

PANOPTES

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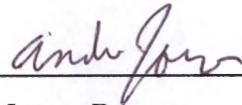
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May 2019

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Panoptes* by Monica Wang, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Fine Arts: Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.



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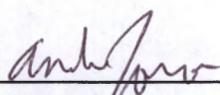
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PANOPTES

Monica Wang
San Francisco, California
2019

In a post-apocalyptic world consisting of two warring nations, sprawling across what used to be the Seleucid Empire, an individual born of both nations struggles with where they belong in a world that continues to challenge their very existence. This journey toward self-discovery questions to what extent can they take ownership of their accomplishments and forces them to weigh the gifts and the curses that their upbringing and their background have given them. These big questions are further complicated by the fact that the people of both nations are engineered by their governments to pursue certain lifestyles and value certain ideals in an effort by the leadership to pursue utopia and end the war. Compliance is rewarded, and rebellion is disincentivized, both on a visceral level. Despite the many challenges they face, the protagonist clings to their individualism and fights for the opportunity to pursue self-actualization.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this written creative work.



Chair, Thesis Committee

5/8/2019

Date

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To my parents, Sharon and Xin.

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THE CAPITAL

New Antiokh sways on the whiskers of a clouded beast. Its vertical sprawl of metropolitan strata shivers with each agile, furdense collision of paw and hoarfrost. Somewhere in the ramshackle industrial webbing between the thirty canonical layers of the city, the Kid teeters at the edge of a thin urban thread. The Loom, like anything driven by the heady brew of adversity and the will to live, is inefficient, brutal, and altogether defiant of space and time and their many rules. In the neutral predawn glow, the neighborhood is filigree and foil, mapped like the pearled lines of saliva hanging between lovers' mouths in some sort of tangled slum orgy. When the sun arrives, the flaws will appear, and the propers will look down from their white architecture and their artificial verdure and claim that the whole thing is an eyesore. The Kid crushes a cigarette into a spotless ashtray. A couple of barebacked teenagers with bundles of paper advertisements hanging from their shoulders skitter like brown brittle leaves past his window. Their bodies react fluently to the shifting of their weight. Their feet clench for the little texture that remains in the wellworn pathways. The Kid leans back in his chair, and the sloppily stacked structure of dented shipping containers shifts imperceptibly with him. Two turns of their ankles and the teenagers preempt the subtle ripple in the terrain. Very often a lazy breeze across the bloom of questionable housing or perhaps even the distant vibrations of Odette's bourrées from the humble ballet recital led by the congenial yet ignorant community outreach program for underprivileged children can feel like it

will overturn the world. A network of catenaries the width of city blocks hemmed in by nothing but altitude and the vertigo of possibility, the Loom has always been precarious. Toddlers learn to predict and counteract the mood swings of their merciless environment. Teenagers frolic with gruesome ease, blaspheming the tentative stories that circulate in reverent whispers along the derivative samsara towards nirvanic veracity, so true that they become meaningless. Everybody's heard of runaway strollers carrying their cargo to their dooms, stacks of shanties collapsing in on one another, maybe a proper or two seeking cheap debauchery sacrificed to the void by the whores they swindled. The Kid rolls another cigarette and suspects that such things may have no basis in truth.

The teenage boys stop to paste a colorful yet somehow already sunbleached flyer onto a utility pole. They smear a starchy mucilage with their fingers onto dense scales of paper, glue, embedded metal hardware, smashing the advertisement into the plaster. DJ Chisto is apparently performing live on Hookah Night at Club Habitud. Promises of harmalinic bliss quickly overtake old propaganda, business endorsements, mournful revelations of lost things. One teen climbs onto the shoulders of the other to lay claim to the prime real estate near the top of the wooden post, and in a matter of minutes, the utility pole becomes a singular creature of homogenous feathering, ruffling splendidly in the wind. The boys, satisfied with their territorial display, pack up their equipment and move on. Within an hour or two, another group of pittance-hungry mentorless youth will traipse along and smother the progress they have made here. Strangled in its entirety by its parchment skin, the Loom seems intent on remaking itself in the image of thrombotic

vessels plaguing a cantankerous old man. The Kid finds it eloquent by virtue of its eczema, its semiosis cephalodic in nature, broadcasting the mercurial motives of its inhabitants through paper chromatophores that channel some ambiguous economic interpretation of local supplies and demands. Yet, despite its obvious aesthetic appeal, he is loath to admit that he most appreciates the stuff when he is urgently short on toilet paper and can simply reach out his window to peel off whatever pieces of mercantile chronology are immediately free of avian excreta just to clean up his own shit.

Tepid milk awaits below, summoned suddenly by the streak of sunlight the teenagers have dragged in with their ankles. The Kid balances the newly lit cigarette on its filter and opens the door. As the tenant of the fifth container up in a stack of six, he is nearly ten meters in the air. Amber calluses running across his palms greet the tough wiry net spilling over the corrugated siding. The rope flows through his fingers like liquid as he lowers himself to the ground. A drop of rain hits the back of his neck, or perhaps Sakan from the third container up is drunk and pissing out his window. A distant peal of thunder rolls over New Antiokh. He picks up a bottle of milk, hoping it is fresh and sweet, but it is cultured as always, acid pooling over the tonsils. The rumble of thunder doesn't break. It just keeps on building and building, a steady hum dripping into his lymphatic system, swelling in the nodes along with the fermented milk. Perhaps, this will be the most extraordinary and cataclysmic burst of lightning the world has ever seen, tasting of kefir and lodestone under the tongue. Electric baritones sizzle within his interstices. Blisters swell across soulful fascia. He opens his mouth, and something stirs

in his pelvic cradle. An acoustic effervescence spirals up from the sacral depths, and he makes a noise so low and alien that the braineating amoeba writhing in the communal cesspool feel the tremor beneath their pseudopodia. The one time he has previously made such a sound was when he first let a woman fuck him. Urine stained marble tile the same as it stained anything else. She pinned him down, and his head slammed into the base of the toilet, skull framed perfectly by offwhite boltcaps. The fancy discothèque in the 17th Echelon thrummed with expensive shitty music. He mourned the glass of microbrew rolling into the next stall, too saddrunk to grapple for sexual dominance, some mite of control to camouflage his insecurities. Then, in the midst of a swell of melodic gibberish, she scraped a sharp aubergine nail across his mons and pulled some secret, tangled, tuneful thing out of him in a taut euphonic wire wrapped tightly around her finger. Ever since, he has pursued many women in attempts to recreate the experience.

The crescendo of thunder comes to a stop. A refuse collector dragging a large metal trashcart pauses to swat at fruitflies. The Kid is almost disgusted that a taste of his overarching musical ambition should happen now in such mundane unexpected circumstances. It was so brief as to be uncertain. Only an ephemeral void of higher consciousness in his immediate memory even vaguely suggests that something has happened. Life resists meaning. Kiddo! The nameless old woman at the top of the stack of shipping containers extends a gnarled claw at him, clearly demanding that he ferry her rightful two bottles of daily kefir up to her window. He stares blankly at the sour milk, briefly considers tossing them at her slightly open hand. She may still have the catlike

reflexes to back up her mewling. Right away, mem. Jamming a bottle under each arm, he scales the wall. She pats him on the cheek in a manner that almost feels like a reprimand for taking so long. He lets gravity pull him back into his residence, and reaches promptly for his guitar, strumming a few tentative chords that might go well with that delicious primordial bassissimo he just ripped out of his body. After just a few plucks of the strings, he can tell the exercise is futile. The Kid sets down his guitar with undue ferocity. Squeezed through a gnashed sevenstring overbite, a discordant grumble oozes out of the soundhole. He throws himself onto the meager stack of gingham sheets that separate his body from the cool steel floor when he sleeps, plunging his face into an airhollow cushion. As is habit when anxious, his tongue probes at the ragged velvety crater at the lowerleftmost corner of his mouth. After all these years, the experience is still alien and unexpected, his neurology still responding as if something that has been there his entire life has suddenly become smoke. Pain and then endorphins surge into his body from the insides of his knees and elbows, everywhere flesh creases into itself.

BOLT CUTTER

He was very young, and the parking lot had given in to the weight of too many cars. Each child-sized palmprint of asphalt, single cells floating in a matrix of dark space, seemed unsure of its future. The backpack dug into his shoulders. Knees buckled in response. The Mother dragged him towards the school, versicolor threads of mutual obstinate affection binding them together like a shared piece of skin. The world shuddered and thrust into the air both loose pieces of ground and the green huarache that flew from his left foot as he struggled against that motherly juggernaut. It seemed to soar endlessly into the sky, hurtling round and round towards the pale daylight moon, destined to ink a new crater on that silvery surface by the time night fell. Glossy laminate flooring slithered unannounced beneath his bare foot, and then, before he could preempt the momentum, the Mother tossed him into the jaws of something. A narrow esophagus opened into a warehouse packed with children lined up against its walls. At the prodding of a teacher, he melded with considerable disquietude into the serpentine queue of students all the while glaring, astonished and betrayed, at the strategically retreating silhouette of the Mother. Something heavy dropped inside him, a luminous innocence collapsing into a dense accretive substance. He yearned secretly for nakedness, but the heaviness at the core him tugged greedily at the coarse fabric pressed against his gallsmooth skin. Toes pressed against toes. Ankles squelched against the splintering baseboard. The Kid felt the weight of something on his feet, an authority figure's

purposeful gaze. One foot sat practically on top of the other, and his heels were separated by a centimeter, practically one entire social canyon, from the floor molding. He adjusted his stance. The weight lifted. So this was what aging meant. It was never merely the golden image of physical maturity that the Mother planted within his dreams but also the growing presence of an innate, autonomous, snowballing incentive to conform wrought by the invisible worldly machines swirling in perpetuity around him. The urge to obey, the thoughts that surrounded this urge, fit snugly at the core of his identity. It felt like a natural evolution, like the standards of behavior came from him. When he probed the idea, he recognized the language, the emotions, and the interpretation as his own, but there were holes when he attempted to sort out motivation. Why did he want to obey? How did he come to this decision? It felt as if some extrinsic thing had replicated, quite perfectly, the idiosyncrasies of his thinking and then simply nudged the concepts into place.

Still, this insisted system of compliance was always tempered with a large degree of detachment from reality. While his bashful body merged in symphonic perfection with those of his classmates, his mental schema operated in unknowable spectra, whittled sharp by the electrostatic dust of kaleidostorms. Desperately chasing a fleeting chromatopause that had been spun in his mind, he didn't hear his name at first, sopped so thoroughly in Ms. Kasperek's garlicky saliva. She spoke it so differently than the Mother did. Surely, it should have meant something else entirely. He continued to stare at his palms, hoping to burn the pseudoimaginary coils of ultraviolet insectoids gathered there.

Then, a student shoved him forward. Refusing to crush the plump helpless larvae he supposed to be asleep in his hands, the Kid did not attempt to catch himself. Nose met with concrete. The squirming mass of students healed itself, umbrous derma pooling into the gap he created. After weeks of amicable semiexistence, he was astonished to realize that this frivolous ritual involved anything more than just keeping quietly to himself for a few hours each day. Kasperek was upon him in a few overextended strides. She pried his fists open and annihilated the creatures sheltered there with a wide wooden ruler. Now, please, the poem if you will. He didn't comprehend her demand. The painful verses the class had been trading among one another couldn't have been significant. They barely resembled anything semantic, and despite this, unfamiliar phonemes churned in his stomach, ready and willing to become poetry, if he chose to unleash them. To the metronomic drip of blood from his nose and the tapping of the wooden ruler in the teacher's hands, he channeled something he scarcely understood and succumbed to the delirious burn of music in his lungs.

Notes erupted from his vocal chords with a preternatural familiarity. They were like seapolished pebbles whose every peculiarity had been committed to memory by his discerning glottis. A vacuous nostalgia slithered into him. It probed at memories of lyrics and melodies that shouldn't have existed within him but slumbered there nevertheless. Was this also the work of that nonindigenous motor in his head? Perhaps, while he was lost in his fantasies, his subconscious had simply picked up the songs that his classmates had been trying so desperately to learn in these past few weeks. He

couldn't explain it. He had done nothing to deserve this boon, but just the same, a warm glow of pride surged through his body, to his chest, to his tongue, to that unmapped territory tucked between his thighs. Kasperek's eyes glinted with canny. All schools in the Echelons required at least a baseline of scholarly accomplishment to warrant their endowments. At the lowest point in the system of privileges, primary schools cultivated their reputations by milking statistics. At least a handful of the many students processed by entrylevel institutions would have to be extraordinary, and the schools poured resources into these investments, vaunting and refining every trace of the exceptional. The Kid was too young to recognize the privilege of attending a school in the Echelons, even if it was just a kindergarten in nethermost tier of the city, let alone appreciate the herculean efforts made by the Mother to secure him a position in such a place. He did, however, realize that for whatever reason his musical abilities held sway here.

Everything in New Antiokh was inherently hierarchical. Just as the physical mechanisms of the city relied on electricity and raw materials, its social appariti required privilege, money, influence, talent—historically in that order—to function. Even the structure of the city reflected this. The thirty Echelons of New Antiokh proper jutted out of Mount Amanos like a spiral staircase made by giants reaching towards the summit. Each of the rocky outcroppings, symbolizing both a geographic and a social tier, were once rumored to be supported by the mountain's natural buttresses, but having long since been sculpted into the sleek modern liths of today, the city now more resembled a colony of angular polyps taken root in the cliffsides than a settlement that burgeoned from within. Clinging

to the underside of the city like a windblown spiderweb, the Loom held what could not be contained by the thirty canonical tiers. Some argued that it comprised its own layer, an unofficial 31st Echelon, the capital S Slums of New Antiokh.

Breadwinners in the 30th Echelon struggled to keep their households from slipping into the Loom's expansive embrace. Many worked menial jobs, using their own bodyweights to anchor the townhouses and families strapped to their backs firmly within the terra firma of the city proper. Like any stairway, it was always easier traveling down the strata of New Antiokh than going up. However, the 30th was built like a treadmill, a socioeconomic conveyor belt with which the city relinquished its debris to the Loom. If they knew to keep their head down and feet nimble, one could live happily in the lowest Echelon. However, if a person stopped to hope, to fever for the dream of reaching the summit of the mountain, they could easily stumble and fall forever into the plumbless depths of poverty. The Helena Avenue Primary School was therefore awash with children who lived in constant threat of social collapse. Deep down, they knew the boundary that categorized them as propers as opposed to spares like the Kid was thin and fragile, and they defended it with ferocious tenacity. Whenever recess devolved into uninspired bouts of cops and robbers, the Kid always played robber. To a child, being a thief held no mystique. He felt only shame and the steam pouring from imaginary exit wounds. The students traded new ways to mangle his body amongst one another, but then they would each beg him for help with homework on the sly. The kindness asked of

him wasn't even worth the effort of making them sweat. They were like dying men asking him to pass a breath through their lips.

God help me, Jun, but you had better get this through your head! Kasperek had attempted quite literally to beat the medieval ballads into Jun for weeks. Until that moment, the Kid knew him solely as the boy who became sheriff when the unspoken consensus of play transformed the cafeteria tables into the grimy counters of the New Antiokh Saloon. Jun would spin his revolvers and growl through tobacco-soaked teeth, I'll give you ten seconds to get out of my town, desperado, but then he would barely count to three before setting the posse loose. The game always ended with the Kid crumpled obediently on the floor, eyes blank with apparent death, until his pickpocket sidekick recovered his body, found the faintest trace of a pulse, and nursed him back to health, allowing the cycle to begin again. As a pickpocket, Navin was neither particularly swift nor cunning. He relied on an inherent ability to shroud himself in a sort of organic perceptive grease. The talent had nothing to do with wellhoned skills of misdirection or even camouflage. Instead, it was just extremely difficult to spare Navin even an iota of attention when any number of viable options existed to compete with one's focus. Notwithstanding, Navin had become an essential, if somewhat invisible, fixture in the Kid's life. Their surnames were alphabetically adjacent, and whenever the class fell in line, they crowded against one another. Before the other students folded the Kid into their recreational customs and introduced him to Navin as the pickpocket, he could never penetrate the oil slick surrounding his fellow student. Saccades would

overshoot. Points of fixation ricocheted from that slippery haze. His vision would cloud over in a fleshtoned blur of motion, and then his eyes would land on whichever nearest object could catch his interest: the translucent hairs on another student's chin, a toesized bare patch on the floor. Once, by endeavoring to discern the primary features of Navin's face, the Kid was flung into some faroff dimension populated by ornate planispheres suspended from the ceiling of a bedroom occupied by an astronomer's child. Each star chart diagrammed their own impossible night sky. They could have become portals if he hadn't been so afraid and so homesick.

In the wild west world of their fanciful games, Navin was supposed to be the Kid's most trusted confidante. Jun had demanded it. The world needed some sort of petty criminal, and the role would harmonize well with the townsfolk's most grievous malefactor. When he was first thrown into the relationship, the Kid could hardly understand what he was seeing. Something about the epistemological shift of their makebelieve had lifted Navin's shroud, and the Kid found himself instantly infatuated with the dogeyed boy. They were playacting of course, but the margin between real and unreal had always been tenuous for the young. After so many shared experiences and whispered secrets, the camaraderie began to bleed into the real world. In a classroom where almost every other student spoke with the same excess of volume and dearth of restraint as their chattering progenitors, Navin was a scrawny but magnanimous nucleus of silence, and the Kid often found himself squeezing into this aura of softspoken resignation. Navin never bullied him, never used him, never spoke much to him outside

of the realm of play. They were ghosts together, content enough just to share space. There was, however, a fatal flaw in their friendship. Navin and Jun shared a face. In a stagnant hereditary pool like that of the 30th Echelon, people tended to share genetic material and thus physical characteristics. Eyes might resemble eyes. Noses may imitate noses. Still, it was rare, thanks to the chromosomal mambo of reproduction, for people to share more than a feature or two amongst one another. In both Jun and Navin, these common traits must have expressed all at once. They looked like one another, because they both approximated the genetic paradigm of the 30th Echelon.

This caused no end of trouble for the Kid. He was used to the diversity of the Loom. All were smeared with the same soot of impoverishment, but few spares shared faces outside of their immediate families. Propers looking down from their Echelons might see the slums as a singular swab of gray and grime and faded advertisements, but the Kid knew that the Loom defied categorization. Despite the Echelonites' insistence that the Loom did not constitute a canonical layer, the 31st Echelon was by far the largest stratum of the city. New Antiokh's newly deemed undesirables poured in every day. Death and genetic traffic were prevalent enough that biological paradigms could not exist. The Loom rejected all constancy. Moreover, the Kid lacked the eye for idiosyncrasies that could have distinguished between his friend and his enemy. It would be another four years before the Mother would ask him to read aloud the ingredients of a recipe for pottage and discover that he needed vision correction. If he had been able to

perceive the details of them, he would have noticed that Navin was dimply and a bit wilted, whereas Jun was bright and taut.

Cool air pricked the eye pressed against one of the perforations in the yellow crawl tube. The fact that it was Jun and not Navin that had come to ask the Kid for homework help was evidenced by the presence of Jun's Aunt, swathed in the plain yet crisp clothes of those living in the shabby suburbia of the 24th to 26th Echelons. The Kid had recited the poem well enough, but then Jun asked him to play. Too shy to openly protest, he clung to the Mother. His eyes implored her gaze, hoping to speak as loved ones sometimes do, in discriminating articulations of the pupils, but she did not spare him a look and swatted him away. She was kneedeep in some insipid conversation with Jun's Aunt, and most of the words traded amongst them had already ceased to be language. Both women seemed content to warble inanely at each other. The Kid found that it was their expressions rather than their speech that seemed to communicate the intimate details of their interaction. The Mother's grin hacked its way across her face, a mask of admiration and resentment waging war across her cheeks. The unnamed aunt's imbalanced simper suggested that she found the Mother cultured enough to be tolerable, but this revelation disagreed with her sensibilities as a proper. If only she knew that the Mother was once a socialite in the upper Echelons, as blueblooded as any other, she might at least put on a decent false smile. The Kid had half a mind to relieve her of her assumptions, but then Jun dragged him away.

Lost to a maze of psychedelic wormholes woven through the spacetime of a garish plastic playground, the Kid moored his rocketship to a drifting asteroid and basked in the light of the central supergiant in the asterism comprised of a noughts and crosses panel. Jun had never signaled that this should be a game, but it had might as well been. No sane person would worm through dull claustrophobic tunnels that smelled of wet skin for leisurely purposes. The sound of the Mother's laughter on a gust of wind billowed past him, disturbing his meditative game of Xs and Os by spinning the cylinders until they depicted nothing but the yellow void between the two alternatives. They would be here for a while. Jun's lumbering footfalls approached him from behind. The ritual was practically harmless. The pain inflicted had become casual at best.

For some time, he felt that he did not have the right to say anything. Only for this precious handful of minutes did the Mother get to relive a little of her bygone superiority. Having to ask help from a Loomer must have felt acutely shameful to Jun, though seeing the aunt he probably idolized condescending to entertain the Mother as a way of thanks might have been worse. A few lazy thumps to the Kid's skull would usually be enough to reassert his dominance, but perhaps he was unusually agitated that day. Maybe, the thumbtack had simply caught Jun's eye. There were dozens of them pinned into the school's bulletin board. Maybe, he had already been on the prowl for something sharp. In any case, when it first punctured that fleshy protrusion between his ilium and the greater trochanter, the Kid felt only a shiver rippling from the metal epicenter. Pain did not seep into senses until a chuckle spilled as if by accident from Jun's lips. It was

entirely too much. Muscles split into thousands of threads and gnarled inside him. The taut resonant fibers slashed by the thumbtack snapped and retreated deep within. Regardless of the tiny context of the wound, his entire body felt knotted and misaligned. He ran to the Mother and begged her to put his innards back in order.

Bavarian tortes were his favorite. They were a relic from the Mother's childhood in the upper Echelons. Because of their cloying luxury and the tedium required to construct them, the Mother promised him just one for every five years of his life. The Kid's fifth birthday was a few months behind him, but here was the Mother, carefully slicing almonds to sprinkle atop the finished pastry, which steamed in the morning light like last night's nightmare slipping out of his longterm memory. A foolish smirk pooled onto his face. The Mother had made an exception to assuage his discomfort. He licked a finger and used it to pick up a wayward crumb, leaving a sticky reflective print on the makeshift cakeboard. Don't touch that! Finger in mouth, he muttered an apology and sat himself down at the table to wait for the Mother to finish. Even when she packed the torte into an improvised pastry box, the possibility that this special treat was not meant for him never crossed his mind. It didn't make sense to bring the pastry to school, but perhaps, she intended for him to use the torte as social leverage. Yes, he could make everyone jealous, or he could make a few tactful trades. His head was still fuzzy with cheese and almonds when the Mother made a show of handing the Bavarian torte to Jun and his aunt. The Kid was aghast. Just like that, the Mother had desecrated a sacred tradition that heretofore had existed only in the secret world shared between them. This

simple gesture, her bowing slightly to place the box into Jun's clumsy entitled hands, had torn a hole in the warm cornflower blue sphere that encompassed his thoughts whenever he thought of the Mother. He shivered. Interstitial thoughts like an icy gale gushed into the ruptured psychological cell. The foreign presence of Jun and his aunt in the flock of subsidiary ideas that orbited the central node of the Mother had stained the entire mental locus a sickly Tuscan yellow. Possibly as retribution for the lost Bavarian torte, the Kid was abruptly overwhelmed by the urge to bite into something, something that felt alive beneath his teeth, something that would bleed over his tongue. The nonindigenous motor protested and shuffled a few trepidations into place. He stared hard at the Mother and grit his teeth. A warm wave of happiness rewarded his restraint.

I hope you enjoy, Jun. Now, let's all agree to be friends, all right? So, the Mother had intended to offer the torte as peace offering of sorts, a bribe for good behavior. The Kid scowled. His wound throbbled. This was not how it worked! Jun was supposed to be the one making peace to him, and there were no such things as bribes for good behavior, only undue rewards for bad conduct. Jun could easily think to stab him again in order to win another pastry. The injury on his hip bled in solidarity with the Kid's hurt feelings. However, what hurt the most was that Jun could not look less impressed by the pastry that the Mother slaved over. If at least the Kid could have come out of this with a little pride at the Mother's baking prowess, then this situation might had been salvageable. His teeth sharpened into jagged fangs. When class gave way to lunch, he had no appetite for the crust of bread that the Mother had packed. Acid splashed into

his esophagus. The nonindigenous motor was silent beneath the pulse roaring in his ears as he pushed his meal away and solidified his will. The awful pressure around his skull, intended by the motor to act as punishment for what he had decided to do, only spurred his rage. The planted ideas thrashing against the dome of his skull, coagulating and liquefying to the rhythm of his agitated breathing, warned him that despite the longstanding series of grave injustices Jun had afflicted on him, his decision to retaliate would still paint him as the sole malefactor in this situation. The Kid could feel this moral machine swelling inside him, conveying principled chemical messages throughout his body, but it felt powerless against the axis of teeth grinding in the thick of him, powdered bone suffocating the ethical organism.

Jun sat at one of the central tables in the cafeteria. The Bavarian torte was gone, probably thrown into the trash. He was chewing on something else. The Kid could not make it out through the smog circulating in the periphery of his narrowed vision. His eyes were already drowning in the deep flaxen expanse of Jun's inner forearm, the meat throbbing at him through the smooth skin. It was harder than he thought to bite through the boy's flesh. His teeth yearned to meet through the splash of sinew caught between his lips, but he could not seem to make any further progress. A chorus of howls gathered around him, Jun's own distorted by the refrain. The Kid tasted a bit of copper spilling into his mouth, sweet and acidic down the sides of his cheeks, satisfying, but he had expected to choke on the stuff. Kasperek appeared suddenly in the turmoil. She wrapped her arms around his torso and began to yank him off his prize. It was her timely use of

force that finally succeeded in separating the chunk of meat from its previous singular existence. Why did you do this to me? He swirled the dying tissue across his tongue, memorizing the copes of hair, testing the elasticity of the skin. Even when he realized that he had mistakenly bitten Navin, he felt no immediate remorse, only a faint annoyance at the realization that he missed his opportunity to damage his intended target. The teacher maintained her glower, but she almost seemed unsure as to how to address what he had done. The Kid tucked the lump of flesh between his molars and chewed. Once the blood had been squeezed out and the fat emulsified, he opened his mouth and spat the hardened kernel of skin at Kasperek's turgid face.

Until that moment, he had committed no real crimes against the hierarchy. Any enmity he projected towards others had only existed in the possibilities of his imagination, the elsewhere of play, but he felt it now, Bavarian tortes and well-dressed aunts and innocent dogeyed boys with permanent teethmarks on their arms all plummeting towards him as the Echelons collapsed in on one another like a giant stone accordion. The Kid had never begrudged someone their superior social standing. The nonindigenous motor had made sure of that. He never believed the Loom to be lacking in any particular manner, and he did not resent the pariahdom that clung to him whenever he strayed beyond the boundaries of his home. The nub of wet skin slid harmlessly down the teacher's face. Any chance that he might had been protected by his specialness disappeared as Kasperek crushed the amorphous gray blob under her heel. She could have attributed Navin's injury as one of the many hazards of play, but this had become

something more. She beat the Kid with her bare hands, though not because of the purely ethical implications of the bite. His futile act of vengeance had violated social law, defiled the revered hierarchy. It was too late for remorse. Later, when the students had left, they tied him to a chair, and Kasperek, Navin, Navin's father, and the Mother took turns taking a bolt cutter to his teeth. It didn't hurt so much as the massive headache the motor generated in retaliation for his misdeeds.

THE UNREST

All teeth eventually grew back when it came time for his adult teeth to come in. All except that lowerleftmost molar, which remains as a badge of infamy that only he can shame himself with. It was altogether a very visible act of ostracism. The Mother beat him again when they got home that day, and then she toiled over a set of dentures made from ground rice. They weren't useful for chewing, but at least, he could pass for an upstanding citizen. In the end, it was perhaps this one event, combined with the badgering of the Mother and the subtle manipulations of the Legate, that so-called nonindigenous motor the government implanted into his brain at birth, that ultimately dissuaded him from joining ranks with the rebels. Every now and again, he will awake to their cries in the middle of the night, their Molotovs illuminating the cobalt blue sky, and he will feel that atrophied predilection twinging uselessly inside him. It used to be connected to every part of him. When he breathed, when he sang, when he moved through the world, the desire would scrape against that tender pulp of thought at his core. For a time, it was the puppeteer to his listless body, occupant of the versatile blankness of his mind. Even when he deliberately sought do nothing, he could feel the weight glutting him completely, the staggering itch to wound the hierarchy, if not its substance, then its pride. The Kid supposes that this is what the rebels have become, warriors of pride. They are children who spit in the faces of their teachers. A Molotov to the underside of an Echelon does no actual harm to the city proper. However, the fire and the shards of

glass that eventually rain back down on the rebels' heads can quite easily enact devastating horrors upon the Loom. The stories are old and stale now. A stack of shanties burns down because a Molotov aimed at a proper ends up falling back onto a row of firetraps. Teenage spares stray into the upper Echelons to graffiti a politician's estate. Grease paint washes off easily. Brain damage is not so easily shrugged off. A Loomer boy falls in love with an Echelonite girl. The couple disappears, and a week later her father sends his flunkies to rape everything attached to a passable orifice within a few blocks of the boy's childhood home.

It might be pleasant enough to persuade himself that he could be doing something worthwhile by making enemies of the proper. Any suffering inflicted on his people as a direct result of his actions would just have to be accepted as collateral for the principles he so altruistically upheld. The withered inclination twinged again. He silenced its rhythms, or the Legate silenced its rhythms, by forcing himself to prod the ragged crown of flesh where his tooth once was. The rebels aren't so much wounding the proper's pride as they were coddling their own. Even as a child, the Kid knew that biting Jun would only succeed in providing succor for his wounded selfregard. The fact that he bit Navin instead only proved the futility stacked upon futility of his poorly conceived actions. His logic, or the Legate's, agreed with his selective compliance, but some soulful sliver of him still respected the need to do something, no matter how pointless and selfdestructive, to at least remind the Echelonites of the often forgotten injustices of the Loom.

CONSENSUS

Nothing that existed beyond the confines of the Loom could hold his attention for long until a 7th Echelon businessman, who had no living direct heirs, came to the Loom to chase rumors of a bastard he may have spawned with a prostitute decades earlier. The Kid was attending a school in the Loom now, and his incisors were just about to come in. He paid no mind as the businessman's prim ungainly assistant picked her way through his neighborhood. She wore gloves, but still refused to touch anything or anyone without first cloaking her fingers in a handkerchief. When she knocked on the door, he readily let her in. He had no reason to suspect she would cause any more than a momentary complication in his life. May I speak to your parents, little man? He pointed to the formless shadow curled up on the mattress in the corner of the shack. Thank you very much! The assistant approached the Mother and gazed at her for an awkward span of time. The woman's back was turned to him. The Kid tried to imagine the many possible expressions that could have been dancing across her face. Then, she spoke a word that he didn't recognize. Jhonn-vee-av? The Mother's eyes blinked open, lashes fanning the torrent of motes worshipping her sleep. The two women, neither moving a muscle, stared at one another for a small eternity in the darkest corner of the shanty, populated at most by a single stubborn streak of sunlight, which now cut across the Mother's eyes like an ornate ephemeral Colombina. It was not the name he understood as the Mother's. Jhonn... The Mother sprang up and pushed the assistant out of the shack. There's no

one here of that name! I don't know what you're talking about! She slammed the door, eyes bulging with veins. Mom? She said nothing.

Love meant nothing to him except the linear singleminded pull that pinched at his insides when he wanted something with an unusual fervor. He understood this kind of love and love for affection, of Mothers and dogeyed boys, but the Kid had never heard of love for ideals or love for principles, or love between people mediated or diverted by such axioms. Thus, it only caused confusion when the Mother explained that the love that brought her and his father together was grounded in principles. The Kid imagined a vague pliable screen separating lovers trying desperately to press their mouths together, darkness and separation in the creases of their lips, tastebud apogees, where there shouldn't have been any space at all. There was no criterion for families in the Loom. It all seemed arbitrary at the time. He hadn't an inkling about reproduction. It was somewhat of a daze to learn that it was a biological phenomenon and heterosexual in nature, slimy and unfair. The concept of a father burrowed into his skull, the possibilities there exponentiating. There was fire at first, amber and effervescent, in his mind and then a tunnel opening to weepy sunlight refulgent with male archetypes. He looked at them, long and languid, a patriarchal bouquet in his hands, and they looked at him. The more they looked the more they looked like one another. He gathered the fathers and squeezed.

This was before the Fourth Nicatorion Concordat, she said. The eyes of our nation were fixed on the Susian gates, on the other side of the country, as Timarqa made

their bid to wrench the Cradle of Civilization from us. We Antiokhians did not notice the second Timarqan army at our backs until they neared the summit of Mount Amanos. Unbeknownst to us, they had taken the Beilan Pass, their presence flooding the Orontes gorge a season early. They meant to dismantle the city. I remember the exact moment our eyes rolled back into our heads, and we forgot our devotion to the treasured alluvium shielded by the Zagros as our perceived selfhoods gushed from our unassailable intellects back into our vulnerable cumbersome bodies. The threat had become all too suddenly immediate. We had become visceral and futile. Nothing is ruined with quite so much ease and satisfaction like fat aristocrats on their meager pedestals, jeweled insects crushed underfoot. Our officers rushed to defend us. My then fiancé was among them. He had spent the week prior expediting wedding plans with the intention of impregnating me as soon as I walked down the aisle. He felt certain that he was going to die young, an unaccomplished casualty of the war. Implanting a genetic vestige of himself inside me seemed to be the optimal avenue through which he could preserve and embellish an altogether unremarkable legacy.

At the time, I often ventured to the slurry vats in the bowels of my father's factory, bored deep into the mountain's core. After he found a small cache of mescaline buried in the compartment for loose beads and broken chains and peerless earrings in my jewelry box, this was the only way I could get high. It's not that I disliked the boy my parents had subtly encouraged me to fall in love with. He was good looking and of exquisite lineage, and I think for a while I was convinced I did love him. Still, he fell

into my grasp far too easily. Despite my parents' mastery of understated manipulation, my relationship with the lieutenant reeked with the scent of their veiled intentions, their immoderate glee at a successfully orchestrated scheme. Do you understand why I could not marry him? The Kid was unsure. Words blurred as he salivated for evidence of a father.

As he looks back on the moment now, he recognizes that the illusion of hindsight, in which he understands much more than he did at the time, is firmly in place. His memory of the story continues to exist as a woven tapestry of her narrative and his ingenuity. Many of the ideas and notions the Mother so carelessly planted in his head remained dormant within him for many years past the initial conversation. They were abstract and complicated, contradictory to his childhood psyche, like nebulas swirling in great ragged tears in the fabric of her story, waiting for the right context to shake them out of their latency. The few blank spaces that continued to exist after that he simply filled in good faith with contextualized guesses. Still, he had tried many times to get the Mother to recount the story again, not just to fill the residual voids of understanding, but to explain why she would reveal anything of the sort to him, at that age. To this day, she continues to deny that the story or the things that occurred in it ever existed.

You understand, she continued. It was less of a question and more of an expression of self-assurance. He nodded anyway. I just couldn't. There was no ill will between any of us, but I couldn't do it when I knew that they had devised the whole thing. It felt artificial and just so constraining. My happiness and his happiness and the

happiness of our parents were all stacked on this thin rigid presumption. There would be no room for things to proceed organically. We would always have to be these idealized versions of ourselves that our parents sold to one another, and on top of all that, I just couldn't give them the satisfaction. This sort of thing, love, it had to belong to me. It had to be my doing, mine alone. The lieutenant was almost perfect, but I would accept someone far less worthy if only I could take full ownership. Do you understand? It was about the principle. His ears pricked at that word again. He was ready to accept the particularities of the Mother, but he could not unravel the mechanisms churning beneath her façade. She made a brief exasperated sound, and he felt that it conveyed everything that could have been conveyed by all that she had uttered. So here I was, staring into the swirling detritus that the batch agitators lathered with fervent alien affection, trying to get high off chemicals that might have killed me if I hadn't been careful, and praying that somehow my uterus would shrivel up in the synthetic fog. The irreverent hollow rattle of automatic gunfire was lost to the low whirl of momentous nothingness eclipsing my thoughts.

I knew him first as a scattering of color, a crumbling of blue and gold, dried paint in the air. Then, he was a thigh that followed my gaze out of the ground until a knee, ruddy as a peach, breached the neoprene surface of the factory floor. Lips and eyelashes surfaced from a depthless gurge of chemical sludge. A canopy of skin parachuted to the floor, left a thin formless smear on the ground that stuck to the bottoms of my shoes. I tightened the canister of my gasmask and willed the disparate pieces to come together.

Even before the disembodied anatomy snagged onto some wisp of a soul there, and the bones and the blood and the viscera were poured into the tempered vessel of skin, I knew he was Timarqan. He smelled of metal, sulfur, and a bit like he carried a handful of spice in his pocket—cloves, anise, crushed grains of paradise. Did you know that gunsmoke smells like a hot breeze through a spice market? Still, it was the traces of stone dampened by sweat and sand soaked through with dark viscous oil that revealed his nationality. Slowly, I pieced my shattered vision together.

We stared wordlessly at one another. I could see volatile possibilities flickering across the smooth mucous round where his lips stopped suddenly and gave way to the intimate sheen of the insides of his mouth. His tongue kept darting there, as if probing each outcome, measuring how long they would reach. I had started to unscrew the canister of my gas mask again when I heard my father calling my name. The echoes of it seemed to wrinkle over every surface of the chamber. Each bubble on the surface of the chemical ooze popped in unison. I felt I had to shelter him. It had nothing to do with the war, the politics of it. The conflict, even as the Timarqan army spilled into New Antiokh, always felt a bit theoretical. We valued the war like we valued the combative nature of sports. I suppose it was also about principle. The perpetual stalemate had to continue, if only to maintain some veneer of national integrity, but here we were just two kids with chemicals sweating into the folds of our brains. We came to the same conclusion, your father and me. He was a soldier, and he knew that this integrity came at the price of human life, resources, infrastructure. I was a spoiled upper Echelonite, and I knew that

integrity required absolute obedience to the hierarchy and its many laws. In that moment, we decided we would create our own principles. Genevieve, my father called again, as if he didn't know how I hated the name and how I hated that he sold the privilege of naming me to professional contact in the 1st Echelon just so they could christen a business agreement. I could hear his footsteps now, charging through the adjoining hallway, and the footsteps of associates following him and the footsteps of laborers scrambling to make way. I threw the Timarqan soldier a gas mask and a worker's uniform and turned to meet my father.

Within the next few weeks, our soldiers pushed the Timarqans back into the Orontes gorge, where we trampled our farmlands to save our city. For the time being, it appeared that the only hint of Timarqa still left in New Antiokh was my soldier. In spite of all the things that had been difficult, harboring him in the bowels of the textile manufactory was easy. I only had to make a few subtle alterations to the company's records. My father praised me for my initiative. My fiancé was preoccupied with the battle at Beilan Pass. I started to wear expensive provocative clothing underneath the ungainly material of the protective uniforms and uncomfortable seductive lingerie underneath that. He spoke, and I ate his words. The porous tangles of them were light reflected in my throat. I looked into his mouth, the uvula churning phlegm and philosophy in the pink hollows of his palate, and the marmalade air of the facility was exuberant with his wit and saliva.

I was wearing the dress that the lieutenant had purchased for me to wear just for him in the lush darkness of our nuptial bed, while the acoustic mist of our dwindling revelers freckled our bodies with acrid fiction. It was a shade of green that paired well with the gas masks that had been faithfully filtering my conversations with the Timarqan soldier. The restaurant was nice, but not so nice as to warrant the heels so high that they dug furrows into the skin where my toes connected to the top of my feet. My body puckered at the thought of you, the shallow bowl at the base of my navel bulging to make room for the possibility. The Kaukasos Indikos changed my life, my Timarqan soldier said. Apparently, so did Meroi, Albanoi, and Getai. I imagined a snow globe above his fireplace. I imagined that wherever he came from in Timarqa there would have to be a fireplace, and he kept snow globes there for each pilgrimage he had ever made. The snow must have been terrible in the Kaukasos. The itch to embark on elaborate quests was quite infectious, but the illness never took hold. Perhaps, this was my greatest failure, complacency, stubbornness. Despite my multitude of problems, going away just never seemed like the right way to go about finding solutions. He smiled easily, casting fragile germs of profound and foreign ideas onto my flinty skin.

Wine swelled over the rims of our glasses and had begun to trickle down the fancy cloth covering our table. I never let him become a person, not fully. I clung to his foreignness. It was what made him mine, but that night, as the wine was singing, the inherent flaw of my companion gathered suddenly to a point, lost in a blurry mole, dancing at the very edge of my perception, almost endearing. My legs kicked under the

table. The wine continued to rise—Sangiovese to the hips, Barbera to the nipples, and it was in this sweet, sweet lagoon that we made the pact. Maybe it was spoken. Maybe we didn't say anything at all. In the end, we simply agreed. He wrapped his hand around my wrist. I shivered, and to still the peaks trembling across my skin, he rubbed his thumb along the veiny protrusions of my wrists. His hands had hands. His thumb was populated by millions of thumbs, tiny knuckled nailed cilia, undulating over some interosseous artery, pulling thin rows of furrowed skin. The sensation crawled up to my elbow, grit rolling under the muscle. I squirmed, pushing the joints in my fingers to the limits of their motion. My bones pitched against their sinuous shell. I masked it as a sneeze. I shouldn't have masked it. He just smiled vacantly as some cosmic legion of hands traced the mounds of my palm. My lips begin to part, my tongue coiling. Without so much as a blink or flare of the nostrils, he gave my arm a willful squeeze, all hands and fingers seeking entrance, succor, at once. The air coagulated in my lungs. My wrist opened to his touch, a yoni vomiting smoke.

Smiling cannily at my coincidentally crossed legs, he attempted to force a thigh between my knees. You're a little sexually repressed, aren't you? We were methodical and patient. After six or seven ovulatory confluences, I told him that this was the one. There are many layers of sleep. I fell so deep that night. I would never be able to rest well again. Strange currents took me up and carried me somewhere I couldn't bother to know. I surrendered, and the vaporous tendrils of sleep folded over me. I felt myself shrink into the spine, swaddled by a warm velvet sheath of dormancy, and let my sleep

move my body on strings. It dug my nails into the fleshy rounds of the Timarqan's back, found all the freckles caught in the calendar of his hips, made me worship the zodiac tongue, almanac eyes. It forced me to assent, let slip only the faded mimeos of my conflictions, an eyebrow twitch, lip flick, dimples incandescent cornering nasolabial creases. This was love, sleep, being a shrunken worm in a bony nucleus, who repeats when prompted, yes, yes, yes. I dreamt that time passed too quickly. I dreamt that when I shuddered out of my long sleep, I would find myself wearing a dress more expensive than anything I had ever known. Its fabric clung so tightly to my ribs that I could not think of anything else except to tear myself out of it. My fingers found the knot holding the garment together at the base of my spine, but my fingers were clumsy with sleep. I stumbled when the ground started to move beneath. The earth was made of bugs.

Black, iridescent beetles scuttled endlessly down the stone pathway running from one end of the glade to the other. Seconds clumped to make years and spread their thin lustrous wings to scatter the sun. I looked up at the trellis, the fiery honeysuckle, and closed my eyes. My skin pooled underneath the chin. Dark spots rose to the surface. Where the lattice left shadows, wrinkles dug into my flesh. My eyes opened again, pupils gleaming in the sun, but I did not realize. The world was clotted and gray behind a web of cataracts. The audience at my back stopped their quiet chatter to hold a collective breath. I answered the question. Thunderous applause, he jerked my head towards his, and sucked the air out of my lungs. The finger was synecdoche. The ring on it enclosed my entire self. Life passed in blips of consciousness between chemical fogs. Dreams are

like that. I was reminded of the moments when I wanted to lose the mechanisms of my body in the toxins of the pulp vats. Noxious gas was good for meditation. The poisonous fumes caught the brain on a hook and pulled the consciousness down the nose. All else sloughed off the surface of my mind as the reptilian instincts for survival took over. I stood there for many millennia, screwing and unscrewing the canister of my gas mask. I smiled in my sleep.

When I woke up, he was gone. It was to be expected. Our agreement had ended. Our desired goal had been achieved. The central vortex of my being had shifted, ripples breaking against some gelatinous round at my center. I unfurled around this dimpled nucleus and shuddered at the little snap in my gut. When I dug my thumb into my side, I could feel your cells contort and howl in embryonic madness. It was just a soft twinge at first, swelling up into my diaphragm, forcing its way into my lungs with a burst of cool musical air that quickly lost its contours as it flooded my body. My eardrum would shiver in response, releasing the cadenced pulses of heat gathering on the balmy side of the sonorous membrane, and this warmth would rush from either ear, trickle through my lymph nodes, gushing blood vessels. These streams crossed in my center, over the empty cavity in which you would one day grow and pooled with a roar into my hips. That's how we spoke in the beginning.

He left no note. Perhaps, he joined his Timarqan brethren at Beilan Pass. He might had met his death there. He might had not. I like to think that he strayed somewhere unknown, sought some form of a future. My mother stirred crushed heads of

cabbage in chicken broth. I rubbed the back of my neck and groaned in my morning stupor. When I brought my fingers to my nose, I found that it also smelled of wilted cabbage. The odor stuck to every surface. I threw the duvet over my head and remembered that mothers don't exist. A solidified whip of rotten soup slapped me in the face when I threw open the windows. The tall brown columns of my father's factory breathed fire in the distance.

THE LAW

Guitar strings exert their usual dull pain on his callused fingers. For years now, the nails on his right thumb and forefinger have been short, almost to the quick, ripped raw skin corrugated beneath ragged nails, and the tips of his left fingers look as if they have been run through by a singlebottomed plow. Each distal knuckle is starting to be pronounced. There may be cherries there one day under the skin. The Mother used to take his hands in hers and cry to the heavens that he had absolutely no right walking around with such delicate hands. She promised that she would cut them off one day and take them for her own. In an effort to preserve his fingers when he took up the guitar, she had given him a wooden plectrum. It felt smooth and good in his hands, but the music sounded wrong. It was not that the sweeps and the djents were too crude or too loud, but they were too candid, too naïve, like the unbridled laughter of children in a world that does not deserve their honesty. There was too much distance. He wanted to be close and his music to tell lies, and he wanted the sharp tip of this fiction and poetry and performance to find the pulse in his wrists and to force it and the c(h)orded singularities of the universe into inexorable rhythm. The Kid squeezes his guitar into a cardboard box and stuffs rolled up paper advertisements around it. He did purchase a decent black case with only a few scuffs on it, but the first time he took it out into public someone tried to steal it. Now, the guitar case only serves as another container into which he can cram soiled clothes. Using fraying nylon rope, he secures the cardboard box onto his body.

Most people just assume that he's ferrying around excess advertisements from the day, and he can travel easily through the Loom. He bangs on the side of his shipping container, and the nameless old woman at the top of the stack pokes her head out of her window. I'm going out, he gestures. Look after my shit? She waves him away without confirmation.

The old suspended monorail running underneath the Echelons makes it easy enough to travel throughout the city. He walks to the closest end of the catenary and slips into one of the cars. The usual woman is clawing at invisible demons in the seat a few rows in front of him. There's something about the upper Echelons, like the air is aware of his intrusion and actively hostile. The Kid could step easily onto the 6th Echelon, knowing he didn't belong, but the air wouldn't feel as stagnant and bristly. There is something about 5 and above that prohibits travelers like him from staying longer than a handful of hours. Maybe, it's some sort of chemical deterrent. Maybe, it is the Legate at the back of his mind, slowly squeezing and squeezing until it becomes unbearable even to breath. The Kid lets his consciousness sink a little. *Nomos*. The Legate responds by flooding his head with brief effervescent joy. Most people pick custom names for their Legates. They believe that their Legates are unique, that they have their own personalities, even though they are just processors that relay the carefully calculated commands of the hierarchy in the most computably effective manner to their hosts. The Kid just stuck with the default name. Maybe, it's only painful to linger in the elite quarters of the city because *Nomos* is trying to protect him, nudging him to vacate what it

understands as hostile grounds. After all, it's nice to believe that Legates are symbiotic, loyal, even though it's probably not true, and the headache he feels coming on is actually just punishment for tainting the upper Echelons with his wretched presence. It might even sense the Timarqan in his blood.

BOMBLET

Cold weight sank into his pubescent hands. There had been many awards, but they were all plastic. This was crystal glass. The Kid had never seen anything so delicate and clear. On his right, the Mother dug her lacquered nails into the hollow above his clavicle. On his left, the mayor just barely pressed the mounds of his palm onto his shoulder. Both were grinning maniacally into the flashing cameras, all teeth and gums, eyes neutral and wide. A photographer cried for him to move the trophy away from his face. He refused and was captured forever, face round and blue, distorted by the glass shield of the award, the bubbled worlds there promising to hold his attention forever. It was a good thing he was looking into the glass, and not through it. This was not a competition he should have won. It was a music contest meant for the wellbred children of the middling Echelonites to establish their place in the hierarchy and gain the favor of their parents. He was oblivious, gluttoned and drowsy with victory. He hugged the trophy to his chest and delighted in the catering. In the middle of his gorging, he felt that the air had suddenly become heavy, chemical, sharp. Unbeknownst to him at the time, somewhere in viscous hum of the now somber affair, his mother had leaned in, too close, to the mayor's liverspotted ear, and whispered something she should not have whispered.

A momentous slap such as this should have rung out, brought the crowd to their knees, but it didn't. The sound was lost to the drone of chatter, and his ears were already swarming with the sound of chewing, juicy grapes bursting between new adult teeth. It

was instead the cries of WHORE and TRAITOR and HEINOUS BITCH that finally turned everyone's heads. He scanned the dark hall, his eyes a flurry of static. The mayor materialized with thunderous steps, his fingers like god giving life to Adam, landing squarely in the Kid's direction. He looked at the man and realized with an almost blinding awe that this was what true power was. ABOMINATION, TIMARQAN, BASTARD. His body buckled, liquefied, reformed. He became these things the mayor wanted him to be. Nomos quietly made itself known, quelled his fear and his anger, and replaced them with meek shame, the compulsion to make amends for his own existence. The Kid could feel the ideas pouring in, smooth and cool over the brain, but they would not take root without his consent. It would be so easy to just dive into those feelings, comply and reap the rewards that the Legate promised, dopamine spikes in the brain, but he faltered, clung to those instinctual feelings of dread and repulsion. They were real, and it was scary to let himself be carried away by false ideas, no matter how sweet they were. He made his decision, and he could feel a tightness puddle over his eyes. For a moment, only a moment, there was no joy in the world, no colors. His tongue tasted bitter, and there was something wrong about himself, something irrevocably atrocious, that he couldn't put his fingers on.

Strange laughter knocked him out of his fugue. The Mother skipped to his side, beaming. A rush of understanding flooded through him, and that unanswered question of why she agreed to conceive a child with a Timarqan soldier suddenly resolved itself. There was so much affection in her gaze that he would have exploded right then and

there, just to bring a little light into those dark eyes. He was a bomb, developed and established just so he could rock the foundations of New Antiokh's elite social hierarchy, and he almost didn't care that inevitably he would be destroyed in the process. The Kid could feel Nomos scrambling at this development, stoking his fear of what was deemed socially unacceptable behavior. A potent mixture of terror and awe swirled behind his eyes as he peered into the space between the Mother's brows.

As the Echelonites began to realize the implications of the mayor's accusation, their disgust and fury seethed into reality. They had been disgraced not only by Loomers, but by traitors and Timarqan sympathizers. The Kid wanted to explain that they had gotten it all wrong. The Timarqan aspect of things was a means to an end, not the fundamental principle of this endeavor, but the people had been already been hurt, blinded by the pain. There was no cure. The only way to console their agony was to spread it. They latched onto what they perceived to be the most singular and immediate threat.

THE ETIOLATED

Nearly violet eyes crinkle upon his appearance. Despite their not being related to one another, they still somehow look alike. The lieutenant's bastard waves him over. The Kid eats the one and only hot meal he gets each day. The bar begins to whir to life. The Kid had followed the bastard's situation ever since the Mother revealed to him, after hours of pressing curiosity, that the businessman scouring the Loom for a mislaid heir all those years ago was in fact her almost husband, the lieutenant. He had immediately caught the scent of some cruel yet propitious destiny there. The two were near misses, their trajectories the exact opposite of one another's. Both were missiles that met in the middle somewhere above the summit of Amanos, tailfins scraping though not enough to explode, then hurtling past each other—the lieutenant elevating his son, the Mother deprecating hers, the nonexistent marriage making them brothers.

Bonaventure welcomes him, a new slab of fat on his cheeks dimpling with a smile. The Kid has wanted to try the dining couches, just once, but his employer insists that they crouch over their food. He must miss the practice now that he is a proper Echelonite. Begrudgingly, the Kid points his crotch to the fish steaming in its own juices. Though reviled by proper everywhere, it is an efficient way of eating, with the fingers, while stimulating digestion by forcing the food to come to terms with the orifice through which it will eventually meet its demise. Bonaventure crushes a chunk of fish and brings it to his mouth. His joy is obvious, though his employees can't seem to figure out

whether to reprimand him for indulging in the crude behavior or to admire his dedication to hospitality. The Kid can't find the energy to be anything but mildly amused. He may only be an excuse for Bonaventure to delight in his old freedoms, but a hot meal is a hot meal. The advertisement for a casual gig was packed underneath a flyer promoting the sale of used appliances, a leaflet spreading the word of some deity, and a poster depicting the nude profile of a barely adult call girl. Birdshit had nearly censored the girl's tits, and the paper scrawled with the deity's words was too flimsy to use as toilet paper. The used appliances flyer looked promising, but it was encrusted by too many loose warped staples for him to bother with. He was already crumpling the fourth paper and bringing it to his ass when he caught the familiar last name flashing between his clenched knuckles. It was not a particularly rare name, but it felt too coincidental that somebody attached to the surname was also opening a gentleman's club in the fifth Echelon. It seemed to be exactly what somebody who grew up in a brothel would do if he were ever to be lifted into the life of the elite Echelonites.

The shining new layer of fat cannot hide who Bonaventure is. He is smooth for having lived a life in the Loom. His skin has been coddled by decades of the creams and the serums that can mollify even the worst of his mothers' warts and chancres. His hands have probably never seen any real work, except perhaps in the articulation of genitalia, and he is always a little vulgar, though never in words or actions. After decades of living in a brothel, he must have simply picked up the mannerisms. The hips are always open. The body is always forced into elapine curls, and there is something about the gaze, the

heavylidded eyes, like he already knows everything that there is ever need to know about a person. The Kid presses a knuckle to his sternum to keep his ribs from crunching together. When he first saw how the Echelonite elites altered their bodies, he was in audible awe of how they all seemed to glow from within and had to stifle himself. Still, his hand made a hollow sound against his jaw and drew attention to his surprise. He asked the Mother if she was once as beautiful, and she said that she was. No one knows where the beauty standard has come from, but the proper are obsessed with it. They bleach their skin. Some also strip the color from their hair. Even for the eyes, there is a procedure that uses lasers to lighten their color. The only thing that tends to remain of who they used to be is the beds of their nails, deep rich browns that look a bit like fungal infections against the blanched flesh. When the Kid asked about it, Bonaventure explained, with no sign of being offended, that there are pills that lighten the skin in its entirety, but they take too long to work. Many just wore acrylic nails. Bonaventure sports an ashy purple to match his eyes, the violet color resulting from such an extreme ablation that he can't even bear to take off his sunglasses in the dim light of the club.

ENORMITY

For a while after the big reveal, it was difficult to believe her when the Mother professed her love for him. It was supposed to be a secret kept between them, something kept silent to protect him. Maybe, it was Nomos' doing as it gradually nudged him towards socially acceptable ideals. Maybe, he was just growing older. The Kid had always been willing to be her weapon, but it was becoming more and more apparent that any affection she showed him was only a byproduct of her own self-indulgent pride. He was nursing the bone broken by the runnerup in the musical competition. The Mother patched him up, but it seemed she only wanted to put him in situations where they could be broken again. They had never taken nightly walks before, but now they marched up and down the catenaries in their best vibrant clothing every day before bed. The people threw stones and trash, but they never came at him with fists or knives, not at school, not during his evening strolls. There were no jabs or shoves or even the pulling of hair. Finally, it happened at home, where he felt safest and where he expected it would be the most difficult to stage an attack. Are you going to eat that? She snatched the stale cornmeal roll, crushing it a little between her fingers, and stuffed the entire bun into her mouth. Nestling his chin in a cradle of interlaced fingers, the Kid stared at the circle of crumbs where the bread had been. It wasn't that he was hungry, but he found some comfort in the smooth floured surface of the roll. His stomach grumbled a little, and he sunk easily into the semiconsciousness of reverie. He was too comfortable in his own

musings to react appropriately when the Mother leapt up, tensed on the balls of her feet. The sudden pressure at the back of his head sent a cold shock running down his spine. The fogginess in his eyes cleared. The pleasant noise circling at the base of skull fell away. Fists edged into his periphery. Jeers and insults hurtled randomly. The words fell apart as they ricocheted across the shanty. A syllable landed between his toes. The Kid squeezed his eyes shut and shoved a finger in each ear.

Someone grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked it hard enough to bring tears into his eyes. The Mother had fled. Attackers had invaded his home. He jerked towards the offender. He didn't know why. A scowl had bled into his face, even though he had no interest in encouraging a fight. The protocol was to curl up and to use his arms to protect his head, to be boring and still, but he turned around and threw a punch. His fingers hadn't even formed a fist yet when it met the attacker's face. Something wet and squishy scraped underneath his fingers. The smaller boy howling and digging a knuckle into his left eye was familiar. He barked an order, and his larger companion pulled the Kid to his feet. Kierson, the smaller boy, was a classmate at the makeshift school in the Loom. The Kid had done everything in his power to make a friend out of him. He had never hesitated to stick his tongue into gravel of the playground or to throw himself to the ground or the wall. Kierson would throw his head back in laughter, and they would be friends again for a while. They even used to play soccer together. This was a painful betrayal. He didn't recognize Kierson's muscle, but the larger combatant must have been sixteen or seventeen, at least. The Kid could see a hint of a softspoken nature in the

muscle's eyes. However, what remained of a peaceful disposition was largely eclipsed by the ruthless grin, tongue lolling and greedy, mouth salivating at the promise of fear and respect in his victim, but the Kid refused to satisfy. He should have cowered, wept, begged. The fight probably would have ended sooner and with less damage, but he just couldn't do it. It wasn't his fault that he was Timarqan. The Kid wanted to believe that his defiance came from inherent strength, but it was all foolishness. Defeat was inevitable. The only reason to have kept fighting was if he knew for certain that this encounter would end in death, but an opportunity remained for a mitigated loss. The strong have the courage and humility to surrender, retreat, even to appease. He was weak.

Muscles knocked him to the ground with startling ease. When his wrist bent backwards upon catching his fall, the Kid was surprised to learn that strength wasn't driven by will, that tears were largely involuntary. He wiped away the tears, but he couldn't hide the salty phlegm cutting through his voice. He looked at the broken wrist on the already broken arm. The knuckles of his right hand were scraping against the cast wrapped around his forearm. He tried the other hand, formed a fist. The tears had already eaten away at the skin on his fingers, and the bones were visible, white, and porous, disintegrating beneath his gaze. He touched them to his lips. They were sharp. The Kid ran his knuckles over the pools gathering under his eyes. Muscles nudged his stomach with an ankle. The Kid threw a punch. It landed, but not where he wanted. His bonejagged knuckles had burrowed into the pale translucent flesh of the muscle's

shoulder. The assailant didn't even seem to notice. As he struggled to free his arm, he noticed the nails on the fist darting towards his mouth were coated in dark polish.

Finally, he collapsed into a dense crumpled ball and covered his head. It felt like something had twisted inside him, or he had twisted inside himself and was facing the other direction inside his skin. He certainly couldn't see anything when he opened his eyes. Perhaps they were pressed against the inside of his nape. The Kid could feel himself, or his soul (or his concept of a soul), slithering towards his center. He was numb all over. Only the distant reverberations of whatever they were doing to his body reached him where he had coiled. Kierson must have been trying to pound his head into the ground. There was a wet release of suction around his ear every time his head came off the floor. He heaved with the release of a longheld breath, or the thing heaved inside him (or the thing that he was heaved inside the thing that he thought he was but was not). The Kid gritted his teeth, the movement in his core making him queasy. He probed his mind for Nomos. Everything had blurred together. He couldn't tell if it was the Legate that was desperately trying to shield the pain and keep him awake or if one his attackers had knocked the implant loose, and he really was just buried somewhere in that fibrous kernel of flesh channeling his mind and body, or just his mind (or just his body). It was searing hot wherever or whatever he was, and the music was loud and otherworldly. Magma pounded at the back of his throat. Part of him wanted to stay, but he wanted to see and to escape the heat. Kierson and his companion were starting to get bored. The Kid let

himself expand into his body. His toes took quite some maneuvering to squeeze back into, and they felt tight and unnatural against him.

Vomit gushed from his nostrils as soon as he anchored himself to the many rooting tendrils just underneath his skin. The Kid clawed at the metal tray upon which the circle of crumbs where the cornmeal roll used to be remained untouched. He hugged the tray to his chest. The Mother would come back at any moment now. She would bring friends whom he did not know about. His attackers would be chased away. He clung to the metal tray. It was cold and uncomfortable. No, that was a lie. He knew that she would not be coming back. The muscle lifted his body into the air and threw him to the floor. Something inside him blew up, and another wave of nausea rolled over him. He thought it would come out liquid, a slurry of bone meal and scraps of flesh in a red, red froth, but it just felt like heat and acid on his tongue and the stabbing of a thousand tiny needles into the skin. Screams poured from the viscous hush of the distance. There was nothing indicating that they had anything to do with him, but they felt appropriate. The Kid raised himself to his full height, swaying a little. The lunch tray hung loosely from a single corner in his hand. Fear widened Kierson's eyes. The Kid had forgotten that he was taller his schoolmate. The muscly Echelonite teenager was untouchable. The only person he could retaliate against was Kierson. It would only bring more suffering upon himself in the days to come, but the tray was so heavy in his grip. His vision narrowed, and he brought the platter down on Kierson's face. When the Kid poised himself for a second swing, Kierson begged him to stop. His voice sounded strange,

muffled, as if someone had stuffed a bunch of cotton balls into his mouth. It was then that the guilt choked him. He dropped the tray, and the pain came all at once. He stumbled. Muscles came at him again.

THE PRIZE

He never wanted a repeating engagement with Bonaventure. It's too much trouble to be tied down to anyone. The Fourth Nicatorion Concordat has stretched on far longer than anyone may have ever expected. Perhaps, the people are just tired of war. The Kid was glad that people have also gotten tired of him. Before he ran away, he thought he looked just like the Mother, but now he suspects that he is starting to resemble the absent father. Timarqans and Demetrians used to be one people after all. He simply took his new face and a new name, and he fell into the everchurning brew of the Loom. He is stilled cursed at. Those who recognize him will sometimes even shove or spit on him, but no one throws stones anymore. More than anything, they all make promises that when the war inevitably starts up again, the first Timarqan blood to be spilled in the city will be his. Still, the years stretched on, and an uneasy peace became a tedious one. While the Kid is only few years past being barely an adult, it's been a long enough time that the scars are now only visible underneath direct light. He sang a simple song for Bonaventure when he had first responded to his advertisement. He was careful to keep himself steady, above average, not brilliant. The stifled tones felt like liquid in his throat. He took a breath and drooled all over his guitar. He was sure that his performance would only warrant a onetime arrangement, but Bonaventure insisted on a regular gig. The reason why became obvious when the Kid finished his song and opened his eyes to see a smile smeared over Bonaventure's face that was anything but professional.

Shards of glass orbit his spinal cord. He blinks rapidly to clear the tangle of thorns skulking in his periphery. It's becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the instinct to flee the upper Echelons as Nomos slowly tightens its grip on his mind. The elite don't receive implants at birth. Without a semiautonomous network to communicate with, Nomos may be reverting to its most primary function, which is to proscribe. Perhaps, its central processor requires the certainty and refinement of a continuous quaternary feedback loop. In its absence, his brain is the only thing that can hope to fulfill such a role, and the painful consequences are simply the results of extreme mental fatigue. In any case, he can only guess. He has no idea how they actually work. The Kid digs his nails into his palm. Bonaventure asked him to stay. Three out of the last five days, he's stayed with him after the bar lulled into unsteady silence. The velvet cushions in the private room are warm from the evening's patrons. The diligent cannibalization of his Adam's apple only scrapes the fleece nap suffocating his brain. The feeling tugs at a few seams but nothing more. The room is dark to accommodate Bonaventure's scathed violet eyes. Most of the upper Echelonites put a stop to the ritual bleaching when they attain fashionable blue or amber eyes, and many are only willing to lighten their skin to a modish beige or olive. Bonaventure is practically translucent. In the daylight, his veins are bright and visible throughout his body, and every fluctuation of his mood is apparent in the livid flush of his skin. In the darkness now, his skin is red and radiant enough to make the Kid blink through the fog tightening around his forehead. Each hair on his

body is fine and silvery. The Kid wonders if Bonaventure is admired for these qualities or reviled. The thought is met with a crushing pressure between his eyebrows.

Despite the garden of calluses that he's cultivated throughout the years, his hands are still pleasantly sore from mauling Bonaventure's flesh. He leans over, fingers dangling lazily between his knees. Clothes always feel a bit weird. Bonaventure puts on his sunglasses and flicks on the lights. From the existential depths to the sigh that the older man lets loose, the Kid can guess that he bears no small amount of regret for what they've just done. Society demands that everyone eventually marries a partner of the opposite sex and fulfills their responsibilities towards reproduction, but in the meantime, omnisexual interactions are culturally sanctioned as powerful ways to foster community and encourage collaboration. For young people, attaching themselves to an older more established counterpart is a generally respected way to secure a means of living and pursue a career. While Bonaventure has taken every pain to fulfill the requirements of such an arrangement, the Kid has shut himself from the benevolence and mentorship of the older man. It is strange and dangerous to believe in the goodwill of others. He finds it much easier to believe that Bonaventure is simply seeking the thrill of possessing what is now forbidden to him. The older man may also need to feel superior, or he wants to create distance by monopolizing what he once was. The Kid will sometimes catch hints of absolute wretchedness in the older man. It must be terrible to have done everything he can to assimilate to the New Antiokhian elite but to only achieve becoming a bit of a laughable eccentric. The Kid is familiar with pariahdom, but he has yet to reveal this.

Even when Bonaventure probes his eyes for some reflection of this suffering, the Kid gives nothing away. Sometimes the older man seems so sure he will find something to commiserate with that the Kid fears Bonaventure knows everything.

By all means, Bonaventure is not unworthy of kinship, and the Kid isn't fundamentally opposed to being the vessel into whom the older man could pour his trepidations. The Kid has simply never felt this level of resentment and jealousy towards anyone before. He could feel in his stomach the explosive element of obsession mingling with the singular category of admiration, in which an idolizer wants nothing more than to destroy and take the place of the subjects of their adoration. Whenever he shoots that sweet false smile at Bonaventure, he can feel the loathing and the veneration spreading like lichen across his teeth. It's terrible, and he can't stop thinking about it. Ever since the Mother sighed seven years ago and revealed that the bastard lost to the Loom was in fact the lieutenant's, the Kid just hasn't been able to get over it. Of course, the lieutenant fathered Bonaventure long before he demanded that the Mother be faithful to him. When the Kid is able to think about it rationally, the Mother had a very valid excuse to escape the marriage, but he can rarely think about it rationally. The struggles of others always appear slighter than one's own. Still he looks at Bonaventure, and he feels cheated. Even though the older man's appearance has been ridiculed for excess, the beauty standard is to be pale. Why shouldn't one want to be as pale as possible? As a spare, the only chance he has ever had to achieve something even remotely close to the desired appearance was to be born with the gift of albinism. Propers look down on the

phenomenon, but surely they must be envious that these children are born with the beds of their fingernails already as white as the rest of their bodies. Maybe they are cowards, unwilling to brave the sacrifices required of such beauty. In this case, Bonaventure may be a pioneer. It is all nonsense, but at night, the Kid still fantasizes about finding a loose seam somewhere on his body and peeling off his flesh in one wildly inflammatory movement.

The weight of Bonaventure's searching gaze finally forces him to crumple. A distant cry shatters the tense silence. The Penelope Looman Day celebrations must have begun. He stares into the livid red of his palms. It was on this very holiday five or six years ago that he went to a carnival and had a fortune teller read his palms. When she told him that his lifeline was short, shallow, and miserable, he stole the small cup full of coins that she had painstakingly gathered throughout the day and bought a bouquet of cotton candy. He ate them all and got sick. The propers and the spares commemorate Looman for very different reasons. She was the driving force behind the physical resurrection of Antiokh, but she also was the first to be disillusioned by the political infrastructure that clung to the walls like some parasitic ivy as the city erupted from the mountain. Some say that she and Olivera were lovers, that as Looman brought her hammer to the raw and ruined stone Olivera created the Legates to protect the civilization she willed to grace the promised city, and that it all started in a tangle of limbs, sweat, sheets, messianic fumes, a spark of lustfevered zeal. It's not difficult to see why that relationship soured. Looman was an egalitarian, an idealist. She built the Echelons atop

the natural buttresses of Mount Amanos. It was Olivera who looked at the many tiers of the city, spiraling organically down the slopes of the mountain, and thought to enforce the order that persists to this day. Not long after Looman broke ties and began to weave what would become the Loom underneath the city proper, the buttresses and tiers were altered so that each Echelon and the increments between them were equal. In a handful of hours, with the beginning of the day, the propers will be exchanging gifts, dancing, and engaging in polite gambling. The children in the Loom will be gorging on a feast that is only 30% food and 70% clay, sawdust, dish sponges drenched in gravy and grilled. Before they vomit or clog up and die (every year there's at least a handful), they will put their fingers together to make the 30 Echelons of New Antiokh, and a favored child will play Penelope and tangle them with strings.

Another chorus of shouts issues from the dark city. This time it catches, and a few lights flicker on, then a few more. Within the time it takes for the Kid to shake off the steam from Bonaventure's last long sigh pooling in his sulci, it appears the entire Echelon, perhaps even the whole city, has shuddered to a tenuous wakefulness. The owner of the 24hour diner next door shuffles into the street, chased reluctantly by a few stubborn patrons still clutching trays full of stale coffee and the deepfried dregs of yesterday's menu. Slowly, others shamble to meet them. Those in the upper floors fling open their shutters in one fantastic gliss that sounds as if it goes on forever. The story percolates from somewhere. He can't tell if it came from the infectious murmuring or a thought nudged into place by his own imagining or deliberately proffered by Nomos. It

may be exactly as it is told, and a quintet of Timarqan terrorists debauched a diplomat's son's face with their guns and blades. Then again, these terrorists may just be teenagers indoctrinated by large formidable Machiavellians. Is a face enough to brand them terrorists? It may certainly be a terroristic act, but the people involved just seem like victims all around. When the diplomat's son returns to Demetria, there's no doubt his mother will buy him a new face. He may very well become even more beautiful, which will make his trauma ever so poignant. Pain is pain, but is it worth the deaths of misguided children? Will it be worth the countless deaths the fighting will inevitably force upon both nations? There's also the possibility that this was simply an accident. A firecracker lit to celebrate Penelope Looman Day explodes in a foolish boy's face. A firecracker lit by the children or servants of Timarqan embassy staff explodes in the important boy's face. Warmongers from both nations seize the opportunity to end a monotonous peace for money, power, entertainment. It's not as if they haven't tried before, but both governments had canonized the indefinite peace with the signing of the Fourth Nicatorion Concordat. Perhaps, a centuries-long war based almost entirely on principle had simply become unsustainable. The Kid shivered, and Bonaventure snaked a mottled pink arm around his ribs. Conflicts have been consistently quelled, reparations made, negotiations maintained for longer than the Kid has been alive. It looks like only the people are eager for war now. Seleucia was a legitimate nation for all of five years before Olivera was assassinated. Conflict is all that anybody knows. The Kid ponders a final possibility. The diplomat puts her son in harm's way in order to gain something. Is

it the revival of a languishing career, boons offered by jingoists, forgiveness for some political misstep? Maybe, the wounds aren't even real, and after a believable amount of time for the boy to have received a new face, he will reemerge to the adulation of his people, glorious and pitiable, a reborn saint.

Truth is not unimportant, but all possible atrocities are firmly within the realm of believability. Many have done much worse for much less. It is not the monumental why that consumes him. It is the suffering and the promises made long ago to remind him how Timarqan blood will complement his dark, dark skin. Bonaventure eases him forward, but the Kid's fingers remain curled around the doorjamb. He looks at his guitar, still propped against the back wall, and grimaces. If push comes to shove, he needs time to pack it in its cardboard box. Bonaventure tugs him forward again. The Kid follows but keeps away from the direct beams of the streetlights. He stares at his feet, tries his best to look uninteresting. Bonaventure begins to probe the gathered crowd for answers. The Kid gulps, and it feels like a rock skidding down his throat. He's told Bonaventure nothing. Though if he were to find out, the Kid suspects that the older man would care little that he is Timarqan, or an almost brother. The ultimate betrayal is that he pretended to be indifferent, that by performing disinterest he denied a lonely man the comfort of sharing his burdens. The Kid opens his mouth and closes it.

He tells Bonaventure that he needs to leave and check in on friends and family—another easy lie destined to tear open and hemorrhage. The Kid pulls the hood of his vest down to his nose, and he cradles the boxed guitar instead carrying it on his back so that

the rest of his face is obscured by the cardboard. His legs twitched with the instinct to run, but he trundled and tried to mimic those grumbling heaves of breath that rolled from the chests of day laborers as they returned home. When an actual day laborer huddles against him on the monorail and begins a conversation, the Kid thinks long and hard about to how to reply. As he desperately tries to formulate generic yet sympathetic answers, all he can do is grunt in affirmation during lulls in the woman's speech. He is still trying out different combinations of words in his head when she wishes him well and exits the car. The Kid has expected his heart to be beating out of his chest by now, but even when he holds his breath and opens the eustachian tubes of his ears, he cannot find a pulse at all. When the familiar stack of shipping containers come into sight, the relief hits harder than anything. His joints freeze, and he staggers. The guitar is suddenly too heavy to lift. The release of held breath burns in his chest, and the sudden resurgence of a heartbeat feels like it's going to shatter his sternum. He slings the guitar across his back and begins to climb the netting. The first slash of the dull knife is shallow and painless, too inconsequential for him to bother believing it. It is just his calves tensing up. Somewhere in the smothered logic system of his overwhelmed psyche, he understands that this feeling of safety is unearned, but he wants nothing more than to believe in it.

When the Kid finally convinces himself to turn his head, he does not see the old bitter individuals who have waited the better part of a decade to spill his blood. These are young strangers. The girl with the yellow knife seems genuinely astonished that skin can break so easily. He still can't shake the illogical desire to just continue his climb towards

his little metal roost, where he knows they will trap him. He knows that even if he ignores them with a vengeance, they will not melt into thin air, and yet he takes another step up. The girl scrambles after him in a flash of incomprehensible speed, her followers quick at her heels. She pushes the dull metal against his ankle, and makes her intent known with a cry. He flexes his left foot. The cut wasn't deep enough to sever his Achilles tendon. It is finally with incredible fatigue that he does the logical thing. The Kid pushes himself off the wall and runs. He almost makes it half a block before the cuts begin to hurt. The guitar snarls as he collapses. Suddenly there are many sharp things at once, though they are not plunged into him only raked across his skin. In spite of his best efforts to protect his neck and face. The girl with the dull yellow knife pries his head from his hands and drags the blade slowly, agonizingly across his cheek. His eyes flash between their warped reflections on the surface of the knife, his eyelashes scraping the metal, and the cool hazel irises of the strange girl. She must not be much older than fourteen. Her followers may be even younger. She lets his head drop. He sucks in a phlegmy breath and forces himself to stop squirming. After a while, he can feel them tear the guitar from his back. The Kid grits his teeth. He lets the quiet draw on until the wounds begin to numb. As he forces himself to his feet, he sobs just once.

There is a collective roar building in the ambiguous distance, but for now the familiar nook is quiet. He looks up and sees the nameless old woman staring serenely from her window. She opens her toothless mouth, and he just knows that she's going to scream. BOY! TIMARQA! EVIL! She levels a finger at him even though no one is

around to see. It doesn't matter. They only need to follow her voice, parroting the same three words. He can't think of anywhere else to go except towards the end of the catenary and then the trails that lead to the base of the mountain and out of the city. He stumbles into a hobbling jog. The sky has already lifted to a deep mustard yellow. Soon there will be no darkness to diminish his existence.