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Concerning the History of Tree People

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Abstract

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Concerning the History of Tree People is a low magic fantasy novella that traces the lives of indigenous peoples from pre-colonial times to present day. Told in a series of stories with differing forms and points of view, the novella examines the relationships between people and places and how history is written. Other themes include lineage, memory and identity development.

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Being a Collective Account of the History of the Tylrian Continent by that Honorable Gentleman Master William Goldberg

A REMARK ON AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE NATIVE TREE PEOPLES

Tylria was first discovered in the Year of our Savior 1503, whereupon the People of Castran, led by the Admiral Filgye, first discovered the Bay that was henceforth named after him. It was here too that Nine and Forty years later the people of that same great Nation returned, in a Company led by Sir George Ingles, and searched for a proper place to settle, and they did so on the far end of the Bay of Filgye for it had fertile soil and vast forests full of game. But finding that the ocean's air was not suitable to them, the Company continued Northward and settled among the forests that were protected from the ocean's winds.

It was here first in these wild spaces that the Company did also discover the Native Inhabitants, who were simple and ignorant in their Nature, having no king among them and surviving off of the forests. And it was here that Sir George Ingles did write of the Nature of the Natives, saying that they were short in stature and appeared Crafty and Sly, and were able to hide in the trees as if they were invisible. They were strangers to all manners of religions, speaking of no God but only of Nature and her Wonders. The Native Peoples were ignorant of Magick, and it was in this first time that Sir Ingles did discover that Natives could not perform the simplest of Casts, thus proving that the Sight of the great Savior was never upon them, for He did not Gift them with the capacities of Mind nor brightness of his Grace to make them worthy of Casting; their Language did sound beautiful like whispers of air, but it was of a kind that belongs to the Fae Peoples.

When the Company did Call upon the Magick of Light so that they would keep the dark Temptations of the forests at bay, the Native Peoples did begin climbing into the trees and became angered for they could not abide the Light. It was in the next morning that the Natives did attack the Company. But being small People with Natures simple, their Violence was not a threat, and the Company did overpower them with ease, driving them out of the North and across the Bay of Filgye. The Company sent the good word back to Castran that the land was fertile, and within Three and Twenty years in the Year of our Savior 1575, did establish a town near the Bay of Filgye, and they called this settlement Haven as it was a sanctuary from dark places of the world.

And several of the Servants of our Savior did venture into the dark forests to converse with the ignorant Native Peoples, in hopes of learning their language and exposing them to the Light of the Savior Himself. It was during these attempts to convert the Peoples that it was discovered the Natives had no name for themselves, and so they were named Tree Peoples, in a hope to set them within the order of the World...

Journals of Jeffrey Cantor, Naturalist on the First Tylrian Southern Expedition

Edited by Marcus Crowe

23rd Day of Talis Month, the Year of our Savior 1748

My writing hand is cramped from hours of clutching the rails. Chose to write on deck, despite an early onset of sea sickness, as I cannot bring myself to retire to my cabin as of yet, even at this late hour. We set off at daybreak from Filgye's Bay as Captain Shalen requested. Spent a good portion of the day on deck, watching the port of Haven shrink back into the forest. Having passed the edges of the bay sometime after midday, we are now on the open ocean. The salted air and the vastness of the ocean surprised me. Nothing like the close knit trees and the dense forests that are now blurs along the dark shoreline. Away from the lights of Haven, the forest reminds me of Goldberg's sinister descriptions of the land before Ingles' men first settled here. Soon we too shall be going into the unknown places of the world.

The name of our vessel is the Kitsap. Our craft is a long river boat with a flat bottom that is best for shallow waters. Even now we cling to the shore. I can see the rest of the crew looking longingly out at the sea beyond.

There is the cook, who simply goes by Murphy, and then the eight crewmen who I have already spoken of. Their faces, as of yet, are all interchangeable to me. They are all sailors that I have encountered around Haven, all able-bodied crewman who are not overly partial to drink. Captain Shalen will not have a sloppy expedition. Neither will his first mate, Thomas Burgo, a stocky man in his late twenties who gives off the air of one content to be a life-long bachelor. I have heard that they have served for some years together, running trade routes between Haven, Wheatontown in the North and the Old Continent.

There is no cabin boy, no assistant to help me with any of my drawings. I did not bring my paints or easel with me, as they would be a burden once we begin our overland expedition. My sketchbook is already beginning to fill with drawings of the crew and the coasts. As I do not know how to ready the ship either, I expect that my days will be filled with scientific observation and study. When the men were loading the supplies these past few days I assisted by moving my own meager belongings onboard. I am lucky enough to have my own cabin, a small luxury on such a voyage.

I was taken on this voyage by the recommendation of Professor Jaren of Haven College. I purpose is to document the Natives of the Southern region, be they flora, fauna or peoples. I do not have much experience with the latter, only having read the formative texts on the study of Natives including Goldberg's *History*, the remnants of Ingles' journals and the invaluable *Investigation on Native Peoples, Journals of Westernward Expeditions* and *A Native Vocabulary* by Lathan. But as it is I will be spending a good amount of time in my cabin reviewing *A Native Vocabulary*. It is still surprising to me now that I finally possess my own copy, a small luxury bought with a portion of the two hundred astruls that were to be paid to the crew before sailing. The other six hundred shall come with safe return. I have brought none of the money on the expedition of course; where we are going it shall be of little use to us. The remainder of the sum is with May, who is now residing at her sister's in Wheatontown.

There has already been some talk amongst the crew about what will happen if the expedition is successful, and we do find a place in the Southern lands to start another port for His Majesty. Some ponder if they will relocate there. As for myself, I would be more than happy to do so. To live on the edge of the wilds, with uncharted spaces for me to complete my own

studies is a rare chance indeed. May would be upset by the decision however. She clings to her memories of Castran and its large cities, never mind that her family has done very well for themselves in the New World.

Cannot bring myself to retire just yet though the light is failing. Why should I retreat to the privacy of my own cabin when new frontiers are ahead?

25th Day of Talis Month

Did not write yesterday. Did not retire early the night before, as I insisted on being of some use to the crew and taking first Watch. Studied Lathan's *Vocabulary* by Light. One of the sailors approached me when it was past midnight, asking if I was scared of the dark. When I explained that the illumination was pleasant to read by, he informed me that I was not to be doing so.

"Surely it is better to Light the way and see any disturbances that we may come across," I said.

"Either that, sir, or you will plumb Exhaust yourself."

It was true. By the time I was relieved, I was Exhausted, from a mixture of the excitement, the Casting and the seasickness that had taken a hold of me.

Today we near the mouth of the Lathan River. A passage in *Journals of Westernward Expeditions* describes going up river during a dry season of sorts. There are many passages about how Lathan's boat went aground, and how he forced the men to haul it up and off the rocks. I

believe we entered his river only by cresting over the top of the rocks on a large wave, an ordeal that left me gritting my teeth.

A low mood has come upon the ship. The sailors were not eager to enter shallow waters, preferring open seaways to cloistered trees. I myself am in awe of the great rocky cliffs on either side of the river, which is quite wide, big enough for three of our craft to float side by side one another. Finally, being able to witness the wonders that I have only read about in books! No signs of the Natives as of yet. I spent many hours today gazing at the riverbanks, searching for any signs of the elusive Peoples. Retired only when my eyes grew weary. It is difficult to read my own words by Light now. There will be little Casting in the next days, as I recover from my Exhaustion. The other sailors seem to have grown resilient to it; they are not the least bit Exhausted, yet Cast Quicken on themselves regularly. Must find a way to build up my own stamina, or when we form a landing party I will be the one that slows the entire Company down.

30th day of Talis Month

The river journey is awfully slow. We have found our sail to be useless, as the wind does not carry through the trees enough to inflate it. Spend most of my time on deck attempting to discover something new but the hours pass by slowly. Most of the flora and fauna here are species that I have encountered many times, so I have taken to reading instead.

I am tracing our progress with that of Lathan's sixty years beforehand, although with the way the river erodes away at its banks some of the landmarks he mentioned have since disappeared. We have another two weeks along this route at least. Captain and First Mate Burgo are more often than not at the ship's wheel, steering it along the river's low meandering curves.

The pace is not satisfying to Mr. Burgo. His impatience clearly shows upon his face. But there is no point in trying the oars. They would undoubtedly stick in the mud.

I have also not taken to the prayers that are said before each meal—the most common one is the Deliverance Prayer, a common tradition among sailors as I am told as it requests protection from the elements of Nature. Last night I remained silent while the men chanted. I have reason to believe that some of the crewmen suspect I am not a Believer, due to the black looks they gave me. I do worship Him, but out of doors as opposed to in a chapel, and through study of His Wonders instead of prayer.

4th day of Adallan Month

Have compiled my own list of key vocabulary phrases from Lathan's works. To pass the time I have begun reciting to myself, an exercise which amuses the crew greatly. They tease me about going Native. Mr. Murphy is particularly amused, as I try to converse with him about food. He is resistant to my attempts to teach him anything, even though if we run into any natives it is he who will have the greatest need of securing ingredients for our crew! He says that he is capable of gathering his own foodstuffs and that there is no need to go about chattering like a bird.

I am basing my pronunciation off of Lathan's approximations in *Vocabularies*. Lathan was no linguist; he admits in his own chronicles and asserts that all of the spellings are phonetic as the Natives have no written word to speak of. Where the emphasis is placed, not to mention grammatical composition, is anyone's guess.

15th day of Adallan month

Quite an uproar today! Saw a boat—undoubtedly of Native origin—while I was on deck today and immediately requested that we make landfall.

Compared the structure to those recorded in Lathan's and Goldberg's works. The structure is different than what their observations say, which is fascinating. The boat does not have any of the tribal carvings that they speak of; apparently Northern tribes tend to carve waves along the edges of the boat so they can gain protection from the water spirits. The boat is a brilliant shade of white. Three weeks away from Haven now and finally a new discovery!

I myself wanted to take the boat back on board with us, for I feared that my sketches and observations would not do the craft justice. The craft is incredibly light and small, like something out of a story about the Faeries. But not only did the sailors not wish to take it on board, they wanted to burn it! Perceiving it as a bad omen, a mark of the Tempter! That is why I do not take kindly to churches and prayers—burning such a discovery indeed! Make me upset just to recall it.

Plenty of the men seem to think that is too early for Natives; that this is still civilized country. Where they have gotten this idea I do not know, although perhaps it is from my own discussions of Lathan's journals at dinner. We are not yet at the fork in the river where the explorer's expedition was halted. If the land was already written about, it must not be wild, in their opinions.

Thankfully the Captain did not agree with the suggestion of burning, but nor would he allow me to take the boat with him. He claimed the Natives probably were harboring their craft

here. Better to leave it and then inquire about the boat once we actually encountered them. As of such, there were problems with our own vessel.

In order to investigate the Native boat we had pulled the Kitsap up on a sandbar of sorts, more river mud than fine sand. By the time the eleven of us, as Mr. Murphy had remained on board, had returned from investigating the boat, the Kitsap had sank into the mud. Managed to get the anchor up with three men combining their efforts. Spent the next four hours attempting to push the Kitsap down river. There was much cursing about how there was no tide, how our boat had a damnably flat bottom. Tried to get out of the hauling—complaining of blisters—in order to sketch the Native boat more, but was foiled. Mr. Burgo has a watchful eye. Now all of us, including myself, have blisters upon blisters on our hands. Once or twice I stuck fast in the mud—all of us were knee deep in it—and had to be wrenched free. Much thanks to the Captain who pulled with us. The only time that I saw him leave or complain was when he ordered Mr. Murphy to come aid us. After we managed to free the Kitsap it was agreed by all the company that there would be no more docking on sandbars where it could be avoided.

Spent most of the remaining afternoon sketching—I fear so much that the form of the boat will be lost in my memory—and dunking my clothing over the side, trying to scrub the mud out of my trousers. I had taken to wearing the ones that May has patched up for me, the ones worn soft by years of use. Now they are soiled from the mud. The thick smell reminds me of rotting leaves. I don't know if they shall ever be clean. Soap is also in short supply on this boat.

17th day of Adallan month

Spoke to the Captain about walking along the river, as at present we are traveling slowly and there are no records of faster waters in Lastan's journals. Captain approved of my decision to explore the coasts. No species new to science as of yet, although it was the first time I had encountered many of these specimens in the wild. Picked a great many leaves and shoots that are now pressed between the pages of my sketchbook. We have left the rocky cliffs far behind and now travel between low lying forested riverbanks. But none of this land can be settled, not without a good deal of hacking and burning away the underbrush.

Held a shouted conversation across the water with Mr. Palbsey and Mr. Hodges, who were on deck for most of the day. Much to their dismay, it is faster to walk than it is to travel by boat. The Captain refuses to portage as of yet. I believe that he is waiting for the fork in the river and the falls afterwards.

No signs of the Natives at all. Goldberg wrote in his *History* that they have a tendency to flee from settlers, and that nearly all the Natives know how to swim, something that most sailors do not even know how to do! Most of the crew says that if they fall into the water, it is up to the Savior what will happen. Still thinking about the boat—I cannot believe that it was an abandoned craft, but if the Natives were not driven away by Lathan sixty years ago, where are they hiding?

Spent a good portion of the day trying to get back to the Kitsap. Casted Light, a bad idea considering I had missed midday rations because of this venture and was Exhausted because of it. Decided to do a Quicken spell to ensure a fast passage. Avoided dropping any of my specimens or notes in the water, as well as the worst of the river mud. After much hallowing finally got Mr. Palbsey to take notice of me. He hauled me on board and I immediately set to showing him the various plant species I had found.

“It seems that you had a better day than I,” he said. “Ain’t any fish in this damnable river. You said the Natives should be taking more to the water? Or was it Captain that said that? Anyhow, no surprise that they ain’t doing so, with no fish here.”

“You miss the sea,” I said. He gave me a sideways glance but didn’t respond.

19th day of Adallan month

Mr. Servil has been approaching me when I set to writing or reading. For a long time I thought that he was just set to bother me; he still does not approve of me Casting during watch so I can read by my own Light. The past few days he has been asking me what I have been reading. I have answered curtly. To my surprise, I have not received any gruff responses.

Yesterday he saw me reading over Lathan’s *Vocabularies*. After a good many of the crew have expressed annoyance at my “Native practice” I have taken to muttering to myself. Mr. Servil approached and asked what I was doing. I asked if he had taken an interest in my studies, and if he was wondering when we would reach new country. He did not seem much interested in that, but did seem wary. He looked about to see if there was anyone listening before continuing; I noticed that he was carrying a small bundle of newspapers with him.

“It’s the reading part that interests me, sir,” he said.

“But I don’t understand,” I said.

Mr. Servil winced as if I had struck him. “It’s the part where, well, I can’t read, Mr. Cantor sir.” He was going red about the ears. “Most of the sailors can’t sir, but they don’t mind, figure it’s not their place to. I, though, always had a great interest in reading, but I’ve only got it

enough so I am able to know where passages are in the Book are, if you understand my meaning sir.” His voice grew soft. “Please Mr. Cantor sir. If you could teach me reading, it would be...well books are hard to come by, but you can always get the papers at port. It would be a difference sir, if I could understand them.

I admitted that none of the reading materials I brought on board were appropriate for a beginner. Neither was I someone who considered himself a good instructor. But I still offered to give him lessons. Then he explained to me that we could use the newspapers, all of which he had picked up the last time went to port in Castran.

“Originally sir, I got them for the pictures, but those got boring. I started to wonder about the words themselves, and I got to thinking about how awfully nice it would be to just be able to get your news of the world from the papers as opposed to having someone tell you about it all of the time.”

I have already worked with him on his letters. It is clear that William is very eager to learn, but will often get frustrated if we go at it for more than two hours. We have to keep the lessons in secret because of his insecurities.

Although it was the end of summer when we left Haven, the weather here is quite warm. No Natives as of yet. I find myself daydreaming during my walks on the shore, thinking that I am back home with May. No doubt we are in the Southern lands now that Lathan has written about. The humidity, the nights filled with the shuddering and chirping of insects, and the thick air make it hard to rest at any time of day or night.

21st day of Adallan month

Have abandoned hope of sleeping.

Had above deck, in hopes of finding some relief from the stuff air in my cabin. Found two of the crew members were bent over the railing of the ship. One of them, Mr. Palbsey, had been set to watch earlier that night. Heard him praying.

“Dear Savior in heaven, I do not know what this means but I understand that if it is an image sent by the Tempter that you shall remove it from my sight—”

“Blimey,” said his companion. Mr. Swanson, by the accent. “Do you think it’s one of them Natives—?”

“What is it now gentlemen?” I began. Mr. Palbsey started.

“Oh bless his heart, it’s the naturalist,” said Swanson, slapping the trembling Mr. Palbsey on the back. “Come on now Peter, I’m sure if it’s just one of those stinking Natives—”

“It’s not a Native and you bloody well know it.”

I Casted Light, a feat that the sailors hadn’t managed, perhaps because of their fear. Was difficult for me to focus on the maintaining the Light, as the sight filled me with awe.

It was the same white boat that we had encountered many weeks ago. It was gliding towards us, still a good ways away, enough to still be blurred in the thick heat. And there was someone in the craft, looking back at us. It was a woman. But it was not any sort of woman that I have ever seen on this earth. In the light it was difficult to see if her skin was the color of the deep shadows that were surrounding us on either side of the river bank or if she was actually the color of starlight that was coming through the treetops from the heavens. It was then that I saw she was naked, that she did not seem to be steering the boat away at all but was following the

Kitsap as if she was a part of the river. She gazed at us intently, her eyes—and even from that far off I could tell her eyes were of a deep brown.

“Wings,” Mr. Palbsey was saying. “She’s got bloody wings coming out of her back, do you see that?”

And so there were. A giant pair of butterfly wings that seemed like if they too were made out of the mist and starlight. I curse myself even now, as I record the description of her, of not having my sketchbook! Nothing to document such a sight, a woman with wings! A Fae woman! And yet the sailors did not see her as a new discovery to science, but a monstrosity!

“She’s a witch, a fae spirit I tell you,” Mr. Palbsey blubbered. “Don’t let her get too close, dear Savior send her image away from me...”

“Dear lord she ain’t doing any harm, let her...”

Mr. Palbsey had loosed a rock. I did not hear it crack against the boat but in that moment she vanished like the mist itself. The two sailors were making the sign against the Tempter, saying that they needed to tell the Captain about it. But surely he will not believe us—Fae were the stuff of children’s stories, or so I thought before tonight.

We stayed together until the next watch was called, the men out of fear, myself for I was trying to see if I could catch another glimpse of the woman. Retired to my cabin and tried to find a mention of such a woman in my books. Goldberg did write about men encountering women of the forest; many of the adventurers described them as Fae Folk with butterfly wings, but also dismissed them as visions of the Tempter.

Questions that I now have, as I believe that I have happened upon one of the Great Mysteries of the Natural World: Was she like the Fae Spirits that are spoken of in old folklore on the Old Continent? There is no reference to any type of deity that the Natives worship; Goldberg is careful to point out many times over that they are godless creatures, certainly without the light of our Savior. So as of yet, there is no recorded explanation for what we have seen on this night.

23rd day of Adallan month

We have finally reached the falls. It is the end of Lathan's journals and known country. The Captain and Mr. Burgo are discussing the best course of action. There is no point in taking the Kitsap over. Even now she strains at her anchor. I am writing some distance away from the water but my paper is damp from the thick mists of the falls and the air here.

I believe that the Captain means to take us towards the eastern facing fork in hopes that this will get us to the sea. Unfortunate, for no doubt he will plot out the most direct route, considering the nature of our expedition is more for the establishment of a settlement than scientific exploration. The sea is our best hope for a practical place to settle; after mapping a good place and claiming it in the name of His Majesty of Castran, we are no doubt going back to Haven and perhaps a select few to the Old Continent.

No sign of the Fae woman.

26th day of Adallan month

We have taken to the woods. I now write surrounded by trees.

The sailors are displeased about beginning this new leg of the journey. I think the wildest place they have been in is the wrong side of a port. We took the Kitsap into an inlet, a process which required going back upriver. It was a horrible and exhausting feat, as to move the boat took us the entire day, as opposed the twenty minutes that it took us to move past the inlet to the falls when we were going with the current. We have taken care to secure the vessel so it does not go adrift. Reluctant to leave my books, but they all remain on board besides *Vocabularies*.

We first hiked down the falls and are now keeping close to the river, for the access to fresh water. It is slow going. We are hauling a great deal of supplies with us, including one of the small boats that came with our craft in case we have any need to go on the water. With the slower pace, almost slower than our voyage on the Kitsap, the flies do not have to work to take bites out of us. Setting up camp is also a challenge, as we must find spaces that are not muddy. The terrain itself is almost like a swamp. There are a great many pools of water and swarms of insects.

The woods here are sparser than they are back home, but I must say that the trees are absolutely immense! I've never seen anything like them in my entire life, some of them are big enough that six of us, hand in hand, are barely enough to encircle them. I wonder about the seeds that are able to produce such organisms. Determined to find one.

No signs of the Natives at all. Or the Fae woman. Although I believe Mr. Swanson and Mr. Palbsey have spoken of her, for I heard talk of witch folk in the woods around the fire this evening.

28th day of Adallan month

Rain.

Fighting to keep this paper dry. Purchased a small sack of oilskin in Haven, but cannot write with it on.

Lack of good drainage at camp, due to clay soil. Filled up notebook with new specimens, but fear they will rot. No new fauna only deer and sq...¹

.... Natives, perhaps they are on the coast?

30th day of Adallan month

Little time to collect any sorts of new plant species. Pages of sketchbook are stuffed. Fear rain will damage them.

Mr. Servil bought a newspaper with him. Try to show him his letter at night. Will not take chances on *Vocabularies* getting wet. Have discovered that it is difficult for him to read m...²

¹ First instance of water damage in the original copy. Unclear if this was due to poor preservation or the rain that Cantor writes of. Any damaged parts of the journal from here on out will be delineated by a ...

² There are least four entries, as far as historians can tell, between this entry and the following. From cross referencing Captain Shalen's and the remnants of First Mate Burgo's journals, it is clear that the expedition switched to smaller ration portions in order to go further in the journey, as they had not yet seen any sign of the sea. It is estimated that two days before the recording of the following entry, the party went on the hilltop as described in Captain Shalen's journal and were able to view the sea from that point on.

...Olda month

First evidence of Natives in this new region!

Today during our midday rations I discovered a Native carving—very simple in its nature, only a circle, but unmistakably carved by human hands! Cannot tell if they made camp nearby as the rain has all but washed any signs away. Also noticed stripped bark on some of the smaller trees here—clean cuts indicate it was done by Natives!

The trees continue to grow tall here even as we approach the shoreline. Captain believes there is a delta nearby that supports their massive growth, a theory supported by the whiffs of rotting plant matter here and there and the marshy terrain.

12th day of Olda month

After making camp we spread out in all directions, six parties of two with the Captain and the First Mate. I went towards the beach with Mr. Servil. There is a river basin further south, with what looks like to be fertile soil. No signs of agriculture. No small animal traps that I could take notice of. Definitely an ideal place to settle. Mr. Servil and I went further north, going along the sandy beaches on the coast.

Spied a new species of dregan today! At first I thought it was a bird for it had the coloration and size of one, but then I realized that it was not feathers that I was looking at but scales. Have only read about dregans in books, but this one did not resemble any of the sketches

I had seen! Mr. Servil said it was a probably a female, guessing by the grey color. He has had the opportunity to see other species on his trips to the Southern parts of the Old Continent.

“They be fierce little buggers. Don’t know much about the scales at all although I think it would be a great thing to hang one up on the mantelpiece. They do breathe fire though, that’s the scary bit about all of it. A buddy of mine, whenever we were traveling, he would try and catch one. Tried to get dang close to one and put a bag over its head, but it burned his whole hand it did. I told him, put a Hold spell on it, mebbe you’ll get it. He was talking about some of the people of the South Castran ports, they would wear them for jewelry, the scales I mean.”

We watched the little lizard glide over the sea, searching for any sort of fish. “Mebbe you’ll get your dregan someday Mr. Cantor, although you may need a great more people than just me and you to get it.”

I wonder what May would say if I was to bring one of the dregans back and hang it over the mantelpiece...³

... also concerned about getting the boat back over the falls, and the need for good land to be surveyed. Also the Native problem, as Captain calls it. No questioning that we were going to be the first Castrans that they have ever encountered. I assured the Captain that I knew enough of

³ From the journals of Captain Shalen, historians believe that the parties reconvened, and there was some concern by many of the members of the swampy conditions that they had found farther inland; there was a particular fear of yellow fever, transmitted by mosquitoes, that was believed to be spread by marsh gasses. But it was clear that the Eastern fork of the Lathan River. Captain Shalen believed the best path would be to return to the Kitsap and sail out of the delta. The following discussion, conducted between Captain Charles Shalen and Jeffrey Cantor, was apparently a private one about the possibility of encountering native peoples.

the language to communicate that we were not hostile. He, however, was not willing to treat the Natives as anything but dangerous until we had evidence to the contrary.

“I am not willing,” I said, “to enter Native territory with any sort of weapon besides a knife, which would be more for survival purposes and not as actual defense. I will not take a gun with me Captain.”

“If I order you to take a gun with you, you will be taking a gun with you Mr. Cantor. If you are having any sort of difficulty firing it then I am sure one of the men will be more than happy to teach you.”

I will continue on foot, complete with rations, and a gun, to encounter the Natives by myself. The purpose is to scout out the land in order to identify potential settlements. The Natives probably inhabit areas that are good for farming and fishing. My own survival will depend on coming to agreeable terms with them, as the rest of the company would be returning to the Kitsap and send the boat down river.

As of tomorrow morning then, I will head out to encounter the natives on their own territory, no doubt as great and notable a feat as Goldberg’s own expeditions ever were. My plant specimens have been given to Mr. Burgo for safekeeping.

Circles

In the beginning, which is always, there is Te.

The air is heavy with the scent of salt, the heat of high noon. Te digs her toes into the warm earth, the particles of soil sifting between her toes. There is a soft breeze flowing through the tree branches. She stands, rooted.

Breathe.

The forest breathes with her. Across the clearing, a fire lizard unfolds his wings to catch the heat of the day, scales glinting in the sunlight. He is clinging to the edge of a tree trunk, wing veins thin and spidery like a leaf's.

The lizard opens one eye. He blinks, then takes off in a spiral of legs, wings and tail, bits of bark splintering off the tree in his wake. Te laughs as he loops above her head, the sunlight shining through his translucent wings, making tiny short-lived rainbows on the ground. Te follows him to the beach, through the summer grasses. The ground slopes, changing from hard packed earth to sand, from tree trunks to beach grass. Te leans back on her heels as she descends, breathing harder once she begins to run across the sand. The fire lizard glides above the shallows, skimming the top of the water.

The silver glint of fish scales. The fire lizard diving. Te reaches the water as he emerges, a purple streaked nightfish caught in his jaws. And where there are nightfish, there are sweetfish.

Te comes to a small inlet in the bay, peers through the water at the frothy masses of sweetfish eggs clustered against the rocks. Sometimes, if she Listens, there will be someone else

in the water staring back at her, a lady with a long fish tail and deep eyes like the bottom of a lake. But today there are only sweetfish eggs, tiny circles that are not yet ready to be taken.

Smoke. The fire lizard is perched on a rock, a jet of flame coursing from his mouth, burning off the slimy poison found on the nightfish's scales.

Circles. The fire lizard's eyes, the sweetfish's eggs, the tide pool, the base of a tree, the deep brown eyes of Te's people. Te is born of circles, of her first circle of breath by the light of the summer sun. The breath escaping her father's lips as he passed into death after a battle with a neighboring tribe, only days after Te was born. The silver circle of the moon above as Te's tribe set him in the earth on the island. Circles spreading and bubbling around one another in so many exhalations, life circles of all of the creatures as they live together and fight one another, the circles of the revolving heavens. Circles bumping up against one another, even when death is growing bigger and squeezing the life out of a creature, forcing out their breath. Even when death clouded the land, as it did when Te's people went to war against others of her kind. A squeeze, sharp and all at once or gentle and slow, a pressure that all must face before they pass.

Nothing given. Nothing taken away. It is a truth Te knows with every breath.

Te watches the fire lizard tear at his fish dinner. Soon she will go back to the forest, to tell her mother that the sweetfish eggs have not hatched yet. There is no word in Te's language for waiting. Things are as they are, and her people are patient ones.

History will name her kind Tree People. But this is an untruth, for Te's people are of everything, of the great circle, of more than just the trees that hold up the heavens with their arms.

In the beginning, which is always, there are questions.

Te's people take shelter in the deep forest, away from the shore with its waves and storms. They make lean-to shelters against the bases of the huge trees. Te is with her brother Little One on her lap. He will be called Little One, like all of the Little Ones before him, until he grows old enough to choose his own name.

The children chatter like birds. "What did the winged ladies tell you Te?"

"They said that the sweetfish eggs will be good this year, when the moon is fuller. That it will rain tomorrow."

"It does not smell like rain," one of the children, who calls himself Inan, says.

"Perhaps you have not been Listening."

"We cannot have sweetfish eggs yet?"

"You could, but they would not be good." When Te speaks, the children do not speak much. For what Te says usually comes to pass.

For even among Tree People, all who are good Listeners, Te is different. The other people are quiet, but not silent or still enough to watch and see women of the forest, the ones with butterfly wings and voices low and crooning like cricket songs. Te spends many of her days in silence, pondering the moon or the spots on the beetle's back, lying on the forest floor with her arms wide like the limbs of a tree. Just to Listen.

For Listening is with the whole body. Listening is being, is knowing your own place in the circle. For most Little Ones, it takes a long time to learn how to Listen even for a short time.

Two or three summers of babbling and fidgeting will pass before Little Ones can Listen enough to hear their own names from deep within.

Te did not babble when she was called Little One. Her mother, Aila, thought her Little One was grieving for her father who had passed. But a summer later, her Little One spoke her first word with a deep sound of knowing in her voice – Te.

For the best Listeners do not need to learn how to Listen. They simply remember how.

In the beginning, which is always, there are dreams.

Te cannot breathe.

The whole forest is burning. The flames eat away at the trees, the earth. The camp is full of burning people, cooked by fire that eats away at them from the inside.

Te screams. There is only the darkness of the hut. No flames. Only sleeping figure of her mother, her hair grey like winter skies, and Little One. There is a burning in the hollow of Te's chest. She stumbles outside of the hut. The night is thick with the sounds of frogs and creaking insects. Te feels like her limbs are on fire, that ground is made of hot coals. Even once she reaches the beach, with cool sand under her feet, the feeling does not go away. Te runs into the surf, gasping as sea comes up to her waist, knocking the breath out of her.

Breathe.

Her lungs expand and collapse, expand and collapse, cleansing the heat from the dream. The surf laps up against the shore and the moon grows fuller. It is almond shaped now, like a fire

lizard's eye. The ocean air is warm on her face and the waves send cool vibrations up and down her body. She closes her eyes, a girl held in the arms of the ocean.

The woman of the water is there, with her shimmering powerful tail and hair like sunlight upon the ocean waves. She takes Te's hand and the girl feels that the fingers are soft and smooth like the stones the water wears away. The woman is crying and her tears are reflected in the light of the moon.

The fire returns, but it is a strange fire. And the ocean as Te knows it is gone.

For the sea is there but it is thick with mud that smells foul and there are thin brightly colored shards floating on its surface. The sun is too bright and the air is thick with the smell of burning. The trees are gone, and Te is facing a giant rock face that shines. But it is a cold hard shine like that of the stars. Rock faces up and down the coast, and twisting vines of rocks where loud and roaring things belch foul smelling air. Te chokes—

There is the quiet lap of the sea on the shore. The sea water burns her mouth and nose. Te coughs, splutters, a foul taste lingering in her mouth. The taste of that other sea, the one she did not know. She feels the woman's hands lifting her up and out of the water so she can breathe. Once the pain begins to ebb away, Te thinks that perhaps this, too, is a dream.

You must teach him. You must teach him for only he knows what is coming, the woman whispers.

And Te is on the shore, shivering. There is no sign of the woman in the waves.

In the beginning, which is always, there is passing.

There is no word in Te's language for coming or going. There is only what is now, what is always here.

Te is sitting against a tree, when the world's breath catches. There is a stutter in the great circle. Te's stomach clenches hard. She digs her fingers into the ground. The world sways on its axis.

There is a man on the other side of the clearing.

But this man is not like any of the ones in Te's village. His skin is pale like the underside of a fish belly. She can see the sweat glistening on his brow and no wonder, for his whole body is wrapped up in cloth in high summer. Te's dress is thin, made from the woven hair of the deer and the soft beach grasses. Thin so she is able to feel the air on her skin.

Te hunkers low in the grass, eyes barely peeking out over the stalks, every fiber of her being vibrating, blending in so the man cannot see her. The man has a great sack on his back. He walks across the clearing and Te sinks to her belly. The man walks like thunder. She can hear the dry summer grass being crushed underneath. Heavy thumps. Maybe it takes all his energy just to lug himself across to the other side.

Any of Te's people would have noticed her, as the hiding place is not good, the grass is too short. But the man is different and he does not see her at all.

The whole forest is Listening. Everyone and everything in the woods knows where he is, but the man does not know them at all. And Te cannot tell the village. She cannot stand on her own two feet, for the nausea will not leave her.

For the man is not Listening, not Listening at all and the whole world cries out at his deafness.

In the beginning, which is always, there is silence.

No one is sure what to make of him. They are wary, because of the wars that have passed, but he does not look like one of the tribes that they went to war with. The man wants to learn. This is all he says, over and over. The children ask Te who the man is. Te says his name, and they grow silent because it sounds like she is coughing. The children think he is sick, for why would he call himself by such a name? Why would he be so pale? Why would he bundle himself in thick clothes in the heat of summer?

The adults are surrounding the sick man, speaking with him. But his answers change and he calls people by the wrong names, which causes them to grimace and turn away. For nothing is worse than hearing your name misused, to be called something that you are not. Sometimes, the words the sick man uses are ones that do not exist.

That night, in the hut with Little One and Aila, Te learns that the sick man will stay. Te can feel him even now, how the word stutter steps around him, crying without being heard.

“He says that he comes from far away, and that he only wants to learn,” Aila says.

“He is sick,” Te says.

Aila shakes her head. “I do not think he is sick. He is from far away and he does not know our country. That is what he says. If he were sick we would all be able to feel it, would we

not? He does not feel sick. He feels..." But Aila does not have the words. For the man is different, but Te's people do not have a word for the kind of different that he is.

In the beginning, which is always, there are words.

The sick man's words are mumbled and clumsy. And he is not getting better. His skin is still pale and he is still wrapping himself up in cloth. Maybe this is why he sweats so much and why he will not get better.

Te knows that this is the man that she must teach. She wants to tell the ladies of the forest that this is too hard, that teaching the sick man is not possible. The adults have tried, for everything the sick man says is a question: Eat this? See that? Who is? What is?

The sick man will ask these things and when people start to answer he takes out a cluster of white leaves stacked on top of one another, and a brightly colored stick that makes markings. He then paints all over the leaves, little squiggly lines upon lines. He fidgets when he sits, he is loud when he should not be. He shouts when he sees something that he does not know the word for. And he does not know the word for many things. He has not seen many things. He has not seen the fire lizards. He has not seen the horned ones, with their white manes and shining horns.

This is what makes it so hard to teach the sick man. How can he expect to learn if he is never Listening? Te sees him painting when he is talking to Aila, who has Little One on her lap. Little One is beginning to say his first words, and the way that he speaks is brighter and happier than the way the sick man says them.

Te is at the beach one day when she sees the sick man laying out on the sand and looking up at the sky. His face is red with fever. Te collects sweetfish eggs and she thinks about how funny he is, how he lies on the sand yet seems unhappy when he gets any in his eyes. She laughs, startling him. He sits upright.

“You are laughing,” he says in his flat voice. Te carries the bowl of sweetfish eggs up the bank; some of the water sloshes out of the bowl as she does so. “Never seen you laugh.”

Te’s mouth twitches. “Heard.”

“What?”

“You never heard me laugh,” she says.

“Heard heard heard,” the sick man frowns. “It like word for seen, same but...”

“You do not see and hear. You paint.” The sick man does not know this last word. Te imitates him, pretending to paint on white leaves. “You cannot Listen.”

“I Listen. My way.”

You must teach him, says the woman in the water, far away in Te’s dreams. She does not want to teach him now, not when there are sweetfish eggs to be eaten. But Te thinks of the treeless world the lady showed her and shudders.

“Sweetfish,” the sick man says, pointing at the bowl.

“Yes there are sweetfish,” Te says. “We can Listen to the sweetfish.”

“Yes,” the sick man says. He is already going through his clothes, feeling for the little pile of leaves that he carries with him everywhere. He gets it out, the stick ready to paint. Te shakes her head.

“No. If you want to Listen to sweetfish, you will not use your way.”

The sick man looks confused. Te does not move, rooted like a tree. The sick man puts the leaves back into his clothes.

“Listen,” he says. Te takes his hand; it is big and soft, she realizes, from days of holding sticks and not climbing trees. She plunges their entwined hands into the bowl. The sick man’s face twists as Te closes his fingers around the sweetfish eggs, so he can feel their slick outer coating. She will know if he is not Listening, because the big fingers will close around the eggs and crush them.

Te tells him about the eggs and how to feel their circles. She tells him about the water that the eggs came from, and how the nightfish feed upon the sweetfish and the fire lizards eat the nightfish. She tells him about the circles of the moon and how the heat of the summer makes the sweetfish sweet. She tells him of the shorebirds and their eggs. She tells him about the ladies in the water and how if you are a good Listener, they will come to you in the water. She tells him about the island where her people take their dead, where they can hear the whispers of those who have passed.

She has to hold the big fingers back because they twitch and try to crush the sweetfish eggs instead of cradling them. At first the sick man stops and asks many questions. Te has to answer with small words because he will not understand. But as the sun goes down, she does not use any words at all because they are Listening together. The stars are peeping out over the

ocean. The moon is full. Eventually the sick man shifts and the Listening ebbs away. His eyes are soft.

“I hope that I will remember,” he says.

“Why would you not?”

He takes out the pile of leaves now and paints onto it. “This is how I remember.”

Te takes his hand and opens his fingers. Then she takes a sweetfish egg and places it in the center of his palm. The baby sweetfish is still swimming, a dark spot in the egg, a pupil in an eye.

“You were Listening. When you recover, when you are not...” but she cannot say the word, for it is not true. He is not sick, his circle is full but wavering, as if he was caught, as if his mind is stuck on the very brink of passing. “When you learn to Listen...”

She says his name, slowly, because she does not want to get it wrong, but it still sounds like a cough, scratching its way out of her lungs. “Jeffrey.”

In the beginning, which is always, there are voices.

Over the next phase of the moon, Jeffrey and Te Listen many times together. He learns many new words and tries to share his words with her. But it is hard for Te to say his words, the dead words that all sound the same.

“You sound like a bird,” he tells her.

“I am not.”

“Te, Te,” he says. “A bird.”

“Te is my name. Te has always been my name. Please do not call me a bird. It hurts.”

And it does, to hear someone call her something that she is not. It makes her stomach clench.

“Sorry. You are Te. And Aila is Aila and Little One is Little One.” These are the names that he has heard the most, for since Te began to help him Listen, he has spent much time at her own lean-to, sometimes with Little One on his lap. Sometimes Jeffrey wraps Little One in a blanket, for the nights are growing cooler and the summer is coming to an end.

Te shakes her head, cringing again. “Little One is not his name. Little One is where he is.”

“But you call him Little One.”

“Yes, because he has not Listened. When he does, he will tell us his name.”

“He does not have one?”

Te’s stomach clenches hard. “No! No he has a name, he has not shared it with us.”

Jeffrey looks confused. “He...will name himself?”

“Yes!” Te says. But then she stops, for a horrible thought has occurred to her. For Jeffrey does not look like he understands at all. It occurs to her then, about why Jeffrey feels sick, but there is not a word for the kind of sickness he has.

That night is very hard for Te to Listen. It feels as if clouds have come down over her mind.

Is this how Jeffrey feels, all of the time? To not Listen?

You are the same, one of the ladies of the forest says, from somewhere above.

Jeffrey and I?

Yes.

No, Te says, thinking about how hard it must be for Jeffrey, who has never Listened all his life, for his parents who never remembered how. And she weeps for him, for the man whose parents made him the one who is always stuck in passing.

For Jeffrey's parents forced a name on him, and all of his life Jeffrey's true name has been caught, somewhere, like a bat fluttering to get out, fighting to be heard and shared.

In the beginning, which is always, there are mornings.

Te walks across the grass towards Jeffrey's own lean-to that Te's people have made for him. He wished to walk to the beach to see the fire lizards. But Jeffrey is not in his lean-to. He is not in the camp at all.

He knows where the beach is, Te thinks as she walks. No doubt that he was excited, he wanted to Listen by himself at first. Eventually she comes to the tide pool, and there is Jeffrey lying on the sand, the fire lizards sunning themselves on the rocks.

Te creeps up next to Jeffrey. To her surprise, he does not startle. Instead he is looking at the lizards, curled up with their wings folded, their heads facing the ocean. There are four of them, three silver females and a dark green male, all of them Listening for the rising sun.

Jeffrey's breathing is soft but full. He moves towards the fire lizards and Te smiles. The lizards are not moving, they sense that he is not a threat. He is learning, he is Listening well. She feels his circle, still wavering but more still than before, not an irregular skipping beat. The male

fire lizard is only a few paces away now, a green breathing stone except for the golden slit of his eye.

“Careful,” Te whispers. Jeffrey is close enough to the lizards now that he could touch them. The male fire lizard has his hackles raised, the thin sharp teeth visible. Too close, and Jeffrey will lose a finger.

There is a scream. Te is upright, screaming, for there is a searing pain in her chest. Jeffrey has lost a finger—the lizard has taken it. She can see the silver females taking off, kicking up clouds of sand. But the screaming is no longer audible, it is a horrible twisted feeling that vibrates through the air.

Jeffrey is standing now, and his palms are out. And there is a golden light coming from his hands that Te has never seen before, terrible in its beauty. For the scream was not Jeffrey’s. It is the male fire lizard who is screaming as he writhes in midair, suspended in a golden shroud of light.

Te’s vision goes blurry and she staggers. The ground under her feet swings upward. The fire lizard’s circle is sliding back and forth, between passing and not passing. Jeffrey is looking at her now, his mouth open and Te and the lizard are screaming together as he closes his hands, crushing the two of them in the golden light.

For a moment, time stops.

Warmth. The smell of salty air. And a foul smell, of something rotting. Te is awake on the beach, and Jeffrey is leaning over her.

“Te!”

She sits up, groggy and discovers the source of the smell is her own vomit, covering the front of her dress. Her hands are shaking, burning.

“Te...” Jeffrey’s hands are on her shoulders, she can see his worried eyes. His hands...

She thrusts them away, scrambling back over the sand to standing.

The fire lizard is still in midair. He is encased in a swirling golden ball of mist, his circle horribly misshapen. In between life and death, pleading for the passing to come. His breathing is unnatural, as if two hands are squeezing and releasing the lizard’s chest. The eyes are clouded over as if in death, but Te can see a flicker in his eyes, as the lizard’s circle tries to turn.

The air is humming with an unnatural energy that she has never felt before. Her mouth is dry. Jeffrey steps in front of her.

“What have you done?” Te chokes on the words.

Jeffrey looks at the fire lizard. “Magick,” he says. “I am Holding him.”

And that is when Te knows that he cannot Listen, that he will never Listen like she and her people can. Not someone who can touch another creature’s circle and Hold it against its will, to play with the threads, to stop the passing. She cannot help but look at the fire lizard, trapped like an insect in amber, struggling at the Magick that Jeffrey Holds to keep him there. Te knows nothing of Magick. It is fear that keeps her back, keeps her from trying to touch and hold the fire lizard. Fear too that she will be caught in the golden mist and Held there.

“Why?”

“To bring the lizard back to my people. So they can understand. To learn.”

“Your leaves were not enough? Your paintings?” Te is biting off the words now. “Do you mean to keep us...” she points, shaking, thinking of Little One, of Aila, their eyes like dead things.

“No, no, you do not understand, it is different. Never...”

“No!” Te says. “No...” And she can say nothing else, there is nothing that she can do to make him Listen. For he cannot Listen, he cannot feel the circles even though he pulls hard on them and makes them misshapen with his Magick.

She runs, from Jeffrey and the beach, with the fire lizard still trapped in the orb. She can feel him following her, with the lizard, still Held. All of her people can. Jeffrey enters the clearing with the fire lizard still breathing in his arms. Te feels the entire world go off balance.

Cries of anguish. The children backing away up against the trees, the adults transfixed in horror. So many pairs of eyes asking, “what have you done?” And yet there are no words. Jeffrey approaches his lean-to, clutching the fire lizard close to him like a Little One, folding up his clothing and placing it in a sack with his piles of leaves. The whole forest watches as he walks away, the circle of the fire lizard wavering.

There is a snap, a tremor.

Te does not know who threw the first stone, but she feels it hit. Jeffrey turns, the fire lizard still in his arms. Another stone, missing. And soon all of her people are running towards

him, a burning filling all of them that Te has never felt before, an anger of something that has been broken and cannot be mended. The air is thick with stones and the heat of this anger.

“You cannot take him,” someone yells. “You cannot take him, we won’t let you take him!”

Stones and sticks and harsh words. Jeffrey is shouting. The lizard’s circle is still off kilter, and Te is crying, that they will not restore the balance, not like this. And then there are deep words of Magick being used. The world shudders. Te feels an itching crawling up her arms, like a thousand little insects are biting her.

It is blurry. Te cannot breathe. The world has stopped. Jeffrey has his palms out, and Te and all of her people are Held. Te feels like she is looking at herself from a place far away.

It lasts for an instant. It lasts for forever. Te slides back into herself, her vision blurry, a piece of her dead, cut off.

When it is over, the fire lizard remains on the ground, upside down. His chest moves as if someone is still pumping it.

Jeffrey is gone.

The fire lizard will not pass.

Nobody will touch him, nobody can bear to touch him, so he sits at the edge of the camp for days, his chest going up and down. No one, not even Te can Listen over the earth’s cries of

anguish. The fire lizard is caught somewhere, the same place that all of Te's people found themselves in, that place that was not a real place.

Te spends her days at the beach, in the surf, waiting for that feeling of the place that was not a place to leave her. The summer heat is waning into autumn, but still there is an emptiness that stays with her and will not leave her bones.

The moon is barely a sliver in the sky now. There are talks of moving the home circle, away from the fire lizard. There are others who say that it will hurt the balance more, that something else will snap.

In the beginning, which is always, there is passing.

The sky is dark. The moon has vanished. There is only the light of the stars and the feeling of one another that guides Te and her people to the beach. The fire lizard, that no one can bear to touch, is strung up between two men, still breathing.

The water is lapping against the shore. In the haze, Te can barely make out the soft shape of the island, close enough to swim to. But when someone has passed, Te's people do not swim.

It is she who goes first, far ahead of the fire lizard, Listening hard. Her people clasp hands, forming a giant ring, a great circle. It is then that Te steps into the surf, her foot skimming the edge of the waves, coming to rest not on the ocean floor but the water itself. The people are silent, Listening. And so the circle crosses, step by step, the water growing deeper underneath them, walking across the ocean to the island where they bury their dead. All across the circle there is the hushed breathing of Te's people.

It does not take them long to get to the island. This earth is a muddy soft patch of sand where the silence grows deeper, for this is the land of people who are passing and so Te and her people walk lightly over the unmarked graves.

Whispers.

Sometimes Te hears them even when she is not Listening, The quiet voices on the other side of the breeze, the voices that come out when the moon's light is gone. Only whispers. And they are whispering now, but they are not the voices of the winged ladies, of the women in the water, but of those who have passed and can feel others on their land, breathing.

Te bends over and sets her hands in the soft earth. She begins to dig, pushing back the wet clumps of sand, the grit getting under her fingernails. The ring of people stands impassive, until she has made a hole big enough for the fire lizard. The men set him in and bury him. They start at the feet, covering him with sand. They do not look at his chest, which still rises and falls with his breaths, although they are small.

There is a soft wind, bringing in the whispers of those who have passed. They ask why the fire lizard joins them, when he still breathes.

Te is standing at the end of the island, looking towards the east. Soon the sun will be rising on the island and the whispers will disappear with the light, like drops of dew in the morning sun.

I could not teach Jeffrey, she thinks. There are tears coming to her eyes, and she tries to hide them. One does not cry when someone has passed. But the fire lizard has not passed—they set him in the earth because they cannot bear to see him above ground, to witness his unnatural

misshapen circle. And there is something coming, the thing that Te was shown and could not stop.

In the beginning, which is always, there is an end.

**Excerpt from *Constructing a Nation: An Abridged History of Tylria* by Huey Tilmeade,
edited by Brian Green**

SECTION 3.4: THE SHALEN EXPEDITION AND THE GREAT BURNING

...the expedition chose to return to the *Kitsap*, leaving Jeffrey Cantor, a naturalist, to establish contact with the native inhabitants. Cantor did not follow orders to carry a gun, writing in his journal that he chose to bury the weapon underneath a tree.

Little is known about the indigenous people that Cantor lived with for nearly two months; as of today, the naturalist's journals are the most complete primary source regarding native culture. The natives were most likely descendants of the tribes driven out by Ingles expedition (See Chapter 2.2). Cantor wrote that they lacked the ability to Cast and did not appear to have clear system of writing or tribal organization. Their religion was a type of animism, although Cantor's records do not indicate that he had a comprehensive understanding of their religion.

Cantor's relationship with the tribe turned problematic after he attempted to collect a dregan specimen for the expedition. He was driven out of the camp, spending several days surviving off the land before meeting up with the expedition once more. After learning that the native people had driven Cantor out by force, Captain Shalen set fire to the forest, an act which the expedition described as "The Great Burning." This action had two purposes: clearing the land on the peninsula for settlement, as well as expelling the natives from their homes. Tribe members who survived the fire were driven out across their burial grounds and onto smaller islands off of the Cantor peninsula.

Shale City was established in 1750, two years after the Shalen expedition claimed the land. The original settlers began arriving from Haven and overcrowded cities in Castran, hoping

to find a better life in the Southern lands of Tylria. These settlers also brought disease with them. As the city expanded to the surrounding islands, the natives were more frequently brought in contact with settlers and the diseases they carried. It is estimated that above eighty percent of the indigenous tribes died from small pox, the rest fleeing to islands farther South, hoping to outrun another wave of colonization.

“Remembering Whisper Island: Community, Cultural Heritage Site, or Slum?”

By Harold Butcher, *The Times*, Oran 17th 1998

Whisper Island, a dark stretch of grey across the middle of Shale City Bay, looks much like it did five years ago, the morning after the Great Storm. The island is still covered in wreckage, pockets of trash and refuse that have collected over the years. Gaivin Marsheyez, a 22-year-old survivor of the Great Storm, points out where houses once stood, where the roads wound through the neighborhood. Only the collapsed bridge, which connected Whisper Island to the mainland, serves as a permanent landmark.

“I’m getting scared that someday I am going to come out here and I won’t be able to tell where anything was,” he says. “It’s already getting harder to remember what it was like before the Storm. My kids are never going to know the island as I knew it.”

Marsheyez’s story is not unique. The estimated population of Whisper Island in 1993 was 5284. After the storm hit, there were 2075 deaths, most from collapsed housing or drowning. Eight hundred and sixty one people were reported missing. Originally a Category Three storm, the Great Storm reached Category Five status by the time it made landfall on Oran 17, 1993.

Marsheyez was on the island when the hurricane hit. He survived by climbing onto the roof before the storm surge came in. The bodies of his mother and two younger siblings were never recovered. Marsheyez spent three days on the house’s roof while the flood waters receded, until a helicopter from the National Guard rescued him.

“I wish people would just take the time to clean the place up,” he says. “The government doesn’t seem to want to put in any effort anymore. And none of us who lived here are really in

the place to do it. So all we have is a huge reminder that things weren't taken care of when it first happened.”

When the Holding spells on the bridges failed, emergency Casting forces were sent to put a temporary barrier across the Water Front, Shale City's bayside business district. Additional personnel were sent to evacuate the remaining people from Whisper Island. But by then the island was entirely underwater; the storm surge peaked around fifteen feet, two hours after the Great Storm made landfall. The lack of bridges made the channel separating Whisper Island from the mainland impassable. Police were only able to rescue those who had made it across the water and take them to local shelters.

Mayor Jules Nolan, serving his first term in office at the time, was heavily criticized for his apparent lack of action during the storm. An official statement from the mayor's cabinet, issued Oran 20, 1993, claims that none of the decisions regarding the response to the Great Storm were made lightly and that the best course of action available was taken.

Helen Yamaway, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Shale City, sees the response differently.

“The government wasn't willing to get involved because to them, Whisper Island was not a community of people,” she says. “It was a slum. When it was clear that the Water Front was under threat, that's when the barriers went up. No effort was made to help those still trapped on Whisper Island.”

Yamaway considers the island a cultural heritage site. Before the establishment of Shale City in 1750, Whisper Island was once a burial ground for the indigenous people who lived in the area. According to Yamaway's research, the island received its current name because of

rumors that ghost could be heard there. Some of the individuals living on the island may have been direct descendants of the indigenous people, who were otherwise barred from living on the mainland.

“In the 1800s segregation laws prevented people of indigenous or minority descent from living on the mainland. Whisper Island was the only place for them to go. It became a very cultural place, one that continued to flourish even after segregation laws were abolished. The destruction of the neighborhoods on Whisper Island, whether or not the city wants to talk about it, was a huge historical loss.

But Whisper Island had not been flourishing in recent history. Many of the homes had stood vacant since the 1950s, after the collapse of the economy. High Tides Inc., which tried to develop the island into a high end resort, went bankrupt due to the falling housing industry and the high costs of establishing a hurricane wall in the area.

Sharon Williams, Director of the Shale City Regional Housing Commission, claims that decline continued until the present day. In 1990, statistics from Shale City’s Regional Housing Commission state that eighty six percent of the individuals living on Whisper Island did not own their homes. Ninety one percent of the population lived within one hundred and fifty percent of the poverty line. Sharon Williams, Director of the Shale City Regional Housing Commission, also claims that squatting was a major problem on the island, and that many of the homes were not up to building codes.

“There’s been a lot of talk about rebuilding since the land is valuable. But if you look at the costs that come from making the bay safe, even with the establishment of Held Barriers, it’s always been a risky place to invest for any developer.”

The community of Whisper Island had been scheduled for demolition. At least a quarter of island residents received notices from the Housing Commission, evicting them from their current homes but offering vouchers for low income housing elsewhere in the city. The last notices were issued two weeks before the Great Storm. Maysheyez claims that his mother knew about the notices, but was wary of uprooting her children.

“We didn’t have anywhere to go,” he says. “But we didn’t have a choice. And with the vouchers, we were still being uprooted.”

The Life Journey: A Definitive Guide for First Time Parents by Sonya Cameron

Chapter Eight: Your Child's Magickal Development, Glossary of Terms

Cast: The act of accessing Magick. Requires concentration and specific hand gestures particular to the type of Casting desired. Based on the exchange of mental and caloric energy (See also Exhaustion, Magick).

Detect: A type of Casting. Detects the presence of other Casters or Casted Magick within a given radius. Eighty percent of Casters Detect visually, where an aura of white light appears if Magick is present. Twenty percent of Casters detect tactilely, where they experience a tingling or itching feeling when they approach a Casted area.

Exhaustion: A physical state where one is unable to Cast due to mental strain or caloric deficient. First signs of exhaustions include weaker Casting abilities, sweating, shakes, headache and/or hunger, with the risk of fainting if Casting is continued. Several days or weeks may be needed to recover from extreme cases of Exhaustion. (See also: Permanent Exhaustion)

Hold: A type of Casting. Holds an object in place. When Casted on a space, creates a force barrier.

Light: A type of Casting. Creates light.

Magick: Natural unseen force that can be accessed through Casting.

Permanent Exhaustion: Permanent loss of Casting abilities. Results from repeated cases of extreme Exhaustion or trauma.

Quicken: A type of Casting. Speeds up movement for a short time. Can only be Casted on animate objects. More likely to lead to Exhaustion than other types of Casting, due to high caloric expenditures.

Ward: A type of Casting. Prevents other Casters from accessing Magick. The most difficult type of Casting. Most likely to lead to Exhaustion.

Wield: A type of Casting. Moves objects within a given perimeter, determined by the amount of Magick accessed. More likely to lead to Exhaustion.

Excerpt from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*

CASTING DEFICIENCY DISORDER

Diagnostic Criteria

402.1

- A. Failure to Cast, not attributable to a lack of knowledge of, or comfort with, Casting or Magickal systems.
- B. Two (or more) of the following, each present for a significant amount of time during a 1 month period.
 - 1. Complaints of physical symptoms when in the presence of Casters or Magick, including feelings of itching or burning skin and/or nausea.
 - 2. Claims of supernatural abilities, including being able to become invisible or being able to locate and/or track a specific individual's presence.
 - 3. Distrust or anxiety around those with the ability to Cast.
- C. Failure to achieve expected level of interpersonal, academic, or occupational functioning.
- D. Continuous signs of disturbance persist for at least 6 months. This 6-month period must include at least 1 month of symptoms that meet Criterion A.
- E. The disturbance is not better explained by an anxiety disorder and does not occur exclusively during the course of a trauma-or-stressor related disorder.
- F. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or another medical condition.

Diagnostic Features

The characteristic symptoms of casting deficiency disorder involve a range of cognitive and behavioral and emotional dysfunctions, but individuals will vary substantially on most features, besides Criterion A. The vast majority of individuals with casting deficiency disorder claim that they are able to Cast, and that they access Magick through a different process.

Associated Features Supporting Diagnosis

Associated features of casting deficiency disorder may include the belief that others who have the ability to Cast are the cause of their disorder, social isolation and withdrawal (in order to avoid spaces where Magick or Casting may be present) or increased frustration with modern society's reliance on Casting and Magick. Often individuals with casting deficiency disorder are simultaneously diagnosed with a depressive or anxiety disorder, stemming from their perception of being marginalized by society.

Prevalence

Casting deficiency disorder is a relatively rare disorder. Prevalence using various clinic or school samples ranges between 0.05 and 1% depending on the setting. The prevalence of the disorder does not seem to vary by sex. Incidences significantly higher, up to 75% in some cases, in indigenous populations...

Twitch

There are not many good trees left in Shale City.

His mother said that before there was a city, before there were any houses at all, there were only trees, stretching out until the land met water. It was difficult for the boy to imagine such a world. The only trees that he knew were those in Main Park, sickly skinny things, some of them with bright labels tied around their trunks.

But even with its sick trees, Main Park was one of the boy's favorite places in the city, besides the island. It was the only place he knew that had clusters of trees in it. A little forest encased by all sides by the buildings on the Water Front, the ruler straight, tall grey uniform structures like silent sentinels.

The island was a forest of a different kind. The homes on the island were more like decaying plant life, with their sloping floors, sagging roofs, and paint that had been peeled away by time to reveal the dry wood underneath. Homes, as the boy came to know them, were mounds of floors and wood and ceilings with splintering boards and no glass in their windows.

It is difficult to picture their home now. During waking hours, the images run out of his mind like receding flood waters, leaving only traces of a feeling—the carpet under his feet, the dim sound of the kettle boiling, the way the upstairs floor boards creaked, the sound of his mother opening the door when she returned from work. It is only in dreams that the pieces come together, that he can walk through all of the rooms.

There was no porch. Instead the steps came right down to the beach sand, littered with cigarette butts and whatever else washed up from the city. There was the bottom floor with its clumped blue carpet and the living room, the warmest room in the house that faced the sea. There he would spread out the playing cards across the floor like an armada of flattened ships. There was the tiny kitchen with its spotted cabinets, its termite holes and sloping linoleum floors. Neither he nor his mother could reach the top cabinets without the step stool. Sometimes his mother would pull out the drawers, leaving them hanging in their slots, to act as a makeshift set of stairs. They used the cabinet under the sink as a pantry, when there was any food in the house at all. There was also the bathroom with its broken tiles and splotched mirror. They put their first and only rug to cover up the holes in the floor. There, propped up next to the nonfunctioning toilet, was where the step stool lived.

There was also the laundry closet, with its unhooked washer and dryer and double doors that were almost always closed. There was the staircase that he always took his time going up because of the big slats and spaces in between. Once or twice when he was very little he had fallen through onto the blue carpet, knobby knees bruising and turning an angry red with the impact. There was the bedroom with its lumpy air mattress, a room that always smelled of warm salt and the cinnamon water they would boil on their stove to keep the smell of the damp away in winter. And the roof, solid above them, only leaking during the rainiest parts of the year.

In his dreams, his mother is seated on the air mattress. She has the letters piled up to one side and postcards in stacks across the bed. She is arranging them across the bedspread and the pillow and the wooden floor beside her. And she looks up and smiles at him, a postcard in between her fingers.

“Look at this one,” she says. “Come here and see the picture...” And he already knows what postcard it is, because it’s their favorite, the one they always looked at together.

But even as she speaks he can feel that it is wrong. The house starts to shudder and the darkness starts to seep in, because all of it, the playing cards and the cinnamon water and the footstool and the quilt and his mother were lost in the swirling rage of the wind and the water.

The winter air hangs like a thick cold blanket over the city. The tree branches in Main Park are like grey lines of smoke curling into the sky. Bare from the early snows, they don’t provide much in the way of shelter. But it is better than sleeping on the muddy ground. Twitch is nestled in between the branches, his backpack tucked in a fork of tree limbs behind him.

“Hey!”

Twitch doesn’t move, his big eyes closed, mouth half open in sleep.

“I said hey!”

The tree shakes but still the tiny boy doesn’t move.

“HEY!”

This tremor dislodges the backpack, the big pocket opening as it falls. The blow is enough to wake Twitch. He gasps, struggling to collect himself. The cop at the bottom of the tree kicks its trunk again, then grasp it in both hands as if to uproot the thin spindle. Twitch gropes for a handhold.

The cop scowls and glares up at him. Twitch doesn’t recognize him. Considering how many run ins he has had with cops, this is surprising. New guy then.

“Alright, you’ve got about five seconds to come down otherwise I’ll—”

Twitch Twitches.

The cop’s eyes narrow. He curses, then pushes the brim of his cap up. Twitch, inches away, is looking right at him, not breathing. Every fiber of his body vibrates as he struggles to maintain his invisibility. It is a miracle that the tree isn’t shaking.

“Everything alright over there Louis?”

The cop at the bottom of the tree is still staring at where Twitch was—and still is—the expression on his face changing from annoyance to disbelief. The second officer approaches, his hands in his pockets.

“I said is everything okay?”

“I could have sworn—” Louis jabs his arm through the branches. Twitch lifts his foot, the nausea rising from his stomach. Don’t puke, thinks Twitch. Don’t puke.

“There’s a kid up there. I just saw him.”

“All I see is a backpack, Louis.”

“I swear he wasn’t even five feet above me. Staring right at me the little bugger—”

The second cop mutters, making the hand sign for Detect as he does so. There is a glimmer in the air, and Twitch can feel the presence of Magick in the air, searching for him. The whole world is spinning, the branches blurring into one another and sliding apart as Twitch sees double. The itch of Caster Magick crawls up his arms. It is like his skin has gone painfully dry.

“Nothing’s here Louis. Okay? One of the homeless guys probably moved his stuff up there while he went to go get breakfast at the shelter.”

There’s a crumpling noise. More cursing. Twitch closes his eyes. Now even the veins in his eyelids are bulging, his innards turning into a hot vibrating mess. Somewhere, on the edges of his consciousness, Twitch can hear the cops arguing.

He Releases.

A spasm ripples through his body. Twitch vomits in between his legs, knuckles white as he grips onto the tree branches. There is a roar of disgust from below. Twitch reels and drops out of the tree, the shock of hitting the ground unsteady him. He takes off running down the hill, his scarves unwinding, the cops behind him.

Twitch scans the park for somewhere, anywhere, to hide. The cover that Main Park provides is disappointing—skeleton trees, a few wooden park benches and metal lampposts, and trashcans bolted down next to nonfunctioning water fountains. His sneaker comes down on the end of one of his scarves. Twitch trips, uses his hands to break his fall, rolls, spits the mud out of his mouth and looks back to see that the cops are nearly on him. He can feel the second cop coming, the ripples of Magick trying to Detect him.

Twitch gags and Twitches. The world trembles. The horizon jumps up and down. Twitch shuts his eyes, throws the scarves around his neck and sprints forward. He doesn’t make it far before the urge to vomit again becomes too strong. He opens his eyes for a quick glance around and then dives behind a nearby trashcan.

Twitch Releases. The world swings back into focus. The mud is everywhere, seeping through his clothing and shoes. His stomach heaves but he forces the urge down, tucking his knees in to form a small ball on the ground. Breathe.

“—Fuck that, you believe me now Cooper? Fucking kid was in the tree and would you look at that, he vanished right in front of us—”

“Geez Louis! Excuse me if I couldn’t pick up anything. Kid’s a Wisp, clear as day and their Magick won’t pick up—”

“You call that Magick? You fucking call that Magick, last time I heard nobody can Cast anything like that...”

“They don’t Cast Louis. They do something else, I dunno, but it’s Magick.”

“You’re kidding.”

“What the hell do you think it is?”

The voices grow fainter. Twitch doesn’t move until his stomach has settled. The horizon is a firm line again. He returns to the tree. The cops were kind enough to leave his backpack, but it’s muddy now and covered in large footprints. Twitch checks the contents—a smashed takeout box, the food dribbling outside of its cracked edges. The t-shirt from SC Youth Ministries is unwound, revealing the photo album.

The cop crushed the book when he stepped on it, leaving an entire chunk of the book dog eared. There is some mud on the edges of it now, to go with the frayed cover and the pages that were already separating from the spine.

Twitch swallows hard, flipping through it. It may be dirty, but at least all of the pages are still there, the plastic edges ripped from years of living in his backpack. There are four slots per page, but they are overstuffed, many of them carrying several images instead of one. There are postcards, newspaper clippings, advertisements, all of them showing people and places from far away, all of them with curled edges.

His favorite postcard is still tucked inside the back cover. The unekorn on the front was washed out, as if someone had tried to photograph it in the rain; the green ink of the background had leaked across its white coat, and there is a dark blossom of yellow and orange across the bottom. Twitch pauses, traces his fingers over the water damaged lettering, feeling the ripples in the paper that had formed as it had dried. Minerva said it was useless. Even after all of the listening that she had done there wasn't enough to attach it to anyone. He needs something else. Twitch unfolds the album's pages and squeezes it to his chest.

"I'm so sorry, Mom. I'm sorry. I'm sorry that they did that to your book, they crumpled it." Twitch's green eyes close and he whispers apologies under his breath over and over again as he goes down the hill.

Instead of a front yard, he had a beach. The house steps sunk underneath the sand, as if the home itself was rooted to the land. His mother told him that when she first found the house it was a dream come true.

"I always wanted a beach house when I was a kid," she said as they sat on the front steps together. "And look, our house is prime beachfront property. Can't get anything that is much better than that."

The beach came with plenty of its own marvels. There was the sand. The muck below that, which made a slurping sound when he dug in it with his bare hands. Once he found a thin bone, caked in earth. He brought it into the house and set it on the window sill with the other treasures—a few shells, some milky green sea glass that he had found a few summers ago. But that night the house was filled with a strange wind, one that trailed whispers from somewhere else. The next day he and his mother went out to the beach together and reburied the bone, the boy shaking, his mother with a creased worried expression on her face.

It was the only time he heard the ghosts. His mother heard them every night. The boy could tell by the way she would wake him as they slept next to one another, her body cold even on the hottest of summer nights. She would sit straight up in bed and mutter about the voices, forcing herself to breathe again and again.

“I don’t hear anything,” he would say. “I can’t hear them Mom.” She would stroke his thin hair and say that maybe things were better that way.

The beach yielded up other things too, like cigarette butts, plastic water bottles, Styrofoam containers and a needle that he had approached only to have his mother scream and push him away. She flung the needle, as if it was a crouching adder, into one of the new trash cans Shale City Sanitation had installed on the island.

He went wading often, even on days when the water was cold enough to make his skin go purple. He would walk out through the surf, his pants rolled up, the fabric ballooning out with the water. One day, he saw an image of a white horse with a horn in the middle of its forehead floating towards him. Astonished, he picked the sagging image up. It nearly came apart in his hands. He returned to shore, spreading his fingers to support the fragile paper. When his mother

came home later that day, she found him in the living room, the image of the unekorn on the living room floor.

“Is somebody writing postcards to us now?” she said. “Where’d you find it?”

“The ocean gave it to me. It was floating.”

“Someone must have thrown it away. Shame that, such a pretty picture. And look, it’s even got my name on it.” His mother pointed to the front yellow stain. “F-A-E-L-E,” she said, tracing the cursive, stopping about halfway across the card.

“It doesn’t!” Her son replied. “They’re too loopy, F looks like...” He drew a boxy letter in the air, and then pointed to the boat like image on the front. “That’s not F!”

“Yeah it is, it’s a different kind of F. It’s a grownup F. Not a little kid F.”

“But it’s my card.”

She kissed his forehead. “Of course it is.”

The safest place to go for a Wisp living in Shale City is Whisper Island. Cops don’t come here, nobody but addicts and wreckage scavengers. At SC Ministries, when people hear that Twitch goes to the island often, they call him crazy or stupid or both. They say that the island is an eyesore, and that everything worth saving has been washed out to sea long ago.

From afar, the island resembles a beaver dam, the remains of the neighborhood piled up like woodchips. Like bones. A house graveyard. Twitch faces the sea. The cold salt air stings his

nose. He is wearing the SC Youth Ministries t-shirt over his child-sized pea coat. The shirt, an adult medium, is much too large for him, so he has knotted the excess up to keep from tripping over it. The traffic on the Water Front Highway is a dull whisper that mixes with the soft sound of the waves.

This is, as far as he can tell, where the beach was, and where the house may have been. Somewhere deep beneath the piles of rotting wood are the foundations of the homes. On the shore, where the debris has gotten into the water and formed a new shifting coastline of trash, flotsam and jetsam. The remnants of the bridge are shrouded in fog, enough to remind Twitch of the ghosts. Every time he walks here, Twitch thinks of the ghosts.

He has the album open towards the back, a section dedicated to maps of fading colors. Ten pages of maps, none of them of Shale City or Tylria, at least that's what people tell him. There is also no one in the book that looks like Twitch, from what people say. He squints at the letters again. There is an F, and the curve of a lowercase A. There is an M...or maybe it's an N, he can't be sure, the boxy letters all look so much the same. At thirteen, he can barely read the street signs around Shale City, and that is a humiliating process that usually involves asking passerby for help.

He flips back to the inside front cover and looks at the inscription on the front plate. There is his mother's name written in the curly grown up letters that are also on the bottom of the unekorn postcard. Then there is his name, Twitch, written in green crayon at the bottom. There is also his other name. His real name, Haden, the one that he never uses.

Twitch shuts the album and holds it to his chest, flexing his feet up and down to work the wet muddy stiffness out of his tennis shoes. A small dregan has perched on the pile of wreckage to his right, sunning herself in the few rays that have peeked out of the clouds.

Twitch starts for the channel, getting ready to cross the remnants of the bridge when he sees the tree. It is a tiny sampling, barely peeking out of the earth, the first buds of leaves clinging on to the branches. Twitch thinks of his mother, how happy she was when she saw the first shoots on the trees in Main Park. But this tree looks like it is hiding, crouching up against a pile of wreckage. Not like the trees she used to tell him about. Towering ones. Bigger than houses.

The southernmost pillar of the bridge is a solid one that managed to make it through the storm. The ground is soft but not waterlogged. Twitch begins to dig, stopping to rub his hands together as he feels the itch of Caster Magick spreading up his arms. At least it isn't strong, he thinks. And I can tell it's the right pillar. When he first buried it here, he thought of how his mother hated the Caster Magick itch. But it was the only landmark Twitch knew wouldn't rub away easily. The Hold spells had been there for decades, and their remnants would take decades more to face.

Eventually, Twitch finds the handle. He traces his hand around the edges of the box, but he hasn't dug wide enough. He grabs fistfuls of the muck, not caring that his t-shirt, fighting the rising nausea that Caster Magick brings.

The metal lunchbox is still intact. It is cold to the touch, but Twitch grits his teeth and tugs it out, falling backwards as he does so. He flips up the clasps, peeking under the lid for just a moment before shutting it again, heart pounding. He freezes, waiting for the whispers.

Nothing.

Twitch swallows hard, looking out at the sea. It will be awhile yet before the sun goes down, but he wants to be as far away from Whisper Island as he can by that point. No use in upsetting the ghosts if he doesn't have to.

There were a lot of people living on Whisper Island at one point. He and his mother were lucky to have the house to themselves. Most houses had up to forty people in them. His mother always said that was disgusting, even if the homes were built for Casters and not people of their size. But people were coming and going all of the time, and would often leave without telling anyone. He would go over to someone's house to discover that it had been abandoned the day before.

When his mother worked, he would roam the streets with their deserted cars and broken glass. Most of the kids played in the road, and practiced hiding in the houses, for a lot of them could Twitch but weren't good at it yet. They couldn't hold it. Some of them said that they went to the city to get food and sneak into the shelters before they were supposed to let you in. You have to be careful when you go, they told him. You can't Release too early. They told him about the Casters, the big people that used to live in the houses before nobody wanted to live on the island anymore.

His mother would come home in the evenings in her bright green uniform with a mop bucket stitched over the corner and her fair thin hair wrapped up in a bandana that was much too big for her. And usually there was some kind of food for Twitch, either peanut butter and crackers or a leftover sandwich or on very special days there would be a candy bar wrapped in its

own wrapper. He would wolf the food down while his mother sat and watched, her mouth in a firm line.

“You hungry, Mommy?”

“I already ate, sweetheart. And Mommy doesn’t get really hungry.”

“Is it the Casters?”

“It’s a lot of things, sweetheart.”

“I itch sometimes, too. We were playing over by the pillar today where you can walk on the water because of the Holding Spells. And I got really itchy and so did everyone else.”

“Maybe not itchy like Mommy gets itchy. Did you find anything good on the beach today? Did anybody send you any letters?”

She had started bringing him pictures, after the unekorn. At first it was just one or two, but then there were magazines with their shiny pages. Heavy stiff paper that had prints of paintings on them and usually smelled of garbage. Advertisements on brightly colored paper. In the evenings they would huddle on the air mattress, picking out their favorite pictures. He liked the magazines because of their bright color. Also the Lost Dog signs because of the animal pictures, although those made his mother sad. She preferred the landscapes and the maps, and would talk to him about other places and people, about islands farther down South where it was warmer and the houses were built for people like them.

At first they kept the pictures in a pile next to the bed, but it rained, and they went upstairs to discover the pictures were sopping wet. The next day, he placed the bits of soggy paper all around the living room, moving them so they were always in a patch of sun. His mother

showed up with the metal lunchbox to put all of them in. And a few days after that was the album, wrapped in plastic wrap and smelling like the inside of a department store. He spent an hour flicking back and forth through the crisp pages, marveling at their clear pockets, rubbing his hands across its smooth red cover.

“We can pick out our favorite pictures,” his mother said. “We’ll have a nice place to put them. And they will be extra protected, if they are in our book and the lunchbox at the same time.”

“But they are all my favorite ones,” he said.

“You can choose your extra-favorites.”

“I can’t wait until the other kids see.”

His mother’s brow creased. “How about we keep it in the box okay? The book cost Mommy a lot of money, and I don’t want you to go around losing it. So keep it in the box. If you don’t, I’ll know.”

And it was true. His mother always seemed to know everything that was going on the island, even the names of the other kids when Twitch hadn’t told her everything about them, even when their house was a good block away from everyone he played with. Once he had asked her why they couldn’t move in to be closer to the other families. His mother smiled.

“Sometimes being around people for a really long period of time can make me a little crazy, okay? And we want to make sure that Mommy doesn’t go crazy at all so she can still do a good job when she cleans.”

But sometimes she wouldn't clean at all. She would stay in bed the entire day and look up at the ceiling. Twitch would sleep next to her for most of the day, because it was easier to be hungry if he wasn't awake for most of it. And when he dreamed he could still feel her, lying next to him with a warmth that he couldn't describe.

SC Ministries is a squat building located on the bad part of Downtown, meaning that it is mainly populated by people like Twitch. It lacks in restaurants that are good enough to actually want to eat at and bad enough that it's okay for people to sit outside and ask for food. The cops have a different name for it of course—they call it begging. With the recent crackdowns on city cleanliness Twitch has found himself on the wrong side of a policeman's boot more than once.

During the Storm and afterwards, when Twitch's mom had gone missing, he started hanging out there a lot more. Especially since by then SC Ministries had gone from a soup kitchen to full blown shelter, one that gave out t-shirts, decent sandwiches, cans of beans and noodles that Twitch eats dry out of the package when he gets them. SC has rooms for people to stay in, and showers every other day. The only requirement is going to chapel. And say prayers before dinner, and listening to people read out of the Holy Book. Twitch looked inside one of the copies once, but decided it was boring, as there weren't any pictures.

The chapel itself is Twitch's favorite room in SC Ministries, with its rickety rows of chairs and fake stained glass windows. Nobody's allowed to go in unless they are having chapel, unless it's winter time. Twitch has seen the whole chapel fill up with people that the Ministries doesn't want to turn away. They really care about people at the Ministries. Places like

Hollonbrook over on 42nd have better food, and they've even got a playground over at Vail's, but once those shelters hit capacity they lock their doors, no matter what the temperature.

Twitch arrives as soon as the doors open for dinner at 5:30. The cafeteria is a damp industrial place, with low cement ceilings and tables that are bolted to the floor. Twitch is crammed into the line, surrounded by people that are at least two feet taller than he is. There is the thick smell of cigarettes and bodies that haven't been washed in a good while. Some of the arrivals smell like garbage.

"Hey sweetheart, did you get separated from your Mom?" one of the lunch ladies says, spooning a glop full of what appears to be lasagna onto his orange tray. Most of the staff members here do not understand that despite the fact that Twitch is only three and a half feet tall, is thirteen, not a highly intelligent eight year old. Tonight's side dish is green beans that have coagulated into a greenish brown mass, and what is supposed to be a dinner roll but is instead a cinnamon raisin pretzel. SC Ministries takes what they can get, as does Twitch.

Twitch makes his way across the cafeteria. It is already getting loud enough that it's difficult to make out individual conversations. There are a lot of Casters here, and even with the Perma-Wards to keep them from Casting, Twitch can feel his arms itching. He takes a seat as close to the windows as possible. Twitch places his backpack in his lap, leaning over it to get to his food.

"Oh hey. Look who it is. Pee Wee." The table rattles. Twitch looks up to see Gordon, an obese man in his forties, who is also in the residency program, taking a seat. "It's been awhile Pee Wee." The two of them are quickly joined by a slim dark skinned teenager. Twitch ignores the bland taste of the lasagna and focus on the fact that it is warm. It's enough.

“We’d thought somethin’ happened,” Gordon says around a mouthful of dinner roll.

Twitch shrugs. “Nothin’. Slept in the park a couple times. Got some takeout too, not gonna eat that yet.”

“You don’t need to be visitin’ no more,” the dark skinned teenager says. “Graduation for us is in ten days.”

“That so,” Twitch says.

“Raphael’s gone and completed the program,” Gordon says. “Got himself some housing that’s what.”

“No way man.”

Raphael grins, showing crooked teeth. “Yeah, way, man. An apartment, they placed me three days ago. Gonna live with two other guys. They said they could get me a job mebbe. And…” he pushes his plate of food away, holding his hand out in front of him.

There is a soft warm glow, and suddenly a small flickering ball of Light appears between Raphael’s fingers. Twitch chokes—it feels like his arms are on fire in the presence of the Magick. Gordon whistles, but not before there is an angry hiss of a Ward being triggered, the red script suddenly appearing on the table. Raphael’s Light dims instantly, and he shakes his hands, cursing. Twitch bites his lip as the itching starts to ebb away. The food in his mouth has gone sour.

“Shit,” Raphael says, shaking his fingers as if to get water off them. “Shit, I forgot how much the Wards burn.”

“You aren’t supposed to Cast here,” Twitch says.

“Yeah. Raphael, you ain’t supposed to Cast,” Gordon says. “Whole goddamn place is Warded.”

“Excuse me for getting excited that the Ward they placed on me for two fucking years was taken off.”

“When’d you get it done?” Twitch says, pushing his food away.

“Once I got my housing, went down to the police station with a case worker. Got my Casting privileges after two years of living clean. No more Ward. Took ‘em long enough. Ten days until I am freaking moving in. House and Magick again. Can’t wait.”

“They still ain’t found me any fucking housing,” Gordon says.

“Makes two of us,” says Twitch.

“You aren’t even in the fucking program Pee Wee.”

“He’s basically in,” Raphael says. “People think he’s a kid and so when he comes to the door at, like, noon, they let him in.”

“Nobody lets me in! I Twitch and run through and wait in the bathroom ‘til they unlock the lunchroom for you guys.”

Raphael snorts. “Oh that Twitching shit. Right, where you go invisible.”

Twitch ignores him. Before he would have tried to Twitch, but the Wards are making it hard to focus. No point in arguing with Casters.

“—looking for her huh?” Raphael is saying. “Not coming to visit us. Just looking for Minerva.”

“What’s it to you?” Twitch says.

“It’s nothing to me.”

“Where is Minerva anyway?” Gordon asks.

“Up in her room again. You know her, she’s never down here. She gets all funky around the Wards. Hey Gordon, they say that they haven’t found her housing either.”

“Nobody’s gonna give Minerva housing,” Twitch says.

“Hey now. Girl’s trying hard.”

“They should just fucking place her in her own apartment, in one of those government assistance apartments or something. Ain’t nobody going to take a Wisp in.”

“Girl’s been trying real hard,” Raphael says again, wincing.

“She’s done the program three times,” Twitch says. “She could teach the thing.”

“She does teach the goddamn thing,” Gordon says. “Least she acts like she does. They like her here too. What is it with Wisps, you fail the program and they aren’t supposed to let you repeat for a whole year but she’s already failed it once, and they are still letting her fucking live here—she can’t even work—”

“She’s failing it because nobody is fucking going to take her in,” Twitch says loudly. A few people at the next table stop chewing to stare at him.

“Hey now,” Raphael says. “Once me and my roomies are tight, we can take Minerva.”

Twitch shakes his head. “Nobody’s gonna take her. People are shitheads.”

“Hey Twitch,” Gordon says. “Is that why you won’t ever apply to do the program?”

“I don’t apply for shit that isn’t going to get me place anywhere. They can try all they want but people don’t take Wisps no matter what they say. I fucking know man, been doing it all my life.”

“You can surf on my couch,” Raphael offers. “Or in my room, if you don’t pull any weird shit.” Twitch swings his backpack over one shoulder.

“You’re just going to lea—” Raphael says, gesturing to Twitch’s plate still half full of food.

“I’m going to find Minerva.”

The women’s residential wing is on the other end of the building. There are not supposed to be any men on the women’s side. The rule is no visitors, period. But sometimes Twitch can fake it, because a few of the women are living here with kids. The Twitching helps too, as the staff can’t do anything if they can’t see him. He’s tailed staff members to get the elevator codes, and they don’t change them often.

The floor that the women’s residencies has flat woven carpeting. Six doors face each other on each end of the hallway, which dead ends in a glass double door that leads to the common room, which smells of potpourri and new synthetic fabrics. More like a public services office than a home. Which, Twitch thinks as he bolts to the couch, it is.

It’s also warm. Warm and safe enough that he’ll actually take his coat, scarves and hat off. Twitch stretches as he undoes the wrappings and buttons, his body a good five pounds lighter. He can feel the air on his scalp again through his thin hair.

“Twitch?”

Twitch turns. Minerva is standing in the sparse kitchen. Her frizzy sparse curls are up in a short pony tail on the back of her head. There are purple dark bruises underneath her eyes. It is an expression that Twitch knows well, a sickly exhausted one that never leaves, the same one that was on his mother’s face during her bad days.

“Twitch,” Minerva says again. “Twitch, what are you doing here?”

Twitch says nothing. Instead he opens up his backpack and hauls out the silver lunchbox, placing it on the couch. He turns and stares.

Minerva sighs, itching one of her arms. Twitch can see a dark bruise right underneath her elbow. She’s wearing a t-shirt from SC Ministries over her jeans. The fabric pools around her sparse frame; both of the items are much too big for her. “I’m not feeling better today you know.”

“Look, I went out to the island and everything and got it. And it’s cold out there today.”

“Shame that.”

“You wouldn’t know. How long’s been since you’ve been out? Raphael says you didn’t get housing again.”

Minerva shrugs. “I actually did. Didn’t take it though.” She isn’t looking at him. “The woman running the apartment complex, she’s a Caster, it’s all full of Casters, and considering that I can barely even go downstairs anymore without...” she shudders, crossing her arms across her chest.

“You promised,” Twitch says, realizing how small his voice sounds. “I lugged it all this way, okay.”

Minerva slumps onto the couch. She toys with the clasps on the lunchbox. Twitch never thinks of his people as fragile, despite their name—Wisps. Some say it’s a racial slur and refuse to say it. Twitch uses it because otherwise he doesn’t have a name for what to call himself.

“What did you want?” she says

“You said the last time, when you tried, you couldn’t find her. When you used...” Twitch takes the album out of his backpack, flipping back to the unekorn postcard. “...this. That you needed something older.”

“It was too washed out. I searched for miles, hundreds of miles and there was nothing. I was sick for days afterwards, and it was too far out for you to go anyway. I shouldn’t even be talking to you right now. After how bad it made me feel.”

“You’re the only one I know who can do it.”

Minerva sighs again. “I told you that I’m not. We can all do it.”

“I suck at doing it, I can only Twitch, that’s all. I can’t Listen, not like you. People call me Twitch for a reason, Mom...Mom called me Twitch for a reason, because I can’t sit still.”

Minerva flips open the lunchbox.

It is filled to the top with postcards, to the point where they fall out onto the floor when the lid is lifted. Images from magazines and art galleries, some with people, some without, all of them wrinkled from the water. Minerva wrinkles her nose.

“They smell like dirt.”

“Yeah, I know. I dug them up.”

“They were buried?”

“Yeah. On the island. I put them there, after...” He sees that Minerva’s brow has creased and he speaks more quickly. “There’s no ghosts! I swear they’re mine, I put them there, they don’t...”

“They’re your Mom’s, you said.” Minerva has shut the box, and is walking away into the kitchen, her posture stiffening. “You get that thing out of here.”

“I—”

“You don’t know what followed you off that island!”

“Please!” Twitch cries. “Please, I dug them up, I came all this way. They were both of ours. If there’s a ghost you’d have felt it. Mom always felt them!”

Minerva leans against the refrigerator. She sighs. “I haven’t eaten in a bit. They didn’t give me any snacks earlier today.”

“So you have been out.”

“Yeah,” she says, coming back to the couch and picking up some of the cards up off the floor. “To donate plasma, at one of those sketchy places.”

“You’re going to get sick,” Twitch says, already going towards his pack to fish out the box of takeout food that he found the night before. It’s a big portion, and Minerva’s appetite is even smaller than most people that he knows. He goes to the kitchen to warm it up.

The world softens. There is a gentle warmth coming from Minerva's side of the room that is more mental than physical. Twitch pauses and closes his eyes. It is like he is being watched, but not stared at. As if for the moment the universe has paused and is paying attention to who he is. From across the room he can hear Minerva breathing.

At one point Twitch hears the microwave beep, but it is a far off sound. The whole kitchen seems to be cast in a warm glow, the sounds of the traffic outside fading away, the day not any clearer but beautiful for just what it is.

Breathe.

By the time the feeling begins to ebb away, the shock of the cold tile floors coming back, the disruptive roar of the traffic, the sky has grown dark. Twitch glances at the microwave, the food inside now cold again. Forty five minutes has passed.

Minerva is slumped over on the couch, her body beginning to slide towards the floor. Her breathing is ragged. Twitch runs over to her, seeing the sweat dripping down her brow.

"Food," she rasps, clutching one of the postcards. Twitch offers the cold takeout box full of pasta and tomato sauce. Minerva nudges the pieces out meat with her fork, moving them away from the spaghetti. "Hey, this is actually pretty good."

"You can find some decent stuff if you go outside. Did you..." He swallows hard.

Minerva has stopped eating. "She's gone Twitch. There wasn't..."

He turns away, not wanting her to see his tears.

"Twitch," Minerva is saying. "Twitch, I'm so sorry. But your Mom is gone."

He had been out on the beach all day, looking out at the surf and playing with the other children. By the time dusk fell, he was inside and staring at the clouds that were coming over the bay. There was a draft in the house. The window over the kitchen sink was never able to shut, so when the gusts came in it sounded like something was trying to get in. Rain had started to fall. He had gone upstairs and put their one pot under the big leak in the roof, and scooted the air mattress farther to the side. The lunchbox was still in its place, solid as ever.

His mother arrived home late, her face wet from the rain. There was no food with her that evening. He tried to hide his disappointment, but couldn't help opening and closing the empty cabinets under the sink, checking again and again even though he knew nothing would appear. About the fourth time she caught him doing it.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't find anything today. If I have work tomorrow I'll go out and try to find something okay? And maybe you can come with, okay, buddy?"

There was a gust of wind. The front window banged open and his mother crossed the living room to shut it again. The rain stung, and he could see that she was fighting the wind to cross the floor.

"Baby?" She said, throwing her weight against it. "Baby, go upstairs and grab Mommy's box okay?"

He headed towards the stairs, feeling the wind like a hard weight against his back. There was water coming from up above. By the time he reached the top the air mattress and the quilt had pressed themselves up the wall opposite the doorframe, as if they were banging on the walls to get out. Rain. Rain on his face in the dark and on the floors that he crawled across to get the box.

The handle was slick and cold in his hands. Rain. At first he thought it was coming from the leak in the roof, but looking up he could see the stars where the rafters should have been.

“Baby?”

“Mommy, there’s a hole—”

“I know sweetheart, I—” He could hear her footsteps, but the wind was in his ears and it was erasing her words. “—going to be a bad one.”

“Storm?”

“Yeah, so we’re going to go downstairs to the bathroom okay? Like we’ve done before.”

As they went down the stairs he could feel the wind all through the house, as if the building didn’t have any walls at all. The wind was whining, playing the house like a musical instrument. He could feel his mother tense, clutching his hand. They tripped over the last stair and he fell into her as the window banged open again.

“It’s alright now,” she said when they were in the bathroom. “It’s alright now, okay?”

“Mommy—”

“It’s going to last for a little while but it’s not bad see? They’ve got the Holding Magick up on the bridge, I saw the glowing.”

“Mommy, I’m cold—”

He reached out for her in the darkness but couldn’t see anything. The tile was cracked and sloping underneath them and he could feel the holes in the floor, going down onto the cement, the cold harsh enough to go through his sneakers.

“I know. Mommy’s got you okay? It’s okay. The quilt’s outside but we can use the rug right? We can use the rug, I know it’s kind of itchy.”

They waited, sitting next to one another in the darkness, trembling. The wind wasn’t letting up. He could hear the house rocking, creaking back and forth with every blow.

“It’s okay,” his mother kept saying. “It’s okay now. The Magick’s up. You can go to sleep if you want.”

But it was hard to sleep during the storms. His mother would keep saying the same things over and over again, until it was like she wasn’t saying them to anybody at all.

Perhaps he did manage to fall asleep at one point. Or maybe it seemed like he had fallen asleep because the world in front of him was dark. In any case, he felt like he was waking up and found that the rug had slipped off of his shoulders and his mother was standing next to him. His toes were wet through his sneakers.

“Mommy—”

“Get up sweetheart. I know there’s water, okay. It’s a little cold, you can stand on top of the toilet if you like. It’s a little taller huh?” He felt for the toilet in the dark, shivering, and climbed on top of it. The door was straining, the hinges starting to pop off.

“Mommy—”

“Yes?”

“Mommy, I can feel the water.”

“I told you to stand on the toilet.”

“Mommy, I am standing on the toilet.”

The door whined and smashed above their heads. He screamed but it didn't sound loud, not compared to the wind. His mother threw herself over him and he felt the lunchbox bang into his back, causing him to gasp for air. The water was knee high now, but he could only feel it, seeing nothing.

“We're going upstairs!” They waded, ran, threw themselves up against the staircase as the whole house moaned. The wind pelting them with splinters, the water sloshing around the bottom floor of the house. He clambered, everything bruised.

The roof was completely gone. There was only the hole where it used to be, the quilt gone, the air mattress gone, just the bare slick wood and the remains of one of the walls. They slid against their will, the wind picking them up and tossing them over to one side. Together they huddled in a ball, the box clenched between their shivering bodies, his mother digging her fingers into the sides of the house. The storm was all around them, a swirling mass and she was crying, saying that it was going to be okay.

He looked out and found that the lights on the Water Front had gone dark. Looking out over the bay, he did not see the orange sparks on the bridge, showing that the Magick was holding the worst of it back.

The water was crawling up the staircase. It was difficult to tell in the darkness where it was coming from, the rain overhead or the sea. He and his mother were a tangle of hair and limbs hunched in the corner. He was screaming but he could not hear and the box was wedged into his side, he was holding on to it for dear life.

The world vibrated. He could feel his stomach writhing as if it too was being knocked around in the wind, and his mother was pleading for him not to be scared, that it was going to be alright that there was no reason to worry. The whole world was a mass of darkness and he was trying to hold it back, screaming to hold it back, to stay here, to not Twitch because there was nowhere else to go, the storm was everywhere and running would mean going someplace that he did not want to go, not away from her—

“Baby! Baby stay with me! Stay here! Hayd—”

The world cracked in two.

Cold.

The splintered remains of something against his face. A shiver went up his spine and the boy found himself clutching to a piece of wood, floating. The water was everywhere, up past his neck. He kicked, legs underneath the water, hitting wreckage, something hard.

Water everywhere. And wood.

He choked, floundered, hauled himself up onto the wood, feeling the crevices. It was the kitchen door. Maybe not theirs. The paint wasn't the same. Water. The ocean, everywhere, with little chunky islands of dark wood. He whirled, the bit of flotsam he was clinging to bobbing as if to throw him. The city was behind him, but there was no island.

“Mom?”

No answer. No hum of cars, the buildings bright in the sunlight. No people. A floating void and in the distance the pillars, the bridge cracked in half.

“Mommy!”

He paddled towards the land, screaming. It was farther than he remembered. At one point he dove into the water, tried to swim, his clothes weighing him down. Choked. Grabbed the door, kicking, hauled himself up, gasping like a fish, crawling for a handhold. He kicked after that, onto the beach, coughing, screaming himself hoarse. By the time he reached it the sun was in the sky, without warmth, the island, wherever it was, gone under the waves.

The beach underneath the overpass was a dirty one, loaded with modern brambles. A twisted car. Wood. Signs unhinged. Plastic everywhere. A mountain of rubble. He climbed to the top, kicking metal, organic, everything, one something soft. Looked down. Body of a dog, blank eyes staring up at him. No breath in it. Fought the urge to Twitch.

The single strong bright orange beam of Holding Magick. On one side the rubble mountain, but it was leaning up against a solid stretch of nothingness. An invisible barrier. On the other side, nothing touched. He could see the road, wet with rain but nothing else. No people. When he reached the top of the rubble there was a horrible burning, an excruciating hot spark that whipped through him.

His foot caught on something as he slid down. He tumbled, his face coming down in the rubble. He cried out, pushed himself up, grabbed his foot to free it. Felt the cold familiarity of a metal handle.

He dug, fingers sifting through the splinters. The box. The lunchbox, still clamped shut.

“Mom!” Hauled the box out, opened it. The album was still inside, and so were the postcards, but their colors were bleeding together. He went back down to the surf, straddling the line between beach and ocean. Only the muddy water, with flecks of brightness in it. He

searched for a bare stretch of concrete, ended up having to clear one, causing piles of rubble to collapse around him. He dumped the postcards, water sloshing out of the box too. Most of the pictures were stuck together, inky stains running from one to another, some of the images transferred to the back of others. He spent the day separating them into piles, hoping that they would dry, scraping the silt off and weighing them down with rocks to keep the wind from taking them.

Whisper Island was underwater. The water was higher than he remembered. He could see only the roofs of houses across the bay. Night came before the post cards dried. He was on the beach, scared to wring the last bits of moisture from them.

There was no wind that night. He could hear the voices from across the water. But they were not the ghosts. These were different, cries for help from across the water, from the living.

He spent the next three days on the beach, watching the waters recede, other people clamber up on the shore, the helicopters thrumming overhead, the wreckage come in with each passing wave. Waiting for the sound of his mother's voice from across the bay.

Visiting Minerva is always hard, because in her strained tired face Twitch can't help thinking about his mother. He imagines when Minerva goes out, she comes home wishing the same thing that his mother probably did—that there wasn't going to be another day following it. Minerva never buys lottery tickets like his mother did, though. He's pretty sure that Minerva doesn't even have a job. He spent the last night in her room. The space was like a hotel, giving no hint that it belonged to Minerva, besides the photographs that she had on the wall.

He is on the boardwalk next to the bay. There are plenty of joggers out this morning, who are more interested in running him over than moving to the side. He doesn't like to look at the bay, because looking at the bay means looking at the island, or at least what's left of it. It's ugly, even from far away. The Storm took everything, even the shape of the island, leaving it a lumpy mass with beaches that look like the ocean had coughed them up.

Twitch pulls his scarves in tighter against the cold, thinking of the sleepless night he had, riffling through the postcards. Minerva didn't wake the whole night, she was too exhausted from Listening.

His mother is gone.

It should not be a surprise. But even so, he hoped that Minerva would tell him that his mother is still out there somewhere. After so many dreams where Twitch can still see her, speaking to him from the broken remains of the house. He thinks about the postcards and how the ghosts were plaguing him. He remembers thinking that burying the postcards on the island would appease them. But he's learned that you cannot blame everything on ghosts.

Twitch is trying not to look at Whisper Island, the grey little bit of land so torn up that it is as if it is floating on the bay, instead of being a steadfast stretch of rock. Nothing's anchored anymore, the little roots that all of them tried to put down on the island are gone ripped up by the ocean and the waves.

Transcript of scenes from *Broken through Silence: Untold Stories of Domestic Violence*

Documentary by Clarence Malcolm, 1996

Audio	Visual
<p>MALCOLM(O.S.)</p> <p>How long have you been living at the center?</p> <p>WOMAN</p> <p>Three months. Left my husband three months ago, came here, never looked back.</p> <p>(MORE)</p>	<p>EXT: Front of the Wellspring Women's Center.</p> <p><i>Cut to:</i></p> <p>INT: DARKENED ROOM</p> <p>Women's silhouette, framed by the blue curtains behind her. Darkness obscures her face.</p> <p>(MORE)</p>

MALCOLM (O.S.)

How long had you been
together?

WOMAN

Six years.

(pause)

He started abusing me before
the marriage. So--

(pause, she licks her lips
nervously)

Nine years I think.

(MORE)

Cut to:

Back of the woman. She is
looking out of the window, her
hair spilling down the back of
the chair. Outside it is
raining. The chair is one
commonly found in corporate
office rooms, metal with
plastic padding. (MORE)

(MORE)

WOMAN (CONT'D)

I still have scars from it,
mentally mostly, but
physically too.

When somebody's that mad, you
just try and run. I would take
my kids, tell them to run into
the bathroom and when they
were too little I would lock
it ahead of time and pick it
afterwards.

(crying)

I mean, I would just...stand in
front of the door you know? I
didn't want him to have any
chance of getting through.

(MORE)

Cut to:

INT. DARKENED ROOM

Silhouette shot.

(MORE)

<p>MALCOLM (O.S.)</p> <p>Why didn't you leave him?</p> <p>WOMAN (V.O.)</p> <p>I didn't have any place else to go. Didn't have a job, license got revoked a while back because of a DUI. Not like he would even let me use the car. I was always scared that if I left, he was going to find me. I'm still scared.</p> <p>MALCOLM (V.O.)</p> <p>What made you decide to leave?</p> <p>And come here?</p> <p>WOMAN (V.O.)</p> <p>My son, one night, when the</p> <p>(CONTINUED)</p>	<p><i>Cut to:</i></p> <p>INT. WELLSPRIING WOMEN'S SHELTER - MONTAGE</p> <p>-DINING HALL. Clear it has not been renovated since the 1970s. The table are empty except for the napkin dispensers. Room is in a soft grey light from the windows.</p> <p>- KITCHEN. Shot is from over the kitchen sink, looking at the playground.</p> <p>- FRONT RECEPTION DESK. Secretary typing, assortment of magazines lying on a coffee table.</p> <p>-Children's playroom, with mirrors on one side. Toys are all over the floor.</p> <p>(MORE)</p>
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<p>door was loose, my husband was finished with me and he hadn't...even hurt me that badly that night. He'd gone to sleep it off and my son...I unlocked the door and I-I--</p> <p>(breaks off, crying)</p> <p>I'm-I'm-I'm sorry...</p> <p>MALCOLM (O.S.)</p> <p>You don't have to continue if you don't want to.</p> <p>WOMAN</p> <p>Actually, could I have a minute...?</p> <p>MALCOLM (O.S.)</p> <p>Sure, that's fine.</p> <p>Noise of camera and equipment shifting.</p> <p>(MORE)</p>	<p>-Stuffed rabbit on the floor</p> <p>END OF MONTAGE</p> <p><i>Cut to:</i></p> <p>INT. DARKENED ROOM</p> <p>Silhouette shot. WOMAN is shaking as she cries.</p> <p>Silhouette straightens.</p> <p>Camera moves, goes out of focus for a moment.</p> <p><i>Cut to:</i></p> <p>INT. DARKENED ROOM.</p> <p>(CONTINUED)</p>
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<p>WOMAN(sighing)</p> <p>Ok, I think I'm ready now.</p> <p>(pause)</p> <p>My son, when I opened the door, I saw that he was clenching and unclenching his fists, just like his father when he...</p> <p>(swallows)</p> <p>It was the scariest thing I've seen in my whole life.</p> <p>WOMAN(O.S.)</p> <p>I left him that night. Just took off with the kids.</p> <p>Traffic noise.</p> <p>(MORE)</p>	<p>WOMAN is positioned differently here, indicating that there has been a time change.</p> <p><i>Cut to:</i></p> <p>EXT. WELLSRING WOMEN'S CENTER PLAYGROUND</p> <p>Swing creaking in the wind.</p> <p>EXT. WHISPER ISLAND, FROM THE VIEW OF THE SOUTH BAY NEIGHBORHOODS. EXTRA-WIDE SHOT.</p> <p>Camera down from the island into the neighborhoods, ending</p> <p>(CONTINUED)</p>
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<p style="text-align: center;">MAN</p> <p>Every place has got its problems I think. The way I see it, some places have a lot more problems than others. You got a lot of poverty here, there's a lot of anger too, sometimes.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(CONTINUED)</p>	<p>with the image of a dilapidated house.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Cut to:</i></p> <p>EXT. SOUTH BAY NEIGHBORHOODS.</p> <p>CONTINUOUS.</p> <p>Ghettos in one of the southern regions of Shale City, miles south of the Water Front. Camera is focused on MAN'S back, he is gesturing towards houses as he walks, the camera behind him.</p> <p>Camera pans over to one of the houses. Plastic lawn furniture is crumpled in the driveway.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(MORE)</p>
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<p>MAN (CONT'D)</p> <p>the anger go away, and there are some ways to do that here.</p> <p>CAMERAMAN (O.S. less distinct)</p> <p>Like what?</p> <p>MAN</p> <p>Alcohol. Cigarettes. Drugs for some.</p> <p>MALCOLM (V.O.)</p> <p>Have you used?</p> <p>MAN</p> <p>Me? Oh yeah. It's like a cycle. Father used. Stepfather used. Grandfather probably did too. Never knew him though. Alcohol mostly. Occasionally</p> <p>(CONTINUED)</p>	<p>There are a few hollow eyed children staring out from behind the abandoned cars. Pans back to the man's back.</p> <p>MAN waves his hand.</p> <p><i>Cut to:</i></p> <p>EXT. FRONT PORCH OF HOUSE</p> <p>MAN is facing the camera but his head is down, hands clasped in his lap.</p> <p>(MORE)</p>
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MAN (CONT'D)

some other drugs. There's a lot of anger here. People here, drink, snort, whatever, but I know now.

MAN (CONT'D)

Makes the anger worse, I think. But a lotta people here, that's the only way they know how to deal. Life's hard here, sometimes anger's all you got.

Cut to:

EXT. SOUTH BAY NEIGHBORHOODS.

SUNSET.

View of sunset over WHISPER ISLAND is cut off by the dark rectangle of one of the houses.

Pan out.

Fade to black.

Trigger

You cannot remember your father's face. You can see your mother's face clear as day but your father is blurred, a thick mass of anger with liquor on his breath.

Your father would always take his breakfast on the porch, usually toast with eggs, maybe bacon, maybe orange juice. He would watch the sun rise over the bay, a cigarette dangling off his lips. Your father was never one to skimp on breakfast. He would always scowl at you when you headed out the door on your way to school with a Poptart, still in its silver wrapping, clenched between your teeth.

"I've always loved your mother," he would say, stubbing the cigarette out on the edge of the breakfast plate, the good plates that were supposed to be reserved for Sunday mornings. You wondered if any of the fights were ever started over those plates. You wondered if making breakfast was your father's way of apologizing. Fine, maybe he was thinking. Fine, you know what, I'll get up and make my own breakfast in the morning. 'Cause I'm sorry, I'm sorry for what happened last night, I'm sorry for the yelling, for all of those times I made you cry, Angie, I'm sorry for making you cry again last night, fuck, I'm even sorry about the plates. Yeah, I'm even sorry about the goddamn plates, Angie, so I got up this morning and made breakfast for myself. Because I love you, you lazy whore.

"I've always loved your mother, Savon. I care very deeply about your mother."

You were always too tired to fight with him in the mornings, because of the night before. You, smashing the pillow over your head, buried in the back of your closet, your bedroom door barricaded with all of your furniture. If you were lucky enough to get out of the living room. It got to the point where you didn't use the pillow anymore, you just listened to them go at it. You

would sleep in that closet until you were in your first year of high school, that's how short you were, that's how long it took for you to get a growth spurt. Then it got to be a real pain in the ass to sleep in that closet, you would get cramps from doing it, with your head down in between your knees or curled up in a fetal position or whatever you had to do to cram yourself down into that corner.

“I'm going to have a talk with her about it today, and I'm going to not go out drinking anymore,” your father would always say. “Fuck it's not good for any of us, pissing all of the money away like that. Thinking about enrolling in one of those twelve step programs maybe. I think that would help a whole lot, what do you think about that Savon? I think that would do me a whole lot of good.”

You loved Momo from the first time that you saw her.

After you were married, she would laugh and forgive you when you screwed up and lost another job, or when the bills weren't going to get paid on time and the two of you would wake up on winter mornings to find cold linoleum floors and the hint of frost on the dining room table.

She would be in the house sometimes and you never knew; she'd scared the living shit out of you more than once, when you were watching TV, convinced that nobody was home. She was so small, small enough to be a child. On the streets she actually got mistaken for one.

Momo had green eyes, like those of a cat, green eyes like the mini-Quetz that had come with her when you moved in with one another. You always did a double take when you looked at him—the slim little dregan about the size of a housecat, a ruff of emerald green feathers around its neck, little feathered wings instead of bat like ones. You still don't know where Momo got it.

They were a special type of dregan from islands to the south, maybe even illegal to have as pets. She talked about Quetzalcoatl's like she was talking about ancient gods, but the mini-Quetz wasn't regal in anyway, despite the fact that it was named after some deity that you could never pronounce. All it did was bite and shriek like a cross between the velociraptors in those dinosaur movies and a cat in heat. It also ate anything you left on the counter and shat it out later in white droppings. It would never shit on Momo though. You guessed that was how it showed its affection. The things were also supposed to bring wind. Momo had a habit of blaming the drafts in the house on her pet instead of the holes in the roof.

Momo never worked, even when the money got tight, which was often. She said that work made her sick, that being around Casters made her sick.

“Do I make you sick?” You asked once. “Do I scare you?”

“Not as much as the other people. You don't make me sick like they do.”

“Is it because I can't Cast?”

“Partly,” she said.

You didn't know then, but now, looking back, you realize she was lying. You scared her, but she wasn't going to tell you to your face. You were her worst nightmare.

You should have guess when stopped looking you in the eye, when the mini-Quetz got into a habit of shitting on your bedroom pillow, when Momo would prefer to sleep on the couch instead of in bed with you.

The room that they hold classes in at the Shale City Rehabilitation and Recovery Program Center is not even a classroom at all. It's actually the auditorium with a stage and plastic chairs and some black music stands that have fallen to bits over time, stacked in the corner of the room. There are never any tables here, and sometimes when everyone is tired of sitting in the desks the instructor has everyone sit on the floor.

There are twelve of you in the class because the program finds a group of this size makes participants feel like they aren't alone and yet everyone gets individual attention. The colors in the room are all mismatched, sort of like your fellow participants, your classmates, a room full of grown men sitting in desks donated from a local middle school. Jason, Tony, Gary, Conner, Sol, Keith, Lavardo, Isaac, Dennis, Peter, Hai and you, Savon. You know all of their names because at the beginning of each class you all state exactly why you are here. You read the statements out of the front of your notebook, lesson 1.1, *Establishing Purpose*, every single day.

Your name is Savon Honorez, and you are in this class because you don't want to hurt the ones you love anymore.

And it's required, as part of your prison sentence, but you never say that.

Sol, Tony and Jason are all heavy smokers so in the middle of the afternoon they all twist in their seats, trying to view the clock at the back of the room, seeing if it's time for lunch yet. Keith, the redheaded pale guy who always sits next to you, traces around the title of the day's lesson, over and over again until his pencil is worn down to a stub. You've folded your notebook so many times it's at the point where the pages are all creased and soft. The workbook has a man and a woman, black and white sketch with no skin tone maybe to avoid the whole racial thing,

smiling at one another : *The Answer isn't Anger: Controlling Emotions and Ending the Cycle of Domestic Violence.*

Today is lesson 3.7, *Alternate Strategies for Coping*. Your instructor is a tired looking woman in a bright teal sweater. She knits and you know it because she told you so on the first day of class: “My name is Linda and I’m going to be your instructor and my interesting fact is that I love to knit.”

“Does anyone want to share how they did this week? Does anyone have any strategies that they would like to share with the group?”

A few noises of discomfort. You can hear Sol bouncing his leg up and down on the other side of the circle, the sound of his sweatpants rubbing up and down his leg.

Hai clears his throat. After class on the first day, everybody gave Hai shit for his name because it sounds like he’s greeting everyone. He’s also shorter than everybody, like you. It doesn’t help that Hai doesn’t like silence and always answers.

“Linda, I was angry at my boss earlier this week. When I got home—”

“Was your partner at home, Hai?”

“My partner was at home. And I...I was thinking about drinking again.” Hai winces, his eyebrows going up. You’ve seen the same expression in dogs that have been beaten. Hai always has a look on his face like he’s going to piss himself. “Because, well, my boss had been a shi—I was having problems with my boss, he was saying that I fu—that I screwed up four customers’ orders and I was going to have to pay for them.”

“What was your strategy Hai?”

“I went out and took a walk instead. I went out and took a walk around the neighborhood.”

You don't hate your classmates. You really don't. But you also wonder if they are the kind of people who say “just this once.” If they are the kind of alcoholics who say that when they drink straight out of the bottle. You don't blame them. You've been there, they all know you've been there because on the second week of class everybody had to share their bad habits. They are all written in your workbook under Lesson 2.4 *Identifying Problem Behaviors*.

I drink.

I smoke.

I beat my wife.

I don't clean the house.

I ~~fight~~ fought with my boss.

People say I curse too much.

What Hai is really trying to say is “I went on a walk because I think my boss is an absolute fuckhead and I really didn't want to be in the house at the time, and I also didn't have any alcohol to help with it, and I can't Cast for shit which is also making me feel like an idiot. So I took a walk around the block and broke a couple things, but it's okay, because I don't drink anymore on account of the pills that they've got me on, and the Ward they've got on me, and when I came home the missus was still in one piece. Which is important because I love her so much and I don't want her to see how much of a fuck I am.”

Linda is looking at you. Maybe because she can see that you think Hai's story is complete bullshit.

"Savon, you haven't spoken for awhile. Do you want to tell us about your week?"

You have no desire to tell anybody about your week. Nobody wants to hear about how all you do is search for jobs on the library computers near here, how you can't even take the bus anymore because you don't have two dollars to spare. Or that you can only afford your apartment because the local church is putting you up there because they want to do some good. Nobody wants to know about your week.

"My week wasn't that great," you say.

"Why is that Savon?"

"I'm worried about a lot of things. Stuff that's like, out of my control."

Linda is waiting for an explanation, preferably one that includes an alternative coping strategy. You've been smoking a lot of weed, but considering that's listed under *2.4 Identifying Problem Behaviors* you're guessing that's not what she wants to hear.

In high school, you were never able to sit still in class, because you could feel all of the kids Casting stuff at each other in the back of the room. Some of them got pretty good at it, to the point where they could make it look like you had closed the book on your own face. It felt like a million insects were biting you up and down your arms every single time they did it. When you were younger you actually scratched yourself bloody a few times and they would send you down to the nurse's office. A couple times you heard the word autistic thrown around.

The school couldn't afford Wards to keep kids from Casting in the classroom. A few times you tried to tell the teachers your classmates were up to, but you were never believed. You could see it in their faces. You were the kid who could barely concentrate enough to write his own name on an assignment. How the fuck would you know if other people were Casting?

You hadn't gotten your growth spurt so everybody called you Peewee and Baby Face and Wisp a whole lot of other names. It was a game for a long time, with the taller guys. Even the nerds picked on you, anybody would, because you were so tiny. A classmate favorite of the bullies was to strap you down to your backpack with duct tape and try to hang you from the towel racks in the girls' locker room. It didn't work, and they knew never would, you weren't that tiny, but you were dragged, kicking and screaming, across the floor every other day anyway. You still have the scars on your back from when your shirt rode up and there was nothing to separate you from the cement floor.

Eventually they gave up and resorted to trying to flush you down the toilet after school. You could never hide like Momo could, couldn't even Cast a Light to blind them. You failed Casting lessons when they taught them in school, not that you cared. You couldn't do shit, and the kids knew that, they knew that your legs wouldn't carry you that far. They would get you in the locker room and you would just pray that there weren't any toilets that were overflowing that day. They would pull down your pants and try to water board you.

“What's the matter? What's the matter, brown boy, can't you swim? Can't you swim?”

“Fishy fishy fishy gotta go back to the ocean! Swim down the pipe you little fucker, you fucking Wisp, you're small enough, what are you an idiot?”

You didn't stick around high school long enough to get big and try to get them back for it. You stopped showing up to class and just hung out in the neighborhood, looking for stuff in dumpsters, beating your knuckles bloody on tree trunks, imagining that the knots in the branches were the kids' faces.

You leave your phone at home all day these days, especially when you are in class. The bill has been prepaid for the next three months thanks to the church. Because potential employers need to call you back, you use the minutes sparingly. You aren't sure if voicemail counts or not, but may as well not risk it.

Dinner today is a cold noodle dish out of a takeout box. It's not supposed to be eaten cold but the microwave isn't working anymore. The phone rings. You don't recognize the number, but you lunge for it anyway, hoping it's a job, anything.

"Hello?"

They hang up on you. You dial them back, frantic while it's ringing on the other end. Eventually it comes to voicemail.

"Hi, you've reached Monica Mecatle, I can't come—"

You drop the phone and Momo's voice is muffled in the dirty carpet. Hearing it is enough to recall that picture, her dried blood the color of the brown sauce on your takeout, the eyes not looking at you. You think you hear the tone sound, but you sit, trembling.

She calls later that night, when you taking a shower, the water as hot as it can go. By the time you get out and are in the living room, standing in a wet towel, she's already left a message.

“Hey Savon, it’s...it’s me...it’s really hard for me to tell you this, but I’m doing okay. I’m doing alright I’m staying—Anyways, it’s really hard for me to do this but...I’ve spoken to a lawyer, and we’re going to be going through with divorce proceedings, in the light of...anyways. I...I don’t really want to see you, but you can talk to my lawy—”

You throw the phone across the room. It crashes against the wall. Somewhere in the back of your mind is lesson 3.7, But it’s easier to throw the phone, to throw the remote to the dead TV, because she was never supposed to leave you.

Divorce was word that your mother liked to drop over your father’s head all of the time. “I’m going to divorce you! Ain’t nothings gonna stop me, I’mma fucking divorce you!”

“Where the fuck are you going to get a lawyer? Huh? The fuck are you going to get a lawyer, don’t even have enough money to cook a nice dinner in the evenings and you’re going to get a lawyer?”

“You know what! You know what maybe I’ll just leave! Maybe I’ll just leave huh, you won’t have to get a divorce, I can just go!”

“Where the fuck are you going to go!” your father would say with a voice loud enough to rattle the windows. The fuck you gonna go woman! This is all you have! You gonna leave your son huh! You’re gonna leave your son!”

“Don’t talk to me about my son!”

“Here’s news for you Angela, he’s my son, too—”

“Don’t you talk to me—”

Eventually it would escalate into a thunderous roar, broken by the sound of crashing bottles and your mother's cries. She would scream like murder. You stopped praying to the Savior and ended up praying to the neighbors, hoping they would hear. Sometimes it got as far as your mother packing a suitcase the next morning and you not packing anything.

Just go Mom, you would think, but your father would always be waiting out on the porch, breakfast half eaten.

"We need to talk."

"The fuck we need to talk."

He would grab her arm and there would be a scuffle, sometimes so much the suitcase lock would come undone. But it always ended the same way, with your father crying, saying he would do better and that he broke the twelve steps and all of that but he was going to get back on track.

As much as you hated your father when he was angry, you hated him even more when he cried.

After you threw things, when you were still together, Momo would clean up the mess, wash the whole house, clean up all the shit that the mini-Quetz left behind. Make it look like nothing happened.

"I'm sorry," you would say.

"It's okay baby. It's okay. I understand. Sometimes we all gotta break things."

At the very beginning of your course, you were told that if something went wrong that the community center was always there to help you. You aren't sure if wasting the precious minutes on the phone is worth it. But when you pick it up off the floor, snap the battery in and it's still working you take it as a sign.

You don't call Momo's lawyer. You call the center but get the voicemail, telling you that the place is only open from nine to five anyway and that if this is an emergency it's best to call 911. The lights flicker in your apartment and you glance outside. It's raining, hard, you can see the trees waving back and forth in front of your window.

You have Linda's number in your phone but when you dial you get her voicemail. You dial again, again the same thing. You think back and dimly remember a partner exercise where you were assigned supporters, lesson 1.4 *The Support of the Group*. Your partner is Sol, the one you're supposed to call when things get bad. He picks up, but it's difficult to hear him. Maybe it's the wind. Or the phone.

“ ‘Allo?’”

“It's me, Savon. I'm a...I'm having a little bit of a bad night, looking from some...support.”

“S okay I gotchu buddy. Old Sol is here to help.”

You start to tell him about Momo, about the phone call, but then realize halfway through that he's rambling while you're speaking.

“Sol, are you even fucking listening to me?”

“S okay, I gotchu buddy. I gotchu...”

You slam down the phone on the table hard enough that the screen cracks, because Sol is drunk out of his mind.

You were wedged in the back of the closet because they were at it again. You were debating whether or not just to leave through the window, take off into the street. You've got the landline phone, which you've started keeping there for emergencies, although you've called before and have never been able to get the words out. Your father was cursing about the heating bill, how it never gets paid, how your mother is a dumb bitch who doesn't even deserve to be in this house.

You couldn't hear your mother's voice. He was yelling but your mother wasn't saying anything. Your mother was always one to put up a fight. You chose to call, pressing hard on the phone's buttons because the thing was old and did not respond well after getting thrown too many times. You couldn't remember the child services number. You gave up eventually and dialed 911.

Ask for an ambulance and not the pigs, you thought. You hauled yourself up out of the closet, pressing yourself up against the door and not daring to breathe.

"Get up," your father was saying. "Angelaaaaaa get up don't just lie there..." The dial tone wasn't coming. You looked at the phone and dialed again, pressing so hard that the plastic bit around the buttons started to pop out.

Then that you realize the heating bill wasn't the only thing that didn't get paid.

You cracked the door open. The kitchen light was on, casting shadows down the hallway. Your father was collapsed over the kitchen bar.

“Mom?” You tossed the phone against the wall and go into the kitchen on unsteady feet.

She was lying on the floor, head back against the cabinets, as if she was asleep. There was a mass of blood where her nose should have been. One of her wrists was starting to swell.

“Mom.” But by that time your father had noticed you, he was pawing at you from the other end of the kitchen counter.

“Where’d you go Savon—”

You were already back against the wall, heading for your room and the window. He came after you down the hallway like a lumbering bear. The alcohol hadn’t slowed him yet. You kicked the door to your room down. The phone lay on the floor, silent, its buttons looking like so many eyeballs staring up at you. The door was open and your father was coming through.

The window was right there.

But you didn’t go for it. Your mother was in the middle of the kitchen floor and not moving. The phone wasn’t working. You screamed, your whole small little pipsqueak body screams and you threw the phone at your father, hard.

It bounced off his chest, but the whack was enough to leave a bruise.

You were screaming bloody murder and wondering why the fuck your mother never left, why she put up with this. He was yelling your name and calling you a little shit and a million things that he’d said before.

It was the first time you’ve ever thrown a punch at another human.

The night everything went wrong, they were talking about a storm at work, saying there was something brewing off the ocean. A few of your friends were talking about family that lived on the island, maybe going out to see the big waves coming in.

You'd gotten fired from the gas station a few days ago. You were filling a request for two pounds of thinly cut Colby cheese when your boss came over to you at the deli counter and said that he was going to cut your hours. You nearly sliced your finger off.

“What?”

“I said I'm cutting your hours.” Your boss was another guy that made you itch like crazy. He was good at Casting, enough that he'd been talking for weeks about maybe applying for a better job, something that didn't involve managing a meat department. “We're going to be closing the deli counter down earlier, at seven pm instead of ten—”

“I need those hours boss. I got a wife at home, she's sick.”

He swallowed hard. You'd grown a lot since high school but not enough to look him in the eye. “Everybody does Savon.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do about my rent then?”

“I don't need you to cop an attitude right now Savon.” He glanced over his shoulder to the front counter, where a mother with a baby in the front of her cart was waiting on her Colby cheese. “Not in front of the customers.”

“For fuck—”

“You do that again,” he said through gritted teeth, “and you’ll lose all of them. Does that sound fair to you?”

Free cold cuts was not one of the perks of your job. But you were hungry and considering that twenty hours a week wasn’t enough to make anything meet you figured that it was justified. You sneak a bottle of vodka under your vest as you left the store. You got halfway home when you realize that the bottle was half gone and you didn’t remember drinking it.

You came home hazy. The cheese in your mouth—what kind of cheese was it, you couldn’t remember—tasted pasty. The entire house smelled like shit. The mini-Quetz was perched on top of the TV. There was shit all over the couch and the screen. Momo was in the kitchen heating something up in the microwave.

“What the fuck is this?” you said. It was difficult to make her out from behind the counter, she was so small. The mini-Quetz snarled at you, its little claws digging into the top of the television set. It occurred to you that Momo was hiding, ashamed. “I come home from work and step into a dirty house, you are here all day, I don’t understand why you can’t just clean—”

The mini-Quetz shrieked, cutting you off. You roared at it. The dregan snarled and flapped over to the kitchen. Your hand groped for something to throw at it, to knock the little shit out of the air. It landed on Momo’s shoulders. She was cowering up against the kitchen cabinets. Her form was flickering, but you didn’t know if that was because you were drunk or she was trying to disappear.

It was raining heavily outside. It was hitting the windows like a thousand little bullets. Momo’s face was blurred. She was crying hysteric tears, talking about the pain and how going

outside made her sick and by the Savior, she wanted to be able to work but some days when she got up she could barely move—

Your hand came away stinging. And then the mini-Quetz latched onto you, digging all of its needle claws into your bare arm, drawing blood. Then he went for your fingers and you flailed, trying to get the thing off.

“Stop it!” Momo was crying. “Stop it, you bastard, stop!”

The dregan let go. You grab the tail and even though it’s twisting in your grip you slam it against the kitchen counter, hard. It stops struggling.

Someone was crying. But you couldn’t tell if it was the mini-Quetz, Momo, or you. Momo scrambled out of the kitchen, heading for door that had banged open with the gale. You stumbled after. The wind picked up bits of paper and trash and empty TV dinner boxes and threw them around the house. Momo was running towards the mailbox. You couldn’t see because of the rain, because of the wind whipping at your face. You grabbed her arm.

The blows came hard and fast.

For Immediate Release, Frigal 1999

Shale City History Museum Presents “Whispers on the Bay: An In-Depth Look at the Life of Indigenous Peoples”

Shale City—In collaboration with the Department of Archaeology at the University of Shale City, Shale City History Museum presents a new exhibit opening on Frigal 12, 1999, that provides a unique look at the life and culture of indigenous peoples of the bay area. Notable artifacts include pieces from the Shale City History Museum collection, such as arrowheads, clay pots and preserved jewelry. Many artifacts recently uncovered in Burgo’s Bayou National Park during the University’s longest ongoing archaeological project are also featured.

“This exhibition has one that has been very long in the making,” said Professor Helen Yamaway of the University of Shale City. “It was a great opportunity in order to put together an exhibition that showcases a way of life that has been pushed to the margins throughout history.”

The exhibit features several dioramas, including large display of a lean-to and a beach hunting scene. Several specimens from the permanent Hall of Life exhibit, including native plant and animal species, are also on display. Several of the dioramas are automated, using a combination of specialized Wield and Quicken spells.

“The indigenous peoples in the area,” says Head Curator Shawn Rowan “had a clear connection with the different animal species in the area. Including examples of these species was essential for a full understanding of their culture.”

The end of the exhibit also touches upon modern life for indigenous people, some of whom have adopted the colloquial term “Tree People” as a unique identity. This section includes interviews from individuals in Shale City and the Southern Islands who actively participate in the

indigenous community. Some of the interviews in this section were conducted with the help of the University of Shale City's Sociology Department.

“We didn't want to present this culture as one which was completely historical,” said Rowan.

“Allowing visitors to see that there are still plenty of individuals out there who strongly identify with their native roots was very important to us.”

The planned showing of the exhibition is from Frigal 12, 1999 to Brith 2, 1999, during normal business hours. Admission is \$22 for those 18 and older, and \$17 for children, those who are age five or younger are admitted for free.

Ghosts

I have been sitting in my car for nearly twenty minutes, staring at the façade of my grandmother's house. The paint is still a brilliant blue, hidden behind the overgrown remains of her rosebushes. I think back to the calls with the hospice service. We discussed Yamalla so much, except for the last days when everyone went silent. Why didn't I talk to them about the garden? Yamalla would have hated to see it like this. Couldn't I have taken the time to tell them to water the plants? Couldn't I have come over and done some weeding? I lean forward, setting my forehead on the steering wheel.

The tears aren't coming yet. I've cried a lot these past few years, to the point where I believe that some deep well inside me is running dry. That is one benefit of going off Prolital. I can actually feel again.

I think back to Carrie's invitation, to come over and help with the process. The cleansing, she called it. The clearing out. These are words that we use during our group sessions, when we talk about the recovery process. But this is different. Cleansing the house of my grandmother makes it seem like Yamalla was a bad stain, instead of the good person that she really was.

My phone buzzes. It's the real estate agent that Carrie put me in touch with, to work on selling the house. My house, I think, although it sounds wrong in my head. It's Yamalla's house, even though she never liked it. She always spoke about the house on Whisper Island, that I never visited, the one that was sold before my birth, and destroyed five years ago by the storm. But Yamalla still wanted her ashes scattered there.

I shake as I get out of the car and approach the entryway. I fumble with the key. I try to believe that Yamalla would approve of me cleaning out the house. She used to tell me that she would sell it in a moment and go back to the island, if the neighborhood wasn't so bad.

The house smells stale; it's been three months since it has been lived in. I make my way to the first floor bedroom. The room looks as if it is caught in a perpetual twilight. The curtains obscure the light streaming in from the windows. The bed is made, the green comforter lumpy from years of use. Now the tears are coming. Part of me strains to hold them back, thinking of the times that I've had to hide my crying in the past. But there's no one around to hear me. I can feel the deep buzzing in my body; it's been years since I've Twitched and I have no desire to do it now.

There is a framed photograph on the bedside table. It is a grainy one that has faded over the years, a washed out piece of paper that looks like something out of a 1960s documentary. Yamalla said that the photo was taken right before they moved into this house, a few weeks after I was born.

My grandfather Max is staring straight at the camera. Yamalla is smiling, wearing a yellow polka dot frock, cradling me in her arms. My eyes are closed. I am a very wrinkled little baby, like a seed pod that hasn't opened yet. My mother is off to the side, her arm around Yamalla. My father is not in the photo at all. Sometimes I wonder if he had volunteered to take the picture, not wanting to be in it, anticipating that something was going to sweep him away. Within a year of taking this photograph, our family splintered. Max died of a heart attack. My father deserted my mother, who in turn left me in Yamalla's care.

It is easy to place my fingers over the photograph, covering my mother and grandfather as if they had never existed. It was Yamalla holding me up. Crop everybody else out and you still had a smiling woman with a baby.

But taking Yamalla out requires a lot of cutting. And it will leave me, Monica, floating in midair with no support at all. Unbound. Unanchored.

I have tasked myself in these last few days of spring break with clearing out the house. The rooms are not as full as I remembered them being, as if Yamalla's illness stripped away not only her memories, but also the physical reminders of them. When I first made the decision to place her in hospice care, I donated some of the more practical items. The silverware, the food, some of the linens, the furniture from my old bedroom that had been kept in the garage. Anything that Yamalla didn't like, the objects she claimed she didn't have the energy to move. I reasoned I was doing her a favor. When she returned home, she would have a clutter-free house. I hadn't wanted the objects that remained behind to outlive her.

So the objects that are left now are heavy with memories. The photograph for one. The ceramic bowls and plates that she had collected from pottery exhibitions. I am sitting on the living room couch, staring out at the garden. Even during the winter months, when nothing was growing, she had a desire to be outside. The backyard is a tangled mess now, the vegetable patch overgrown and grasping at the lawn, the edges of the flowerbeds smeared. This is even worse than seeing the house empty. Yamalla always said we were lucky to have a sizable backyard, as many of the houses in this neighborhood were pressed right up next to one another.

The house is still. I realize that I'm waiting for movement. It's a feeling that I've had before. After leaving my ex-husband, after the night that he beat me bloody, the authorities told me that my mini-Quetz, Totlacxtl, had not been found. He was presumed dead. For years I kept thinking that I saw Totlacxtl everywhere, that someday I would be going on a morning walk and he would fall on me out of the trees—or maybe even soar gracefully, he'd been gone long enough that his wing feathers would have grown out and he actually would have been able to fly. Now that I've accepted that he's gone, it's my own grandmother that I am expecting to appear around the corner.

I head upstairs to the bedroom, trying to think about the strides that I have taken these past few years. Leaving Savon. Making the decision to go off Prolital. Going to community college. It doesn't feel like I've gone far. I am back at Yamalla's house, still wearing children's clothing because I have not grown any since my high school years.

The bedroom is empty. We moved all of the furniture downstairs to the guest bedroom two years ago to save Yamalla the trouble of going up and down the stairs. But there are several boxes in the closet. Carrie said that I should look for any important legal documents, anything that may have to do with the house or the future of Yamalla's possessions. I haul the boxes out of the closet and start to dig through them.

They are filled with photo albums. The Polaroid pictures are going yellow with age. Most of them are of me in the backyard. In all of them I am somewhere between tan and downright sunburnt. Me blowing bubbles using wands from bent wire coat hangers. Me teasing out bugs from the grass. Me trying to climb in the tree in our backyard. Me with band-aids on both knees, sitting on the porch and scribbling in a coloring book. There are other photos, taken

by other people—my middle school portraits. The day of my high school graduation, Yamalla beaming, me smiling but looking unsure.

There are a few photos of just Yamalla—I remember them as my shaky attempts to become a photographer. Yamalla bending over the vegetable patch in the backyard. A photo of her in Main Park, her red coat looking even brighter against the grey winter cityscape. I turn the pages carefully, my eyes raw with tears. Placing my hand into the box again, my fingers brush something smooth and heavy. It is a mason jar, three quarters full with seeds. I turn it over in my hands. I am shaking, enough that the seeds are sliding past one another, sounding like falling rain.

I have forgotten that I hid it here.

In her last days at the house, Yamalla was prone to wandering. Being away at work and living in my own apartment, I tried to visit often, especially once the home caregivers expressed their concerns. My grandmother needed full time care, they said. Not an intersection of at home hospice and my own visits. Yamalla was still mobile enough to act on her desires to be elsewhere. I learned that my grandmother had taken a jar of seeds from the backyard shed and was determined to be outside with them.

One night that I stayed over in the upstairs bedroom, feeling wary about leaving Yamalla by herself downstairs. I had checked the locks before I went to bed, but they would do little if she was trying to get out. I tossed and turned for several hours before deciding to go downstairs to check on her. I discovered one of the lights in the living room had been turned on.

“Yamalla?” I headed towards the downstairs bedroom. The door was ajar. “Grandma?”

No answer. The bed was unmade. I flicked on all of the lights downstairs, only to go to the backyard door and discover that it was only partially closed. I hit the porch light switch. Yamalla was out in the garden in her nightgown, her feet covered in muddy snow. She was chattering to herself, pacing back and forth and gesturing to the soggy remains of the garden. It was a language that I didn't recognize, words from an ancient time. She was clutching the jar of seeds to her chest.

"Grandma!" My voice startled her. She turned and pointed out the ground. I shook my head. "It's time to come inside."

"They won't grow here," she said. "They aren't going to grow here, not with this soil, this weather. They won't grow. I need a real garden Max. A real one, not a dirty backyard! Why here? Why did we have to come here?"

"We live here," I said, hating that I was speaking to her like she was a child. "It's cold. "Don't you want to go inside? The seeds..."

"We don't live here." She pointed in the direction of the bay. "I want the island! Not here. I want our People."

She says People in the ancient language. To my ears it is a foreign sound, but it is a word that I know, deep within my bones. It was as if she had called out to something within me, a secret name. I stepped toward her. Yamalla's gaze was lost. She squeezed the jar, the pressure leaving marks on her hands.

"It's time to go inside," I said.

I spend the rest of the afternoon just with the photo books and the seeds. By the time evening falls, I have only gone through those four boxes, which I haul out to my car. Four boxes out of a whole house. A whole life.

The next morning I arrive at the house early. Work has already called twice, asking to schedule hours for next week, but I let the calls go to voicemail. Instead I'm on the phone with Carrie. She asks if I am going to come to group therapy today.

"Even though it's spring break for you, they're still running it. And it would be good. If you need help you could talk about it." I fumble to put my hair up in a ponytail while still talking to her on the phone.

"I'm not going to have anything to say Carrie."

"But it'd be good for you." I can hear the clamor from the restaurant Carrie works at in the background. She's using one of her precious fifteen minute breaks for this call, in the middle of the morning rush. "Look, if you come, I'll bring you cupcakes."

"You bring everybody cupcakes every week. For everybody."

"Well I'll bring extra just for you."

"You just want me to come so you don't have to go alone." Silence on the other end. It's true. Carrie's told me time and time again that she prefers journaling, that meeting with other people makes her nervous. We've bonded over our difficulties of being social in public. For me, the issue is that all of the other women in the group are Casters. Even though my decision to go off Prolital is one I celebrate, there are still consequences. I can feel again. I'm no longer numb and cut off from the outside world. But the itching, the anxiety that can cause me to Twitch

without notice, and the fainting spells are all consequences for that. Once, the facilitator Casted Wield in order to fetch us all cups of tea without having to get up from her chair. The ripping feeling of Casting was enough to trigger an anxiety attack. Carrie had to escort me from the room.

“I want you to come,” Carrie says, “It’s good for you, it’s actually good for both of us you know? And you were doing okay, I mean, you divorced Savon. And then there’s your school and your History degree. But then your grandma...”

I swallow hard. It’s strange to hear other people talk about Yamalla’s death, a singular event. It makes it sound like she never lived.

“I think I need to just sort things out by myself. And take care of the house. It’s not like I talk much in group anyway. Not about me.” And this is true. My conversations in the group are limited to what Savon did to Totlacxtl.

“Are you okay?”

I lean against the doorframe. I have opened the door to the house. I cannot help but notice the dust on the furniture. The growing feeling that I am disturbing meant to be left alone. I can feel the tears again.

“How am I supposed to be okay?” I say. “She’s gone Carrie. She isn’t coming back, and in her last days she didn’t even know who I was. I don’t want to remember her like that.” I don’t want to remember the way that I had to spoon feed her dinner. The way that she would babble, lost in a place and time that I couldn’t go to, her eyes devoid of recognition. That wasn’t her. “I have to clean out the house so I can sell it. I—I hate it. I—” It’s hard to speak through my tears. “I—it’s—it’s all I can fucking do.”

“Monic—” The sounds on Carrie’s end are suddenly muffled. As I wait for her to respond, I concentrate on taking deep breaths. “Shit,” Carrie says. “Look, I’m so sorry. I want to talk more, but my boss—”

“It’s okay,” I say. I’m unsure if I’m saying it to Carrie or myself.

I start clearing out the house ferociously, thinking that the faster I do it, the less painful it would be. Like ripping off a bandage in one go. I manage to get through the rooms upstairs, not much of an accomplishment considering most of the stuff was not worth saving. A toothbrush. A bar of soap. Some sheets in the back of the closet that I had forgotten the first time around. Little reminders of life that could have belonged to anyone.

It is worse when I get downstairs, to the rooms of the house that were more lived in, the spaces that were memorialized in the photo albums. The bedroom furniture will have to be sold. The kitchen is full of personal items: crystal butterflies strung across the window over the kitchen sink, herb plants now crispy from lack of water, cabinets filled with bakeware that we used for everything from birthday cakes to casseroles. The three pile strategy—keep, donate/sell, throw away—that I have been using in the rest of the breaks down here. I have a muffin tin at home. But this one is Yamalla’s, too good to throw away. I’ve never liked tea and have no use for the electric kettle. But Yamalla loved tea and wouldn’t want me to sell it, right? I end up spending the better part of an hour swapping items back and forth between the piles before giving up.

The garden outside is a mess, so even though it’s the middle of the day I go outside, intending to start weeding. I hope that the task will clear my head. But the yard, with its patchy

grass, brings on a new set of memories. I take a seat on the lawn, breathing hard as the tears start to come again. How long did both of us spend out here together? When the vegetable patch was not overgrown, but flourishing with enough produce that we had more than enough just for the two of us? When the flowers beds were vibrant with color, and we would press and dry the blooms so that their beauty would be with us all year round?

Breathe.

I lay down in the grass with my eyes closed, feeling every nook and cranny of the backyard in my consciousness. The world slows down. Ants scuttling in between the blades of grass. The roots of the tree, deep and grounded. The dog two houses over, a flashing bolt of white energy barking at passing cars. A woman in the kitchen three doors down, the artificial whirr of her vacuum cleaner. Rows of parked cars. Mechanical bits breaking up the natural pieces, the little flows of energy. My mind fills with circles, a pleasant humming that comes from everywhere, a music of ancient origin. The whole universe breathes.

I am in the yard for hours. By the time my heart slows and my mind is ready to return, my olive skin has burned and the world is settling into evening. I stumble into the house, my consciousness receding from the yard, coming back into my small self. I turn to look back at the yard.

In my dream-like state, I mistake the figure for Yamalla.

But this woman is not my grandmother. Her skin is a sickly pale color, with red feverish cheeks. Her grey hair is tangled. She is wearing a dress of what looks like—smells like—decaying leaves and bark. I have seen animals caught in drain pipes and rodents that had been poisoned on the neighbor's lawns; this woman is like this, a quiet empty shell with sunken eyes.

Our eyes meet. There is a glimmer of recognition in hers. She stretches. Two wings, or the remains of them, are protruding from her shoulder blades. Dead things. Crushed things that make a shifting sound as she moves them. A woman of the forest. Now there are no trees, yet she remains.

She is clutching something in her arms, a spark of brilliant emerald green against the grey. It squirms and the woman smiles, the warmth of the expression startling me. The green bundle twists to look at me. Brilliant green, a dark ruff of feathers. The little needle teeth glinting in the sunlight. Golden eyes. Feathered wings.

My mouth has gone dry. The fairy woman, seeing my distress, offers me Totlacxtl from across the yard. I can hear him purring.

“You’re dead,” I say. The world goes blurry as tears obscure my vision. By the time I wipe them from my eyes, both of the spirits have vanished. I pull the sliding glass door closed and run out to my car, breathing hard, barely remembering to lock the door as I do.

“Ghosts,” I say, turning up the radio to drown my thoughts. “Now I have ghosts.”

I do not go back to the house the next day. But I have no desire to be in my apartment either, now that it is filled with some of Yamalla’s belongings. One of Yamalla’s handcrafted pillows is lying on my couch. I’ve saved some of her herb plants, even though they are dead and I don’t have a well-lit windowsill to put them in.

There is also the package from the National Cremation Office, still sitting in my entryway, across from my line of shoes up against the wall. I dropped it there two weeks ago. I

hate looking at it, knowing that there is an urn inside. With ashes. I'm not ready to open it yet, even though at night I feel like it—she—Yamalla—is watching me from the entryway. Staring. Waiting for me to take care of her. I don't look at the box as I head out to my car, intending to go to the library and get some schoolwork done.

After digging around in the car—the boxes of photo albums are still in the back seat, along with the jar of seeds, my backpack's spilled contents and a pair of dress shoes—I discover the crumpled syllabus for Tylrian History: Early Civilizations to Castran Colonization. I've been behind ever since Yamalla died, struggling to hold onto a C even though I normally do well in classes that interest me. I scan the reading list—more excerpts from the textbook, sections from Jeffrey Cantor's journals. There is also an assignment I've highlighted—extra credit for visiting an exhibit at Shale City History Museum. Not wanting to be alone with my books, I decide to go, plump up the two pillows on the driver's seat. I am too short to see over the wheel without them.

Carrie calls me when I'm on the highway. She's at work again—from the sound of it, she's talking to me from inside the bathroom. I can hear her voice echoing off the walls. I put the phone in the crook of my neck in order to keep both hands on the wheel. Hopefully the conversation will be quick; when I can barely see over the steering wheel I don't need to be talking to Carrie. I tell her that I'm not going to be in the house. That I don't like seeing the cremation box. That I'm going out because I have an assignment to do.

“You should really take care of that.”

“My assignment?”

“No, I mean the ashes.” She pauses. “Where did she...”

“Whisper Island,” I say. My eyes glance over to the bay, where the island is a muddy brown streak.

“Really?”

“That’s what she asked for. I just haven’t had the…” Courage? Time? Neither of them seem right. “I haven’t done it yet.”

“You can’t even get across now. The bridge I mean.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The island. The bridge is gone. They never replaced it after the storm. The road just dead ends. You can’t get across.”

I pause. Traffic swarms around my car. I don’t need to be thinking about the ashes right now. “I guess I’ll just have to put them—her—I’ll have to do it just over the sea.”

As soon as I pay for the ticket at the entrance—adult fare, even though the woman seems convinced that I’m a child by my height—the itching starts spreading up my arms. There are Casters everywhere, most of them towering over me, except for the small children. I pray that the laws limiting Casting in public spaces is enforced here.

The exhibit is on the second floor. “Whispers on the Bay: An In-depth Look at the Life of Indigenous Peoples” reads the sign in slanted script over the doorway. There is also a photograph superimposed onto the wall. It is a crude drawing of an indigenous woman, clad in a dress of furs, her breasts showing. The skin is the darkest shade of charcoal, the eyes looking more animal than human. She is even clinging to the edge of a tree.

“Do you know where that image is from?” I ask the volunteer at the entrance—a teenager, collecting tickets. He shrugs.

“It’s one of the more commonly used images. But I think it was originally from Cantor’s journals. At least that’s what the curators told me. It’s actually one of the few drawings of Tree People that we have.”

Tree People. I recall my professor using the term in class. As there are few records and little archaeological evidence regarding indigenous tribes, some claim that there is no evidence that these people had a name for themselves. Tree People is supposed to be a catch-all, a friendly term for the people of the forest. Better than Wisp, I suppose.

The exhibit is a series of winding halls and glass cases that remind me of the animal preservation cases in the Hall of Life. There is a large map of the peninsula, overlaid with modern day satellite images and maps from Cantor’s era. The satellite photos are out of date—I can make out the houses on Whisper Island, even though there are none standing there now.

The last time I was at the museum was in grade school, when all of the exhibits looked even bigger. It seems like the big feature now is animatronic exhibits. I fight the urge to scratch my arms. There are Perma-Wield spells at work here. Spring break also seems to be an opportune time for educational outings. Plenty of the glass cases are hidden behind walls of children.

After one of the crowds disperse I examine the biggest display. It’s a hunting scene with several animated figures standing with spears at the edge of the ocean. The clothing seems more scanty than historically accurate. The men lean down with their spears, stab at an unseen fish, and bring it back up again. The scene resets, the fish dropping off, the hunters standing up,

unwinding themselves unnaturally. There is dregan, a taxidermy specimen, placed on an artificial rock next to the glass. I turn to read the sign on the wall that explains the diorama. It reads like a plaque one would find at the zoo outside of the enclosure of an endangered species. Behold, the rare organism preserved here that is all but extinct in the natural world.

Another section of the exhibit features jewelry and shards of clay pots, new discoveries from an archaeological expedition. There is another diorama over in the corner, but this one is still. It features a foam tree built into the corner of the wall, with a lean-to structure against it. There are two figures, one crouching inside the structure, the other leaning against the tree, their glass eyes staring out at the main gallery. This portion is roped off, but there is another, more durable looking lean-to that is accessible, a bright orange sign on its side encouraging “Young Explorers” to touch and feel the home structure.

I stare at the collections of artifacts—arrowheads, petrified wood carvings, clay bowls. Every informational paragraph seems to end with uncertainty, claiming that rituals were undocumented, much of the remnants of the civilization have been lost. There is a section about arrival of Cantor and the Shalen expedition, including replicas of the company’s journals. Images on the wall complete with sketches of the Great Burning. I avoid the glass case that claims to show the remains of an indigenous person.

There is a small section at the end of the exhibit that includes a video. There’s a professor named Helen Yamaway speaking about the state of indigenous peoples today. Next to the television is a wide angle photograph of the path of the Great Storm. The curators have superimposed images of different newspaper clippings, particularly ones related to the destruction of Whisper Island, over the meteorological data.

“Not only was the destruction of the community of Whisper Island a blow to the city’s inhabitants who are impoverished,” the professor is saying, “but I also see it as a destruction to a way of life. Whether or not we would like to openly admit it, Whisper Island was both a historical site and one that showed us that the Tree People are alive and that their culture is a living one.”

It is a small footnote after an exhibition that seemed to tell me the exact opposite. That the Tree People are the remnants of some civilization that has been lost to time, an entire primitive way of life that cannot be recovered. Having no desire to see the other exhibits, I head out to the parking lot, wondering if my parking ticket will be free since I’ve spent less than an hour here. Getting in the car, I notice one of the boxes has tipped over in my backseat. One of the photo books is open, displaying some of my high school graduation photos. The plastic sleeve catches the light, distorting the figures of myself and Yamalla, as if I am looking at the photograph through a fishbowl.

I dream of the museum. But the halls are dark and twisting. There is a sense of urgency that seems to come from the air itself. I can hear the shuffle of feet ahead of me. The murmurs of voices on the wind, low and speaking in a language that I do not understand. At one point I hear Totlacxtl. He’s shrieking, crying out like he did when Savon threatened me. Each time I turn the corner there is no one there, only bare glass cases. The voices are growing more numerous. I start to run.

The halls twist again. The voices follow. There is a glass case, empty except for a figure shuffling back and forth. Yamalla is in her night gown, clutching the jar of seeds, her eyes lost. I try to stop, but my feet are carrying me forward. I brace for the impact—

That never comes. I jolt awake in my apartment, sweaty and breathing hard, tumbling out of bed to flick on the light. But I shake away the remnants of my dream, the room seems filled with a presence. I can feel something.

Whispers.

I slam open the bedroom door, turning all of the lights on in the house. The clock over the stove tells me it is early in the morning, just before dawn.

The box of ashes remains in the entry.

Breathe.

I am in my car, parked at the end of a dead end street. It is six in the morning, the treetops dusted with the first light of day. Ahead of me lies the bay, obscured by several construction signs warning that the bridge is out. Whisper Island is cloaked in the twilight. I am huddled in the driver's seat, a grey sweatshirt hastily pulled over my pajamas. The ashes, now out of the package, are in a creamy ceramic urn, leaning up against the jar of seeds in the backseat. The sun is a soft warm presence on my face. I breathe in, feeling, hearing, concentrating on the small spark that is growing within me. With each breath in, it expands, a fluttering small flame.

Breathe.

The sun in the tree tops. The murmur of the waves. The distant padding of a stray cat. The land on this side of the ruined bridge is only abandoned lots, punctuated with cigarette butts and stray plastic bags. A sign advertising the sale of the land is several blocks away, weathered from five years of exposure.

Breathe.

The outside air is cool. I open the back door of the car, taking both the urn and the seeds at once. The urn is not as heavy as I expected. I approach the construction signs and walk around them. On the other side is a steep cliff, a combination of eroded shoreline and the concrete remains of the bridge sloping down into the water. Here and there are rocky outcroppings, Beyond that is the expanse of Whisper Island.

I'm not going to put her here, I think. That would be like tossing her out of the window. I think of the whispers, the ghosts. She would be so close to the island. But not there. Not yet.

I am hardly dressed for climbing down a rocky cliff face, much less carrying two breakable containers. I try to scout out the shortest way down, ending up going to the side of the ruined bridge. I place the two containers on a rock below me. Then I sit down on a flatter patch of the hill, and slide down on my bottom until I get to another section deemed safe enough to sit on. I repeat the process for awhile. There is an itchy feeling spreading up my legs as I approach the foundations of the bridge. But eventually I find myself stranded. The hill drops off into an unforgiving cliff face below me. I am still too far from the bridge to cross. Whisper Island is a flattened collection of ruined houses, wrecked cars and beds of wind tossed trash, the shadows exaggerated in the glare of the rising sun.

“Shit.” I look back from where I came. The hill looks more treacherous than it did on the descent. “Shit.” I huddle into a ball, eyeing the jar and the urn, both precariously stuck on a jutting piece of rock. The gold printed script on the urn is clearly visible now – Yamalla Nica Mecatle 1910 – 1999.

I squint, trying to find a place to cross, or maybe even head back up. But I’m too scared to stand. I scan the way ahead, trying to pick out a path along the rocks, when I feel something slide into the back of my shirt. I squirm, trying to keep calm, and turn to see pebbles rolling down the hillside. There is the jingle of metal on metal. A figure darts across a ledge above me. I start, and then realize the person—a child—is picking their way towards the bridge. Aghast, I watch as he slides down the rock face into the water, expecting him to disappear into its depths. But it is not as deep as I expected. The boy hits the water with a large splash and then sashes across the channel, the water up past his knees. He scampers up onto the shore of the island, his pants muddy.

“Hey!” I yell.

And for a moment I see him whirl—startled—and then he is gone.

But his presence is not.

“Hey! I’m stuck!” No answer. No movement. I try again. “Hey! Can you help me? I need to cross!”

The presence moves. He’s hiding behind one of the wrecked cars. I yell again, but there’s nothing. I call out for ten minutes before my voice starts breaking, watching the channel to see if I can see the waves sloshing. Nothing. The presence isn’t moving though. The kid is staying put. I try to calm my breathing, to start Listening as I did in the backyard of Yamalla’s house. But

it's difficult. I keep wanting to look over my shoulder at the containers, afraid that if I don't watch them they'll fall into the ocean.

I need to cross, I think. I won't hurt you.

Breathe.

The warmth of the sun. The deep wet smell of rotting wood. The distant sound of passing traffic. Footsteps on the muddy banks. Whispers.

I can feel him before I see anything. The air in front of me shudders. The boy's pinched face appears on the other side of the rock. He stares, then slides over. I realize that he's wearing a t-shirt that is much too big for him. He smells unwashed. And he's tiny, my size. Not big enough to be a Caster's child.

"What d'you want?" he says, his eyes narrowed.

"I need to cross. The channel, I have to—"

"You've got a ghost."

"I'm—sorry. I—"

"It's following you." He is still several feet away. "What d'you have a ghost for?"

"Yeah, I do. She...she needs to come home. Could you help? I don't know how."

I try to stand, reaching towards the urn. I am unsteady on my feet, and sit down again. The kid has his hand out, his fingers grimy. I try to hand him the urn but he pulls away.

"The other one," he says. "Don't want to get ghosts on me."

I pass him the seed jar, and he fumbles, shoving it into a backpack that looks like it is coming apart at the seams. I have to place the urn on the rock ahead of me, but the child flinches and backs away. I have to clamber up, my nails digging into rocks, trying not to think about the water below. He's already ahead of me, hardly helping. But I can see a path to the channel once I'm on the other side of the boulder. Looking at the cliff face again, I can make out a foot path, barely worn, that winds back and forth across the cliff face.

I slide down the last remains of the bridge, the same one that he jumped down earlier, terrified that I will lose the urn or fall into the water. The child is already on the other side, frowning. The water is freezing. The waves soak through my pajamas, the water nearly up to my knees, my shoes filling. I hand him the urn and he takes it, drops it with a thunk on the wreckage, and hauls me up over the side of the bank. I come down hard on my stomach, feeling splinters sticking into my skin, the water leaking out of my shoes.

The expanse in front of me is a leveled neighborhood, driftwood and the rubble of foundations. Beyond the island is the glittering expanse of the Water Front and the dark ribbon of the highway.

"No houses anymore," I say.

"Yep," says the kid, who is already wandering towards the bay, away from the skyline. "Not anymore though. Not since bridges went out." Our conversation disturbs a few of the dregans clustered at the water's edge. They take off, their wings aglow with the sunlight.

"Do you come here a lot?" I ask, picking up the jar of seeds. The weight feels balanced now. The urn under one arm, the seeds under the other.

"Do you come here a lot?" says the boy, his tone accusatory.

“No,” I say, “I think my grandmother did though. I don’t really know.”

“Is that your ghost?”

I think back at all of the ghosts. Savon. Totlacxtl. And now Yamalla. “Do I only have one?”

“I dunno,” the kid says. “My mom could tell. I dunno.”

“I have...my grandma. She’s the reason...” I don’t want to cry. Not now. Not in front of him. “Is there a good place? That...the ghosts like?”

He doesn’t answer. I turn away from the skyscrapers, and look out towards the sea. I could put the ashes there. I imagine a black cloud flowing out into the bay. I don’t know if ashes sink or not. I get to the water, my hands trembling, not wanting to take the top off the urn, to break the seal. I pick up the seeds first, ready to unclasp the lid on the Mason jar.

“Wait.”

I turn. It’s the kid. Without saying anything, he takes Yamalla’s ashes in one hand and the sleeve of my hoodie in the other, the grime on his hands becoming mud on my sleeve. He leads me over to the outcropping of rocks, where the dregans were resting a moment ago.

Behind the rocks is a tiny sapling, barely a foot tall. It looks like it is pressing itself up against the rock, the tiny leaves turned towards the sun. There is a pile of dirt around its base, receding into sand as it meets the shore. The tree is hiding. Not yet ready to face the wind, to come up and extend its branches to obscure the skyline. But alive. A trace of green against the grey landscape, a small echo of the forest. The kid traces the edges of the tiny trunk, barely a stick.

“If you put her in the bay, she’ll be gone,” he says. “And if your grandma was like my mom, she’d want to stay I think.”

He sets the urn—Yamalla—down. I swallow hard, close my eyes, and unclasp the lid of the Mason jar.

And we breathe.