind him, their moth shadows fluttering on the ceiling. The face stared into his eyes, upside down, inches away. Cunningham could smell Scope and Royal Copenhagen.

“Do you believe in mercy, Brother Cunningham?”

Tears rolled down Cunningham's cheeks, onto the hands clamped over his mouth.

“The Prophet Isaiah saith, 'He that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil ... shall see the king in his beauty.' You've taken bribes and glutted your ears with blood, your eyes with evil, haven't you?”

Cunningham whimpered and tried to nod his head.

“So you know, then, that you will receive no mercy.”

Cunningham felt the warmth of his own urine trickle down his leg.

“Mercy is reserved for he who wields the power to dispense it.

I'm taking you to one who keeps his vows. You can be sure when I promise no mercy, he means it."

Cunningham screamed through the hands that shut tightly over his nose, his temples bulging with his own shrieks. Robed figures swirled, shrouding him in purple midnight.

He awoke to a horror that withered his sanity. As he screamed, the thing snaked its tongue down his throat, ripping out his viscera. As his guts dangled in its yawning mouth, he saw the hatred in the thing's eyes. It hated *him*. He reared in its grasp to shroud that hatred with the vomit of his own blood, but his chest collapsed when he realized the monster face he was plunging into was his own. He fell into that maw, never to touch bottom.

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*The rhythm is below me
The rhythm of the heat
The rhythm is around me
The rhythm has control
The rhythm is inside me
The rhythm has my soul*

—“The Rhythm of the Heat”/Peter Gabriel

Maria's dream is always the same. The smell of bluebonnets and the purple dusk that creeps over the farm fields tinge her heart like blood staining a white rose.

The exhaust of the silver van shreds the bluebonnet scent. Covering her eyes from the orange bursts of the falling sun in the van's mirrors, she crouches in the trees beside an abandoned church. The State of Texas, in the form of a defaced road sign, tells her she hides beside Farm-to-Market Road 2459. The van grinds to a halt in the church's gravel lot. As its dust settles, her vision telescopes to reveal the face of the driver whose grin is putty worked by numb fingers, his sunglasses gripping his silver temples in spider mandibles.

A stench of attar trickles from the woods behind her. From the ground beneath her legs, a rhythmic humming vibrates her skin, pries her skull, trying to peel bare her mind.

The arriving patrol car makes her want to scream in warning, but something more implacable than fear tells her not to reveal her presence. She knows what happen nexts. As the policeman strides to the van, her vision again telescopes, revealing his badge and name tag. The dream-maker always insists she know the sacrifice's name—“Cunningham.” This nightmare isn't just the bloody things about to happen but that the blood will come from a real person with a name and a mother, friends, hangouts, a

laugh.

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Cunningham takes a roll of bills from the driver and mouths only part of a word before the cheeks of the silver-haired demon face puff and spit a dart. Gargoyles scuttle from the van and clasp the unconscious policeman by the ankles. With the slam of the van door, she is transported miles from her first hiding place. Now, in a full-moon night, she huddles in live-oaks at the edge of a clearing, her lungs laboring in a cloying smoke. She always wonders if the world's last storm is on its way, the air itself reviling what is to happen.

Marching towards the clearing come children in black tunics, led by naked adults and the driver of the van, who no longer wears glasses or any pretension of humanity. He is draped in a red-ochre robe, horns spiraling from his head, eyes glowing molten bullets.

Two men carry a bier. On it is the policeman, unconscious, his face and chest scored with blood runes. The humming presses her ears and throat till tears run down her cheeks.

The parade moves past her towards a bonfire, footstep vibrations hurled from the soil as if the earth is ashamed of its inheritors. She chokes back nausea, some drug in the air confusing her senses, palpating her heart till it pounds behind her eyes. The humming bulges her skull like her head would birth a monster. The horrible idea grows inside her that *she* is the cause of this. *She* is mother to the events this night and everything that leads up to them. She will give birth to an abomination that will swallow the heart of Creation and defecate withered, demented children.

"No! Never!" she wants to cry. But the humming overpowers her refusal until the madness flowers into a piercing wail that runs through her in frozen quicksilver, the sound catapulting her from her hiding place, into the sky. On the altar below is the policeman, the horned man raising a stone knife to the heavens. The knife falls, ripping the sacrifice from throat to groin. Hovering, she sees the horned man's temples flash the silver moonlight, and he traps her in his gaze.

He knows her.

Maria awakes chilled with the sweat, trembling not just for the policeman or the children, but for the scream that echoes inside her—the only sound she's ever heard.

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