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The Man Aflame

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Abstract

The Man Aflame

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All three stories within this collection revolve around a youth named Shaun with the capacity to read other's thoughts and take memories. These stories play upon ideas common to science fiction and comic books to examine how people understand themselves and relate to each other. Central to these examinations is the question of how human relationships can become or begin as destructive, a question embodied by Shaun's experience.

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The Man Aflame

His hands hold fire; he is all dark hair, dark eyes and a single focus. The classroom sits in something like silence, watching or ignoring a quiet man pouring over the little pieces of the world on a whiteboard. Small things, notes and texts pass easily between the students but others are too large. Thomas stares at Maggy's smile, at the way her hair shines and her friends circle around her like planets. Her body is the compact body of a runner, limbs stretching over themselves in a tangle of springs that makes the world blur. This is the first time the awareness of another breathing person has struck him so flatly. It is also the first time since he was five he has felt so scared. He tries to unclench his fists and let out the picture of skin stained black by blood underneath. Thomas stares at Maggy and tries to forget the way he has seen his mother.

After all, it doesn't happen anymore. Not in the longest time—she had told him, breathless with the memory. His father is sober three years, and his mother talks about those memories like they were a story mother and child had read together. But the thought burrows deeper, speaking darkly of the harm that another person can be, or simply is to another. The familiar streams in, which takes away a feeling that seemed new. Thoughts of power and control, of doing everything he can to tear apart a world already falling down come into his head. He feels the air cool around him. His inner spaces tense and the flame begins to flow. He looks now and in his mind's eye a fire is growing from the doorway, turning the room into a bottle of smoke and chaos.

The teacher is closest to the door, and as the flames rear up to touch him something in Thomas stirs. Suddenly at the windows there are flames and smoke. Behind the rising black curtain fire climbs the walls and bathes the room in a blazing heat. The world darkens for some, others scream as the ceiling starts to give, flaming panels falling down around and on top of the

students underneath. In the middle of the chaos Maggy stands, too near the fire to be safe for long. He imagines her, eyes blind with fear, and shifts uncomfortably in his seat. Nothing in him believes she deserves to feel like that, but in his mind's eye he lets the full flame of the fire loose onto her. With self disgust he realizes that the better part of him is unconcerned with whatever she would be feeling. Her death would fit into what he had imagined perfectly. The stir he feels only heightens at the thought—and this terrifies him: that he might want to hurt her.

The fantasy doesn't linger. On leaving the blackened cinders of the school all the excitement fades. The only urgent noise is the soft, quick padding of a marker. He avoids looking at Maggy.

“What is wrong with me?” He mutters to himself, thinking almost loud enough to be heard.

Thomas begins to fashion himself into a myth. Valid excuses for not asking a girl out seem to be fate which separates the innocent woman from the man aflame. It is destiny that her home is too far, her friends are always around, or that he's barely talked to her. He finds himself grateful for this, or at least wishes to think he is. Dwelling on the notion he imagines how she is kept from him, and how every second she spends away from him is one of safety. In those strange moments the impulse to connect transforms completely into the need to recoil. For Thomas this restores the balance somewhere inside that Maggy had been tipping one way or another. Knowing he can only keep Maggy safe by avoiding her is some sort of comfort.

His hands hold fire but he is invisible. When Maggy moves, leaving the room and its thick smell of formaldehyde, the world follows. Thomas sits for a moment, as if shocked at her leaving, and then goes his own way. He will not see her again today, so at least she is safe. The moments pass in fog and silence as he begins the wait for the day to end. But in that fog hope is

an easier thing. The two come together in another time and place, brought back as a perfect record of a brief moment by a desperate mind. It begins with a basketball soaring past Thomas's head. As he holds the ball Maggy smiles. It is the smile she gives everyone but that is exactly why it catches in his head, and he hears almost audibly, "You are family, you are loved." The smile is something like a cool breeze, a warm dawn or the face of God; one of those rare things in the world which show kindness.

"Thomas Veith, right?" Maggy guesses his name but guesses correctly. On some animal level she knows him.

"Yeah. You're Maggy Moore. The one who beat the mile record. You sit in front of me in chemistry." He holds out the ball but she lingers.

"What do you do, Thomas? You look smart."

"Not really." His heart pounds at hearing his name in her mouth. She waits for more and behind Thomas's skull an impressive number of chemicals and neurons work frantically to achieve nothing. Maggy makes eye contact, her lips forming the shadow of a smile as she takes the ball and walks away.

The moment replays itself a few times until his mind can't bear to linger, and begins to invent. He manages an answer, tells her a thousand things about what he does. She invites him to a party and they find themselves alone. They kiss and press against each other until what is inside of them waiting begins to unfold itself. He holds out his hand and with perfect control summons a small flame out of the air. In the light of his fire she stares into his eyes and holds his hand to her breast. He can feel the torrent of her blood, and the smallest curves of her skin that his mind has already imagined in every detail. The thought holds him through half the day, unbroken by the bells, taunts, and questions that enter his ears.

What breaks the thought is a question, not even meant for him. At a white table in an ancient kitchen he sits with his parents, grasping for the last threads of the image he had been clutching. However much he tries not to listen their voices always come through, and tonight is the same as any other.

“How was work, honey?” Thomas’s mother asks his father. She is brown hair, and blue eyes, beaming from a day spent in a place different from her home.

“Well, they had Julio working the press, and it was hot as hell. So all day I’m sweating like a dog and pickin’ up that beaner’s slack—”

“Honey—” she scolds half-heartedly. Thomas sighs as the two talk, picking at his food while his parents take to their plates. It’s rare that they’re home, and rarer that everyone’s in the same room. Dinners like this are the one time during the week he is forced to be with them, and every word spoken weighs on his soul. There’s a picture in his mind now of a quiet little suburbia, and a despicably normal family that lives in the third gray house down the street. From one of the windows a boy stares out, and for a moment his eyes are full of understanding and pity. That is, until a rock comes through his window.

“I don’t mean anything by it. I don’t even say anything, I’m better than most of the guys. They keep telling him he should learn some English. And he says, he says, ‘Well fahk yeu,’ just like that.” He laughs while he eats, and she laughs a little, too, while Thomas winces. Day by day they both seem more disgusting.

“Well, my day wasn’t bad. Mr. Lancaster keeps asking me to send him the same thing five or six times because he can’t open any attachments. He just doesn’t understand anything about computers. I showed him how to open up a pdf with Adobe and he got very angry because it wasn’t already on the computer.” She laughs and he doesn’t.

“Laura, he’s your boss. You shouldn’t laugh at him,” Thomas’s father replies. At a look from him her smile changes and becomes hesitant, somehow apologetic. Anything, the smallest thing, can be a reminder that this is his father’s house. Even when he was in prison this had still been his. She had still been his. The first time his mother had gone to visit his father she could barely walk. When she came back crying, talking about the beautiful things he’d said to her, Thomas had only stared at the bruises and felt his stomach churn. He’d tried to avoid going to the prison, and until he had to, he wouldn’t answer the messages his mother passed along.

“I, I mean you’re right. But it just seemed funny at the time.” She speaks nervously, cowed. Thomas’s father is all wild hair, a graying beard, and a stomach growing with satisfaction. He holds his house in order by keeping it in shambles, taking care to make himself the strongest piece. Next to him his son is almost nothing, and so the small fists clenched under the table are the same. Nothing. Thomas dreams of changing this. Every time his mother looks out with that stupid, childish fear he reminds himself. His hands hold fire and he will burn this house to the ground. When he sees her pacify his father the accusation burns in his mind, dances on his lips, but he isn’t ready yet to speak the truth. You, he will say to his father, never wanted a wife but a dog, and you, mother, never fought for a second to be anything more. But today he says nothing, and the story playing out remains a tragic coupling. Neither parent cares enough to notice the rage in his eyes, or the untouched plate sitting in front of him. When he leaves his mother calls out goodnight without looking back, and he doesn’t reply.

The air shimmers above her blue painted nails as she fumbles with the lighter. All around them in the classroom other students measure and boil, moving in an organized chaos of tiny groups. Thomas hesitates, then takes the green plastic from Maggy and tries to keep his

hands from shaking when he lights the flame. In a smooth motion the shimmering air jumps into life, and he smiles.

“How do you do that?” Maggy asks.

“Don’t you ever use a lighter?” She shakes her head, and he does the same in reply.

They’re in the space between her satellites, watched but not attended. Thomas had been inconceivably lucky, paired with her for a day. Inside of a room full of noise, plans, and boiling chemicals the two work to break things down into their smallest parts. As they do, Thomas struggles to say something, anything. He can’t lose another chance.

“I feel like this experiment isn’t going to work.” The words finally come out of him in a small trickle.

“Why?” she asks.

“I mean, everything is supposed to be so exact, he said a finger print could ruin the weight. There’s no way we’re doing this right.” The two stare at their beaker of water slowly coming to boil above the Bunsen burner.

“Maybe he doesn’t expect us to. When someone starts out running our coach always sends them out longer than there’s any way they could go, without really, really training. He wants to know how far they can push.” Maggy has a lovely voice, sure but soft. Thomas nods, thinking for a moment about how fragile her hands look. If she had struck the lighter at the wrong angle her skin would have blistered and flared into an angry red in the time it takes to blink.

Thomas looks up and their eyes meet. He drops the thought like a thief.

“So are practices always that intense?” When Thomas asks her he focuses hard on her eyes.

“No, they’re really not. Our course always goes through the woods so... most people just kind of mess around.”

“What do you do?”

She laughs when he asks, thinking for a moment. “I don’t know, really. Like, there are tennis balls from the school and people camp out there and leave things. And there’s so many people who are on the team, so you can play any game you want. Sometimes we hunt people down and pelt them with tennis balls, which sounds way more immature than it is. Or maybe sounds just like it is.” Thomas hates himself for it, but he can’t stop staring at her legs, at her lips when she talks. He imagines sparing her as he destroys the school, using the flames to drive her somewhere they can be alone. As he thinks about it he becomes more and more grateful he’s sitting down.

“Fun?” he asks.

“Yeah, actually,” she answers. The two make eye contact again, and both realize at the same time they’ve held it for longer than they intended.

“What about races?”

“They can be a little more intense. I mean, our coach is always really serious, really intense about it. But the night before, being in a hotel room with all of your friends at districts is awesome. You never get enough sleep that night.”

“So is that why you do it? Friends?” After he asks Maggy stares at him, telling him in a look that she knows what he’s really interested in. After enjoying his growing discomfort she answers the question.

“That’s part of it. But really—if you’ve ever been in a race—that last stretch is why I really do it. There is nothing better than leaving someone behind when you know they’re giving it everything they have.”

Thomas doesn’t reply, but to him it all seems so small. The worlds he has taken apart and the lives he’s imagined tower over it. Being faster than someone else and playing in the woods aren’t things he can take seriously. He needs to be someone, and no one is remembered for running in circles, no one changes anything that way. When he thinks about yesterday, even his thoughts of burning the room into nothing are somehow more serious. Controlling someone’s life, even if that means taking it, means something. It’s the purest form of power, and he can claim it at any moment. At his smallest tricks the class would run screaming. In another time or another place he would have been worshipped without question.

When the class ends they leave without really parting, everything having to be put back in its place beneath the gaze of the silent teacher. Maggy’s friends return and she disappears without a word into the mass of people moving about the school. Thomas follows her into the churning chaos, a small ripple in her wake. Soon she disappears, welcomed to class by a tall man Thomas thinks must be her coach. It seems like everyone understands there is something different about her, something beautiful.

But the moment another person touches Maggy his thoughts turn. He can imagine in vivid detail taking her as his queen or his lover, but nothing in his mind will allow that the two of them could walk down the hall together on an ordinary day. He knows he is nothing, that whatever she has it’s more than he does. He knows her family. They’re the type to vacation somewhere in Europe, to buy their daughter a car the moment she gets a license, to get angry only so that happiness doesn’t seem so bland. So Thomas organizes the world and makes it neat,

and tries to save them both from hurt. Maggy is a favored soul, and he is the man aflame. The connection between them is only the harm they will cause each other. He has no right to touch her, no way to show her what he is without violence.

These dark thoughts linger in the classroom but fade in the open air as the world moves around and drops him in another spot. When he comes to himself it is with shaking hands, and cigarettes burning up like aerosol. Thomas is sitting on the tan steps of his front porch, where the paint is peeling into brown. The porch hangs off an empty looking house with a red saltbox roof and a chain link fence. He tries to catch another cigarette and it burns from top to bottom as soon as he reaches out. When the flame has eaten through the paper all that's left is an outline of Maggy's eyes. She stares at him, pleading, terrified. At the look Thomas clutches his own arm, ready to burn himself. Why does he want that? The picture won't go away, nudging his mind into wondering what he could do if he really wanted. If he was evil.

Outside the fence people from the neighborhood and the freeway drift by, hostile in the vague way that people in the city can be. He doesn't notice his father's car until it's pulling in and when he does he sits in place, thankful that the cigarettes are only ashes. Sunlight shoots off the faded brown of the Chrysler door when it opens. He stares at the grille of the car, letting the light cut into his eyes before he closes them. There is still a red light coming past his eyelids, a soft warmth his father interrupts as he passes by. For a second he can hear hands searching, and then the smell of a cigarette washes over Thomas. He feels the weight of another body strain the wood of the porch, then hears the screen door open and shut.

They pass like ghosts by each other. This is how it had become, when Thomas realized almost immediately there was nothing he could do. In his head he imagines conversations, asking his father pointedly:

“When are you going to leave?”

“I don’t to have to go anywhere. This is my house.” His father’s lip would curl at the question. Someone else would have missed it, anyone who didn’t know that could be the only warning sign he would have. The same anger, the same idiot reaction riding just under the surface of the man would still be there. Thomas would be trembling, but then force himself to be still. Then he would answer with a cold rage.

“You don’t have to do anything. But I’d love it if you would find somewhere quiet to die.” He’d say that, and his father wouldn’t be able to meet his eyes. Or he’d raise his hand, and that would be the last thing he’d do.

Thomas can almost see the flames as he walks past where his father sits watching the television. A hungry orange light blackening the old man’s yellow beard and melting the two-liter between his legs. The old man liked to say that prison had changed him. He’d come home looking different, but Thomas wouldn’t forget the man he knew was his father. Prison had made him seem older and quieter, but that wasn’t important. What mattered was that everyone was still afraid. Thomas’s mother did everything to keep him happy, and Thomas kept the words and the fire that built up inside of him in check. But he knew somewhere deep inside of him that nothing could ever be all right while this was his father’s house. Thomas considered every breath the old man took as something stolen from himself and his mother. But he says nothing today, not any day. He has survived by being invisible, and when he walks across the living room he does it quietly.

Thomas shuts himself off first in his room and again in textbooks and papers. Bit by bit the anger that is his inheritance quiets, strangled by a practiced hand. He loses himself for a little

while in the work, but then surfaces, staring at the water stains on the ceiling. They hang like clouds, brown outlines on the faded white sky above him.

Water used to come through when it rained hard, falling down into his bedroom. That night he'd pushed his bed out of the steady drip, and sat reading with his head against the wall. It was the wall that he shared with his parents, and at first the only sound was the rain's drumming fingers. Their room was always quiet, an island of calm in a house that was too familiar with raised voices. And really it was still quiet, nothing had changed. But with his ear pressed against the wall he could hear everything. What he heard wasn't a sharp crack or a deep ringing thud, it wasn't like in the movies. A voice sent him out into the night, his mother's short, pleading whisper.

"Please," she said it softly again and again.

Thomas opened his window and jumped out into the noise and wet. Her voice echoed in his ears as his feet struck the pavement with every bit of crying pain, and he understood his mother had been begging his father for mercy every moment of her life. And this was the moment, the most scared he'd ever been. He was becoming himself, running blindly in the night. Turn followed on turn until the streets were a blur. Somehow he came to the tree, towering up with its leaves shimmering between white and green in the wind. Crouching, shivering under it, he tried to shut out what he had never realized was on the other side of that wall. Thunder roared past, and he jumped. It came closer, and he was crying. The third time it sounded in his ear, impossibly close, and as his chest pounded with fear and cold something happened. A part of him that hadn't been there before lashed out. There was another sound, tremendous and terrible from the heart of the tree, and its parts scattered in flame. He was colder, and still alone, but he

wasn't afraid. That was when he'd been found, a policeman shouting from a flashing car, certain of a lightning strike that had just missed Thomas.

Then, the last moment he could recall after the drive home. The door open and looking past the policeman to his mother, still like death. Lying on the floor.

The stains are still there after all those years. Outside he can hear his mother's voice, raised, trying to draw blood from stone. He thinks again of the happy little home from the other night, and the boy staring out at him. He tries to go there, not throwing stones but living inside that space. Every time he hears his parents he comes back, so soon he stops trying. As his mother's voice reverberates a spider sits dangling above Thomas, spinning slowly as her legs twitch in the air. He pauses for a moment, choking on his own breath, and holds his hand out under the insect. What he is doing is impossible to describe, but what he imagines is feeling for open air and collapsing it together into nothing. When his eyes close first there is the darkness behind them and the still silence of the room. He shuts his parent's voices out, but they are already inside of him, driving this. The insides of him are tensed, focused, straining. After a moment a cool wind starts to flood out from his hand. The sensation doesn't startle Thomas, his body stone through the sudden chill and unflinching when the darkness burns red beyond his eyes.

"Just shut your mouth!" His father's voice echoes through the house, slipping muffled through the bedroom door. Thomas doesn't turn his head. The first spark leaps out, and he grins.

One after another the small shards of light flash and die as they shine through the room. Finally, with a shock of white a fire bursts into life, small as a candle. Outside there is a staccato struggle, a shout and a scream that Thomas knows he should be running towards. The spider

begins to climb, and wordless the flame follows Thomas's eyes. It leaps onto her, leaving a blackened wisp of thread trailing in the air. She flails as the light spreads across her, arms falling apart in the bowl of his hand. The fire grows and crackles, leaving a blackened husk behind. Outside there is silence, and the shadow of a moan. Because he understands he grins. He thinks he knows what the insect must be feeling, and a rush of pleasure comes curling through him at the thought of her pain and panic. Alone he can admit that was what he'd been waiting for, what he'd needed. He can see how the fire hovers above the corpse, begging for everything around it. Aching to tear apart the walls of the house. He listens, waiting for footsteps near his door but there's nothing. Alone with the flickering light Thomas shuts his hand, closing off the flame with a wisp of smoke.

When the next day dawns it has a hint of summer. There is something in the air of blue skies and better days, a palpable impression of hope that an unseasonable wind carries in. Winter is coming, but the world chooses not to notice. The feeling isn't lost on Thomas, but centers on him. Today he can become himself again, reborn as a dark god or a man with some kind of hope, and he would let Maggy decide. She can save him if she wants. Thomas looks for her, and when he crosses paths with Maggy follows her through clutches of students and unfamiliar hallways. He takes the turns blindly, not realizing she is going away from everyone else, away from where it makes sense for her to be.

"I wanted to talk to you," his voice echoes across the stage and Maggie turns, realizing Thomas had followed her into the auditorium. Her eyes dart briefly to a corner of the stage that sits in shadow, but she doesn't say anything. His voice suddenly leaves him, running from her eyes.

“Thomas, what are you doing here?” For the second time in his life he hears that sound, his name on her lips. It gives him the courage to walk across the stage to her. There must only be a few minutes until the room is filled by a class, and he needs it empty.

“I wanted to show you something.” The words hang in the air. It isn’t in her instinct to trust him, but she slowly nods and he comes still closer. She is beautiful, fragile. He wants to touch her. He wraps his arms around her and she starts to struggle.

“Wait, look.” They face the absent audience and he cups his hands in front of her, where the fire leaps up like a torch. Blinking in the rush of cool air, she tries to step back but she’s trapped in his arms. He can feel her heart beat faster, and his eyes begin to speak to the flame.

“What are you doing?” She sounds terrified. Thomas lets her go, unthinking, unstirred. His arms leave her and the flame, which which hovers in the air. Maggy is about to say something, looking back to the boy who can’t meet her eyes, when she realizes the flame is still there. It draws her close, beckoning. She looks for a source, passing her hands quickly under the fire.

“Be careful,” Thomas calls out. Their eyes meet, and she doesn’t trust him. But when she turns back her voice is different, and it gives him hope.

“Is this a trick? How are you doing this?”

“There isn’t a trick. I just can.”

She blows onto the flame and it dies down before springing back up. “Bullshit.”

Thomas shrugs at this, then gestures and the flame begins to move, tracing a slow circle in the air. A grin passes from her face to his. Now he knows this is just the beginning, and as he works starts to feel he is watching himself, floating above them both. He knows Maggy’s thoughts, and can feel the way the fire captures her from the inside, looking out from her eyes.

At a brusque command the fire rears up, building and surging across the empty space of the auditorium like a river. They are in a space outside of the satellites, outside of the school, floating in an emptiness filled solely by light and their own bodies. Thomas can see the fascination and lingering fear run across her face, and knows that Maggy can see his mind, with all its hope and rage thrown across the canvas of the air. He wants to kiss her but doesn't, because he doesn't feel he has to. She wants to run, but senses something tragic. For a moment she turns from the fire to him, and Thomas sees reflected the lonely emptiness he carries. Instead of coming together or apart the two stand exactly where they are, waiting in their new little world. That moment of brief connection and unbound light is like a dream, and as a dream it ends abruptly, with a pair of sunken eyes emerging from the darkness.

He is trying to find a way out. Sitting, talking, trying to explain without involving Maggy, without even hinting at what he is. It shouldn't have been like this. His stomach won't quiet, the feeling that his life is about to end won't leave him. Thomas has lived by being invisible, and now someone has taken notice and just as he expected they are trying to hurt him. The office he sits in seems impossibly small, crowded with file cabinets and hints of the principal's other, warmer life. There are two seats in this room, and nowhere to hide. But the white haired woman who stares back at him is only tired and annoyed. His voice becomes frantic as he realizes she is not listening, and his stomach churns harder.

"Where is the evidence? If I had a lighter, if I had a bottle rocket, where is it?" he asks. The principal, her fierce blue eyes fixed to him, decides at this question she has heard enough.

"This is not a trial Mr. Veith. You've been caught and you will be suspended until Thursday, and allowed back only after a meeting with your parents and my approval. If I should

allow you to return afterwards you will never think of doing anything so stupid as lighting a fire in this school again, because you know that next time I will send you out in a police car and not a school bus. Am I understood?"

"I didn—"

"Nod, Mr. Veith. Now, for whatever reason I can't reach either of your parents to pick you up, so you will spend the day quietly, working or reading in the nurse's office before you ride the bus home." She lectures him, forcing him to be silent and accept that he has no control over anything within these walls. Thomas sits silent, his face red. He is terrified of what his parents will do when they find out and burning with anger at this woman and the teacher, Maggy's coach, who had reported him. No one in the school cared what happened to him or anyone else as long as it was quiet. There were students doing drugs, having sex, beating the hell out of each other right under their noses. None of that mattered to them, but they would take him away from her, trap him at home and give his father a reason.

"If I kill him it's your fault," again Thomas thinks, but not loud enough to be heard. When he leaves the tall, gaunt form of Mr. Masters lingers in his mind. When the teacher had found the two he'd come from nowhere, suddenly standing behind Thomas before he led him off. He was a tall man, his hair cut short and his clothing well fitted. There seemed something cruel in his eyes that suited the power he had at just that moment. He towered over Thomas when he told him, before pressing him into the office:

"I know what you are. Stay away from her."

The panicked swearing in Thomas's head had stopped at that, and he'd looked into the man's eyes and seen so much anger. Mr. Masters really thought he would hurt Maggy, but the truth is nothing like that. The principal, yes, Mr. Masters gladly, but not her. Now as he walks

down the halls he considers. He isn't waiting here all day, so he could walk out, or he could pay Masters a visit, and then leave. Whatever he did they'd know it was him, but it didn't matter. In an actual trial, he thinks with a grimace, they'd need evidence. Something. Before he decides his feet choose, and he finds himself back at the entrance to the auditorium. He quietly opens the door and steps inside but finds everything in darkness. There is no class, and probably no teacher.

Thomas is about to leave when he hears it, something, in one of the rooms. Stealing towards the noise he peers through a window into a room meant for storage, and sees two forms moving. Somehow when he understands it's what he expected. Even in the darkness he can tell it's Maggy. And in the dim light he divines the figure moving with her as Mr. Masters, animal, beast.

Thomas grasps the door and this is the moment. He can save her and become something new. The door handle turns and the air cools, justice waiting only for a spark. But at the last moment Thomas hesitates, listening. She isn't struggling or calling out. The wheels in his mind turn and engineer the reason she had been alone in the auditorium. Maggy was waiting for her teacher. Nothing moves inside of Thomas. The anger he's lived in doesn't come, not when he knows he should feel it. What he realizes instead is how much he's lied, imagining that they were ever connected. What's happening in the room is none of his business. Inside of Thomas now there is a frozen stillness that calls for nothing and wants nothing. Leaving the school and getting away is the only thing that is important. He strides off, not caring whether they hear him. He tries to find a way out in the halls but can't manage. It seems like he's only taken a few steps, it seems like fate when he sees the principal almost on top of him, a missile bearing down.

"What are you doing?" There is no answer to give her when she asks him, nearly shouting, and grabs his arm.

“I need—I need to leave,” is all he can say, all he feels. And she is not letting him go.

“You are not leaving this building.” She wrests him around, and feels a wave of freezing air wash over her. He will not be controlled, he will not be silent.

“Fuck you, bitch,” he whispers. Soft words belie the hate they hold, and her wrinkled face is just starting to twist in anger when the fire ignites, raging across her skin. What has stirred rises to wakefulness, devouring her in a moment too small to think. Another creature now, Thomas doesn’t understand the pain, doesn’t care about the pain. When her ruined body falls in a patchwork of blisters, blood and char, he only searches for the next thing to take apart. Smoke falls like the curtain of night, trapping those who don’t run at the first and smallest sign of danger. For those unlucky enough to run into the path of the man aflame there is no escape without some mark, and some few fall as the first, covered in flames and screaming. The once invisible, the angry god, stalks these halls attacking without thought everything that comes near. And so it happens that something darts across his vision and he consumes it like so much charcoal. The world’s old center, a tangle of springs and flashing hair now is suddenly blackened and still. Thomas walks past not knowing, or feeling that it was his love.

He is no small thing anymore. The school sits in ruins, mired in screams and injured, soon to be beset by the flashing lights that mark the storm and the night’s end. What he wished and dreamed of is done. Thomas Veith sits in the ruins of his work like a gluttoned beast, and waits, not knowing what to do, but thinking perhaps he should die like this, after bringing everything around him to its knees.

There would be a trial, for what it mattered. They arrested him on the charge of arson, and he sat in his cage, just as he had sat in his classrooms and his home. There is no difference

now in his cell between the isolation he felt or the cold indifference brought out to face it. There are just less distractions with his existence fixed between the bars and the bed of the room.

Thomas closes his eyes, and waits. First he imagines an interview with a reporter, asking him what he'd been trying to do, exactly why he'd done it. They wouldn't understand him, but he could shock them, challenge the neat little world millions of people lived in so that they'd begin to understand how dark the world really is. Even trapped he could keep tearing the world apart, only this time they'd thank him for it. Talk about him until their mouths run dry, and always wonder what it means, why this happened. When he imagines what must be happening at home his thoughts are that much sweeter. His parents haven't come yet, but he knows they will be forced here eventually. They've ignored him for a very long time, but not this. For the rest of their lives they will live in his actions as he had lived in theirs without choice, or escape. Criticized, mocked, and forever known only as his parents, the ones who were sick enough to raise him.

But before long he becomes restless, and starts trying to reach out of his cage in his thoughts. He pictures the path out of the building he's in, the streets from a bird's eye view, and the world feels less cramped. But once he's out he has no idea where to go. He has no desire to picture home, to see the burning school or anyone he knew. He hovers for a moment, and then moves to the strangers in one of his old fantasies.

In his mind there is a picture of a quiet little suburbia, and a boy staring out from the front window of a house. Once he's found it, the picture keeps coming back for days, and as time passes in the cell the boy becomes more defined. His eyes stay the same brown, his hair becomes darker, just as his parents are given names. Mr. and Mrs. Cobb, and their son, Shaun. Suddenly he begins to hear them speak, and for the first time wonders where his mind has led him to.

“We want you to know there’s nothing wrong with who you are,” Mrs. Cobb began. Even trying to be stern the eyes that sat under her curled hair were kind.

“Something’s happened, and a lot of people are going to be afraid. You have to be more careful,” Mr. Cobb added. Thomas immediately liked him, admiring the stern voice, the way he dressed like a professional. Shaun was the only one Thomas didn’t like. He seemed weak.

I am careful.

Shaun spoke without opening his mouth and his voice still rang through his parent’s minds and Thomas’s. Thomas starts trying to answer, suddenly not caring if it is a fantasy, when his cell opens. The vision disappears, and as he’s led off he nearly screams at losing the picture of another person something like him.

At the first meeting with his public defender Thomas learns exactly what he’s done, and all his satisfactions ring hollow. In his cell time slows until each moment becomes a torture. He is trying not to think about Maggy, but she is there waiting behind his eyelids. He pictures her without the familiar stir, brushes against her memory and sees a girl, a breathing body that he has made feel fear and agony. Without her wreath of flames or any dark shadows of possession a girl stands and beckons him in dreams. Again, a living, breathing body, the tree sitting beside him—gone. The worst had happened and he is alone. Not afraid, but alone.

“I’m sorry.” A whisper passes through the cell like ice, once, and then repeated each second he is alone for a long span. But there are no words that can change him from what he is. He knows this and denies himself the guilt and pity which threaten at every moment, that force him to imagine taking himself into the fire. Maggy is dead, and Thomas doesn’t deserve to mourn her. His apologies end, and his eyes become clear.

Eventually he turns again to reaching out, searching for the vision from the other day. He pictures himself above the city shining in the night and looks out, but sees nothing except the electric lights and shining stars. The wind ruffles against his skin and suddenly a voice comes, faintly running through his mind. Thomas follows it, moving through countless miles of blurred trees and buildings until the sound grows, and he hears what he'd least been expecting.

I'm just like you.

Shaun's voice, inside of him. Thomas pauses, looking at the boy who is staring past him out into the night. As he does a picture enters his mind of smoke rising from the school. He thinks of the fire and remembers walking from room to room and destroying the building piece by piece.

Why did you do it?

Thomas tries to answer, but as his thoughts touch on the way it had felt to be in control they start to slip away, and he can feel them echo in the Shaun's mind. The boy had taken the thought. Despite himself, Thomas smiles. He'd found the perfect family he'd always imagined and their son is another little vampire waiting to be let loose on the world. Perhaps he could change him right this moment, craft him into another dark god. The man aflame reaches out, offering all the darkness the boy can handle. When he feels the same stir, and wants nothing more than to reach out and take apart the things around him Shaun will be nothing more than the first disciple. But on reaching out it isn't the fire that the two share. Instead what Shaun finds is Maggy, staring across the firelight. She is beautiful, for a moment more real than any time Thomas can remember, but then the image becomes blurred and the time vague. In that moment Thomas loses control. Terrified that he might lose her again, he takes himself away. Shutting out the voice and everything outside his cell, he comes out of the vision like a dream.

Sweat is dripping through his clothing as Thomas comes to himself on the bed, thinking of her eyes. All he wants is this punishment, seeing her every moment.

When his mother finally comes he doesn't feel so ashamed as he thought he would. Instead it's like a part of the weight has been lifted off. She can still look at him, even when she's crying, asking him the same question again and again.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he answers, when there's really nothing to say. There aren't any opportunities left now to change things.

"You know you've hurt me more than your father ever could." A question dies in Thomas's throat, and he looks at her. Wanting to show her the insanity she put up with and forced him to live through, and wanting just as much to walk away. But before he can do or say anything she moves on, and he realizes she didn't mean it. Not like that.

"Are they saying how long you're going to be in here?" Their eyes meet, and he tells her somehow that what he's about to say is a lie.

"Not all that long. It depends, but at least until I'm eighteen."

"I could talk to the judge."

"I don't know how much that would help, mom," he tells her and almost smiles. "Are things ok at home? How's dad?"

"He's alright. They let him go at work, so he's looking for something else. He wanted to come, but you know him," she answers. Thomas nods, looking out of a barred window into a gray sky.

“Mom, you can leave,” he says, keeping his eyes on the table, trying not to let them blur. “If you were staying in the house, because of me, you don’t have to anymore.”

“Thomas, if I’d known that man...I wanted you to have everything. I was trying to protect you. I hope you know that,” she says, her voice wavering. Thomas listens and his insides twist together as he realizes she wasn’t blind, or as blind as he was. He can only manage a nod, wanting so much to take the past week back, the past year back.

“You don’t worry about me. You just take care of yourself,” his mother tells him. They talk a while longer, and for a brief moment before she leaves he feels human.

“Do you know this girl?” The prosecutor’s voice echoes with the force of all right judgment, as if having known her was the crime. He is a bald, short man with a pug face and quiet brown eyes, but terrible in the way he would make you say only what he wanted. The picture he is pointing to is one of Maggy, and Thomas stares at it for only a moment before saying he has. There have been no interviews, no grandstanding or brave words in this trial. But when he glances at the picture he is not sorry that he has been ignored. It would be better if they remembered her. Now even the jury’s eyes are painful to rest under, and he is careful not to meet them. What the twelve men and women think about him as they look on is awful and true.

“Can you explain your relationship with the victim?” In between the word relationship there came out a thousand terrible things, so that Thomas could see himself following her, stalking her. He instantly becomes nervous, not because of what it might mean for the case, but because he wants somehow to protect her from this, remove her from the story.

“We had some of our classes together. We’d talked before, but not much.” Thomas answers, with an effort not looking back to the eyes watching him.

“So you two didn’t really run with the same crowds.”

“No.”

“She was beautiful, popular. Her home was in a better part of town. But you still wanted to date her,” the prosecutor questioned.

“I didn’t want anything from her.”

“And did you love her?” Thomas’s face flushed.

“No. I barely knew her.”

“Well, that last part I believe, Thomas. I don’t think you knew her at all, but there has to be a reason you two were alone in a locked auditorium. Unless the both of you had suddenly taken an interest in theater.” Thomas was silent, thinking, and the prosecutor went on cutting.

“You must have been waiting a long time to get her alone. What were you planning before Mr. Masters walked in? Did you think she was going to kiss you?” Those words are fatal. Thomas looks and sees the twelve pairs of eyes boring through him. They think he is exactly what he is. A loser, a freak.

“No, I—” Thomas raises his voice but the prosecutor interrupts, drowning him out.

“Or were you hoping for more?”

“I wasn’t trying to make her do anything.” It’s all happening so fast. He pleads with the jury but they’ve left him alone with a wolf. No cries from his lawyer or the judge will stop this.

“But when she was scared, when Mr. Masters found the two of you things changed didn’t they?”

“I don’t know,” Thomas whispers. The man readjusts his grip, looking Thomas directly in the eyes.

“Why would she be scared of you? What were you planning?”

“I don’t know,” Thomas speaks, and tries to hold it down. The air between the lawyer and the boy cools as the jury waits for the blow.

“I think you do know. I think you wanted to kill her.” Those words are the prosecutor’s last. In full view of the courtroom Thomas lets out a shout bordering on a scream, and what was once a man in front of him becomes a pyre. There are other screams now, panic and twisting legs. A flash from a camera flies by just before a bailiff collides with Thomas, slamming his head against the stand. He falls, bleeding, under the weight and lets his eyes close. As the man aflame lies silent the panic from his existence floods into the streets.

Darkness. Metal against his wrists, and the world dim through a cloth blind. This is the circumstance Thomas Veith awakens in. All that greets his ears is an unwelcoming silence, but still he listens. Straining through the headache that throbs with each heartbeat he begins to reach out like before, and hear what couldn’t possibly reach his ears. His mother’s voice, shouting. Soon when he shuts his eyes he can see her, tired, cursing at his father. He expects her to stop, to realize what she’s doing, but she doesn’t. Her face red, her hands drawn back she seems to be screaming, threatening all things. She looks as if for the first time all she wants is to be free.

It would be a strange sight, if anyone were watching. A fearless smile crosses the face of the boy tied and blindfolded, and his hands open. A second sun has risen. Miles away the fire starts as smoke pouring through the panels of the floor. Everything he was will burn, and if his mother wants her chance, this is it. His parents run as the fire rises, heat and smoke rushing from the windows. A net falls on the outside of the building, eating its path in lines of red and orange. In moments his house burns from top to bottom and threatens everything near it with waves of heat. The flames are too hot to tame, and the firemen are useless when they come. From above

the smoke rises in the quiet morning in a massive gray column, carrying away everything Thomas had left in his old cage. Slowly the fire settles and as the rising smoke begins to die away the roof falls in. A shower of sparks rises up into the air, a spirit reaching for the clouds.

His hands shaking, Thomas lays back slowly, reeling himself in from the painful distance. Ice clings to the room, and the silence dies in noises that are close and coming closer. He will not be alone for long. But as Thomas struggles to keep himself alert a voice rings out in his head. It is not his, but it seems like him. Someone familiar, Shaun. Somehow he knows the boy will understand when he thinks:

“Why are you here?”

And there is an answer, after a pause. But the words come through as if they were spoken from his own mouth, it's not like before. Thomas can sense feelings and thoughts that sit under the answer. What he sees is a full person hovering inside of him, revealing itself without knowing it.

“I want to help you,” Shaun replies. In that space Thomas begins to get a sense of what's inside the other boy. There is the quiet house, the caring parents, a perfect life waiting on the other side of that connection. But at the same time Thomas sees bound up in Shaun something exactly like himself. The same stir exists as a ravenous hunger within him, sleeping. Shaun Cobb, a little vampire waiting but too young to realize. Thomas answers back, suddenly seeing a way to take control of these last few moments.

“You can't reach me Shaun. I'm here, and there's no getting out. They're going to kill me, and that's not a bad thing.”

“Who?” Shaun asks, and Thomas answers quickly, goading the boy’s trust as he begins to curl deeper inside of him. Outside of the room footsteps are coming, the door is opening. He doesn’t have much time.

“Who do you think? They want me as a lab rat, and I’m not going.”

“Escape. Read their minds like you’re reading mine, find out what they don’t want you to do, and do it,” Shaun tells him. There is so much naivety in the suggestion that Thomas nearly laughs. But instead he prepares himself, allowing the flames within him to rise up as he answers.

“I’m not going to escape. Listen, you’re not like me. What I have I can’t control, it only does one thing, and I don’t want it anymore. So what I want is for you to look at what I show you. Focus on it, harder than you’ve ever focused on anything.”

“You can get away.” That last childish plea before the man aflame extends his neck, letting Shawn see the fire in his hands, the power of his thoughts. The boy attacks without thinking, and in a rush of flame Thomas Veith disappears.

Poet

Mr. Harris's room was always neat and quiet. I spent first period there, and so I remember it with the sun coming in on the desks, and everyone talking before class started. As much poetry as would fit was stuck up on the walls, all in neat little printouts and posters. His desk was taken up by a miniature library he loaned out books from and a set of literary action figures he guarded. Everything in there fit Mr. Harris so closely. It was hard having class in the same room after. That day the room had gotten louder as we waited past the bell for him to come. Mr. Harris was ten minutes late when he finally came in panting, and the first thing he did was glance towards me. For a moment I thought he knew, but when I listened it wasn't me he was thinking of. When Mr. Harris started to talk, stumbling through the lesson I knew something was wrong. But I didn't stop. I should've noticed just how sick he was, but I was fifteen, obsessed, barely sleeping. I'd been waiting since yesterday just to see the next scene, and I swear part of him wanted me to. His mind turned with mine, looking through each memory until there was just one thing left I hadn't seen. It was like leaning in for a kiss. When I did he fell down, that last push pressing him into a void. I can't change what happened but I can tell you his story just like he would. Just like he will.

Kevin Harris picks up a comb and runs it through his hair, holding the gaze of the blue eyed man in the mirror. That man is about thirty, his hair cropped, his face shaved, dressed well but comfortably in a button down and sweater. He looks to his wife, Hannah, lying by the bed and wishes she was up. They hadn't gotten a chance to talk yesterday. The night before he'd sat in a shop that was something between a bookstore and a bar, and watched people who might have been any age, but seemed younger than him, pouring out their vanity into a microphone.

Some had whispered a punctuated line like a love starved drum, others had been rumbling streams, ranting about the truths they'd found in pieces. One, a woman, had spoken to him. Their eyes had met, and when her voice hit the air the two were alone, drawn out of their skin to take the place of worlds. He couldn't remember her name the day after, but there were a few lines from her poems that hang stubbornly onto his lips.

Harris leaves for the school, his car groaning into life despite the frost and somehow managing the odd miles to work. Inside the building he takes his place within his kingdom, a room littered with posters quoting Elliot and Yeats, and sits making notes for his first class's discussion. Today they will talk about "The Raven," and he wants them to notice the sound. That was what made him fall in love with the poem years ago, and if they can just hear it, well, that's enough to make them notice a thousand other details. In the silence he thinks about when he used to haunt readings, searching for somewhere to let his voice roam and find others who thought in kind. That was how he'd first gotten drunk, met older people, and had every opportunity to put himself in control by doing something stupid. He can't talk about the bad decisions he made as a teenager to his class. But the same questions he was asking are in the poem, and they can hear it word for word.

By the time his students enter he is more than prepared, having set aside his notes and brought a projector to a cold hum. When the bell rings he lets the class quiet, taking a quick glance across the student's eyes as they turn to him. Those eyes are full of anticipation, maybe not for his class, but the world outside they've barely seen. Harris loves introducing a poem and wondering whether each student will become familiar, or even intimate with the words. In the classroom he gets to be their guide, teaching them not only how to read and analyze, but in a strange sort of way, how to see. He pauses, breathes deeply and begins reading aloud.

The blurred words on the projector screen become something else as his voice rings out, and begin to summon a dark night. Alliterated lines, a melody of love and loss finds its way across the room and changes it into a gloomy study. Some students, listening intently find themselves line by line closer to Poe's place and time. But their teacher has gone somewhere else entirely, watching in his mind's eye a ray of light pouring through his bedroom window that died years ago. His eyes locked with one student, he forgets the classroom and comes back years to hear his own voice reading "The Raven", repeating the same words again and again.

"Once I pondered weak and weary, over many curious—over many a quaint and curious..."

He is memorizing each line of the poem, resting his voice and his feelings inside of it. There is no good reason to be stuck on this page and this poem, except that his father's notes run in between the lines. Arrows and circles, parts of words and whole arguments mark just how much time his father had spent. The poem meant something to his father, and so it means something to Harris. This is not his first time reading it but his first meeting with it, when he began to wonder how it came to be written, and how it would be said. How would his father's voice have behaved, tracing the same sounds? As he is nearly finished with a stanza the noise outside that had been a quiet rummaging starts bursting through the wall. A steady thump, heavy footsteps, and an occasional curse. Suddenly there is no ignoring it, and he leaves the book, and the bedroom's gentle ray of light for the living room.

Stacked against a wall are boxes and boxes of books. Next to them is his father, a tall man with a wide red face and a sharp nose, overcome by a sneeze that shakes his body. This man, brown hair and dark blue eyes, a sports jacket and khakis, is the one he is trying to understand. Poe has nothing to do with it yet.

“Hey guy, can you give me a hand?” his father asks, his voice exactly like Harris remembers. Soft, kind in a way that borrowed shadows of selflessness. The two begin to work, heaving boxes, coughing in the dust and sweating in the heat that had built up with the sun. This was a ritual, moving things out so that his father could come and bring everything back in a few weeks. Once his father had gotten lonely, or once his mother had cooled down it would happen. But each time it seemed like less things came back and more things left, and now there were the boxes of books heaped up to the windows of the car. They were part of the house, like the paint or the windows. Harris had poured over them for hours, trying to read everything his father had, curious to touch the same thoughts and stories. In a strange way they were his father, or what Harris knew of him, and now they were leaving. Harris thought about the books in his room, the books that he knew were scattered around the corners of the house, but decided not to say. He’d already helped more than he wanted to. This whole thing was stupid, moving his father out when they knew he was coming back. When Harris knew he didn’t want to leave.

The two stood for a moment, breathing hard, watching the sun’s last stumbling steps. His father turned, and hugged him.

“You know I don’t want to go, but it’s not fair for me to be here. Not to me or your mother.” The words don’t mean anything to Harris then. But years later he will remember them, and crack the halo he’d hidden the man who was his father under.

“This isn’t about you,” his father had said, hugging him again briefly before getting into the car. When he drove off Harris was in his rearview, waving like an idiot and still thinking how stupid it was. He was coming back. Why move everything you own when you’re coming back? Back inside Harris reclaimed the bed and the book and went back to his work. Repeating the words, tracing the notes written years before and probably forgotten. Harris wondered if his

father ever thought about the poem anymore, and then decided suddenly that he didn't. There was too much loss bound up in it for someone to think about that and then spend his life away from the people he loved. He sat on his bed, waiting for his mother to come home and break the silence of the house. Waiting to understand.

The poem ends its ringing call of madness and Harris returns to the classroom. Questions follow from his lips, prodding the students to examine what they've heard. His eyes lift as if released from the student they'd fallen on, Shaun, who had been staring back at Harris, fascinated and gloomy. Just by the look Harris can tell that Shaun was thinking, making the connections that he hopes others are finding. But in a moment Harris forgets him, swept along by the class's energy, the student's thoughts from the four corners that they bring and place onto what they've heard. The bell seems to ring quickly, and suddenly the room turns from an organized discussion to a chaos of shifting bodies and voices. The students file out, and as Shaun passes by Harris remembers the look on his face, and asks him what he thought of the poem.

The small face turns to meet him, and a pair of dark eyes flash. Shaun answers simply, "I love the sound." Despite a feeling that's something off about Shaun and the way he answers Harris is elated. At least one student had heard the poem the way he had, and maybe would even fall in love with trying to understand it.

I kept coming back to the moment I'd seen in his mind, and it was amazing feeling like I knew another person so closely. I wanted to talk to him about it, to make Mr. Harris tell me the story in words so that I knew he'd meant to give it to me. The next day I waited for him to come to that moment again in his thoughts, ready and eager to come up and push him to talk to me. But everything was new, even when I tried to bring him back there. I remember the bemused smile

on his face when I asked him when he'd first studied "The Raven." He told me he didn't know, and I was terrified. But behind his eyes the words of the poem circled, and so after a second I thought he really did remember that moment, he just didn't think it was the first time. I told myself that, and let the question drop.

Tonight Harris sits in a jazz club, Avenue 9. He is listening to the rasp of a woman in jeans and an expressive black top, thin like death. She sings about love like painful mourning amid the soft buzz and chatter of the club, and he thinks about what he's doing. A silver trumpet wails in chorus, answering seduction to the woman's rough silk voice, and suddenly he knows. He's being an idiot. Searching for the woman's lines that still hang on his lips after two days, searching for trouble and newness. The horn and the voice dance a slow circle, and with them the two women he can't stop thinking of, the poet who spoke to him, and Hannah, the wife that he wakes up next to. In his mind both are being given a separate set of fantasies that make up imaginary lives. His eyes brush the tables, searching out the woman from the reading on the odd chance, or premonition that she's here. Harris isn't thinking about her hips or the fierce white teeth behind her smile. This isn't about sex. It's about being someone else, unattached, desperate and genius. When he listened to her he could remember when he called himself a poet, and thought that writing something perfect was bigger than everything else.

But he does think about being alone with her. Harris searches faces until he spots the bright red hair, and knows it's the same that had gleamed under the stage light. She is here after all, sitting at a table in the corner. As he watches she stares at the stage, slipping a pen out of her mouth and tucking it away. A line sped through his mind.

Trace the line that breaks

Me

She had said it with a rhythm. Even if he didn't want to his eye and his mind still followed the command, and felt the curves of her skin. God, she was beautiful. He would write her out, stand in front of a mike and summon:

under red flame

White silk

Thin strokes hold, black ink

holds a body

Suddenly the words appear scribbled on a napkin. Harris finds himself writing again, tapping into the rivers inside him which are either endless or dry. Tomorrow can be something entirely different, if he is only willing to give up everything he has. With that thought writing consumes him for a space, becoming his only concern in the world. When he looks up from the page he can't find her, and at first it doesn't bother him, but now that he knows there's no trouble waiting the excitement fades. Soon the napkin slips into his pocket and his eyes surrender to the dim light and rolling smoke. He used to read to Hannah when they were just dating, whatever he was working on or had found to show her. She told Harris that she didn't understand poetry but she liked his voice, and somewhere along the line he'd stopped writing his poems down. Then he'd stopped thinking about them at all, content to tell his thoughts to her in plain speech, and let her be his comfort.

When he opens his eyes the woman from the reading is there across the table, staring back out of a pale face and shocking blue eyes. In that moment his thoughts are vicious with need, cutting through clothing and words to a body. But the urge to run is just as strong. Harris loves his wife. When he sleeps next to Hannah he feels safe, and there were times that she was

the only one who could help him. She kept him inside lying next to her on the nights he used to spend on high buildings looking down. Thinking.

“May I?” she asks. He nods, and she sits down, her eyes passing over him. She notes the napkin, and then starts to talk again, looking away towards the stage.

“You were at the reading. Now here you are again, staring at me and trying to get something out.” Her voice can’t move without making a challenge. It’s like energy, a bright shifting imp made to ask questions.

“That’s all true. I’m sorry if I scared you, I was just surprised to see you again,” Harris replies.

“I don’t think you were. What are you writing?” she asks, and the words in his pocket tremble at her mention.

“Nothing I’m willing to let breathe. I’m Kevin.”

“Hannah,” she responds. Her hand slips out and he takes it, wanting to mention the coincidence but distracted by the feel of her skin.

“Can I ask, have you ever been in love?” Harris surprises himself with the question as her hand slips away. He knows he asked it because of an image that is running through his mind’s back corners, his Hannah in the bed he might not come home to tonight.

“I don’t know. I always feel I am, so I suppose that means I haven’t,” she answers.

“Whenever I ask someone they always say ‘you’ll know.’”

“They’re right.”

“They’re full of shit,” he tells her. She doesn’t like the word, which is strange coming from a poet. Poets normally love shouting the wrong words.

“Doesn’t your wife keep you happy?” Hannah asks and Harris looks down at the ring forgotten on his finger, and laughs despite himself.

“I suppose she does.”

“Then why are you thinking about fucking me?” She asks the question with such supreme confidence. Much more like a poet. Their eyes meet, and he decides to say what he feels like.

“I was thinking of making you my mid-life crisis. You fit the bill: young, beautiful artist,” he is speaking half truths. That is the answer for sex, not the answer he meant. The lost life, the lost self, none of it is in there. This Hannah smiles, and it burns inside.

“I can respect honesty,” She replies. Vain creature.

“How far can the truth get me? I have a talent for it.”

“I saw your eyes when I was reading. They danced. If you want—” she begins, then a buzzing shakes the table. Suddenly the new Hannah grabs for her bag. A look comes into her face that can only mean something is terribly wrong, and Harris knows he will never hear the end of that offer.

“I have to go,” she says, her eyes touching his one last time.

“Go. Another time, maybe.” She walks past him and he sighs, planning to trade his coffee for something stronger. As he gets up Harris notices her card sitting on the end of the table, inviting, offering tragedy. That night he comes home to his wife, and sits beside her in the living room, trying to remember what they used to say to each other to fill up time. But with every half-hearted pass at conversation and hollow smile he gives her Harris becomes convinced that they’re lying to each other, and he’s been alone for years.

One night I woke up repeating the words “shall be lifted—nevermore,” in a voice that wasn’t mine. I’d barely glanced at “The Raven,” but suddenly I knew every word, and I couldn’t stop repeating them. Maybe I should have been scared, if not about what I was doing to Mr. Harris and the moments he seemed to forget what he was doing when I looked into him, then what I was doing to myself. I wasn’t scared. It’s hard to explain what it’s like to be me, to hear everything from the people around you, even the things they never meant to say. Imagine a song that you can’t stop listening to. Sometimes the music changes, but it’s always been there, even when you sleep. The sound becomes comfortable. At some point you adjust so that if you can’t hear the song you feel lost, like part of the world is gone. After enough time living like that you wouldn’t be able to stand silence, and if the song went away you’d have to find another. I couldn’t choose to shut out what I wanted, but I could invite other things in. I focused on Harris, even after I realized I wasn’t just looking into him. I knew I was hurting him somehow. But I didn’t want to admit that I was losing control, so I never looked back to what I was leaving behind until it was too late.

Harris is standing in front of his class talking, providing the energy they don’t seem to have. Over the years he’s picked out stories from his own life that connect neatly with the readings, and today is a perfect example of why he has them. A part of the class looks visibly ill, whether having found some way to drink or simply stayed up after the school’s homecoming, which was poorly scheduled on a Tuesday night. Even the students he’s certain didn’t go seem infected by the other’s apathy. But he knows, even if they won’t engage actively, most of his students will at least listen when he tries to tell them something about his own life.

“Again, we’re talking about death. Here the purpose is very different, though. The author is looking for a sense of immediacy, of impermanence. He uses death to try and get there—which I think a lot of us agree works fairly well. He wants to shock us into listening, and he does, despite that most of us have never really been close to death. I’ve only been there once. For me it happened while I was driving home from college for winter break. I had a GPS back then, this newfangled device, but I had taken a couple of wrong turns and ended up being routed through all these back roads. Suddenly I find myself climbing, and climbing—it starts out looking like a hill but I swear it was a mountain somewhere in the middle of South Dakota. And the roads are slick, and not that well maintained, I’m listening to Dave Matthews, jamming out, and I lose control. There are a few moments where I’m spinning and everything is blurred. Then I’m there on the edge of a mountain. My car is hanging over the edge of the road and I’m thinking, I’m going to die. I feel the car shift, and I see myself falling, feel it. Freefall, lifting out of my seat, the glass crashing and the car caving in on me. But then the wheels kick in behind me and I peel back, far enough from the edge that I can breathe.” A few students stop talking about football as he stares at them directly, pausing.

“I was driving back, and after I could think again I began to think about how I was spending my time. I spent a lot of it alone. And thinking about it—that changed what I wanted to do, made me move in another direction. Being close to death can wake you up, that’s why we see it used so much.” He makes the discussion after mercifully short, spoon feeding them a key set of study points in a way he almost never does for advanced students. It isn’t long at all before he sets them loose to study vocabulary sheets and sits back preparing for the next period.

Suddenly as he works Harris pictures a white road bristling with ice, the same one he’d driven across and almost died on in college. He glances up from his notes to his students, trying

to clear his eyes, and finds that Shaun is staring back. A look passes between the two and for a split second a strange focus is in the boy's eyes, like an animal watching prey. Part of Harris panics, telling him to run, while the rest of him is ashamed by the impulse. The feeling stops almost immediately, and Harris tells himself that whatever he just saw was only his imagination. He goes back to work, laying out a plan across a string of pages. The image creeps in again, the white of the papers shifting into ice, and this time Harris falls into the memory completely, reliving the story he'd just told.

He's exhausted, barely able to keep awake as he sits behind the wheel. If he lets himself stare at any one thing his eyes start to close, so he keeps looking out the window, glancing back to the road, changing the station on the radio. The music is blasting, freezing air pouring in from the open windows but at this point none of the shock from the cold or the noise even reaches him. Outside his window the morning light glares off of the melting snow and as he drives forms a white blur. Everything begins to merge and seems far away until the light, the music and the cold are just an overwhelming, numbing sensation. Harris's head nods, then falls, lolling to the side. The car starts to drift, accelerating. It only takes a couple of seconds for him to completely lose control.

When he wakes up he doesn't realize the car is spinning, but he sees the mountain and the road whirling outside his windows. The force of the spin holds him breathless against the door, shocked and helpless. He's waiting for the crash but finally the car stops and he gasps, trying to get his bearings. Before he can manage to catch his breath a new panic sets in. With a long slow lurch the car begins to tip forward over the side of the mountain. Harris can see the emptiness that hangs in front of him, and on the other side trees and rocks small in the distance. Right then it isn't real. He doesn't feel anything, only pushes his foot down on the pedal. The wheels spin

for a few horrifying moments then catch, dragging him back from the drop. Before he realizes he's safe Harris screams, thinking he's fallen over the edge and picturing his mangled body.

The car comes to a stop in the middle of the road where Harris sits, clutching the wheel. He turns off the music, rolls up his windows and steps outside to look over the place he almost fell. It doesn't seem real to him, and the tire tracks and a gap in the snow don't change that. Off of the edge a cluster of pine trees sits quietly just where he would have fallen, and he knows the drop he's looking at would have killed him. He tries to process that. After a few minutes waiting he doesn't feel anything, and remembers he's parked in the middle of the road. The drive to a rest stop is no problem, but he keeps his speed down and his eyes on the road. When he can finally stop he gets into the back seat and lays down. Outside a brilliant sun creeps higher into the yellow corner of the sky, past his reflection in the window. Like everywhere else that people stay away from the whole scene is gorgeous, all towering pines and mountains. For once nothing nags at him, and he's content to be alone and just watch something even if it means nothing. He falls asleep slowly, listening to the wind blowing against the car.

I remember thinking I shouldn't have forced it. Part of that day was just gone, I couldn't remember anything. As I drifted through what I'd gleaned from Mr. Harris I didn't see what was happening around me, and I didn't care. Control was slipping out of my hands and the reality mattered less each day because nothing seemed so real as what I could see in his life. I felt that I could understand him. Each time I moved deeper, looking out from a single moment to a thousand thoughts it connected to and inspired. I was learning how to bring the plant up with the roots. But none of that mattered, the forest of his thoughts seemed like it would hold me forever.

What I wanted was always there, waiting for me.

As the reverie ends a pain begins as a dull ache in his head and grows to a violent throb. Under his breath Harris groans and finally looks up from the paper sitting in front of him, to realize the classroom is empty. His eyes move to the clock, which tells him that nearly two hours have slipped away somewhere. When his eyes return to the paper on his desk a verse in neat little lines smiles back. He rubs his temples and scans the lines. This isn't his, but there's more than a page of measured verse from somewhere. His hand, someone else's words. All the same they feel familiar. When he reads the lines aloud, softly under the steady throb of his head, they echo somewhere inside of him. His hands must have been carving mountains while he drifted off.

The time that he lost keeps weighing on his mind as the more he thinks about the words the more certain he is that he's heard them before. Gradually the pain leaves, but a cloud hangs over his thoughts. Harris keeps trying to remember what he was doing last, but as he thinks back the moment hovers just out of his reach, teasing him with a picture he can't quite bring into focus. The day ends and he heads home, remembering that his wife will be home late and thinking first he could use the time to figure things out. But parked in his driveway, looking at his empty house a strange panic seizes him. He thinks of the conversation at the jazz club, and wonders if the new Hannah still remembers him. He threw away the card, but the number is already in his phone. Harris decides and before he has time to rethink types out the message and sends it along.

< Hi, It's Kevin from the reading. What are you doing tonight?)

A few minutes pass, and he's trying to reach through the cloud that still hangs in his mind. He remembers his class studying silently in first period. He was prepping and noticed one of his students—just as an image starts to form Hannah's response dings in on his phone.

[I was thinking about going out with some friends. Why?>

<I thought we could do something. Dinner?)

This is the first move in a series of maneuvers that he knows will end in sex. His breath quickens with the knowledge, and as Harris tries to pick up the thought he had it disappears under a vision of the pen slipping out of Hannah's mouth. Suddenly he remembers his notes, and grabs desperately for the chance to put things in order. He reads her reply as he begins searching through his things.

[Tell me what you really have in mind>

Harris swears under his breath as he tears a sheaf of papers from his bag, and then looks down at the message. He clicks a response before tossing the phone aside.

<I mean, dinner, wine, maybe a movie? I'll bore you like before if you don't mind ;))

He finds what he's looking for, and ignores the sound of the phone entirely. Within the spider web of notes must be his notes from the entire morning, but they sit in a sea of other thoughts he can't quite navigate. Once when he'd taken notes in a freshman class he'd come back to them before the final and found them absolutely useless. What he'd written were half words and arrows scrambling under vague headings, or living with no point of reference at all. Today that same sinking feeling he had then struck him again. What he'd written this morning and yesterday dissolved into gibberish in front of his eyes. He looked down at his phone, and saw the text. In a moment of panic those words too meant nothing, than resolved into the answer to his question.

[Fine. You take care of dinner, I'll bring the movie>

The two sit together on her couch, watching Jake Gyllenhaal pour out his love in a rain soaked street. Harris checks every minute to see if he can remember the past few hours. They come through more clearly each time he pages over them, and each time he becomes a little calmer. He has no trouble following the plot of the movie such as it is, and can recall with perfect clarity the fantasies he's had about this moment. Those thoughts actually lead him to cut the scene playing out on the screen short. Harris lays Hannah down on the couch and hesitates a few inches away, looking at her tight lips and ready eyes. Knowing he's about to do something he doesn't want to do. Just as he realizes he means to leave she pulls him down into the kiss. Then there is no struggle, only a soft, wet exchange. For a second he lives his other life, and remembers what it feels like to be alone and clinging to a stranger.

"No." He gets up, not even able to look at her.

I have the wrong Hannah. The thought makes him smile, and he apologizes before leaving, but leaves quickly. When his wife comes home he's waiting, and without a word he starts to kiss her. Lays her down on the floor, and all of his thoughts are about her body, the little thoughts and rivulets that course through it as they strip each other bare. This is how the middle aged have sex, in the middle of the living room. Like the young could only imagine, alone in their own house, without any pretenses.

"Tell me what you're feeling," Harris asks her between a kiss, traveling up her leg.

"It feels good." That answer isn't what he wants, but in those moments he's become too busy to reply. Harris is lost in a world of pulsing rivers and sweating earth; skin, water and blood. Caught in the conviction that whatever Hannah had said wouldn't have told him anymore than he could feel with his tongue pressed against her. It seems something like kissing, and kissing is something like speaking. Another language, a private reading. It's still true that he can't

understand those feelings that are hers, but what he wants to say she might feel exactly as the message shudders through her body. A message in a single part, performative speech at its most unruly.

Bodies laid against each other, they forget for a moment the thousand things that swarm near the surface of the human mind and become mired in striving towards the same end. It was only after, when they were still close, draining the last dregs of warmth from the night that a sickly sort of fear stole in again. It came in the form of a folded piece of paper, which had found its way to the side of the bed. Hannah reached out, and unfolded it in idleness as Harris looked on. It was a moment before he realized it was the strange poem he'd been writing, and another moment before the words she said to him, smiling and questioning, would make sense.

“Is this yours? Why did you write out the Raven?” Harris had a sense then in an image of eyes that were dark and empty, of the creature he had encountered. The urge to run, the pain he'd forgotten swept back, and he believed that what had happened had not been a lapse in memory, or a failure of his body, but an attack. There was something staring out of darkness that had seen him. Something he only knew as a flashing image, and in the next second might not know at all. He leaps up and writes frantically about the eyes, the forgetting, the monster he'd glimpsed. As Hannah looked on in apprehension he stood trembling, trying to draw closer, to snatch and hold the truth he had realized in that moment.

“Kevin, are you ok?” Hannah asked. He looked to her and in a wild moment not just her, but anyone could have been the creature. But the confusion, and the fear that came into her face brought him back from the thought. He calmed himself, looking to the paper for a moment before returning to bed. Hannah harried him until he explained to her, but by that time his

thoughts had calmed, and it was only the shadow of what he'd seen that still held onto the corner of his mind.

“I've been forgetting things, and what you said triggered something I'd been trying to remember. I wanted to write it down, but now that I have it's not anything. I think I might just be afraid for no reason. But I am, terrified.” They talked in hushed voices until the vision disappeared. She held him for a little while, and the two fell asleep together, clinging close in the darkness.

He knows me now. Not who I am, but what I am. When Mr. Harris steps into the classroom he imagines a set of eyes, disembodied, watching. He's started trying to fight me, but his own mind works against him. A stray thought can lead him away from the classroom to wherever I want to go, and every time we meet I know better what he'll respond to. There are days now Mr. Harris doesn't remember. He's looking for me in the classroom, in the corners of his mind, trying to find something that can be hit, killed. I want to stop too, but it's like he won't let me either. When I sleep I dream of Mr. Harris's life, when I sit up trying not to dream I think of the moments in between what I already know and try to imagine them. Each time I try to resist feels like rejecting someone who only meant to help me, and each time I fail is like leaning in for a kiss.

As his students talk, Harris begins writing on the board, trying to shake the feeling that he's being watched, the image of eyes glaring out of the darkness. Despite the twenty odd pairs of eyes that are always on him he's never been bothered until lately. Today the feeling is so

strong it takes an effort to face the class and keep going with the lesson. He almost expects to see a monster in the midst of the students, glaring back at him.

“As I’m sure you’re all aware by now, T. S. Elliot is extraordinarily dense. He’s difficult to get ahold of, even with a list of references and Spark Notes in front of you. But if we look more generally—” Harris pauses for a second, as an image of a girl in a mint green dress, beautiful but shy, appears in his mind. He knows her. She is Cindy, his date to the high school prom, one of the girls he was almost in love with years ago. When he remembers her a rush of feelings come into him, but he ignores them finally, grasping for the words he’d been saying. The other half of his sentence dutifully returns, and he continues.

“—we can start to notice patterns. You’ve all read ‘The Hollow Men’ by now, so get it out in front of you. Look at the lines, and just answer the basic question, what are the things he’s talking about?” Harris asks his students, and turns to the whiteboard as they begin to call out. When Cindy drifts back into his thoughts she has to contend with the students’ thoughts that crowd her out. Harris beams at the class as they keep him focused. He writes his student’s responses in little boxes, beginning a conceptual map. The classroom shifts into a march, becoming his kingdom again. For the first time in days Harris feels like he’s in control.

“Good. Now we can start to look at the parts. Talk to me about how it sounds—actually David, why don’t you read it?” Harris asks one of his students. David begins to read, and after a moment two other students join in, prompted by a few subtle glances. Together they work to sound maniacal, impersonating a soulless, possessed horde. Harris laughs, about to say something, when suddenly the words fall away. More than a picture of Cindy enters his mind this time. A feeling takes ahold of him, half excitement and half fear, as if he was about to gain or lose everything he wanted. He feels the full anticipation of the night. With the words he was

saying the discussion, the poem, the morning leave as well. All that's left is Cindy, and a night back in high school he'd never meant to tell anyone about.

They're alone, breathing fast in the backseat of the car Harris managed to beg from his mother. His hands are trembling, and he can't stop thinking he's going to rip some part of Cindy's clothing with an accidental mammoth stroke. Of course the fear is irrational, because there's not enough room for that in the car. Not with how close they're pressed, faces locked together, kissing each other for life and air. He slips the dress off of her shoulders then fumbles with her bra while Cindy methodically undoes the buttons to his tux. They keep kissing each other, harder, not wanting to stop. He feels her tongue inside his mouth, and kisses her neck, taking his undershirt off. In one glorious moment her bra unsnaps, and for the first time he sees real naked breasts. But in the next few seconds everything grinds to a shuddering halt. Suddenly Cindy is crying, and he can't tell why but he knows he's made a mistake.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"I'm sorry." There's something so sweet and strange about the apology she manages through a full coursing sob. All his want turns to guilt, and he works to hide what's happened. As if he could wrap up her tears in a corsage and unsettled dress. He's not angry with her, part of him is even relieved, so that if she wasn't crying he'd be happy. Harris can't manage a word, but he wants so desperately to ask. It seemed like everything was ok. He hadn't meant anything like this.

"Are you alright?" he finally asks. Cindy nods, but nothing agrees with her answer. As Harris reaches out, wrapping his arms around her there are tears running down her face. He holds her for an awkward moment, and hopes that she's going to be all right. He was an idiot, thinking

the same girl who led youth group would want to hook up in a parking lot. Eventually Cindy calms down a little, and as she tries to do something about the splotches in her makeup Harris drives towards her house. Halfway there she turns to him with the question, and he's never been more confused.

“Do you want to pull off somewhere?” she asks, and for a moment neither of them say anything. Harris bites his lip, trying to tell in her eyes what she wants him to say. In the end his conscience won't let him say yes. So he lets her off at her parents, hoping none of what happened will come out. When he finished the short drive home and walks in the door his mother is still up. He knew she would be, and is at least grateful not to have to feel the awkwardness that would have come with a more successful night.

“How was it?” His mother sits in her massive chair in the center of the living room, a book folded on her lap. Waiting for him the same way he'd waited for her the day his father left. He had a feeling he could always find her here, in this space surrounded by all the things she was interested in. She'd filled the room with herself, filled the house somehow. Her mystery novels and thrillers lined the walls, closing the gaps that the other books had left, and Harris wondered suddenly why he never read any of them.

“It was fine. Kind of boring. A lot of people dancing really badly, really closely.”

“That was all of my adult life.” Both of them manage a grin. Harris realizes without him she'll be alone, and the thought scares him. This house is too large, too old for that.

“What are you going to do when I'm gone?” he asks. His mother brushes the question aside, surprised he still thinks there are things she hasn't considered.

“You’ll never be quite gone. I know it seems like you’re already there but, believe me. When I went to college I still had so much to learn. I still needed my mother. So, not that I wouldn’t be happy to have the extra free time...”

“Right.” Harris nods, then starts to head towards his room.

“Goodnight,” his mother calls after him. Once the door to his room closes he suddenly feels trapped, hating himself for feeling relieved when Cindy cried. Hating himself for wanting to stay in this house.

Pain courses through him, and Harris knows that he’s waking up, but the world keeps a haze. He wonders if he’s ever told Hannah, the road signs drifting by him marking places he can’t remember, and things he doesn’t understand. There were so many things he could have chosen over her, but she won out. And he can’t remember now, when it was, if it ever was, that he last told her that. How he loved her. Roads stretch on, cut off, arrows point under headings that never really fit. Harris doesn’t know why, but he has to drive away from home. There is something important at the end, and this is the way, it has to be.

Panic leaps up and he rams it down into his gut. He will find his way, he always finds his way. This is something he can do, for everything he can’t. More roads, more signs, strangers on sidewalks in a little town like any other little college town. People here must forget their lives waiting. Suddenly it’s certain that he’s gone too far. But if he goes back, which turn was it? There were dozens, and there isn’t time, there’s somewhere he needs to be. Harris fumbles for his phone, remembering that he can always call her. Hannah could help him—but the number is somewhere just out of reach. Ringed with threes, but that’s not enough to make the call.

By some magic he finds the building, and at first he's proud but the sick feeling in his stomach only grows stronger. There are eyes waiting there for him. Forget it. Forget the fear, be a man. Don't let anyone see this. Harris walks out of his car and into the school, and in just enough time finds the kingdom of a strange soul, ringed with the quotes of men who must be important. Brilliant. There are so many eyes on him and he focuses, trying to speak, until Hannah comes into his vision for that first time. There is the urge to run, a scream trying to leave his mouth. Harris imagines that he closes his eyes.

But his eyes never close. He is part of me.

Cannibal

“I have this dream where I’m sitting alone in a room, and even though I can’t see the flames I know there’s a fire. Smoke is coming from nowhere, filling the space up, turning everything black. When I look beside me I can see Thomas Veith, the one from the news, and he’s smiling this real creepy smile. Then there’s a girl, and I don’t know her but I know her name. Maggy. She’s younger than us, but she’s beautiful. She walks up to the two of us, and I can’t turn to look at Veith, but I know what he’s about to do. He holds his hands out, and I expect fire to leap from them. What’s weird is there’s still nothing, no flame. She comes up, and opens her mouth, and smoke just pours out. I can’t move, I can’t do anything and the room keeps getting hotter. The dream ends when I tip my head back, just like her, and I can see the cloud coming out of me.” The words hang in the air, and Shaun wonders how he has the courage to say this to Sandra. He’s afraid of what she’ll think, but he needs to tell another person about the guilt, the thoughts and dreams that are eating him from the inside out. Before this he’d spent a day not talking to anyone, and he couldn’t stand it.

They’re sitting in her house, allegedly studying. Books and notes spread out on the floor, taking up the spaces left by their sprawling bodies. Head down Shaun stares at Sandra from the corner of his eyes, making out her sharp nose and large brown eyes. She keeps her hair short and seems to always be wearing stripes or on days like today bright, swirling patterns. When he looks at her face instead of shock or discomfort there’s a question on her lips.

“Have you had that dream for a while?” Sandra asks Shaun, and he glances down, nodding.

“How long?” she asks. He hesitates, but he can tell Sandra can already guess.

“Not every night. Not even often. But, I’ve had it since I found out about Veith, for years. It started back up after what happened to Mr. Harris,” he says.

“Do you know why?”

“I, uh,” Shaun starts to answer, fumbling for something reasonable.

“I’m sorry, that was a stupid question. You don’t have to tell me. But I mean, I’ve had nightmares. Looking at what you’re afraid of helps, even if that means being scared, or admitting something you don’t want to admit,” Sandra tells him. She smiles, and as they go back to work Shaun thinks how strange it is, but nice, that she always knows what to say. Still he knows that he can’t keep talking to her like this, that he’ll end up hurting her.

Don’t.

The house shakes, and Shaun can’t stop it. He hears his voice rumbling like an earthquake through the walls. He needs to be left alone to pull himself together, but a wheel spins behind his eyes with all the thoughts he’s ever heard or had. Half the wheel is something from a dream, feelings, images and half spoken words. The other half is a scream cut to bits by the motion. Through his headphones the sound still comes out as if it were shouted an inch from his ear. With his eyes closed he can still see a pair of eyes reaching out to him, empty.

Don’t.

The word draws itself out into an impossible sound, and the whole house is about to come down. Outside his father is banging on the door, wandering what the hell is going on. Inside Shaun is realizing he’s not the victim, staring back at two souls, Harris and Veith, dead inside of him. The destroyer Shaun swallowed whole he can shut out, denying the vicious want, violence and sex in one smoking pile. He tells Veith he didn’t choose him, that he’s not sorry.

But Harris only comes closer, his eyes full of ice, empty, fading. Harris's hand reaches out with the reflex of a dying nerve.

Stop.

Even shouting he can't hear his own voice, but the house groans from it, the ceiling bowing under the pressure. Face to face with Harris Shaun feels himself lose his bearings, slipping into his own memory. He remembers something he had said to Sandra two days ago, then it slips away, and soon after he forgets that he had even talked to her. The morning drifts away and then the days behind it, so that as soon as he touches something it disappears. The only thing that stays is the empty eyes staring back at him. The music from his headphones cuts out, spinning off with the broken wheel into the void. Shaun sits in silence, lost and shaking in his bed as the house settles.

His father calls out, and right then the voice and words mean nothing. After a minute the house becomes familiar, the lamp, the chair, the bed again his. Gradually he remembers that this is his room, that the man worrying on the other side of the door is his father. Shaun listens gratefully to the heavy heartbeat, to his father wandering if he's dead. Somehow just understanding the worry is comforting. Shaun is about to get up and talk to his father when Harris's eyes flash into his mind, sending a chill through him. With everything else he remembers how dangerous he could be to his father, or to anyone. Instead of getting up he turns his headphones back on and slumps into his bed, thinking. Tracing through his memories, struggling to bring back the time when all of this started.

He was young. It seemed like everyone else walked around the world blind, never feeling the impressions of want or fear, the pictures and words, or the music that coursed through the

strangers surrounding them. The word telepath was only meant for books and movies, there wasn't even a name for what Shaun was. He could still remember his father holding up a history test, copied from the thoughts of his teacher, and trying to tell him.

"This has to stop," but what he'd heard was everything underneath, courtrooms and fire, helicopters and worry passing from his parents' thoughts to his. All he'd said and understood was this.

"There's someone else like me." As his mother explained in the gentlest terms why he had to hide, why everyone else might be afraid, his thoughts were on the one that had already been found. He didn't understand the danger, or the tragedy behind that discovery. Thomas Veith was just a photo from a news report. When Shaun stayed up that night and stepped out under the stars he didn't know anything. He called out blindly to the darkness with the voice his parents had told him not to use.

I'm just like you.

That was where it began. A voice answered in kind, and Shaun began to talk with the stranger, know him. By the time he saw the smile and understood the vicious want it was too late, and Veith had already found his way inside. Whatever Shaun was before is lost. Now as he looks back to the moment he met Thomas he sees it in reflection, his own memories buried under what the stranger saw. The view is from a prison cell, and in place of a boy calling out to the darkness he sees what Veith believed he'd found. A sleeping vampire. Shaun comes to the image and struggles against the feeling that it's all he is. Eventually he leaves Veith's mind and comes back to the present, but the thought lingers in his own breathing body. He spends the rest of the night trying to ignore what he can see from Veith's stolen memories, that the two of them meeting changed nothing.

From a book that can't hold everything in place he turns to the internet which will, surfing in a blind float from one thing to the other. He reads articles, checks on the friends he won't let himself talk to, and assumes a pixilated persona, becoming the hero of a virtual world without guilt and without evil. Somewhere in his roaming he comes to his favorite subject, his city's hero. What he finds is a news article, less than a paragraph, but Shaun's mind fills in the details wonderfully.

It's one A.M. and a young man named Matthew stands on a street corner, bulky and threatening. He's waiting for a customer, fingering the knife in his pocket. That same knife cut another dealer to shreds two days before, and Matt still smiles when he thinks of it.

"Fucker got what he was asking for," he mumbles, spitting on the street. Right now he can stand out here in the open. Hell, Matt could be here with drugs, cash, whatever he wants. No one's even going to think about touching him for a good long while. But business is slow, the nights quiet. He's almost starting to nod off when he sees the vague outline of someone coming towards him. He calls out, unconcerned, expecting someone trying to buy.

As Matt looks down to his arm he notices blood pouring out from a cut on his bicep, a red stream dripping down onto the pavement. He swears, reaching for his knife but in a second jerks his hands out of his pocket bloody. Cuts start to appear all along his body, but there's no one near him. Blinking back blood he shouts, trying to lash out, but there's nothing to hit. Eventually the anger turns to exhaustion, and he lies down on the street, realizing he's going to die. As he looks up he sees himself, holding the knife to his throat, and the word appears in his mind.

Confess.

Later Matt is at a police station, telling them how he murdered another man, down to the last detail. He's not trying to cut a deal, not asking for a lawyer. He signs what they put in front of him, and when the cops ask him why he keeps his mouth shut. He doesn't even let the word come out of him, because he knows what's waiting if he goes back outside.

Labyrinth. Every one of his victims calls the phantom by that name, without understanding why. They never hear him speak but they know what he is and compared to what else they've seen a name is nothing. When he finishes they confess, at victims doorsteps, at police stations, in writing before they do what they would never have had the courage to do otherwise.

Every time Shaun finds an article the legend grows in his mind. The man is a hero, tracking down pimps, drug dealers, murderers, rapists. Not just taking them off the streets, not just showing the world, but showing themselves exactly what they've done. The same hurt, down to the quaking fear and helplessness. Every day another article, more notice, and the nicest thing they can manage to call him is a vigilante. Otherwise they write murderer, sadist, freak. They don't understand what's happened.

Someone out there has everything under control, can do everything that Shaun can and uses it only to help other people. They should pray to him. Superman save us. Labyrinth never killed an innocent. Every punishment he delivered was a punishment the criminal himself had thought of. Shaun knows, because he's one of the same kind, Labyrinth is just another telepath. He can make people see what he wants, or what he finds inside of them. Everything that happened to them was in the victim's own twisted mind. Nothing that happened would be any less than they deserve. Shaun continues surfing, then looks through his favorites, finding in the videos and notes the moment when a hero was born.

The first evidence of a vigilante resembling Labyrinth is two years old, and Shaun has already watched it a dozen times, but he watches it again. It's a clip from a crime special, an interview with a woman who isn't identified past a fake first name. Here she seems young, attractive, happy, in contrast to the blurred pictures they show of her face swollen and bruised.

"I was out early jogging, cutting through the park when I saw a man coming up to me. He pulled out a gun and he tried to grab me. When I started struggling he hit me, and he kept hitting me. I thought I was going to die, when all of a sudden he just stopped. Froze where he was, like he was having a stroke. That gave me enough time to get away," the woman says all of this quickly, unflinching. The interview Shawn's watching online has been cut together so that it suddenly jumps forward, and her voice changes and becomes harassed.

"I know what I said on the police report, but I wasn't actually sure if anyone was there. I just glanced back and thought I saw something," the woman says.

"And when this man did confess the next day, police observed a number of self-inflicted injuries on his body," the reporter states meaningfully.

"Listen, I can't tell you exactly what happened, because I don't know. But if someone was there they saved my life. He would be a hero," she answers with conviction.

Worship is a strong word, but it's accurate for what Shaun is doing. It fits the fantasy, the love-worn image of approaching this dark judge on his knees and finally paying for what he's done. Shaun prays to Labyrinth for release, understanding, and destruction. He knew, felt in his animal mind they would meet. A normal person, if they knew what Shaun was or if they talked about Labyrinth would call them Flares. It was a catch all for the psychics, mostly children and teens, who had started making news. The name came from creatures like Veith, and it meant something dangerous and short lived. Flares didn't use the word, didn't have a name. Words

after all are scalpels in place of sledgehammers—Flares didn't need them. But Shaun sometimes thought that wasn't the reason. Men could be called men, but some things warranted, or demanded, a more personal address.

<[Are you there?]

Sandra's message appears on Shaun's screen, and a feeling courses through him, accompanied by the memory of their hands twined together. She is there every time he needs her. He replies, taking the image of Harris out of his mind when it appears. This far away it had to be safe to talk.

[Yeah, what's up?]>

<[Are you ok?]

Shaun pauses. He had told her everything he could before this. Maybe she didn't know why he felt what he did, why he thought like he did, but she knew honestly most days what it was that was going through his mind. It hurts to let another mirror go and become faceless.

[Yeah. Just thinking a lot. Haven't felt much like talking to anyone]>

<[You totally ignored me today, and yesterday. Are you pissed?]

[No. It's not you. I'm just...thinking. Need some alone time]>

He can see the expression on her face when she types the response. He wants that from her, to be poked like everything is all right.

<[When did you become such a girl?]

But he can't let it be all right. And this time it tears as he tries to say something back, so that she keeps typing.

<[I was just joking. You know you can have all the space you need. I just...]

<[I was worried.]

<[And there are things I'd like to talk to you about]

Shaun sets the feeling aside, knowing he has to protect her first.

[Thanks. This shouldn't be a long term thing, and I'm fine. But, yeah. I'll talk to you when I can]>

[I should go. It's getting late.]>

He wants her to bitch him out, make him stay and believe she wouldn't mind the risk. Instead she gives him what he asked for. Space.

<[ok. I guess I'll see you]

She logs off, and he starts typing a text, trying to explain. But if he hints, she'll come. Sandra can't be the next person he starts taking pieces of, he won't let it happen. Shaun hurls his phone onto his bed, and sits back with his hands clasped behind his head. An image drifts back, one he's been coming back to more and more. It's the first time they'd met more than casually, not as he'd seen it and forgotten, but how he'd seen it through her, and remembered.

His teeth were a little crooked, but she noticed his eyes first, saw them looking for hers, and she met them. Deep but not dark, they stayed on her when she talked, and came back with every other word he spoke back, nervous as he tried hard to keep his hands in his pockets. A small white bird against a wide blue sky, some image from a movie came in and stuck in her mind while they talked. They talked—and they both tried to sound older—about people, friends, what they were waiting to do in college. She loved being able to think about being somewhere else, and to tell someone so bluntly she was leaving not to find something, but because she hated every little thing about the school, the neighborhood, and the people around her. It was refreshing to be honest.

Everything that had ran through her mind he can make come into his. He'd never understood before the tragedy behind that. Because he holds that memory she won't be able to see it. He'd thought of her thumbing through the moment too, but really it would just be an ache when she reaches back. With enough time everything could be like that. He could tear her down piece by piece and before long she'd be like Harris, something worse than sleeping. Drooling and babbling softly. That fear more than anything is what keeps Shaun alone in his room. It is funny though, he can't really remember half the things she noticed about that moment. There are whole stretches that he's been near her and can't remember, and even when he does they're the smallest things. In his own memories it's nothing so vibrant.

Space is empty, cold. Lately it's Shaun's fantasy to drift in between the stars. To sit alone in the darkness and let his breath come out like smoke. He sees himself there, free, a thousand miles from the flitting thoughts that brush against his mind every day. Out beyond him there is a sea of cold light, and its glow hides a thousand mysteries waiting to be uncovered. He sees them. Countless, burning stars that do nothing to heat the darkness. They are cold and beautiful, unconcerned in their perfection. But that's just the freedom he wants, to become part of their quiet existence. To watch and be beyond touching. If he imagines it clearly a distance really does come between him and his surroundings. When he can reach this space and feel his thoughts held up in the vastness everything else falls away, his body forgotten along with the lives it holds. But when he comes back there is always the shock, the world roaring into him.

I bet she doesn't even know

Can't do this if I

Fucking goddam

Like a swimmer brought under by a wave Shaun surfaces, and tries to find his bearings amid the voices, images and feelings that keep pouring in. It only takes a second to know what had brought him back, the weight of a hand on his shoulder. He looks up and his friend is there, staring at the drawings on his notebook. Mike is tall and thin, tanned in a way that makes his brown hair look almost blond. Like every day he is dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. Suddenly smiling, Mike motions to his ears. Shaun takes his ear buds out, ignoring the small stab of pain as the room rushes in closer.

“Hey.” Shaun speaks quietly.

“Dude, what the hell have you been up to?” After a look at the study hall teacher, who is buried in a newspaper, Mike steals the desk next to Shaun. At the same time Shaun steals a few of his friend’s thoughts floating near the surface. Mike is worried about him, the days stand out in his mind when they haven’t talked. He’s noticed somehow when other people didn’t.

“C’mon, what’s up?” Mike asks again, and the voice is so familiar Shaun makes the mistake of meeting his eyes. Behind them are the remnants of a book, a discussion, all these little thoughts that make his friend want to reach out somehow for something solid. Shaun knows Mike wants to feel close to someone because of the way he feels displaced, and there isn’t anything strange about that. Looking into his mind is like coming home, but Shaun can’t stay. He knows that, but he asks the question on his mind.

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?” The two lock eyes for a moment, and Shaun feels his own question turned back in the glance. Mike still answers, willing to go first at least.

“Gave Andrew stitches once. I felt pretty bad about that.” Andrew was Mike’s little brother—Shaun had met him. He knows the wide face, short hair, that loud voice that won’t stop putting questions, but what he can see now isn’t what he knows. The spot of blood behind his

friend's eyes, the anger that only grew as his little brother howled, neither is anything like what Mike said, or what Shaun thinks of him. He doesn't like Andrew, but he doesn't hate him and Mike—it didn't seem like he could do that. But he meant to, Shaun knows just by the way the memory comes back. It isn't just guilt that makes it clear like yesterday, it's a sort of truth. In that moment the animal soul had been on the surface, and Mike had seen himself. If Shaun focuses hard he can remember that moment, and Mike will forget. Would that be a favor?

"I think I'm a vampire," Shaun says. He listens to his own voice, hovering outside of his body waiting for the reaction, a denial or a secret acceptance on the part of his friend.

"What do you mean?" Mike answers. Shaun finds the denial he wanted, but what he hoped for still makes him angry.

"Have you ever heard someone say something, and thought that it was just, perfect, so you take it? And you parrot that, but then you find something else. A word here and another somewhere else, until half of what you're saying is from someone else's pockets? Because of that you think like them, you see the world like they do." Shaun waits, not welcoming but inviting an interruption. Nothing comes so he keeps explaining, reveling in the sound of his own voice picking and hammering words out from his messy thoughts. He learned that from Harris, but he doesn't care just now.

"Well, that even isn't that bad. You can say it's inevitable, our parents teach us how to talk, right? But uh, what about when you grow up, then hear something and it's off somehow. You know you can say it better. So you take that too, and you pound it out, and now it's not just perfect, it's yours. You get to ignore where it came from, the old word and the awkward phrase are just gone. Now, you meet someone, and what you love about them is what you think they are, or what you could see them being. So you make them that, and if you're good at it, they become

your vision. Whatever they were that you didn't see is lost. And even if you know that, and all you want is to know them as they are you will still change them. The more you struggle the more you will cut their guts out and leave them on your table. Instead of your vision they become a subject of objective, neat, sterile dissection. They still die. Human interaction is about death, and the strong consume the weak. That's what I mean." Shaun ignores the look on Mike's face, wants to shock him. Wants someone to realize that, no, everything is not alright.

Mike looks at Shaun and the words of a benign comfort die in his mouth. What he feels isn't sympathy. Repulsion comes instead from his deeper parts, so that all of the neat little explanation Mike has just heard means only the emotion behind it, some disease of melancholy. Shaun appears through a formless gloom, and nothing can be said or done. As Shaun sits crouched there in Michael's brain he perceives how his friend suddenly likes him less for his weakness, and tries to hide his bitterness when he answers.

"I'm just out of it."

"Yeah, well I mean, if you ever need someone to talk to," Mike responds. His voice somehow still sounds kind.

"Sure."

When the study hall breaks up Shaun replaces his headphones, and almost without realizing passes by Sandra in the halls. Not that noticing her matters. Before her face can react, before he could see her and crawl back into the familiar space of her thoughts he hurries past, glad she hadn't been the one he tried to explain this to. All of his feelings rise to the surface even walking by her, he would have never been able to hide the quiet loneliness and guilt. He would have had to wait for her to pull away, knowing before she made the decision how she'd judged

him. But somehow Shaun is more terrified of finding otherwise. That she understands and shares his disease.

Can you hear me?

Shaun's eyes open. Posters, his desk, the night's threatening shadows of the things he'd become familiar with. He closes his eyes again, and hears the same voice calling.

Someone, if anyone can hear me. He's going to kill me. I don't deserve this.

Shaun answers, leaving his room. Pants, hoody, shoes, house keys. The streets are black and slick, reflecting the tiny suns of streetlamps in the evening's rain. A van edges by like a brooding animal, and Shaun pulls up his hood. Street signs, stop lights, cracked sidewalks giving way to the new and worn walkways of the city.

No, no, don't.

A pair of eyes meet Shaun's out of an idling police car, and he ducks into a gas station as he remembers the curfew, only to come out the other side and keep walking. Rounding a corner it comes to him, the image of a rusted knife.

Please—

And the last words cut off by a scream. The vision leaves him in the city at a crossroads. A hundred sleeping buildings, a dozen dark and silent roads in sight. Whoever he had followed is gone. But in the silence, alone, he whispers the word without thinking.

“Labyrinth.” And he felt sick having seen the killing room, and felt the warmth of blood.

Mrs. Cobb hasn't seen more than a glimpse of her son in two days when she finds him on the couch, staring up at the ceiling. It reminds her of the night she'd found him years ago, lying

on the stairs, and the way he'd seemed suddenly different. How she'd struggled to push out all the things that wandered in, and hardest against what found him that night.

“Good morning.” Her voice is warmer than the words.

Morning.

She doesn't chide him, but sits down in a chair, opening up her day planner. After what had happened with the house it's a relief just to have him in the living room, talking.

“Do you have anything to do for school today?” she asks.

Shaun shakes his head in response, drawing in his sprawling legs. She draws a breath, hesitating, than realizes he's already heard her question.

“Do they know who's going to replace Mr. Harris?”

“No. We'll probably have a substitute for the rest of the quarter,” he answers, his voice a little coarse. He hasn't been sleeping, she can tell in a glance. It kills her that two weeks ago things had been so different.

“It must be tough. I know you really liked him,” she says.

“Yeah. I'm sure it's tougher for him.” A pained smile crosses her son's face, and Mrs. Cobb wonders how much he knew about what had happened. He would have looked into his teachers, especially one he liked. He might have known more about what was happening than the teacher's wife.

“Do you feel guilty?” she asks.

“Yes,” he replies. The answer follows on the heels of her question, and she is surprised. He is normally more guarded.

“Because you couldn't see what was going wrong?”

He looks over at her, and she suddenly sees a thousand little snapshots of the teacher, his voice and fantasies coursing through her head. Then emptiness, confusion spreading through every picture she'd just seen until they aren't anything. In the last picture that stays, she sees his eyes, and the horrible way they fade. Mrs. Cobb sees all of this and knows, but Shaun still tells her.

"Because I made it happen."

"Why?" she asks him. It's all she can manage.

"At first I was just curious. I didn't know until I'd already hurt him, and I couldn't make myself stop. I really didn't know, not how bad it was getting," he answers her, and he's lying.

"How could you not know Shaun?"

"I, I just—"

"You murdered someone!" Her eyes are red, she's half shouting. She doesn't bother to disguise what she feels, not after years of being so gentle. He is supposed to be better than this.

"And you knew it. You just didn't care." She speaks in the silence, and her mind rushes through what to do, how to tell his father, how to control Shaun and make sure he doesn't hurt anyone else.

"I do care." He speaks softly to himself so that she barely notices.

"What are you doing?" She asks, her voice harsh.

"Being better," he answers.

Shaun gets up, and reaches for something. She tenses, but he is moving away, leaving before she even realizes what he is doing. She calls out after him, her voice fierce.

"Get back here!" But he is out the door, slamming it behind him and she is alone, putting the pieces back together.

Near the center of the city the voices become a river rushing out, pushing back against invaders with a mumbling roar. This is where Labyrinth makes his home, the stone jungle with its thrashing violence a living altar to his judgment. But Shaun hasn't come this far to worship. In the center of the chaos he lets the waters close over him, listening for the prayer among thousands Labyrinth will answer. His vision splits and at one moment Shaun is on the street and inside of a taxi, running across the park and ready to collapse as his phone rings. Some of the moments he can glean the meaning of, but the voices are legion. What comes through clearly isn't a prayer at all.

I wouldn't send

Hate what he

Leave

The last word comes with a flash of metal, a knife laced in blood as a wordless threat. Labyrinth, watching him. Shaun smiles, whispering under his breath:

"Come get me." Pressing deeper, looking to the bottom of the fleeting pictures and words Shaun forces himself to let go of his own senses, drifting offshore. He is not himself just now, watching the streets and buildings from every side. Somewhere in this space is the weakness Labyrinth scents for, and the one thing that Shaun can trust the animal inside of him will find. Despair. At the headwater he is bouncing from person to person without pausing to think and grasp the phrases, plans, or the soft city melody of screeching horns that rides across the tide of human minds like a thousand ripples. He becomes the people in the city, and forgets himself. The creature that exists then remembers what it was meant to do, and forgets its sins as it looks for the sins of others.

From voices beyond counting a few come into focus of the same tone struck through by gloom and regret. They pair themselves down to a core of the truly sick, men and women whose vision has narrowed to shut out everything but their own need, failure, and rage. The prayer is spoken by a man in the crowd, and it is short and bitter.

You don't have long before I find you. We're both going to die.

The pieces of Shaun slip together from out of the crowd, and the thoughts of violence fall into the body of a man in his late forties. A fantasy plays out in the man's mind of killing his wife by various means, even as he makes a very real plan to find and shoot her. His name is Jacob Kennings, a policeman who has just killed his partner for sleeping with his wife.

When Shaun looks below the surface of the man there is a vision of a bloodied face struggling to stare down the barrel of a gun. Then the kick, the noise loud enough to make another man jump and the body falling limp. This was Jacob's partner, and from the inside of him Shaun only feels a rush, a sense of satisfaction and power. All that matters for this man is getting revenge for this betrayal.

Jacob walks in plain clothes through the streets with a look on his face that begs for a challenge. As he strides out from the safety of the city's heart Shaun follows, certain that the two are not alone. The voices dwindle to a trickling mutter, and then come to nothing in the basement of a parking garage. Jacob moves for his car only to find himself surrounded by darkness. In his mind he stumbles for a few steps groping in the shadows, as in the garage he stands with the door to his Chevy Malibu half open. Shaun waits, watching for some movement, any sign of where the vision comes from. It takes him a full minute to realize there is someone standing right in front of his vision, a hand on Jacob's shoulder.

“Hey! Don’t you have someone else to focus on?” Shaun half shouted, his voice nearly failing him.

Labyrinth turned to Shaun. Dressed in black, the hero’s face was hidden behind a leather mask. He gave no answer. From the darkness in Jacob’s mind a hand with a gun comes down on the back of his head, sending him to the ground. A little shock of joy runs through Labyrinth at the pain and panic in the other man. On the inside Jacob is barely able to think past the pain and dizziness, feeling the blood as it pours out of his head. Shaun flinches with the blow, and feels something flit through the mind behind the mask. It seems like Labyrinth is hesitating, and Shaun finds his courage again.

“I know you’ve been stalking me. Why haven’t you done it? If you want to hurt someone, I’m right here.” Shaun kept talking, stepping closer. The gun comes from the darkness again, and Jacobs teeth set against each other. His mouth is numb and bleeding, the world dim as he stares down the barrel of a gun.

Let him go. You don’t need to hurt him.

That was Harris’s voice running through Labyrinth’s mind, borrowed to try and do some good. But something else comes out of Shaun as the gun cocks, and the cool muzzle presses between the murderer’s eyes.

I will make you forget how to breathe.

Now Veith speaks, threatening evil, and Labyrinth turns ever so slightly. Suddenly Shaun feels himself strapped down to a table, his shirt cut open. A scalpel grazes his skin, tracing a path in a thin trail of blood. At first he struggles, caught up in the fear that he might die here, or live through worse than he could imagine. But as the knife caresses him he looks into Labyrinth’s eyes and realizes there is nothing there. No thoughts, no sick joy or satisfaction. Shaun senses a

feeling away from the table and surgeon, and follows it. As an empty body stays behind he comes to rest in Labyrinth's mind, and watches the hero raise the knife, grasp it tighter, and then lie it down. There is something in its mind, a picture of a bird in a blue sky. Shaun lets himself fall out of the vision altogether, back into the garage and the echoes of the city.

"Why won't you do it?" He is close enough to Labyrinth now to see how slight the frame is under the folds of black, how short the monster turned out to be.

"Because I didn't want to hurt you. I wanted you to forget." Sandra takes off her mask, and Shaun's eyes harden. He looks back for signs in all the times he'd entered her mind, and realizes he can only see himself in the memories. Every time she'd come to him when he was panicking there had been a voice, her voice, pushing him there first.

It's our beautiful love story, vampire.

Shaun looks up, and he doesn't return her smile. He doesn't ask the question, but lets her see it run on the surface of his mind. How many people had she come after like the policeman?

"Seeing what I do doesn't change what it is."

"How many Sandra?" Her eyes waver when he finds them, and for a second he sees her, younger even than he had met Veith. Realizing she can make everyone around her do exactly what she wants.

"You'll make forty nine. You can't go home Shaun. Neither of us can."

"We should end it, together." He thinks of praying at her altar one more time, knowing that she understands, seeking destruction.

"Boy, we should start together. Even if all we can do is break things, sometimes people need that. There's a place somewhere for an artist and a hero, or a cannibal and a god."

There's no place for us.

He touches her mind for the last time, and then lets Veith out of his cage. The air catches fire, and after a moment of the brightest light he's ever seen he can feel his own skin and hers being stripped away. This is the penance she'd offered him, assuming he'd never accept. The souls inside of him can finally rest. But outside of that burning pain is another world, where a soft wind blows through the parking garage, and Labyrinth walks away from Shaun, into the night.

When Shaun comes to himself he is alone, the city asleep and the streets lit. At the top of the garage he looks out on the buildings that dwarf him, and the stars pouring out their heat into the silence. He doesn't bother calling out, only walks into the darkness. She already knows he's looking.